

HOW FAR WOULD YOU GO TO GET BACK AT A BAD BOSS?



GAME ON



ELISE ELIOT

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A SWEET ROMANCE

ELISE ELIOT

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**GAME
ON**

1

“I ’m sorry, Millie, but we’re going to have to let you go,” she said, her eyes a combination of her fierce professionalism and empathy for my situation.

“Wow, okay, wow,” I said, taking a deep breath and blinking back tears, “Is this from what happened on the Mansini account? That was my mistake. I’ll call them and take full responsibility.”

“That was a huge blow to the brokerage,” she nodded and my heart sank. “Losing that partnership absolutely impacted our bottom line. But, that combined with the real estate market in Sacramento slowing down has required us to downsize,” she continued. “We have to adjust the team accordingly.”

Gulp. Debbie always served the truth nice and cold. You didn’t get to where she was at in her career without being willing to say tough things directly.

“I get it,” I said. “What happens now?”

“Well, we’re going to give you a one-month severance package, and then you’re welcome to file for unemployment to hold you over until you find something new. I do hope you find something quickly and, despite our differences at times, please don’t hesitate to use me as a reference.”

I hate you, you’re the worst, I thought. “Thank you, that’s so nice of you.”

My mind was reeling. One month of severance. One month before a severe pay cut while collecting unemployment. I immediately started thinking about what I could cut to minimize my monthly expenses, but it was a short list. As a single mom with two kids, I was already living paycheck to paycheck.

“Since it’s the end of the day on Friday, go ahead and pack up your things. Rebecca will be in shortly with your final check.” I heard a soft knock on the door behind me and Debbie stood up before adding, “Thank you for your hard work. I know you’ll land on your feet.”

“I sure hope so,” I said, *but I feel like I’m drowning*. A couple tears slipped through, despite my best efforts to hold them back.

She pointed to the tissue box as she left the office. Rebecca came in with the final paperwork. It went quickly, and I was back to my desk to clean up my very few personal items.

Once I was in my car, I drove down the street and parked where no one could see me. I sobbed thinking of my two kids and the stack of bills with my name on it. I was still in debt from my divorce and now this.

“I can do this, I can do this, I can do this, I can do this,” I repeated to myself, while I unlocked my phone and started looking for jobs. I could barely read the screen through my tears, though, and chucked my phone into the passenger seat in frustration. I aggressively dried the last of my tears and sat up straight to get myself together.

“Suck it up,” I said. “You’ve gotta figure this out.”

Truth be told, I hated working for Debbie, but I was too afraid to quit. A good paying job is better than no job. As a single mom with a limited resume, I was counting my blessings instead of complaining, but now that she had let me go, maybe there was a silver lining in there somewhere. I knew exactly who could help me find it.

I shot a quick text to my best friend, Paige, letting her know I was stopping by on my way to get the kids. I was only a few minutes away from her place, though, so when I got there, she threw open the door in surprise, “Hey!”

When I took off my sunglasses and she saw my puffy eyes, her demeanor softened, “Oh no, come in,” she said, ushering me inside, where her demon dog started jumping up against my leg.

“I swear he’s an angel until you come over,” she said, while luring him outside with treats and closing the back door to give us some peace.

“I believe it,” I said, even though I didn’t. There was really something wrong with that dog.

“So, I’m guessing you’re not just here because I make great coffee,” she said, glancing at the coffee I was holding.

I took a seat on a bar stool at the kitchen bar, took a deep breath, and just shoved the words out of my mouth, “I got fired again.”

“Crap,” she said, her shoulders sinking.

“She gave me a month’s pay, said I can get unemployment, and offered to be a reference for me.”

“How generous of her,” she said, deadpan.

“What am I going to do now?” I asked, holding back the flood. Paige wasn’t as emotional as me, so I usually tried not to sob like a baby in front of her.

“Well, what are your options?” she asked.

“I’m tired of real estate.” I dropped my head in my hands. You had to be tough—tougher than me—to be successful in real estate. I was just an assistant.

“Can’t blame you there.” She reached over to pat me on the shoulder awkwardly. Physical touch was *not* her love language.

“Why does this keep happening?” I lamented. “I know successful agents ride the waves, but I’m tired of the inconsistency.”

“Then maybe it’s not the industry for you.”

“I agree, but then what is?” I looked up, my hands out like I was surrendering. “Know anybody looking to hire a mom of two with no college degree?”

“That depends. Are you still against selling feet pics?”

“Very funny,” I broke a smile. Leave it to Paige to make me laugh right now.

“Seriously? Be your own boss. Stop working for these imbeciles. You have your real estate license, just do your own thing. Then, hire people to work for you.”

Paige was my biggest supporter, but I often wondered if she saw something in me that just wasn’t there. I wasn’t a shark. I couldn’t survive on commission. “I’ve got the kids,” I said, shrugging and shrinking. “I need a reliable paycheck.”

“Okay, then we’ll find something else for you. Maybe it’s time to go back to school. Learn a trade. Open some new doors,” she offered, and the idea got my wheels turning. If I could find a program that was free or had deferred payments—maybe it could work.

“That’s not a bad idea.” I took a deep breath and felt my body relax a little. Paige was so unafraid. I wish I had a little bit more of that fearless spirit in me.

“You’re going to be okay,” she added, while she turned to make more coffee for us, mixing all sorts of sauces and syrups like a coffee sorcerer. “You’re a fighter.”

“I hope so.” I said it, but I didn’t believe it.

“You hated her anyway.”

I laughed again, nodding in agreement. “You’re not wrong.”

A fresh coffee and a few laughs, and I was starting to feel human enough to go pick up my kids from school. I didn’t want them to know anything was going on, so I touched up my makeup before hopping out of the car to sign them out of after school care.

As soon as they spied me in the entrance, they dropped what they were doing and came running over.

These two kids, they were my whole world. I would do anything to give these kids the life that they deserved—the life I should have been able to give them with their father, before he abandoned us to ride his motorcycle across the U.S. instead of being a dad.

“Brielle! Beckett!” I said, hugging them tight. As we walked out to the car, I asked, “Hey, who wants a special treat?” The big smile on my face hid the waves of anxiety pummeling me from the inside.

“Me! Me!” Brielle said, excitedly hopping into her car seat and buckling in. She was my over-enthusiastic 5-year-old who reminded me every day that there was good in the world.

“Well, that depends on your definition of treat,” said Beckett, my autistic 9-year-old who always cracked me up with his super literal take on everything.

“You’ll just have to wait and see,” I said, before closing the door and walking around to hop in the driver’s seat. I picked up the Starbucks treat bag and turned around before dramatically revealing two special edition, unicorn cake pops.

“CAKE POPS!” they cried in unison.

As we drove home, I knew I was at yet another one of those dreaded “sink or swim” moments in life, and one thing was for damn sure—I was not going to sink with these kids on my back.

2

“Let’s see what’s out there,” I said, slipping on my tortoise-shell glasses and sitting down at my computer.

The kids were asleep and it was time to start searching for jobs. My cat jumped into my lap, as if on cue, and I mindlessly stroked her soft, black fur. “What do you think, Medusa?” She purred in response.

I had found her in a parking lot one night while leaving my divorce lawyer’s office. It was cold and rainy out, and she was just a small kitty all by herself. She came right up to my leg and purred. I looked around and didn’t see any signs up or people looking for her. She also didn’t have a collar or any tags. The next day, I took her to a vet that said she wasn’t microchipped, so I took her home. I believe she picked me that night—because she knew I needed her as much as she needed me. Two castaways abandoned by people who were supposed to care for them.

“I need to expand my skill set, so I can get out of real estate,” I said to her, as I sat back in my desk chair, deep in thought, my mind swirling with ideas.

With Medusa’s purring approval, I started searching for a local certificate or trade program that would give me a wider range of job options.

“Bingo!” I found a place called Brighton Career College nearby that had several different programs, including dental assistant and vet tech. They started sessions every six weeks and you didn’t pay a dime until you graduated and found a job. I texted Paige to see if she would go check it out with me:

Millie: Found a school. Wanta tour it Monday?

Paige: You know I have a job right?

Millie: Come on, I can’t make this decision by myself.

Paige: Fine, but you owe me a coffee.

Millie: Obviously.

The relief I felt now that I had the possibility of a plan was enough to help me fall asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow. It felt like seconds until Brielle was sitting on me, peeling my eyes open, her face so close to mine I pressed my head deeper into the pillow in surprise. “Wake up, Mommy,” she whispered into my face.

“Brielle, please get off me,” I asked as she rolled over onto the bed giggling. Beckett pushed open my blackout drapes and bright light poured in. I covered my face with a pillow. “Can you guys please sleep in for once?” I pleaded as they laughed.

“Come on Mom, we want pancakes!” Beckett yelled, before they ran downstairs like a wild animal stampede.

I groaned into my pillow before dragging myself out of bed and downstairs to make breakfast. While pancakes cooked and bacon sizzled on the griddle, I fired up my coffee maker.

“Please be strong,” I whispered to it, as if it had magical powers, and pulled out a coffee mug that said, in big neon letters, “YOU GOT THIS!”

“Coffee with a side of pep talk,” I mumbled, as I poured my drug of choice into my cup and doused it with a heavy pour of creamer.

Flipping the pancakes and bacon, I reminded my kids that there was no running in the house and settled in for a relaxing weekend.

By Monday morning, I was ready to drop them at school and hit the ground running. When I pulled up to Paige’s house, she opened the door wearing giant, black sunglasses, her signature curly brown hair piled in a messy bun, and said, “Coffee first,” before closing the door.

“Hello to you, too,” I said, laughing.

She pulled her sunglasses down to make eye contact and said, “You’re in a good mood.”

“I’m feeling uplifted,” I responded, putting the car into reverse.

“I love that for you,” she said as she put her seatbelt on and pointed us in the direction of the nearest coffee drive-through.

Once we had our coffee and were on our way to Brighton, I noticed she was zoned out, reading something on her phone.

“How’s your latest book?”

“It’s awful. It’s terrible. I hate it.” She put her phone down and exhaled.

“Sounds promising,” I said sarcastically. “How bad can it be?” Paige edited books for a living and some went smoother than others.

“I don’t know, how does a book about a girl who gets pregnant from a paranormal encounter and then gives birth to a half-vampire, half-werewolf baby who has been chosen to destroy the planet sound to you?”

“Like a hybrid antichrist?”

“Something like that.”

“Sounds like it’s time for you to start writing the books.”

She laughed. “Maybe someday. Editing pays the bills.”

We pulled up to Brighton. I couldn’t help but notice that it wasn’t Harvard, but it was clean and bright and not too depressing. Baby steps.

“Welcome!” the young girl at the front desk said, a little too enthusiastically. “I’m sooo excited you’re here!” she said. “I’m Holly, and I’ll be giving you a quick tour of the programs!”

“Thank you so much, Holly,” I said, trying not to make eye contact with Paige who hated when people were overly excited about mundane things.

We followed Holly through the doors and into another lobby area. “This is our student lobby and waiting area,” Holly started, as if reading from a script. “You’ll see students hanging out here, studying, or having a snack, and it’s also where we welcome guests who participate as patients in program demos. They are offered free services in exchange for letting our students practice their newfound skills,” she flashed us another blinding smile, and waited for a response.

“It’s a great room,” I said, before glancing at Paige, who still had her sunglasses on and was sipping her coffee. I nudged her with my elbow and she came back to life. “Great room,” she said, mimicking me.

Holly turned to walk down a hallway, and I slowed down until Paige was next to me. “Try to look a little more excited to be here,” I whispered, “and take your sunglasses off.”

Paige exhaled, sliding her sunglasses off her face and looked at me with her giant hazel eyes. “Happy?” she said, a half-smirk on her face.

“Much better,” I said, before we were interrupted.

“HERE WE ARE!” Holly said, far too loudly for the short distance between us. “This is our dental assisting wing where we run the in-person part of the program.”

“So, people come here, in-person then?” Paige asked, sarcastically.

“Yes, that’s right!” Holly said excitedly, before opening the door for us.

I shot Paige a look. “Please don’t embarrass me,” I hissed under my breath.

“It just comes so naturally to me,” Paige quipped back.

“This place has a nice vibe,” I said to Holly, before I saw Paige reaching for one of the dental tools. “Don’t touch that,” I said, smacking her hand away.

“The dental assistant group has become really close,” Holly said, “We try to foster a family atmosphere here.”

“Does the family help with job placements?” I asked, trying to get a read on support once the program ends.

“Absolutely! We have a great network for job leads,” she said, before turning and leading us out the door.

We followed her down the hallway to the vet tech wing of the building. She led us into a room where vet techs were practicing some of their skills on some sweet animals who, for the most part, seemed happy and comfortable to be there.

“Welcome to the vet wing,” Holly said proudly.

“Is this where the animals are?” Paige asked.

I elbowed her, keeping a tight smile on my face, which was not an easy task given the rather pungent smell in the room.

“Yes, of course!” Holly said, a big, toothy grin on her face.

When she turned to show us to another area, Paige whispered under her breath, “These aren’t just different programs, they’re different worlds.”

“Certainly different smells,” I whispered back and Paige nodded in agreement. The people in the vet tech program were a little more standoffish than the dental group. Plus, I loved animals, but I didn’t know if I wanted to work with them all day.

Holly finished showing us around and guided us back to the front. “Thank you so much for taking a tour today! If

you're interested in applying, I can help you fill out an application right now!"

"I'm definitely interested. When does your next cohort start?" I asked, taking the application she was offering me and grabbing a pen.

"Monday. We still have spots open, so if you turn this in today, we can get you started in a week."

I turned to Paige and said, "What do you think? Animals or teeth?"

"Which one would you rather have bite you?" She asked seriously.

"What would you do?" I asked her.

"You're asking a person who started a business with the least amount of human or animal contact possible."

Just then, a man tried to get his rabid beast of a dog into the lobby. He had a white-knuckled grip on the leash and it looked like the dog was walking him.

Paige and I instinctively moved out of the way to give them a wide berth and get far away from Kujo, who seemed to be frothing at the mouth. I wasn't sure if the dog needed a vet or an exorcism.

Once they were inside, we looked at each other and I said through a nervous smile, "I think I'll go with dental."

"Strong choice," Paige said, putting her sunglasses on and heading back out to the car. I took the application with me and promised to turn it in ASAP.

Back in the car, I turned to ask Paige if she had plans for lunch, but my phone pinged, interrupting us.

Jon: Hey beautiful. Are we still on for lunch?

"Shoot!" I exclaimed. "I totally forgot!"

"What happened?" Paige asked.

"I have lunch with Jon today. I gotta drop you off, so I can get ready. He doesn't know I lost my job." I ignored Paige's

obvious disapproval and shot back a text:

Millie: On my way!

“So, we’re still talking to Jon?” She said flatly, staring out the window.

“I know you don’t like him, but I really do,” I explained, hating that she and Jon didn’t get along. “Why do you hate him so much?”

“Oh let’s see, why don’t we start with how he has never introduced you to anyone in his life? Or, how you’ve never seen where he lives? I know, how about the way he just pretends you don’t have kids?” she said, looking over at me before adding, “I can keep going.”

“No, that’s good.” There was no use arguing with Paige about this. She had no idea how hard it was to date when you were a single parent. It’s not like throngs of successful, handsome, emotionally healthy men were lined up outside my door.

3

After I dropped Paige off, I zoomed home to freshen up for lunch. I wasn't ready to tell Jon I'd lost my job, so I dressed like I was coming from the office.

I threw on some fitted black dress pants, leopard print kitten heels, and a shimmery cream blouse with a flattering drape to get that perfect office/date vibe. Then, I spritzed on a little perfume, floofed my hair, adjusted my bra to give the girls a little lift, and stood back to survey the results in my full-length mirror.

“Not bad for a 31-year-old mom of two,” I said to myself.

Jon was waiting for me when I got there. I always felt a little silly parking my Bronco next to one of his fancy cars. It was like the perfect metaphor for our relationship. He was the human version of a Masserati and I was like a rough, slightly scratched up SUV that had seen better days. I never quite understood why he liked me.

As I walked up to the restaurant, he popped out and held the door open for me. “You’re a sight for sore eyes,” he said, winking.

Holy moly, you’re one fine man. I walked up to him. “Hey you,” I said, giving him a hug and a little kiss on the cheek.

“You smell good, too,” he whispered into my ear, the warmth of his lips gently touching my skin, sending electric shocks straight through me.

“You’re not so bad yourself,” I teased, pulling away from him and walking in.

“I’m glad you think so.” he followed me inside to the hostess stand.

Everybody thinks so, I thought, as I watched every woman who spotted him stand up a little straighter, pull their shoulders back, and immediately look flushed. It was like living in a mating ritual scene from National Geographic.

The girl at the hostess stand was looking at him instead of me when she said, “We can seat you now,” before turning and showing us to the table, her tall, slender body perfectly accentuated by her form fitting black dress. She was undeniably gorgeous, and as I sat down, I watched as she attempted to get Jon’s attention. When she gave him his menu, she leaned a little too far down and stood a little too closely, but he acted as if she wasn’t even there. He was holding my gaze, a light smile on his lips. If he had noticed how beautiful she was, he wasn’t ever going to let me know. This was a little game he played that I liked to call “sucking me in.”

Damnit, I thought. I’m in trouble.

We made the appropriate small talk, but neither of us was really listening. Well, I wasn’t. He could’ve been talking in Swahili for all I knew. I was too distracted by the way he was gently playing with my hand on top of the table and the way our knees gently brushed under the table. Every one of my senses was on high alert. When our food arrived, it temporarily broke the spell, and I realized I hadn’t eaten anything all day and was actually starving. Once we stopped

staring at each other and started to eat, I could focus on what we were talking about.

“So, how is work going?” I asked him.

“Same. People buy. People sell. I make money,” he laughed. “You know the game.”

“Not at your level,” I said, smiling. *And now I’ve been fired.*

“It’s all the same. I’m just working with more commercial clients who aren’t usually spending their own money, so they’re willing to be a bit more reckless.” His deep blue eyes sparkled when he talked.

“Where do you find your clients?” I asked. If I could build a business like Jon’s, nobody could ever fire me again.

“Now? Mostly through referrals, but I also go to a lot of boring networking events, charity balls, that sort of thing,” he winked again and my heart fluttered.

“You know, if you ever need a date...” I teased, only half-joking. I imagined Jon standing at these events alone in a crisp tux. He must be like catnip for the ladies.

“Oh, they don’t usually allow you to bring someone,” he explained, looking away.

“Then what do married couples do?” I genuinely asked. If Jon were my husband, I wouldn’t want him going to these things without me.

“I haven’t thought about it,” he wasn’t even looking at me anymore. I had found another one of his “no fly zones” and sat there frustrated. I hated when his mood suddenly shifted like this. He was distracted with getting our waiter’s attention for another round of drinks and when he turned back to me, he changed the subject. “So, how is work going for you?”

“Same,” I said nonchalantly, before taking a drink to avoid saying anything else that might make him close off again.

He waited a second to speak. He was always careful with his words, unlike me.

“You’re too good for them. With your skills, you could make so much more money working for someone else,” he said, his face softening into one of his heartbreaker smiles. I relaxed when he seemed happy again.

“Is that a job offer?” I played along.

“Do you need one?” he asked, and in that second I saw something flicker in his eyes and I knew. I knew that he had found out that I had been let go.

This is so embarrassing.

“No, actually, I’m considering changing careers. I need a change of pace. I think I’m going to go back to school,” I said, more confidently than I felt.

“Why don’t you let me help you?” he asked, reaching over for my hand again.

“I really have it covered,” I said, looking down at my food instead of him. “I’m willing to put in the work for a better life.”

“If you went back to school, when would I see you?” He leaned his head down a little like he was trying to get me to look at him. He liked to have my attention all to himself whenever he wanted it.

“I have to try something different,” I explained, finally looking up, “for me, for my kids, for our future.”

He looked a little jealous and I loved it. “Just don’t forget about me.”

I blushed a little and smiled. “It’s no secret how I feel about you, Jon.”

He was gently rubbing my hand again. “You look beautiful today, Millie,” he said, his eyes drenched with desire.

The rest of lunch was a blur. We always seemed to reach a point of no return. The chemistry between us was unlike anything I’d ever experienced before—even with the father of my kids. Jon had been one of the first guys I had dated after my husband left. We’d stopped talking a few times and I would date other people briefly, but then he would be back,

wanting my attention again. When Jon wanted something, nothing got in his way. I would inevitably end up right back where we had been before, but things never seemed to progress past a certain point.

He followed me back to my place and started kissing me before I had even opened the door of my townhome. We collided like two stars, the heat threatening to destroy us both.

Stumbling inside, we made it upstairs slowly, littering the steps with our clothes as we fumbled our way to my bedroom.

Once we got there, he pulled me up against him, kissing me more passionately, one hand in my hair while the other hand shoved the door closed.

Hours later, we were still in bed, and I was resting my head on his chest. His body was so relaxed and the slow rhythm of his breathing was gently lulling me to sleep.

We were rudely jolted fully awake by the piercing sound of my phone alarm and I instinctively sat up and dove out of the bed. I had completely lost track of time.

“My kids...my kids, Jon. I have to go get my kids,” I said, trying to extricate myself from the blankets, but my foot got caught causing me to collapse in a heap. I popped back up like a whack-a-mole, my hair puffed out in every direction and my eyes wide. Jon started laughing at me while I scrambled around. “Where are my clothes?”

“Probably on the stairs where we took them off,” he laughed, rubbing his face. “You can’t stay for a few more minutes?” he asked.

“They can’t really drive themselves,” I said back, sarcastically.

“Okay, I get it,” he said, looking annoyed as he got out of my bed to get dressed.

I looked up at him and lost my train of thought for a second. *I didn't have to rush, did I?*

“Your clothes,” he reminded me.

“Yes, I need clothes,” I repeated, racing into my closet and just throwing something else on. I didn’t need to dress up to go get my kids.

As I raced downstairs, I panicked, realizing that I couldn’t leave everything like this or Beckett would have a zillion questions. “I have to pick this all up,” I said, starting to grab things.

“I’ll take care of it,” Jon said, exhaling in frustration. “I’ll lock up when I leave. Go. Go get your kids,” he said.

I looked up at him standing at the top of the stairs. He was saying the right thing, but his body language told me something different.

This, right here, is why things could never work out. I swallowed my pride, “Thanks, I appreciate it.”

As I got in my car, I got a text from Paige asking how lunch went. I grimaced thinking of what her response would be if I told her the truth, so I just tossed my phone in my purse and went to get my kids.

I decided to surprise them with something that would keep us out of the house longer, in case Jon was still there. He had never met my kids, and it was going to stay that way until things became more permanent.

“Guess where we’re going?!” I said, with as much excitement as I could muster.

“Home?” Beckett asked, while Brielle yelled, “DISNEYLAND?!”

God bless her optimism, but we were further from a trip to Disneyland than ever.

“To get ice cream!” I exclaimed. Brielle ran and hugged me and Beckett looked bummed.

“Hey, at least one of you is happy,” I said to Brielle, who was beaming her megawatt smile at me.

While we were sitting and eating our ice cream, Beckett was looking at me strangely. “Mom, you look different,” Beckett said, “what did you do today?”

“Oh, well, after I dropped you off, I ran some errands and had lunch with a friend.”

“Auntie Paige?” he asked.

“A different friend,” I said.

“Auntie Paige is your only friend.”

“I know it seems that way sometimes, but I have other friends.”

“What’s their names?”

Beckett, you are almost too smart! I swallowed and cleared my throat, buying myself time while I tried to come up with a few friends when Brielle took the silence as an opportunity to launch into a story from school about the picture her best friend drew for her.

On our way home, I silently prayed that Jon was gone without a trace. There was no way that Beckett was going to miss anything.

When I unlocked the door, I opened it a little bit at first so that I could peek at the stairs before the kids ran in, but they pushed around me and ran inside anyway.

Jon was definitely gone, all of my clothes had been put in the laundry basket, and he had even made my bed for me.

In fact, the only sign that he had been there at all was a little note he had left on my nightstand, tucked under the edge of my lamp.

*Millie,
You're amazing. I miss you
already.
Jon*

I smiled a little, tucking it under a book in my nightstand drawer. My relationship with Jon was either hot or cold, and today it was a little bit of both. I felt tangled in his web—and

while I wasn't ready to escape, I wasn't sure he would let me if I tried.

4

Once I started school, the days and weeks began to blur together. We moved through the units at a pretty fast clip, so I really had to focus. I had to go in person to school a couple days a week and then keep up with the online coursework at home the rest of the time. When my kids were home from school for the day, I gave them all my attention until they fell asleep and then stayed up late studying dental terminology until my eyes crossed. Jon had tried to get together with me a few times since the program began, but much to his chagrin, I just didn't have the time.

One day, I was sitting down for a break at school and checked my phone. I had a voicemail from an unknown number, and I played the message on speakerphone.

“Millie, this is Colton Cox from Colton Homes. I got your number from Debbie. She said you're the best real estate executive assistant in the business. I need an assistant ASAP,

and I have a big incentive package that will blow anybody else out of the water. Give me a call at your earliest convenience.”

“Wow, girl, who’s that?” One of my classmates, Angela, was eating a burrito next to me.

“I have no idea. I can’t remember ever meeting Colton when I worked with Debbie,” I said, confused.

“Why would another realtor ask someone for their old assistant’s phone number?” Angela asked.

“Yeah, that doesn’t make a lot of sense does it? Maybe she feels bad about firing me, so she’s throwing me a bone?” I took another bite of my food and looked over at Angela who didn’t look convinced.

“Does she know you haven’t found another job in real estate?”

“I don’t know, we haven’t spoken since the day I left. We weren’t really friends.”

“This smells like a rat to me, girl,” Angela said, pursing her lips and shaking her head.

“Yeah, but how? I mean, real estate seems like a big network of people, but it’s also not. These people talk all the time. Maybe Colton asked her where she found her assistants and she said, ‘Well, I had to downsize and let a great one go, give her a call,’” I offered as a possibility.

“That’s the difference between us,” Angela said, wiping her mouth.

“What is?” I asked.

“You see the good in people. I see what’s really there and usually, it ain’t good,” she said, getting up to throw away her trash.

“So, you don’t think I should call him back then?” I said to her back.

She turned back around. “Oh yeah, let’s find out how big his package is,” she said, before laughing like a teenage girl.

“That’s disgusting.” I laughed back.

When I left for the day, I pulled out my phone and decided to see what this Colton guy was all about. I had no interest in going back into real estate, but you know what they say about curiosity.

I expected to leave a message, but he picked up on the first ring.

“Hey, Millie, you called me back!” he said, excitedly.

“Yeah, you know, I was just a little curious what this was about.” I started picking at my nail polish.

“So, I know you’re a licensed realtor, but prefer to work as an executive assistant, is that true?”

“It *was* true. I did do some deals on the side before, as well, but I prefer stable hours and income to being all commission based,” I explained, before adding, “but I’ve left real estate and am pursuing a career in the dental field.”

“You want to be a dentist?”

“No, a dental assistant.”

“Oh, they don’t make any money.”

“More than a real estate assistant does,” I shot back.

“Not the ones that work for me,” he deadpanned.

“Okay, tell me. What’s your incentive package?” I asked.

“Well, I do a profit share, plus salary, so you’re guaranteed \$85k a year, without working a single deal or making a dollar in commission. Then, your bonus is directly tied to how much we make as an office, so the more we make, the more you make. With my numbers for the last year, you would have made \$150,000 as an assistant—without working a single deal on your own—but I’ll be feeding you the small deals I don’t have time for, and that can add significantly to your earnings.”

“Are you telling me I can make almost \$150,000 a year *as your assistant*,” I leaned forward, my face in shock.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying. But, if you don’t want to get back in the game...” his voice trailed off. Damn, he was a good salesman.

“Haha, I could be persuaded,” I said.

“A true businesswoman. I like it. That’s exactly what I need,” he said.

“I just need to know, though, with a compensation package like that, why are you calling *me*?” I asked.

“Debbie says you’re the best,” he responded, flatly.

“How do you know Debbie?” I volleyed.

“We’ve been on opposite sides of deals several times. I prefer to be a seller’s agent and, as you know, she handles buyers more often than not.”

“Interesting,” I said, mentally reviewing all the deals I worked on with Debbie trying to remember an agent named Colton on the other side. There were just too many deals to sift through.

“Well, think about it. I need someone fast.”

“Oh, well, I am currently in a program, and I can’t quit now that I’ve started. I need to have this as a backup plan. I wouldn’t be available to start for a couple months at least,” I said.

“Let me make you a deal. Start working with me part-time now with the hours you have available. Finish your program. Then, when you’re done with it, work full-time. By then, we’ll have our systems in place and it’ll be go-time,” he said.

“Okay, so pay would be what...half that?” I asked.

“Yup, let me put together a part-time compensation package and send it over to you. Text me your email. Listen, I’m getting a call on a deal. I gotta run,” he hung up before I could say anything.

“What the hell?” I said, sitting back in my seat in shock.

I heard a knock on my window and looked over to see Angela standing there. “Hey girl, you okay?” she asked.

I turned on my car and rolled down the window. “I think I just got the best job offer I’m ever gonna get,” I said to her, a rush of adrenaline tingling through my body.

“You gonna take it?” she asked.

“This would be more money than I ever thought I could make.” I was still mentally processing what he said and what this could mean for me.

“Money is the root of all evil, girl,” she said, pointing at me as she started walking to her car. “Remember that!”

Well, that's dark, I thought, grimacing a little. “Thanks, Angela, have a good weekend!” I called after her, before rolling up my window.

I had to agree that something about this was a little strange, but life changing money like this did not come my way often.

Correction: it never came my way.

I needed to talk to someone with a strong business acumen, who was cutthroat and always looked out for number one.

I pulled out of the parking lot and headed straight to Paige's house.

“So let me get this straight,” Paige said, while simultaneously pushing a small bowl filled with mini chocolate peanut butter cups in my direction. “This guy called you out of the blue and offered you the best paying job of your life. You don't have to apply or even send him your resume. Just a crazy offer?”

“Yup. He knows I worked for Debbie and she recommended me. The job I'd be doing for him would be very similar, so I guess he just doesn't want to deal with any of that.”

“But, you'd have to give up your new dream of being a dental assistant.”

“Not necessarily,” I said, picking up another chocolate and peeling back the wrapper, “he said I would go part-time until I finished school.”

“Okay, but then you would quit to work at a dental office or you'd stay working for him?”

“I guess it depends on how things are going,” I said, shrugging my shoulders. “I didn’t plan for any of this, so it’s hard to think that far ahead.”

“You would be back in real estate, though,” she said, tossing another candy in her mouth.

“I know. Not thrilled with that,” I said, drinking the last of my iced coffee.

She pointed at my empty glass, “Another one?”

“I’ll never turn more coffee down,” I laughed, while she pulled the cold brew out of the fridge and filled my glass back up.

“What are you going to do?” she asked.

“What would you do?” I asked.

“In your situation? Take the money. Finish school so if this thing goes sideways, you can always go back to your plan to work at a dentist’s office.”

“That’s what I was thinking, too,” I said.

“Then there you go.”

I let myself sleep on it, but the next morning I was feeling the same way. This was a great opportunity for myself and for my kids. I was up before them and snuck into their rooms to pull their blankets up a little higher and gently sweep their hair out of their sweet faces, making sure not to touch Beckett—he didn’t like to be touched unexpectedly. They were my everything and if taking this weird job offer gave me a chance to give them more of the things they deserved, then I would do it.

Sitting down at my computer, I did a little bit of research on Colton Homes and he definitely had a lot of listings and the few reviews he had were positive. “Let’s give this guy a shot,” I said to Medusa, who was relaxing on my lap. I pulled up the email Colton had sent with the part-time compensation package and clicked “reply”:

Dear Colton,

Thank you for reaching out yesterday. I have decided that I'd like to take you up on your offer.

I do want to finish my dental program, so I'll need to be part-time at first and then I can extend my hours as I complete the program.

Please let me know next steps! I'm looking forward to working with you and helping you grow your business.

Best,

Millie Barlowe

I started to get ready and expected Colton to take a couple days to get back to me, so I was shocked when my phone was ringing before I'd even gotten out of the shower. I didn't get a lot of calls this early in the morning, so my first thought was something bad had happened. I reached out of the curtain to glance at my phone, but shampoo ran down into my eyes. I tried to wipe it away, but had soap on my hands, so the soap stung my eyes instantly. I reached for a towel to dry my hands and dabbed at my now watering eyes before grabbing my phone to see who it was.

"Colton?" I said, blinking my eyes repeatedly to get a clearer look at the number that went to voicemail. "I'll have to call you back," I said out loud to myself, dropping my phone on the towel before slipping back into the warm cascade of water to finish my shower.

PING. PING. PING.

"What the hell?" I said, my message notifications pinging incessantly. I tried to finish my shower as quickly as I could, but my mind was racing and I couldn't remember what I had or hadn't washed yet. I'm pretty sure I washed my hair twice.

When I got out, I gently shook the phone off my towel so I could dry off and picked my phone back up to see what the heck was going on.

Colton: Millie, you there?

Colton: Millie, let me know when you can be here today.

Colton: Are you on your way?

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I muttered as I typed a reply.

Millie: Hey Colton, I have in-person class today, so I won’t be available until this afternoon, but I can head over to your office then.

Colton: Okay, sounds good.

“Wow, this guy is a lot,” I said, before putting down my phone to finish getting ready. “I guess we’re just going to dive right in then.”

Before I left school that day, I had planned to stop and talk with Angela about my conversation with Colton, but as soon as our lunch break started, I turned on my phone and found another stream of messages from him. “What did I get myself into?” I said under my breath, while scrolling through his messages.

It seemed like he was in the middle of a few deals and was drowning in all the paperwork and details. He kept saying he really needed my help, so I jumped in my car to meet Colton at his office, which was twenty minutes away.

When I got there, I was surprised to meet him in person and see that he wasn’t much taller than me. He had dark brown hair that was combed over and brooding, dark brown eyes. He wasn’t a good-looking man, by any stretch, but he wasn’t ugly, either. He had a commanding presence that made him seem taller and he dressed well enough to fit in with the luxury real estate crowd. To be honest, I barely got a direct look at him, because he never stopped moving, and the second I walked in, he launched into all the details of the office. I was also distracted by the whiteboard labeled “DEALS” that was packed full of properties in all stages to the point that it was almost illegible.

“This is your desk,” he said, pointing to a desk piled high with paperwork and nothing else. “We’ll be in the same office most of the time, because I like the synergy, but I also work from the next door office when I take private calls or film my YouTube videos. Do you have any video editing experience? I need a good video editor.”

“I wouldn’t say I’m good, but I know some basics,” I said, looking around the large room which had three desks crammed into it, one on each wall and then the boards on the back wall.

“Basics will work for now,” he said, before walking quickly out of the office, leaving me standing there for a couple seconds before I heard him say, “Come on, Millie,” from the hallway.

“Oh, I’m following you, okay,” I said, dropping my purse on the chair and following him into the hallway. I got a whirlwind office tour and the place looked and felt like a bachelor pad. If there had been a cot in a corner of one of the rooms where he slept, I wouldn’t have been shocked in the slightest, so when he talked about his wife and kids, it surprised me. He didn’t seem to have enough time left for a family.

“So, what are the main priorities while I’m part-time,” I asked, noting in my head that in addition to real estate executive assistant tasks, I also needed to get this entire office organized and looking more professional.

“First, we need to get caught up on deal paperwork. I have so many new clients, existing clients, and past clients and I haven’t been tracking them efficiently. Once we get caught up on all of the active deals, I want to look for ways to keep in touch with my entire client base. I have thousands of people on my email list, but I never talk to them, and I have almost no reviews online.”

“So, you’re working so many deals, everything else is falling through the cracks.”

“Exactly. This is the kitchen,” he said, pausing for a brief second on his whirlwind office tour.

“How long has it been since you’ve had an assistant?”

“I’ve used a few friends of the family part-time here and there, but never anybody for very long or full-time. This is a new position, so you’ll have the opportunity to set up systems your way—with my input, of course,” he said, before pausing again and barking, “Conference room.”

“Got it. This is more than part-time work. What do you think about me working from home sometimes?”

“Great. I do prefer in office as much as possible. But, if you are able to do more work at home, do it. Just don’t go over forty hours,” he said, stopping again. “Waiting area.” I noticed the magazines were old and it had a dusty smell. I’d definitely need to work my magic in here.

“I wouldn’t worry about that,” I said, laughing, “until I’m out of dental school, I don’t think I could squeeze out more than twenty hours if I tried.”

“You’d be surprised,” he said, walking back into our office and sitting down before looking up at me with his piercing brown eyes. “This office moves fast, and we make a lot of money. That can be addicting. The faster we move deals, the more both of us make.” With that, he turned back around and took a phone call that was coming in on his cell phone. “This is Colton,” he listened for a moment and then abruptly got back up and walked out of the room and into his other office.

“Woo, this guy moves fast,” I said to myself, exhaling and sitting down in my chair for the first time since I got here. I looked around and took a status report of the current condition. I started mindlessly picking at my nail polish while I made a mental list of what I needed to do to get this office organized.

I decided to start with organizing the boards. Debbie had taught me a lot about how to set up and run a luxury real estate brokerage, and his boards were a mess. I began by erasing and rewriting them so we could actually track every deal at the correct stage. When I was finished, I could clearly see the pipeline.

I whistled low under my breath. “This is a *lot* of deals.” I was thinking about my incentive package, which included scaled bonuses based on how much we made. If he was selling as much as it looked like he was, I’d be maximizing my bonus earning potential with quarterly bonuses in the 5-figure range—*each*.

That kind of money would be a game-changer for a girl like me.

5

Working for Colton was like trying to assist a hurricane. He had so many different deals going simultaneously, yet found the time and energy to flip properties on the side and invest in other real estate ventures and businesses that made him (and me) even more money.

I'd never seen money fall out of the sky the way it did for him. He had a knack for finding it, making it, and multiplying it and seemed determined to share it with me and his whole team, too.

The downside was that his expectations matched his work ethic. The whole part-time thing flew out the window pretty quickly and before long, he was maxing out my forty hours a week regularly—so I was making full-time pay while I was still in school, but the hours were killing me. Plus, last time I checked, I still had two kids who depended on me.

There was no way I was going to tell the guy no, though, because working for him had single-handedly transformed our quality of life. I had money for things I'd never had before and could give my kids anything they needed or wanted.

Since working for Colton, I'd been able to put Brielle in those ballet classes she'd always begged for. Sure, I had to take calls and work from the waiting area, but Beckett was happy to play on his tablet anyway—a \$500 tablet I could buy him because of this job.

More importantly, I finally had the money to put Beckett in the best autism support groups in our area. They were heralded as the “holy grail” for autistic kids and had a track record of incredible forward progress for kids who really needed tailored programs to help them catch up in specific areas. For example, Beckett was in computer coding classes with high schoolers, but couldn't always pick up on social norms. I wanted to give him every opportunity to thrive.

The longer I worked for Colton, the more I found myself resenting days I had to be at school or working on coursework, because I wanted to be at the office with Colton, pushing deals through, updating the boards, and running from property to property. The more we could accomplish, the more money rained down from the sky.

We were on fire and I never wanted it to stop.

But, Colton didn't really comprehend the concept of “downtime” or “offline,” often calling me over and over again when I was in class. One time I forgot to turn off my phone while we were in an ops group practicing teeth cleanings and my phone rang repeatedly in my purse until the instructor asked me to stop and go turn it off.

I'd even missed a couple days of classes because we had to focus on big deals that were time sensitive, and I couldn't take even four hours away from it to go to school.

“I'm not even sure why I'm still doing this program,” I said to Jon on the phone, when I was driving from school to the office. He was so happy when I had told him I'd gotten the

offer from Colton and accepted it. “I wish I could just work for Colton full-time already.”

“I’ve heard about him,” he said, “He’s one of the best. Totally unstoppable. His vision for his business is huge. You made a good decision.”

“Wow, thanks,” I said, surprised to have his rousing support to work with another man. “I’m excited about it, but it’s making me question why I’m even doing the dental program anymore. He was supposed to work around my schedule, but that went out the window pretty fast.”

“Just quit,” he said. “Chase what’s working. You’re great at this and real estate is a more profitable business. Focus on where the money is,” he added, like the true businessman that he was. He didn’t understand what it was like to have kids relying on you and limiting how much you could work. He had never experienced getting fired and immediately wondering how you were going to feed your kids. Something about him wanting me to quit made me want to finish even more. “Besides, then you’ll have more time to see me.”

I rolled my eyes. Of course that’s what he was thinking about. “I get that. I just want a backup plan.”

“I’ll be your backup plan,” he teased. “Anytime you want to back up, you tell me, and I’ll be there.”

“I’m sure you will,” I laughed, drinking up his attention.

“Seriously, though, if anything happens with Colton, just come work for me,” he added.

This was not a new idea. He often threw this out randomly. Truth be told, if I were ever desperate enough, I’d take him up on it before I’d let my refrigerator go empty, but barring anything that dramatic, I never wanted to work for him. “Don’t mix business and pleasure” was a cliché for a reason.

“I appreciate that,” I said. Before we could continue, my other line started beeping at me and a quick peek showed me what I already knew: it was Colton. I quickly said goodbye to Jon and clicked over.

“Where you at?” he barked at me.

“On my way, boss,” I said.

“Good, we’ve got work to do.” He hung up and I turned into the parking lot at the office. Right on time.

The minute I walked in, it was like a firestorm of information. He stood at the boards and talked me through the stages each deal was at and then complained that he had a few more and no space for them.

“We need more boards,” I said, standing up and getting my purse.

“Where do you think you’re going,” he asked bluntly.

“To go get more boards,” I explained, looking at him like this was obvious.

“You don’t do errands like that anymore,” he snapped his fingers off to the side and a younger girl I’d never seen before walked in. “This is Chloe, she’s the daughter of a friend. I’ve hired her to be my second assistant and she’ll handle daily tasks like runs for office supplies. I need you here with me working on deals. You’re being promoted to my business manager,” he said, going back to the board while Chloe and I looked back and forth at each other in surprise.

“Hi Chloe, welcome aboard the crazy train,” I joked, which made her squeeze out a nervous smile. I turned back to Colton, “Does this promotion come with a raise?” I joked again—sort of.

“Of course. I’ve already emailed you the details,” he said, without turning around.

“Oh, you’re not kidding. Okay,” I said, shocked, standing up to invite Chloe into the office where we had an empty desk off to the side. “Chloe, why don’t we set you up over here. We can talk about which tasks I’ll be delegating to you and we can get you going.”

She nodded and walked over to the desk. I could tell she was nervous and a little intimidated by Colton’s management style. I tried to make her comfortable by acting like I knew exactly what to do, but before I could dive into getting her logged in to the systems she would need to learn, Colton put

down the Expo marker and said abruptly, “I’m feeling inspired. I’m going to film another YouTube video,” and cruised out of the office. Both Chloe and I relaxed a little. It would be much easier to train this poor girl without him sucking all the oxygen out of the room.

“Is he always like this?” she asked, her big brown eyes framed with black rimmed glasses. She had a sweet, slightly mousy looking face and couldn’t be any older than 20 or 21.

“No, sometimes he’s worse,” I joked, which made her crack a smile. “Don’t worry about him. He’s harmless, really,” I assured her, and I could see her shoulders relax.

I spent the better part of the remainder of the day planning out how we would share tasks. It would be nice to offload some of the things I was spending my time on that weren’t difficult to do so that I could be more available for “revenue generating activities,” as Colton called them.

Before I logged off and packed up to go get my kids, Colton popped back into the doorway and announced energetically, “Got another one!” clapping his hands and then raising them in the air like he was in church.

“Woohoo!” I cheered, pumping one fist in the air, while my other hand grabbed my purse.

“Where are you going? We gotta send over the contract!” he said, spying my hand on my bag.

“Colton, it’s the end of the day. I gotta go get my kids,” I said. “I can send it from home in a little bit.” I threw my bag over my shoulder and started to head out.

“You can’t leave them there any longer?” he said, as I walked past him and toward the door.

“Not unless I want to pay double,” I said over my shoulder, without slowing down.

“I’ll pay for it,” he called after me, but it was too late, I was already out the door and heading to my car.

There was one thing I would not compromise on and that was my children.

After my kids were in bed that night, I sat down to push through the rest of my work, and true to form, Colton had already sent me a bunch of texts and emails.

I had started turning my phone off when I was spending those few precious evening hours with my kids, because he would just keep sending me messages. It gave me anxiety to turn my phone back on and see what I was dealing with, but I needed to put at least some boundaries in place with this runaway train of a boss.

I finished what I needed for the night and decided the rest could wait until tomorrow. I didn't have in-person classes, so I could get to the office first thing and start back up on this list. Nothing else was urgent and I was exhausted. Right before I turned my phone on airplane mode, a text slipped through from Jon.

Jon: Hey beautiful.

Millie: Hey you!

Jon: Any chance I can come over tonight?

Millie: I wish. My kids are here.

Jon: I'll be quiet.

Millie: I'm already in bed.

Jon: Perfect.

Millie: LOL. I'm going to sleep, Jon.

Jon: Just come out and say goodnight to me.

Millie: You're outside my house?

Jon: I just wanted to say hi.

Millie: Alright, hang on.

I threw on some cuter pajamas and my slippers before heading downstairs, turning on the porch light and quietly stepping outside. There he was, leaning against the side of his car with his hands in the pockets of his sharp, slim fit, black pinstripe suit with a light gray dress shirt underneath. He'd pulled his tie off already and unbuttoned the top couple of

buttons. His brown hair was still perfectly coiffed, but he had a little scruff on his face, so when I walked up to him and leaned in to give him a quick kiss, I reached up and ran my thumb over his stubble and said, “You can’t kiss me tonight with this.”

“Watch me,” he said, his hands wrapping around my waist and pulling me closer, before giving me a passionate kiss that made me weak in the knees. He kissed me like a man in the desert who’d found a spring of fresh water. I wrapped my arms around his neck and ran my fingers through his hair while I reciprocated his passion match for match.

“My seat leans all the way back,” he said, in between kisses.

“I can’t risk my kids waking up,” I said, pulling away, “but it was nice to see you.” I took a couple steps back, and he kept hold of my hand, not wanting to let go.

“You really won’t let me in?” he asked, his eyes soft and glossy.

“You know it’s complicated,” I said, my resolve starting to weaken. I stepped forward again to give him one last hug and a kiss on the cheek. “Let’s get together soon.”

“I never get to see you,” he said, holding my hands until I stepped far enough back where we both had to let go. “I thought you were going to quit dental school?” His face folded into a smile that made his dimples pop. *Heaven help me.*

“I’ll be done soon. Very soon,” I said, turning to go inside before I gave in. I closed the door, turned off the porch light, and leaned against the back of the door to catch my breath. Holy moly this man had an effect on me. I rested against the door for just a second.

“Mom?” Beckett asked, standing at the top of the stairs. My eyes shot open. *How much did he see?*

“Hey Beck, you okay?” I asked, heading upstairs.

“Why was the porch light on? Why are you in different pajamas?” He was starting to get anxious.

“I had to put some trash out, because I accidentally dumped something on my clothes.” I was already heading upstairs to gently tuck him back into bed.

Beckett was my angel; my super smart, super anxious, boy. Giving him every opportunity he deserved was my number one concern and it was more important to me than anyone, including Jon.

As I cuddled with Beckett until he fell asleep, and listened to his breaths become deeper and longer, I renewed my promise to put him and his sister first. After all, thanks to their father abandoning us, I was all they had.

6

The next morning I got to the office bright and early, even beating Colton there, which was exactly how I liked it. This gave me time to organize a little, get the pot of coffee on, check some emails, and get settled in before he came in like the Tasmanian Devil of real estate.

We were flying through our morning routine when Chloe came in looking a little sheepish.

“Chloe, so nice of you to join us,” Colton said, so sarcastically it caught me off guard.

“Sorry,” she said quietly, before sitting at her desk and picking up where she’d left off the day before. She was supposed to be working on some basic data entry, but I’d shown her the same task over and over and she still couldn’t do it independently. I saw her frustration, but I couldn’t help her right away, because I was on the phone with a client.

“Um, um, excuse me,” she was saying to me, but I was waving at her to stop, so I could listen to the client on the phone.

Colton saw the interaction and got upset, barking at her, “Chloe, figure it out!”

The loudness in his voice made me stop talking for a second, and when I caught my breath, I stood up quickly and walked outside the office where it was quieter.

When I came back in, she looked ready to cry, so I walked over and sat next to her. “What can I help you with?” I said, trying to calm her down.

“She should already know how to do this,” Colton said, his back to us as he typed on his computer. I wasn’t used to seeing this side of him. He had never talked to me this way.

“Colton, it’s getting tight in here, why don’t you work on things in the other room and I’ll get Chloe situated?” I suggested.

“Okay,” he said, grabbing his things and leaving. One thing I appreciated about him was that I could be direct, and he wouldn’t get offended.

“He hates me,” she said, getting emotional.

“No, he’s just a dude. He has no idea how he comes across sometimes,” I said. “Let’s focus on this spreadsheet, so you can start to update it.” I focused on the task at hand and could see she calmed down the longer he was out of the room.

Once she was settled, I let her know I’d be back in a few minutes and slipped out to find Colton. He was in his office doing three things at once, so I knocked as I walked in and said, “Hey boss, can we talk?”

“I’m a little busy right now,” he said, and he looked it. But, I wasn’t going to back down.

“You’re being a little hard on Chloe,” I said. “She’s a young college student, and I don’t think she was totally prepared for the pace at which we work. I think we should be more patient with her.”

“You can be patient with her,” he said curtly, still not making eye contact. “I’m going to be her boss. She’s taking too long to learn these basic programs.”

“Hey, can you make eye contact please,” I said, noticing he was starting to work like a crazed animal. He finally stopped moving for a second and looked at me. “If you’re not happy with her, we can find a replacement. If we’re keeping her, let’s try to make it work.”

“Aye, aye, captain,” he said, giving me a mock salute.

“Okay,” I said, before turning around and walking out.

This was the first time I’d seen this kind of immaturity in him, and I wasn’t a huge fan of it. Still, working for this man had dramatically changed my quality of life, so I was going to give him the benefit of the doubt.

The next day after class, I popped over to see Paige for a quick lunch before heading to the office. We could barely get a word in, though, because my phone pinged and rang incessantly.

“Can you just silence it?” she asked, getting annoyed.

“I can, but then I know I’m getting messages and calls that I’m not answering, so I have even more anxiety that I don’t know what’s happening.” I tried to explain.

“Is it always like this?” she asked back, her face crumpling in disgust.

“No, sometimes it’s worse,” I joked. Humor was my defense mechanism. “Honestly, it’s driving me a little crazy. When I’m sleeping, I dream that I’m missing calls or texts and then wake up to check my phone. The only time I turn my phone off is when I have focused time with the kids, but then I get anxious turning it back on, because I know there will be a zillion messages.”

“He still won’t pay you overtime?” she asked.

“Nope, he says he’s budgeted for forty hours. Here’s the thing, though, I don’t want to work more than that. In fact, I’m supposed to only work half of that, so this has been a lot more than I bargained for,” I explained.

“Why don’t you get a second phone,” she said, before popping another chip in her mouth.

“What do you mean?”

“Make this number your work phone, and then when you clock out for the night, turn it off and use your personal phone only. Don’t give anyone at work the personal number and you’ll be able to actually check out of work and live your life,” she explained.

“That’s actually a genius idea,” I said, thinking it through and realizing I loved it.

“He doesn’t get your brain on the clock if he ain’t paying you,” she said, pointing at me.

“True, but also, I am making more money than ever before. I don’t want to piss him off,” I said.

“You won’t. Pay to play, baby. He should understand that better than anyone.”

“I like it, I like it,” I said, as I mentally made a plan to get another phone.

“If he doesn’t like it, tell him to pay you overtime. Badda bing, badda boom,” she added as she drummed her fingers on the table for effect.

“Good point,” I chuckled, before taking another bite of my sandwich as my phone continued to ping.

“And if you don’t decide to do that, just don’t come over for lunch again, because that shit is stressing me out,” she said laughing, as she got up to throw away her trash, but I also knew she wasn’t really kidding.

“Duly noted,” I nodded, silencing my phone so I could finish my lunch.

I left her place and headed to the office where things were happening at a whirlwind pace, as usual. Chloe was trying to onboard a new agent over Zoom in the middle of the office without headphones and Colton was on a call with a client across the room from her, while throwing a mini basketball into a hoop over his desk over and over again.

I walked over to my desk and put my bag down before surveying the updates on the board and getting caught up on what was needed.

When Colton finished his call, he spun around and said, “Welcome to the party, we’ve got some big deals on the table.”

“Good, catch me up,” I said, before Chloe’s voice interrupted us, “You’ll need to set up an account and then you can log in.”

“Colton, does she need to do that in here?” I asked, but her voice drowned me out again—we were literally talking at the same time.

“I can’t hear myself think,” I said, signaling for us to go into the other office. Once we were settled into a quieter space, Colton blurted out, “It’s not working with Chloe.”

“I don’t disagree with you,” I said, “but we’ve split up the tasks so I can help with more deals, and now I can’t do both of our jobs.”

“Plus, I can’t fire her.”

“Why not?” I asked, genuinely surprised. He seemed the type that would love to fire someone and wouldn’t lose a minute of sleep over it.

“She’s a friend’s kid and I don’t want to pay unemployment.”

Okay, that was blunt, but at least he was honest. “What’s the plan then?”

“I’m going to make her quit,” he said, before standing up and starting to turn on his lighting around the YouTube filming nook.

“She’s a young kid, Colton. I don’t know that we want to play that game. I think it’s better to just be honest with her and give her time to find something else,” I explained. I couldn’t help but think about my own daughter in the future and how I’d want her boss to treat her. If someone intentionally tried to make her quit, I’d burn their business to the ground.

“Yeah, I’m going to go with my idea. You’ll back me on this?”

“Back you on what? I’m not doing anything dirty or cruel to the kid. I won’t help you break her down. Just be honest with her about what you need and if she can’t do it, let her go with grace,” I said, hoping to find a shred of empathy in that money-obsessed brain of his. “Plus, we need a replacement ready to go. I can’t do both jobs, especially while I’m in school. We’ve grown too much.”

“Okay, sounds good,” he said, but he wasn’t paying attention. He was already getting his camera set up to film. “I have a great idea for a video right now and don’t want to forget it. Can you shut the door on your way out?”

“Sure thing, boss,” I said, as I slipped out, closing the door and heading back to my office.

When Chloe finished her Zoom, I decided to see if I could help her save her job. “Hey Chloe,” I said nicely. “When you’re doing your Zoom onboarding, it is really tough for the rest of us to work in here. Can you please take your computer up to the conference room where you can have a private area to do those?”

She turned and looked at me, her face more serious than normal and said, “I need to do them here. I have all my things here and I’ve figured out what works for me. If you need to go to the conference room, then you can do that,” she added, before turning back around. “Also, you’re not my boss.”

My jaw dropped. I did not see that coming. Little girl had some sass in her. *Maybe she can deal with what was coming on her own then*, I turned back to my computer. I had just started working on some offers when she started up another Zoom and began talking loudly.

I exhaled audibly in frustration, picked up my computer and bag and made my way out to go to the conference room. She was right, I technically wasn’t her boss, because Colton hadn’t set up the chain of command that way, but her boss wanted her gone, and getting on my bad side wasn’t going to help her in the end.

For the next week or so, I kept working from the conference room or the kitchen, where there was a large table and chairs. I actually liked having a quieter space to work, and I was closer to the coffee maker and snacks, so that was a win. Chloe didn't ever seem to drink or eat anything, so I could go the entire time without ever really seeing her.

Once she had settled into her role, she had become more and more rigid, insisting on doing things a certain way and even trying to correct the way that I had things set up.

Colton was actively trying to get her to quit by messing with things enough to make her uncomfortable, but she just kept bouncing back. She was more resilient than I had originally given her credit for.

I took another sip of my coffee and saw an email ping in my inbox:

Hello Chloe,

This email is to remind you that part of your job description is assisting the team and that includes Millie. Your current hours do not reflect the hours that Millie and I like to be in the office.

You will need to adjust your work hours on the days that you are here to match the hours that Millie and I are here, and that is from 8am to 5pm with a lunch break at 12pm. These are the original hours that we discussed when you were hired, and you have slowly changed your hours or adapted them as needed without approval.

Respond to this email and confirm receipt. I expect your work hours to reflect this change to 8am to 5pm next week.

Regards,

Colton

“Oooohhhh, damn,” I said under my breath. He'd never sent me an email like that before. We both knew she set her work hours around her college courses, so I wasn't sure how she was going to accommodate that request. If she couldn't, he'd have grounds to fire her and she wouldn't be able to get unemployment. *He has a dark side I didn't know about.*

Just then, he peeked his head into the conference room and said, “Did you see my email?”

“Yes sir,” I said.

“Step one to getting rid of Chloe,” he said proudly, but before he could slip out, I said, “Hey, let me get you a coffee,” and scooted out of my seat to head to the coffee maker. He came back into the room and leaned up against the counter. We didn’t have a ton of time, just the two of us, and the energy was so much nicer when Chloe wasn’t around. I couldn’t argue that she wasn’t a great fit.

“How are you feeling about everything right now?” I asked him, as I added more creamer. He liked his coffee sweet.

“Pretty good. Business is hot. I need to replace Chloe. I just wish things were going better with my wife,” he said, taking a sip and nodding to let me know it was perfect.

He didn’t usually talk much about his wife, so this was an interesting and unwelcome shift.

“I hope things work out for you two,” I responded, looking away. I was intentionally trying to avoid asking questions or encouraging any conversation about her.

He took a seat across from where I had set up my computer, and kept talking anyway. “We’re in therapy, but she’s not doing her part. She agreed to several things, such as more date nights, more frequent sex, but she’s not doing any of it.”

“Whoa, Colton,” I said, putting my hands up to try to stop him, “I don’t feel comfortable talking about your intimacy with your wife.” Nope, that conversation was a hard stop.

“Really? I thought you might have a woman’s perspective,” he said, looking genuinely confused that I shut him down. “You’ve been through a divorce, so what are the warning signs? Do you think these issues could be the end of our marriage?”

“I don’t know enough about your relationship to make that decision. I can tell you that every couple has their own balance and their own areas they need to improve. Focus on having

these conversations with your wife and don't compare your relationship to others," I said firmly, putting my glasses back on, and flipping through some papers in an effort to look busy.

"I also feel like she isn't trying hard enough to keep the house clean, you know?" he continued anyway, and I raised my eyes above the top rim of my glasses to make eye contact without moving the rest of my head. *This guy has got to be kidding.* "I know we have kids, but she doesn't work outside the home and I feel like it's her job."

"It's her job to be your maid?" I asked. He was really starting to hit some sore spots for me.

"No... it's her job to take care of the house if I'm 100% taking care of the business and finances," he said, completely comfortable with his antiquated ideas of marriage.

"Colton, I have to tell you the truth, I'm uncomfortable talking about this. I am not a licensed marriage therapist and you've already hired one to be that for you and your wife. I really encourage you to talk about these things with your wife," I said again, before adding, "We have a lot of deals on the table right now and I don't have a lot of hours to be here. Let's focus on making money, and you can focus on your marriage at home."

He got up and pushed his seat in, looking completely comfortable with this very uncomfortable exchange and said, "Cool, let's make money," as he walked out the door.

I took my glasses off and rubbed my eyes with my palms. He was really starting to confuse our relationship with something more personal than it was. I needed to figure out how to draw some firm boundaries very quickly.

"What the hell was that..." I muttered to myself, before shaking my head like I could shake his words out.

The next day at school, I couldn't stop thinking about everything going on at work.

"Hey girl, you in there?" Angela asked, pointing towards my head. She must have been talking to me while we were on a break, and I wasn't responding.

“Yeah, I’m sorry, I just keep thinking about work,” I explained, actually making eye contact with her for the first time.

“What’s that little rich boy doing now?” she asked, her voice dripping with disdain.

“Now he’s started complaining about his wife,” I said.

“Oh girl, he trying to have you on the side?” she asked, her eyes squinting and her upper lip curling back in disgust.

“Dear god, I hope not,” I said, mirroring her face. “He is *not* my type,” I added emphatically, my eyes wide. *Gross.*

“They don’t care. Guys with money think they can have anything they want,” she said, shaking her head before taking another sip of her coffee.

“Yeah, I didn’t really take him for a money hungry guy before, but I’m starting to think maybe I misread the situation. He treats our assistant like crap, and she’s not the nicest person, by any means, but I feel like he could be more direct and kind,” I said.

“They’re all the same,” she said, shaking her head. “Don’t try to see what you want, see what is actually there. All he cares about is himself and money,” she added, before we heard the instructor rallying us for the next round of patients.

“What do I do?” I said, genuinely surprised Angela was reading the situation so easily when I was in the thick of it and couldn’t figure it out.

“Don’t give up on your backup plan,” she said, nodding in the direction of the instructor and motioning at the patients coming in for free treatments.

I looked around. She was right. I had started to lose focus and wasn’t doing as well in my classes as before. The money I was making was completely blinding me from why I started this in the first place. This was my exit strategy and I was not going to let it go, no matter how much Colton waved money in my face.

That weekend I was planning on enjoying a much-needed relaxing morning at home with my kids. Things had been hectic, and even when we were together at home, my mind was racing and I felt anxious about the work I wasn't doing. When my phone pinged again and again while we were cuddling and trying to watch a movie, I reached a breaking point.

"Kids, let's get dressed and go get donuts!" I said excitedly and they threw off their blankets and ran to their rooms. What they didn't know was that after donuts, I was going to buy a second phone.

While the kids happily munched on their donuts, I haggled with the cell phone guy about what it would take to get a second number and a new phone.

"I just need to add another line to my plan and get another phone, hopefully for free," I said again, slower, since the first ten times didn't seem to get the message across. He kept offering me things I didn't need or want.

"Yeah, we don't do free phones anymore, but we can add a payment plan to your account to cover the cost," he said, like this was a great compromise.

"Okay, what are your deals for two lines then. Let's just start there," I said.

"It's cheaper to add a Family Plan than to just add another line," he explained, "and that gives you up to five lines for your family."

"I don't need five lines, I just want two lines, so can you give me a discount from the Family Plan?"

"Two lines is more expensive than five lines," he said again.

"What you're saying makes no sense," I said, a fake smile plastered on my tired face. "Why can't I just get two lines for less than the price of five?"

"There is no package for two lines. There's one line or five lines or a commercial upgrade for a larger team."

“Okay, so how do I save money on this?” I asked, getting confused.

“You can get unlimited data and wifi with the Family Plan or you can upgrade to the Extra Plan which gives you limited data and wifi, but costs more,” he said.

“Again, that makes no sense. Why would I spend more money to get less data?”

“Exactly, which is why the Family Plan is the best option for you. Unlimited data and messaging, plus five lines,” he said.

“Okay, but I don’t need five lines, I just need two, so why can’t you discount the Family Plan, or just give me two lines with unlimited data for less. Do you see what I’m saying?” I said, my eyes narrowing in frustration.

“But what about your kids, that could be another two lines right there,” he said, pointing to the kids.

“My kids are 5 and 8. They don’t need phones. They need donuts. I would rather save the money on those lines until I need them.” I said again. “I’m a single mom with two kids, I don’t need to pay for five lines instead of two. You feel me?”

“I get it, and my mom was a single mom, too. That’s why when she wanted the best deal, I told her to get the Family Plan,” he said.

“For herself?” I asked.

“For the two of us,” he said, nodding and smiling like this made perfect sense.

I took a deep breath in and out. Coming to the cell phone store always made me feel crazy. Their plans were nonsensical. It was like walking into an alternate universe. And, was anybody else frustrated that we spend \$800 on a phone that shatters the second we drop it? Why are these devices not made better? Why were these plans so expensive?

“Okay, I’ll take the Family Plan and a free phone,” I said, sliding my credit card across the counter. I was done dealing with these people.

“Great, the phone is extra, unless you upgrade to the Unlimited Plan.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I said through gritted teeth.

I think I blacked out after that or just stopped processing what he was saying, but I left there with another phone that I paid full price for, an expensive phone case, the Family Plan, unlimited data, and a much higher monthly bill.

“Mommy, I want a phone,” Brielle said, licking sprinkles off her fingers as we walked to the car.

“Well, good news kid, you can get one sooner than you think, now that I think I have the Family Plan,” I said as I held open the car door for them to hop in the back.

“You’ll have to buy the phone, though,” Beckett said, as he got into the car first.

“Thank you, Beckett,” I said flatly, closing the door after them.

Once I got home and set up my new personal phone, I effectively turned off my work phone, tossed it in my work purse and collapsed on my couch in a mixture of relief, anxiety, and frustration. I shouldn’t have to spend my Saturday with my kids buying a new phone because my boss wouldn’t respect my work hours.

At the same time, the fact that he worked so many extra hours meant we all made a ton of extra money. It was a dizzying train of thought and left me with no good answers or solutions other than enjoying this rare quiet time with my kids now that I had my own personal phone number that Colton didn’t have.

7

On Monday morning I turned my work phone back on as I was getting ready. I had a feeling that Colton wasn't going to be too happy about my unannounced total blackout for the weekend.

My heart rate started to speed up as I watched my phone log all the missed work texts, phone calls, and emails. They just kept coming.

"208 messages!" I shrieked, grabbing my phone to look at it closer like I was seeing things. I scrolled through quickly, trying to figure out what could possibly have happened that resulted in so many messages, but there was nothing unusual. Was this how many texts and calls I had been receiving on days off and just didn't realize it? Over 100 a day? When I wasn't even supposed to be working?

I quickly sent Colton a text at the end of the thread where he had been having a conversation with himself for two days.

Millie: Hey Colton, I decided to turn my phone off to keep me from accidentally working off the clock. I'm going to go through these messages and catch up on what I've missed.

Colton: You're alive. That's a relief.

Millie: Was that ever a question?

Colton: We almost missed out on a huge deal because you weren't answering.

Millie: It was the weekend and you told me not to work past 40 hours.

Colton: Real estate doesn't sleep, Millie.

Millie: Are you saying you want to pay me overtime?

Colton: With what you're making, you shouldn't even be asking me that.

Millie: What are you asking, Colton? You have me on hourly until I'm done with school and told me not to exceed 40 hours. So, what do you want me to do?

Colton: We can talk about this when you come into the office.

What is there to talk about? I was giving him exactly what he wanted and had to buy a second phone line to protect both of our boundaries when I was off the clock. This guy was unbelievable.

I was so upset and distracted that we almost got into a car accident on the way to school, and then I started slowly rolling away before the kids had even gotten out of the car and closed the car door.

"MOM! HEY!" Beckett yelled, almost falling out of the car.

"Beckett, I'm so sorry!" I yelled, hitting the brakes and waiting for him to safely close the door, before rolling down the passenger window and yelling, "I love you, have a great day!"

He gave me an annoyed half-wave and Brielle blew me a kiss before they walked hand-in-hand to school. Beckett didn't

care that it wasn't cool to hold his sister's hand. He didn't care what was cool or not cool at all. He had absolutely no concern for peer pressure or social norms. "Lucky duck," I said to myself, as I imagined how much easier my life would be if I didn't care what people thought of me.

As I drove to work, my brain was swimming. I was going to take this frustration out at work if I didn't talk through it with someone.

"He never stops working," I complained to Paige, as soon as she picked up the phone.

"Hello to you, too," she said, sounding a little groggy. I had forgotten she wasn't up as early as we were most days. Oops. Oh well, she was up now.

"Even his vacations are planned around where he can work a deal. He took his wife on a trip for her birthday, but it had to be in Vail, Colorado, because he had a huge opportunity to invest in a new build there. It doesn't end," I added, unstoppable now that it was all starting to tumble out.

"I guess it's a good thing you get a cut of all those deals then, right?" she asked, stifling a yawn. She saw how I'd been working myself to the bone.

"True, I've never made money like this in my life. My kids have literally never had this quality of life, ever," I said. "I'm not complaining, but..."

PING! PING! PING!

Our conversation was interrupted by the pinging of my work phone in my bag. Again. The longer I worked for Colton, the more that sound became a permanent fixture in my daily life. I heard that ping in the early hours of the morning, in the middle of studying for my online classes, and while waiting at appointments with my kids.

I was really starting to hate that phone. "Ugh, hold on, let me check my phone," I said, reaching into my bag for it while driving with my other hand.

"Aren't you in your car? Pay attention to the road, Mills," she said, scolding me with love.

“I know, I just need to see what this is about,” I said, leaning further over when I couldn’t find the phone and accidentally starting to swerve into the next lane.

HONK! The truck I almost slammed into let me know I was driving erratically and I immediately sat up straighter and paid more attention to what I was doing.

“Hey listen, go do your thang,” Paige said. “I’ve gotta new project to edit anyway.”

“Sorry, I’ll call you later,” I said, as I heard her phone line go quiet. At the next stop light, I waved and smiled at the angry truck driver next to me and reached over again to grab my phone before the light turned green. Just in time, because Colton was calling me—again.

“Colton, how can I help you?” I asked.

“Millie, where have you been? I’ve been texting and calling you,” he started.

“Just dropping the kids off at school, Colton,” I said.

“Okay, well, drive faster next time. I need you over here at this property on Cassanova. I texted you the address. We’re meeting with a huge investor named Rick. Make me look good.”

“Don’t I always?” I asked.

“That’s why I hired you,” he said, before hanging up. He sure wasn’t big on pleasantries. I put my phone on the dash phone mount, clicked on the address to pull up my navigation and looked at where it was taking me.

“Here we go,” I said, under my breath, before getting on the freeway and heading towards a new neighborhood I hadn’t been to before.

When I got to the property, I was shocked to see that we were on a street that I wouldn’t necessarily want to be alone on at night. We usually worked with large parcels of land that sold for millions or luxury homes. This looked like a really old motel that had been converted into small, rentable units. By

the looks of it, they were not only inhabited, but they may even have multiple families per unit, too.

A large billboard on the property obscured a large portion of the units in a shadow, and the billboard was currently promoting something I thought was rather inappropriate for the tenants of the property, considering many units had small toys and bikes out front.

“This is a little different,” I said to Colton as I walked up to him.

“Positive faces on,” Colton said, “this is a huge opportunity for the business. This guy is a major player in property investing for our area. He owns something like 3,000 properties, all tenant occupied, many with additional revenue streams like this billboard here.” He pointed up at the billboard.

“Yeah, I saw it,” I said, wincing as I tried not to look at it again.

“This is a great business opportunity for us,” he said again and I could almost see the dollar signs in his eyes.

Before I could express my concerns that this was wading into waters that were very different from the audiences we typically worked with, a very nice, black sedan with dark tinted windows pulled up, and a portly, partially bald Caucasian man with gray hair stepped out of the back seat and walked over to us. “Colton, great to see you!” he said, before shaking Colton’s hand. Then turning his attention to me, “You must be Millie. Colton speaks very highly of you,” he said, offering to shake my hand.

I maintained eye contact with his shrewd, beady little eyes while I shook his hand firmly. “Nice to meet you, Rick,” I said.

After that, it was like I wasn’t even there and the two of them walked the property and talked specs, units, income streams, tenants, and more, while I furiously took notes and tried to keep up.

“So, you’re telling me someone could buy this entire property with every unit occupied, and billboard advertising already set up for the rest of the year? This is an incredible opportunity for someone who wants to expand their rental portfolio.”

“Exactly,” Rick said.

“So, just out of curiosity, why are you selling?” Colton asked.

“I want to move into commercial units, so I’ve started selling off all my residential properties. There are hundreds more like this one. If you do a good job here Colton, I can use someone like you to sell off a huge chunk of my real estate portfolio and help me reinvest the money.”

Colton stood up a little straighter, wide-eyed. I could tell that he was literally tasting the money this could make him. “I’m ready. Are you?”

“You sure you can take on occupied units like this? You’ll need to get the tenants out or find a buyer who wants them occupied.”

“Absolutely.”

“It’s a different ballgame to sell units with tenants,” Rick said again, “and I’m not going to make any improvements to the property. They sell as is,” he finished, eyeing Colton for any signs of weakness.

Colton answered without even looking in my direction, “Millie, we can handle volume like that, can’t we?”

“You got it, boss,” I said firmly.

“Good. You’ve got the deal,” Rick said, before shaking Colton’s hand. They both broke out into big grins and we started to head back to our cars.

After Rick got in his car, Colton turned back to me and said, “Hey, can you stick around and start to get to know the tenants? We’ll need them to work with us in order to get the units photographed and ready to list.”

“Wait, you want me to knock on these people’s doors out of the blue and tell them we might be selling their units?” I asked, shocked.

“Yeah, why not?”

“Because I’ll get shot,” I said back, my hand gesturing at the area around us.

“Okay, well, come back another day then, bring mace or whatever you need to feel safe and get it done,” he said, in a tone that I hadn’t heard before.

“How about a bodyguard.” I yelled at his back.

“Sure, whatever you want to do, but you can pay for it,” he said over his shoulder, already heading to his car.

I was supposed to pay for my own bodyguard to help him sell his property? This guy got one taste of big money and changed into a different person. I got in my car and breathed a sigh of relief as soon as I was back on the freeway heading towards the office.

Colton was slowly changing the more money he made and it was not into a person that I really liked. I definitely didn’t want to make him look bad though, nor did I want to get off this money train. I didn’t like to admit it, but I had gotten a taste of the good life since working for Colton and I didn’t want to let it go. I needed to figure out how to handle this type of property and I knew just who to call.

As soon as I heard his deep, lightly accented voice, I felt a little warmer all over. “Hey Jon,” I said. “How’s it going?”

“Much better now,” he said back, always the flirtatious one.

“I was hoping I could get your help with something,” I said, as I hit the final stretch to the office. “Colton wants to start selling occupied properties, and he wants me to go to the units and tell people that the property is going up for sale soon and try to get them to let us into the units to take pictures and videos.”

“Colton wants *you* to do that?” he asked, confused.

“Yeah, he wanted me to start today,” I said.

“First of all, that’s the property manager’s job. Second of all, that can be dangerous. People are not often happy to hear their units are being sold. What is the condition of the property?” he asked.

“Poor. It looked pretty run down, and the client was clear he will not do any reparations.”

“Wow, well, that’s not a good sign. Are you sure you want this deal?” he asked, concern in his voice, which of course made me feel more concerned.

“It’s not my call,” I said, “I’m just the assistant.”

“Well, then that is what you tell Colton. You should not be going in person to those properties at all. If anything, you do this over the phone. The client should be releasing contact info for the renters,” he said. “Last case scenario is putting notices on the doors for when you’ll need to enter the premises and you show up with the inspector and photographer to do it all together.”

“That makes a lot more sense. Do you think we could meet for lunch and you can tell me what to say to these people? I don’t have a death wish,” I said again.

“Absolutely, lunch tomorrow?” he asked.

“Well, I’m supposed to go to class, but I can try to squeeze you in after class before I go to the office.”

“Squeeze me in where?” he teased.

I giggled and blushed a little. “I can meet you somewhere near my school, I have class in the morning.”

“Send me an address tomorrow and I’ll be there,” he said.

Jon may not be perfect, but today he was there when I needed him. Right now, I was especially grateful for that. I felt a little flushed and tingly as I turned into the office parking lot, forgetting all about my money-hungry boss and our brand new shady client.

8

The next day, I couldn't keep my mind on school. I needed to focus, especially since I had sharp dental tools in people's mouths, but I just kept thinking about dealing with the rental properties and having to tell the unsuspecting tenants they might have to leave—soon.

“I knew people like that,” Angela said to me, on our break. “When I was growing up, my mom lived in this place owned by a slumlord. The floors were just plywood, no carpet or anything. If things broke, they wouldn't fix it. Then, he sold it right out from under us one day. The new people wanted to revitalize the units and rent them for more and we couldn't pay it, so we were out.”

“Oh my god, that's terrible,” I said. “What did your family do?”

“What anybody does in that situation. We stayed in family shelters for a while until my mom was able to share a duplex

with another lady and her kids. It was a lot of people, but it got us out of the shelter.”

“What do you mean by slumlord?” I said, a little embarrassed. “I didn’t grow up rich, by any means, but I also never went through anything like that.”

“Oh, it’s guys who buy tons of cheap properties and rent them to people who can’t get a place anywhere else. They don’t check credit or anything, so you can end up with all kinds of people in there. Then they refuse to fix anything and if you complain, they tell you to go rent something else—but they know you can’t,” she said, shaking her head. I could tell this was pulling a string on what could untie a lot of bad memories for her.

“Geez, that’s awful,” I said, suddenly losing my appetite for my pasta salad. It made me feel sick to think of all those families and kids living in unmaintained units.

I made a decision then and there that I was going to tell Colton I wasn’t interested in being the contact person for this property. The current owner needed to give us the contact info for his property manager so we could work through them.

When I left school, I went to shoot Jon a text with where to meet me and saw that I’d missed one from him when my phone was on silent.

Jon: Millie, meet me here?

He sent me a pin to the location. It wasn’t too far, so I wrote back that I’d be there in ten minutes. When I pulled up, I was surprised to see that it was a small, sweet hotel or bed and breakfast of some kind and not a restaurant. I parked next to a fancy car, guessing it was his, and looked around to see if I could find where he was. Then, the door to one of the little cottages opened up and there he was, in all his glory. He’d taken his suit coat off, rolled up the sleeves of his shirt, and unbuttoned the top two buttons. He leaned against the door jamb and crossed his arms over his chest. The whole scene looked like something out of a men’s clothing catalog.

Holy moly, he's so good-looking! I thought, while trying to play it cool and walk without falling in my heels. I'd changed at school into something a little bit more sexy knowing I was seeing Jon today. He looked me up and down and smiled softly to show his approval.

"Hey you," I said, before leaning in to give him a little kiss. He pulled me in closer and kissed me deeper than I was expecting. If he hadn't been holding me, my knees might've given out. "Does that mean you're happy to see me?" I teased, when I leaned back to look him in the eyes.

"Always," he said. "I want to show you this place," he added, while gently pressing on my back to guide me in. He closed and locked the door behind us and as I walked into the living area, I saw a little table and chairs set for two, with lit candles. Soft music was playing and there were fresh flowers and candles all over.

"What is this place?" I asked, looking around in awe before turning around and seeing him right behind me.

"Do you like it?" he said, taking me in his arms and looking down at me like he was going to kiss me again.

"You did this...for me?" I said, shocked. How did he get all of this set up in here?

"I've always loved this little hotel and have wanted to bring you here for a while. They had one of the cottages available, so I thought it would be fun to surprise you," he explained, still not letting go of me. "Dance with me, I like this song," he said, when the music switched to a romantic ballad.

He gently led me through ballroom dance moves, moving fluidly on the hardwood floors like he was a dance teacher. "I never knew you could dance." I said, genuinely impressed and breaking out into a huge smile. Jon was full of surprises today.

"Well, then, you've learned something new about me," he said, pulling me closer and holding me in his arms while we swayed side to side.

“This is very sweet,” I said, my feelings for him sweeping me up and carrying me away. There was no hope resisting this man. He was my addiction.

“Spin,” he said, before stepping back and gently pushing my left side to the right while raising our arms up so I could spin. When I thought I was coming back to center, he quickly leaned sideways, taking me with him and dipping me backward. The motion caught me off guard and I leaned my head back laughing. He leaned towards me and started kissing my neck, moving slowly down. I drew in my breath sharply, the warmth of his lips unexpected against my cool skin. My body began to relax and he slowly pulled me back up until we were standing again. “Let me show you something else,” he said huskily, his voice laden with emotion and desire.

He took me by the hand and walked me toward the bedroom. More candles and flowers were everywhere. “What is this?” I said, breathlessly.

“Something just for us,” he said, coming behind me and slowly removing my blazer, revealing the lace-trimmed camisole underneath. He kissed my shoulder, moving slowly toward my neck. I knew there was something I needed to talk to him about, but my brain wasn’t working.

I turned around, put my hands on the sides of his face, looked him deeply in the eyes and said, “Okay, you win,” before kissing him like my life depended on it. He picked me up and carried me to the bed.

I had no clue how much time had passed, but the incessant beeping of my phone was enough to make me pry myself away from Jon and put my clothes back on.

“I want more, Millie,” Jon said, holding my hand for a few seconds.

“I want more, too,” I said, leaning over to kiss him before extricating my hand so I could get dressed. “Why don’t we try this for real. Go all in. A full on relationship where we live in the real world and do real things.”

“That’s not what I was talking about,” he laughed, rubbing his face with his hands. “We can talk about that another time, though.”

I only half-heard his response, because I had simultaneously dug my phone out of my purse and there was a stream of messages from Colton.

“Let’s talk about this later,” I kissed him again on the forehead. “I’ve gotta go.” Jon got out of bed as I was looking for my shoes, he came out in just his dress pants, holding his shirt. The sight of him shirtless distracted me from everything, even an angry Colton.

He laughed, “I thought you were leaving?” He put on his dress shirt and added, “There was food for you,” he pointed to the table.

Glancing at the silver food warmers reminded me of how hungry I was. “I’m starving,” I said, more to myself than anyone else.

“Take it with you,” he said, lifting off the cover to show a delicious lunch, the smell making my stomach growl.

“I wish,” I said, picking up a fork and taking a couple quick bites. “Oh, that’s good,” I groaned, my hand instinctively touching my mouth.

“If you start doing that, I won’t be able to let you leave,” Jon said quietly, sliding his hand around my waist.

“Okay, okay, I’m going!” I laughed, knowing what happens when we stand this close to each other. I grabbed the rest of my things, holding my shoes in one hand and the plate of food in the other. It took every ounce of strength for me to walk out with him standing there looking like that, but regular pings on my phone kept me on task.

Sliding into the driver’s seat, I waved at Jon as I headed down the road. Once I hit a light, I shot my task master a quick text.

Millie: Sorry I’m late, had a test at school.

Colton: You've gotta be done with school soon or I'm going to have to find someone else.

I leaned my head back against the headrest and groaned in frustration.

When I walked into the office, Chloe was huddled at her desk with big headphones on, tuning everything out, and Colton was pacing back and forth on his phone, talking loudly. For a short guy, he sure took up a lot of space.

"I guarantee you I can net you more money if you sell with me rather than for sale by owner. Guaranteed. That's my job, to make you money," he said. He was convincing when he wanted to be and the client bought it. "Great, I'll have Millie send over my contract," he said excitedly, motioning to me like I had any idea who he was talking with.

I sat down in my seat and got to work, my head in the clouds after my romantic rendezvous with Jon. When Colton got off the call, there was another one, something about a networking trip to San Francisco. Then, another one—it sounded like a woman, and his voice changed a little when he talked to her.

I hope it's his wife, I thought, while I got to work on necessary paperwork for our deals. The calls kept coming and he paced the entire time, back and forth across the little office, sometimes stopping to rest his hand on the back of my seat, which was very annoying. I knew better than to break his flow by asking him to step into his other office and if I got up to walk out, he'd be more annoyed with me than he already was. So, I just suffered through it, trying to focus on my work and pretend he wasn't behind me yelling into my ear. When he seemed to be bored on one call, he started bumping his groin area on the side of my desk. I just tried not to make eye contact with him and focused on my work.

Finally, the calls stopped and I turned around to see what the result was. "Okay, what do I need to know?" I asked, crossing my legs and resting my notepad on top of my leg.

"Two new deals, one great offer, and I've got a few more agents signed up for the networking event in San Francisco,"

he said, before sitting in his seat and doing a celebratory drumming on his desk.

“Way to go, boss,” I said, before standing up to work on the boards. He got very quiet for a moment and I thought he was working, but when I glanced down at him I saw him staring at me.

“Is your skirt inside out?” he asked, looking at me strangely.

“Please don’t stare at my skirt,” I said, stepping further away from him and feeling immediately uncomfortable.

“There’s something stuck to the back,” he said, reaching towards it and I smacked his hand away.

“What are you doing?!” I said, horrified, reaching back there myself and feeling the lace from my thong. “Oh my god,” I said, glancing down and seeing that my skirt was actually inside out.

“What...the...” Why was I staring at the lining of my skirt? “I’ll be right back,” I announced as I hightailed it to the bathroom.

“Hurry up!” he yelled after me. I ignored him and locked myself in the bathroom before unzipping my skirt and dropping it to the floor, flipping it right side out, and pulling it back up. When I looked in the mirror, I realized that my camisole was wrinkled, my jacket had lint all over it, and my hair was a mess. Not only that, but my mascara had left little black marks underneath my bottom eyelashes and my lipstick had smudged when we kissed and left little pink marks around my lips and face. I looked like a really sad clown that had melted.

Why did I not check what I looked like before I left the hotel? I furiously started smoothing my hair, fixing my makeup, and trying to get the wrinkles out of my clothes. I rifled through my purse and found a sample size perfume I used sometimes and spritzed on myself to make sure I didn’t smell like men’s cologne. I was so embarrassed and insanely glad we weren’t meeting with any clients today.

The only thing I had done right was pack a second pair of shoes, so I wasn't wearing high heels in the office. That would have been a dead giveaway to Colton that I didn't come straight there from school. After I'd done my best to look a little less electrocuted, I looked in the mirror and tried to refocus.

"Get it together, Millie," I said to myself in the mirror, gripping the sides of the counter firmly. "No more distractions."

A few seconds after I went back into the office, Colton coughed. Then, he coughed some more.

"What's that smell?" he said, in between hacks that were getting closer together. "Is someone wearing perfume?" he coughed some more. He got up and walked out of the office, his face turning red.

"Oh my god," I said, turning to Chloe. "Did you know he's allergic to fragrances?"

"I don't wear perfume," she said, before turning back to her computer.

I walked out into the hallway and he seemed to be breathing a little better. "Sorry boss," I said, grimacing. "Wasn't trying to kill you. Just didn't want to stink up the office."

"No problem," he said, waving at me to walk further away from him. "Just please don't let it happen again. I'll be working in my other office for the rest of the day," he finished, before rushing into his other office and closing the door behind him.

I was on fire today—and not in a good way.

The next few weeks continued to be an absolute disaster. We took that listing of rundown units, and it was every bit as bad as I expected it to be. When I reached out to the seller for the name and number of his property manager, I was told he didn't have one. When I asked for a list of names and numbers for renters of the units, he said he didn't have one. When I asked

for just a copy of the ID for each resident, so I could find the info myself, he told me—you guessed it—he didn't have one.

Since Colton was refusing to do this himself, saying it “wasn't his job”, it fell under my purveyance. I was now the Tenant Terminator.

The first time I went to the property, I left straight from work, so I was dressed professionally. I had mace in the car, but didn't really think I'd need it. I assumed the residents would be a little resistant, but friendly.

I did not anticipate that they would try to kill me. Maybe that's being a bit dramatic, but I got there, parked, knocked on the first door, and stood back far enough away to ensure they didn't feel uncomfortable. The door jerked open, but only as far as the chain lock allowed it, and a crumpled up old woman's face squished into the space and screamed, “WHAT DO YOU WANT?”

I almost fell over from the shock of it, but kept my composure and said, “I'm just here to introduce myself. I work for Colton Homes. We are the listing agent for the owner of your building.”

But before I could even finish, there was more screaming. “YOU REPRESENT RICK. THAT BASTARD. HE NEVER FIXES *ANYTHING*. MY WATER HAS RUN COLD FOR MONTHS. HE DON'T TAKE MY CALLS. HE CAN GO TO HELL.” She slammed the door shut.

My heart raced and sweat started to bead at my hairline. There was no way I was knocking on that door again, so I stepped back a bit, collected myself, dabbed at my forehead with the back of my hand and was about to move on to the next unit, when the door jerked open again. Oh good, she wanted to yell at me some more.

“DON'T YOU COME KNOCKING HERE AGAIN OR I'LL LET THE DOGS OUT.”

Slam. “Holy moly,” I muttered under my breath before slowly walking over to the next door. But again, before I could even knock on the door this time, they, too, jerked open the

door and screamed, “WE DON’T WANT NONE! GO AWAY!” and slammed the door.

“I’m two for two,” I said, trying to breathe in and out slowly to bring my heart rate down. I was full on sweating now, pretty profusely, underneath my clothes.

I approached the third door and was too nervous to knock. I just stood there, breathing and picking at my nails. I saw movement behind the front window and could feel people staring at me. Just then, I heard a loud banging noise and a door behind me swung open. I spun around and a large man in a tank top with a cigarette hanging out of the side of his mouth came sauntering out. “You can come check out my unit if you like,” he said, looking me up and down, his eyebrows lifting up and down quickly. “Why don’t you come on inside?”

My mouth went dry. “Thank you so much, but I’m out of time for today,” I said, before hightailing it to my car and leaving so fast dust pooled in clouds behind me.

I walked quickly into our office, fighting back tears and went right up to Colton’s desk and said, “I need to talk to you now.”

He signaled at me that he was on the phone, and I could see that for myself, but I’d just put my life on the line for his business and he was going to talk to me. When he saw I wasn’t moving, he asked his friend if he could call him back and put down his phone slowly, maintaining eye contact like a deer caught in the headlights.

“I just went to the property on Casanova to introduce myself to the tenants,” I said, a steely smile on my face. “Two of them screamed at me and threatened me, and then a very scary man offered to let me into his place, where I surely wouldn’t have come out alive.”

“You went there dressed like that?” he said, laughing, signaling up and down at my outfit choice, “Also, stop complaining, you sound like my wife.”

“Complaining? Okay, you can do the next round, boss. I’m out,” I said, before going to my desk and sitting in my chair, turning away from him.

“Don’t be dramatic, Millie, no tenant likes to be evicted. They always avoid it completely. It’s part of the game. We’ll put notices on the doors soon letting them know that we are entering the unit to take pics and there is nothing they can do but make us uncomfortable. It’s just part of the deal,” he said, patronizingly.

I spun around and stared at him, “It’s part of YOUR deal. YOUR deal. Not my deal. I’m not the realtor. YOU ARE. You want this deal? YOU DO IT.”

“Okay, hey, calm down,” he said, both hands in front of him moving down in small increments. “I have an idea,” he said, before turning around, opening his bottom desk drawer and pulling a small black case out. He held it out to me like a peace offering. “Take it. They’re legal in the state of California,” he said.

I snatched it out of his hand and took out what was in the pouch, my jaw dropping. “You want me to go back there with a stun gun?” I said, incredulous. “You want me to shock people? What is wrong with you?” I got up and stormed out of the office. I couldn’t even look at him right now.

He wasn’t done yet, though. He stuck his head around the corner and said, “Hey, don’t blow this deal for me. He’s got a lot more where this came from.”

I slammed the door to the conference room behind me and paced the room back and forth, my hands in my hair, my temperature rising. *This guy is going to get me killed! For what? For a bigger bonus?* I dialed Paige and prayed she’d pick up.

“Hey, what’s up?” she said.

“He’s going to get me killed. This guy is going to get me killed,” I said emphatically.

“Jon?”

“No! Colton! He has me working on this slumlord deal and I’m supposed to tell these people who are living in horrible conditions that their building is being sold and they could be evicted,” I said, starting to feel the tears creeping in.

“There are some things money can’t buy Mills,” she said.

“My life back?” I shot back at her.

“Yeah, that’s right. They can’t buy your kids a mom,” she said. “Tell him you won’t do it.”

“I just tried that, and you know what he did?” I said, not waiting for her to respond. “HE GAVE ME A STUN GUN.”

“Oh wow,” she said, as shocked as I was. “You know those are legal in the state of California, though.”

“Yes, but then I have to get *close enough* to someone attacking me to *shock them with it*,” I said, getting fired up again. I leaned against the wall and squatted down so that I would stop pacing and breathe.

“You can’t go back alone,” Paige said. “Tell you what. I’ll go with you. I have a plan. Come over before you go next time and we’ll drab up and look like locals.”

“Drab up?” I said.

“Yeah, it’s a thing. Don’t question it. Just come over and don’t get all dolled up. Little to no makeup. Au naturale,” she said.

“Okay. You think this will work?” I asked, starting to feel a little better.

“If it doesn’t, at least we’ll die together.”

“That’s not funny.”

“I’m kidding. It’ll work. I grew up in places like that. I know what to do.”

She hung up the phone and I sat there until I felt my blood pressure come down. I knew a little about Paige’s childhood, but not a ton. Imagining little Paige running around in a place like that sent shivers down my spine. “No wonder she doesn’t like people,” I said out loud.

I decided not to go back to the units until I had the notices for the doors. At a minimum, we could just attach them to the doors and leave without interacting with anyone. That sounded

pretty good to me. But Paige seemed confident that her plan would work, so I was going to at least give it a try.

When I showed up at her place, she opened the door in a band t-shirt I'd never seen and really loose gray men's sweatpants.

"Well, you didn't have to dress up for me," I said, teasing.

"This is what I wore growing up. It's what you're wearing today, too," she said, before guiding me inside and showing me a similar ensemble she'd laid out on the couch for me.

"Wow, you shouldn't have," I said, fingering the tag with multiple clearance stickers on it.

"They're not all bad people. It's just like anywhere else—there's good people and bad people," Paige explained, "they're just put off by people who flash their money, because people with money have screwed them over time and time again. It's happening again, actually, with this guy selling the property right out from under them, the property he never took care of to begin with. The property he used to exploit people with no other options," she said.

"You're right, that's exactly what it is," I said, "I really didn't mean to offend them." My heart hurt when I thought about how uncomfortable they were by my visit.

"We're going to go in there casually, act naturally, and make sure they don't feel like we're there with ulterior motives. That's why I even borrowed us a car to drive," she said.

"Oh god, what did you do?" I looked up to her, my eyes widening and my mouth falling open.

"Get dressed and I'll show you," she laughed as she walked back into the kitchen, her hands in her sweatpant pockets.

Once I was outfitted in my own getup, a Queen t-shirt and loose fitting black sweatpants—and feeling very comfortable, if I did say so myself—she guided me into the garage where a chocolate brown Ford Pinto that had seen better days was waiting for us.

“You sure this thing can still run?” I asked, taking a good look at it to make sure it had all four tires and an engine.

“Yup, it’s a solid piece of machinery, just not flashy,” she said. “Hop in and I’ll show you what this four cylinder can do.”

The car had a nice little pick-up and was actually pretty comfortable. I felt like I was in high school again, cruising around in little cars and comfy clothes, just living in the moment. Stripped of any sign of wealth or success, I realized that we all just became people, who had to exist based on our merit as human beings. No other trappings to distract people from who we were. It was a little freeing.

Being sucked into the luxury real estate market made it impossible to not be concerned about looks and status all the time, and I hated that I was becoming more image obsessed.

We cruised over to the property on Cassanova and got out without the notices at first, to see if we could establish some goodwill.

There was a mom sitting outside in a chair by her front door while her kids played. I started to walk up and Paige put her arm out, stopping me so we stayed a good distance away. “Don’t just go walking up to people and their kids,” she said under her breath. Paige waved at her and she waved back. Then, Paige called out, “Can we talk to you for a minute?”

The lady eyed us again, then called for her kids to come closer before nodding once at us. We walked closer. “Hi there, I’m Millie,” I said. “I just wanted to let you know that this property is being sold to a new owner. Hopefully, an owner that will take better care of it. We just need to find some tenants who will let us come inside, on their schedule, to take some pictures of the units.”

We waited for a few seconds while she stared at us, no doubt trying to decide if she could trust us.

“Okay, you can come back when my husband is home and take pictures,” she said.

“Wow, that’s amazing,” I said, feeling relief. “We’ll work around your schedule!” I looked at Paige, feeling victorious, but she remained stoic. She side-eyed me and said quietly, “Calm down, dude.”

I followed her lead and we walked over to another unit where I did exactly as Paige told me to. By the time we were done, we had about 50% of the units willing to talk to us and let us photograph their homes. A few were still upset or unwilling to let us inside, so we left the notice on their doors and moved along.

All in all, it was a very successful day, and on our ride home, I bought Paige a coffee to show my gratitude and we sang the songs on the radio loud and proud like teen girls on summer break.

When we got back to her place, I went inside to get changed and before I left, I said, “Hey Paige, just one more thing.”

“I think you’re all out of favors for the day,” she said, slipping on her glasses and looking ready to get back to work.

“I’m keeping the sweatpants,” I said, as I slipped out the front door with my new black sweats over my arm.

9

A few days later, it was time to go into the units and get some photos and information on the condition, so we could accurately price and list the complex. Since I would have the photographer and property inspector with me, I felt comfortable enough to go without Paige. But, I took notes from her advice and showed up in jeans, a t-shirt and some Converse. My highlighted hair was pulled up into a ponytail and I had very minimal makeup on. One thing was for sure, this look took a lot less time and effort, which made my morning a lot less stressful.

I rode with our photographer, Jason, in his pickup truck. The first unit we went to was the one with the family, but just the husband was home. He was kind and welcoming, opening the door for us and then giving us space to do what we needed to do. It was clear that they used every inch of the small space, but had pushed things aside to make room for us. While they took care of the unit as best they could, it was in startling

condition and clearly hadn't been updated in decades. Flooring was worn thin, some of the lighting was burnt out or broken, there were stains everywhere and the finishes were very old. Before we left, I let him know that we appreciated him and his time.

At the next unit, a girl answered the door and let us in. She told me that a small group of young adults lived there together and shared the rent. They had all met in the local youth shelter and when they got jobs, they worked together to get this place. As we walked the unit, one door was oddly locked from the outside with multiple locks. We looked over at her quizzically, and she tensed up, immediately uncomfortable, and said, "Please don't go in there."

We could hear some odd noises coming from inside, and I immediately felt sick to my stomach, my mind flicking through what could be in the room. Luckily, she gave us more detail. "My brother struggles with several mental illnesses. There's nowhere safe for him to go. If he gets off his meds, it's not safe for him to be wandering around by himself. We do this for his own protection. Please don't take photos in there," she said.

We nodded respectfully and moved along. After finishing the inside, we went out in the back and took pictures of the small, simple backyard with a little concrete pad that was cracking and mostly dead grass. We thanked the kids on our way out and the mom in me couldn't help myself from adding, "I'm proud of you all for working together and taking care of each other. Never give up, and life will keep getting better." Her sweet eyes filled with tears and she nodded in appreciation as we left.

The next few units went similarly. Mostly normal signs of life in a small space, but the units themselves continued to capture my attention. They were in such poor repair that it lit a fury in me that this man had gotten away with renting units in these conditions. There was no way this would pass inspection.

In every unit, the flooring was either rotted or stripped down to the plywood. Some kitchens looked like they had

broken appliances or were missing them entirely. Doors and windows were old and damaged. Some lights didn't work at all and several tenants said they had electrical issues, which was clearly a fire hazard. The grout was black and the tile was so old it was chipping. If a unit had carpet, it was badly stained, worn thin in areas, and smelled. Multiple tenants said the hot water barely worked, if at all, and some showed me areas where black mold was growing.

He was ruthlessly taking advantage of these people and their situations, just like Paige and Angela had said.

The last one we visited held an unexpected surprise for us. The tenants were calm and friendly, and the place was sparsely decorated and clean. But when we got to the backdoor, planks of wood had been bolted across it blocking the exit to the backyard.

"Don't go out there," the girl in the Rastafari hat said to me in an ominous tone.

"We need to photograph the backyard," I clarified, trying to act natural. People bolted their backdoors closed all the time. This was normal.

"You can't go back there," she said again, her eyes big. She placed a hand over the bolt, so I wouldn't try to open it. *What the hell is in the backyard?* My mind raced.

"What's in the backyard?" Jason asked, and he lifted up a plank of wood so we could peek through. The entire backyard was full of marijuana plants, but not just plants...there were at least three large pitbulls on chains, sleeping or walking around. Once one of them spied me, they all charged towards the back door, growling and snapping their teeth. They stretched the chains as far as they would go and for a second, I thought they might even break them off and come plowing through the glass.

"Oh wow," I said, backing up. "Tell me more about what's going on back there."

"Pot farm," she said casually. "It's legal now."

“The pot plants might be, but what about the dogs?” Jason asked, as shocked as I was.

“Running a pot farm comes with serious safety risks. The dogs are here to protect us and the plants. They’re cared for, but they’re bred to protect, so they’re not friendly to outsiders.”

“Okay, so let’s say the property sells and the new owners make changes and you decide to move. Would you take the pot plants and the dogs with you?” I asked, still trying to process the whole situation.

“Of course. This is our business,” she said, like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

“Alright,” I said, looking at the photographer, “we’ll have to skip this backyard. Did you get enough of the interior?” I asked.

“Yup, this was the easiest one,” he said, smiling at the girl.

“That’s a wrap, people!” I joked, as we headed towards the door. Once we were outside, I took in a nice, deep breath of fresh air and noticed how quiet and peaceful this whole property seemed. For how many people lived here, they really did keep to themselves. “It’s peaceful here,” I said.

“During the day,” Jason joked, as he headed towards his truck. I followed him back, hoping he was wrong. The more I got to know these people, the more I really hoped the new owners took better care of the units and the tenants.

On my way home, I tried to call Jon to let him know how things were going, but I was sent straight to voicemail. I thought maybe my call didn’t go through, so I called a second time, and it went straight to voicemail again.

Later in the day, he still hadn’t responded, so I shot him a text:

Millie: Hey, wanted to fill you in on what happened with Casanova.

Jon: Sorry, I’ve been busy.

Millie: It’s okay, can you talk?

Jon: Not right now.

Millie: Do you want to talk later then? After my kids are in bed?

Jon: I'll give you a call when I can.

I hated when he acted like this. Then, I remembered that I had broached the conversation about taking things to the next level, and I hadn't heard from him since. I shook my head and exhaled. Jason saw me and said, "Watcha thinkin' about?"

I looked over at him, surprised he had noticed. "Oh, I'm just involved with this guy and I really like him, but things just never progress past a certain point. I can't figure it out."

"Well, he either doesn't want more than what you already have—no matter what he's telling you—or he can't have more than what you have," Jason said. Having another guy's perspective on this was actually really helpful, so I pressed him further. "What do you mean by that?"

"How honest do you want me to be?"

"Brutally."

"Ok, he either doesn't want a relationship with you or he already has one with somebody else and you're the side-piece."

Oof. "What if I don't like either of those options?" I asked, my heart starting to hurt.

"Then choose yourself. Always choose yourself." He turned into the parking lot where my car was waiting. Jason had given me a lot to think about.

"Thanks...for everything, Jason." I said, hopping out of his truck.

"You bet." He smiled sweetly and drove away, leaving me there to wonder how I'd gotten entangled with another man who was perpetually unavailable.

A week later, all of the photos of Cassanova were ready and we were able to put up the listing. Bids came in quickly. Colton was thrilled that Rick accepted an offer over ask and

came into the office victoriously fist pumping into the air. “Cassanova is in contract!” he said, pointing to the deal board so I would update it.

I jumped up and started moving it to the “In Contract” column and asked him, “So who bought it? Are they going to take better care of it?”

“Oh no, they’re tearing it down,” he said, before sitting down and getting back to work.

I slumped against the wall for a second, the wind knocked out of me as I thought of all those people being displaced. I was starting to really hate this job.

10

I started spending more and more time on properties like Cassanova for Rick. He seemed to have an endless portfolio of dilapidated units. When I was finally back in the office for a whole day, I realized I'd forgotten about Chloe. She was odder than ever. She either lacked total awareness for the fact that other people lived on the planet or she just didn't care.

Once again, she was hosting loud agent onboarding calls without the use of headphones. Since Colton regularly took calls in the office as well, the two of them created a cacophony of noise, talking over each other, each of them getting louder and louder to compensate. I literally couldn't hear myself think. I would try to work from another space, but then Colton would ask me to come back so we could "brainstorm."

I finally just picked up my things and walked out of the office. If Colton needed me, he was going to have to come

find me. I was taking a bite out of my burrito when the door swung open.

“Hey, why aren’t you working in our office?” he barked at me as he came into the conference room.

I chewed and swallowed as quickly as I could. “You’re both talking at the same time and I can’t focus. I have to make sure I don’t make mistakes on these offers. Clients don’t really like it when you start adding random numbers in there,” I said, looking back at my computer.

“I know. Chloe’s the worst. I’ll get rid of her,” he said, leaving and letting the door almost close behind him before popping back in and saying, “Oh, don’t forget about the appointment at Regalia today.”

“Oh that’s right,” I said, checking the time and realizing I’d completely spaced on it. “I will head over there now,” I stood up and packed up my things.

“Sounds good. It’s vacant. Our buyer is out of state, so just do a video walkthrough that we can send to them,” he explained, even though I knew the situation.

“Got it. Easy,” I said. “It’s supposed to be a nice place, right?” I asked, looking down and realizing I was dressed professionally today.

“Yup, very nice. Definitely a luxury property,” he added.

“Thank God,” I muttered to myself, as I took another bite of my burrito.

“You sure you want to eat that?” he asked, and I realized he was still standing in the doorway.

“Excuse me?” I said, turning slowly to look at him, my eyes wide.

“I mean, look around. You see the body type of women as they age, right? You don’t want to look like that. Especially if you’re single. Think about it,” he said, tapping the door jamb a couple times and nodding his head as if he were genuinely giving me good advice. He walked out before I could chuck my burrito at his stupid face.

As soon as he left, I slung my computer bag over my shoulder and stormed straight to my car, tossing my unfinished burrito in the trash can. I'd lost my appetite.

When I pulled up to the neighborhood, I was greeted by a circular entrance with a large fountain in the middle and beautiful landscaping. "That's what I'm talking about," I muttered in relief as I pulled up to a large iron gate and rolled down my window to enter the code. The gates opened and welcomed me into a perfectly manicured community that was no doubt managed by a HOA with an iron fist. I followed my navigation to a beautiful Mediterranean style two-story house.

Unfortunately, two cars were still out front, which meant an agent and their client were still in the house. I definitely didn't want to barge into the house filming a video with people in there, so I decided to start with a video of the front of the house and then go into the backyard. They should be gone by the time I went inside.

"So, this is the front of the property," I started, holding up my phone to video the expansive front, complete with large, mature oak trees, a perfectly manicured green lawn, a four-car garage, and custom stone pavers on the driveway. I swept the phone around the court and neighborhood slowly, "The home is on a large, half-acre lot and is almost at the end of a court that is completely flat, which is ideal for a family or someone with pets. All of the homes here look very well maintained, with mature foliage and a very quiet, peaceful atmosphere."

I turned back to the house, "Because there's another agent still in the house, I'm going to take you through the backyard first. The gate is on the left side of the house, and the fence looks like it's been recently revitalized," I said, lifting the latch to let myself into the side yard. "It looks like the previous owners have put incredible care into the landscaping and you can see how the ivy has grown over these arches, creating a partially covered walkway." I made it to the end of the house and the backyard opened up into a beautiful secret gardenesque, multi-layered backyard.

"You can see that the backyard has two levels. The same custom paver design used on the driveway is carried through

to the patio here as well. On the upper level, there is a large turf grass area and right off the kitchen is a custom pergola over an outdoor dining area. The bottom level has a pool with a small pool house, an outdoor shower, and another alfresco dining area,” I said, panning the area slowly before turning towards the right to walk alongside the back of the house.

“Let’s get a closer look at the landscaping,” I said, while glancing inside the window to my right into the kitchen and catching a glimpse of a pretty woman with blonde hair laughing and a tall man with brown hair in a crisp, navy suit behind her. “Wait, that can’t be right,” I said, forgetting I was filming. I kept walking alongside the house, trying to peek into the next window and get a closer look. “Who...is...that?” I said, the hair standing up on the back of my neck. There was just something a little too familiar about the guy.

“Just turn around already,” I said under my breath, noticing that the woman was laughing a lot, like way too much for a house tour, and the guy was standing closer to her than I would consider professional.

I ran out of windows on the kitchen side and the walls gave away to an outdoor seating area with floor to ceiling glass doors. Just as I turned the corner, I saw the side of his face and it was unmistakable. “Jon!” I hissed, jumping back behind the wall in case he turned to the side.

I peeked around the corner again and saw them disappearing into a downstairs bedroom on the other side of the house. “You’re unbelievable,” I whispered angrily as I hunched over to run in front of the large glass sliding doors, hoping they didn’t see me. On the next wall, there was another window that looked like it was part of the bedroom they were in. While leaning up against the house, I tried to catch my breath. Adrenaline was coursing through my veins, and my heart was beating fast and hard in my chest.

“You are too much, Jon!” the woman giggled from inside the room.

“Oh my god,” I said, clutching my heart, I started panting like I’d run a mile. I heard more giggling and started to feel

weak. “This is humiliating,” I said quietly, bending down a little and putting my head on my knees to try to get myself together. I looked down and saw that I was standing in a planter and my shoes were starting to sink into what was obviously freshly updated dirt and flowers. I put my phone down and stepped out of it, trying to smooth the dirt back the way it was and brushed the mess from my shoes, getting damp dirt all over my hands. I tried to shake it off, but it wouldn’t budge.

“Ugh, get it together, Millie,” I said through clenched teeth as I stood back up a little bit at a time and started inching my way over to the window to peek inside. I turned my face slowly until I could just see inside the room, and it looked like they were in the attached bathroom. More laughing.

“Looking at a house is not that funny,” I hissed, fuming. There was a glare on the window, so I couldn’t get a good enough look. I inched over a little more, then a little more, until I was underneath the window and peeking up into it like a peeping tom.

Just then, they started out of the bathroom and I ducked under the window right before they saw me, but not after I got a clear-as-day view of Jon, grinning from ear to ear, right up behind her with his hand around her waist. “You pig!” I growled, as I crouched down and made it over to the other side of the window.

I plastered myself up against the house and slowly peeked into the other side of the window, hoping to see where they were going next, when I heard the backdoor sliders opening up and Jon’s deep voice saying, “You’re going to love this backyard. It’s perfect for parties.”

“You know I love a good party,” she said enticingly and his deep voice laughed.

I hope you drown in the pool, I thought to myself, while slowly moving alongside the house to get to the other side yard so I could get out of there.

They were in the outdoor dining area when I slipped quietly onto the right side of the house, walking backwards in

an effort to keep my eyes on where they were, when I backed right up to a hard, metal gate.

I heard the low growl before I even turned around. *Shit, shit, shit*, I thought, slowly turning to the gate to find a big, black dog growling and baring its giant meat-eating teeth at me.

“Shhh, shh, I like dogs,” I said, putting my hands up as I tried to get around the giant outdoor dog kennel so I could get out of this yard before Jon saw me. On the other side of the dog kennel, they had tons of lush landscaping and I tried to work my way through it without getting bushwacked, but it was thick and branches were whacking and scratching me in the face and arms. The dog seemed unsure of whether or not it could trust me and occasionally rammed the kennel with its nose and growled some more, causing me to press my body deeper into the scratchy bushes. My arms were starting to sting, my shoes were covered in dirt, and my hair kept getting stuck on low hanging branches.

I heard the woman’s voice ask, “What’s all that noise?”

Jon replied, “They have a dog. Not friendly. I would stay away from that side of the yard.”

“Oh, you think?” I hissed sarcastically and I tried to pick up my pace. When the dog started barking, I charged through the rest of the foliage, blinded by smacking branches and leaves, until I reached a large fence. “How the hell am I supposed to climb this thing?” I said to myself, before I heard Jon’s voice say, “Whose phone is this?”

“Oh no, I left my phone!” I screamed into my hands covering my mouth. I had no choice but to climb this fence, so I could go back inside, and get my phone. I took off my heels and tossed them over, then jumped to grab the top of the fence and held on for dear life. I tried to walk my feet up the front until I was high enough to swing my right leg up and over. The adrenaline coursing through my veins gave me enough strength to hoist my body up and on top of the fence and once I got there, I rested for a couple of seconds trying to catch my

breath. “I really should go to the gym more,” I whispered to myself as sweat began dripping down my face.

Looking over to the other side, I saw nothing that could help me get over gracefully, so I tried to climb down as far as I could while holding on to the top of the wood, but my hands were too slippery, and I crashed the rest of the way down.

Once I’d collapsed in a heap, I laid there for a second, trying not to cry and looking around to see if anybody had seen the crazy realtor who had fallen off the fence. Then, I slowly got up, dusted myself off, got my shoes, and tried to strut as confidently as possible towards my car.

There was no way I was leaving my phone here, though—not even to cover my ass—so I was going to have to play this off for it to work. I went back to my car and tried to fix myself up as well as I could. I had some twigs and leaves in my hair, scratches and dirt marks on my skin, my hands were covered in planter dirt and scratches from the fence, and my makeup had melted down my face from the sweat. Luckily, as a mom of two, I always had a pack of wipes around, so I used them to clean my hands and wipe down my shoes. I used the mini makeup kit I kept in my car to do a quick touch up on my face, and a spritz of Jon’s favorite perfume finished it up.

Getting back out of my car, I grabbed my blazer from the back seat to cover up my scratched arms, put the shoes from hell back on, and walked up to the front door like I owned the place.

Since they were already inside, I didn’t need the key, so I walked in and loudly announced myself. “Hello! Is anybody here?”

Just then, Jon and the blonde came walking back in from the backyard with their hands all over each other and the look on his face when he saw me standing there was worth climbing a hundred fences.

“Millie?!” he said, shocked, his jaw dropping as he stepped away from the blonde.

“Jon?! Is that you?” I said, pretending to be surprised. “I thought you mostly sold commercial?” I said, teasingly, a fake smile on my face. I strutted towards them and stuck out my hand to the woman and said, “Hi, I’m Millie. Jon and I are both agents in the area.”

She wilted a little under my intense stare and put out her hand to shake mine, before saying, “Nice to meet you. I’m Sienna, his fiancé. We’re looking at this house...for us.” She looked up at him like a girl in love.

My teeth clenched and my jaw tightened. There was no way I was going to let Jon see that this revelation gutted me. I turned a steely gaze back to Jon, who looked horrified, “I showed this house earlier, and while we were in the backyard, I must have dropped my phone, so I just came back to look for it. What a surprise to find the two of you house-hunting,” I said, laughing good-naturedly like this was all a joke. Jon looked nauseous and I felt like I was going to throw up.

“Oh, that explains this,” he said, pulling my phone out of his pocket and handing it to me. I reached for it and he held onto it for a second, forcing me to look up and meet his gaze. He was serving me full puppy dog eyes, but it wasn’t going to melt me this time. I wanted to destroy him.

“So glad you found it,” I said, with mock sincerity. “On that note, I’m going to head out and let you two finish up.” I winked at Jon and he recoiled for a second, like a man caught with his pants down. I turned towards the door and when I reached it, I turned back around for a second and said, “I hope the house doesn’t burn down after you buy it.” Their faces both froze and I burst out with a maniacal laughter as I left the house.

When I got back to my car, I tried to hold myself together until I’d driven out of the neighborhood, and then the anger and pain came flooding out of me like a tsunami. I couldn’t hold back from screaming and smacking the steering wheel over and over again. Who did this guy think he was, treating me like this?

I got back to the office way too soon and was in no mood to deal with anybody else's crap. When I went inside, I didn't even notice Colton sitting at his desk and went straight to my chair, muttering to myself the entire time.

"Millie, what has gotten into you?" he asked, bursting my bubble.

"Me? Nothing!" I said, my eyes large and dilated, "Just went to tour the house on Regalia and ran into my boyfriend who was there with another woman, apparently his FIANCE!" I said, my voice jumping up an octave to a shriek.

"You have a boyfriend?" he asked, totally confused.

"Not anymore! We weren't, like, married, but I thought it was pretty clear I wasn't interested in being the other woman! Who does that? Not any man of mine!" I was on a roll and I wasn't stopping anytime soon. I was word-vomiting all over the place. "He thinks he's such a hot shot, with his stupid sports cars and his rugged good looks. Well, Jon, replacing a cheater is no work at all, I can literally find one of those on any street corner," I said, all my pent up vitriol spewing out.

"Wait, hold up—Jon is your boyfriend? Jon MONTGOMERY?" he asked, his face now the shocked one.

"Obviously, he's not my boyfriend NOW after what I just saw!" I said defensively, my heart starting to ache deep in my chest.

"I had no idea you knew Jon that well," he said, shaking his head.

"How do YOU know Jon that well?" I shot back, my anger rising again.

"Millie, Jon is the reason I hired you," he said. "We've played in the same golf league for years. His fiancé and my wife are best friends. He told me how great you were and that you were job hunting. He said not to tell you that he's the one that put you up for the job."

I felt like I was going to catapult off my seat and into deep space. Jon was not only cheating on me, but he was the damn

reason why I was in this soul-sucking job to begin with? *I am going to kill him!*

“Jon. TOLD YOU. TO HIRE ME?” I said furiously, with a look that could kill.

“Yeah... have you ever seen me talk to Debbie, your old boss? I don't even know that lady. I prefer to work with male realtors anyway. Women are too emotional. Why would I take a recommendation from a woman?” he said, as if it were okay that he was this misogynistic and narcissistic.

“UN. BELIEVABLE,” I growled, my eyes narrowing. I could smell blood in the water and it wasn't mine.

These dipshits were going down...together.

As soon as I had re-entered my body, I grabbed my cell phone and said curtly, “I'm going to get a coffee, and I'll be right back.”

As I rushed out the door, I heard him call after me, “Can you get me one?” but I pretended not to hear him.

Once I was in the car, I dialed Paige's number and could barely wait for her to pick up the phone so that I could tell her what an epic disaster my life was turning out to be.

“Hey, what's up?” she said casually.

“Oh my god, you are NOT going to believe what is happening to me,” I started, before she cut me off rudely.

“Ooh, I can tell you've had a bad day. I don't have the emotional bandwidth available to support you today,” she said.

“Are...you...serious?” I asked, in sheer desperation.

“I'm just kidding, what did Colton do now?”

“Oh, it's worse than that!” I screamed, “I saw Jon at a listing...with ANOTHER WOMAN!”

“Was it his mom?”

“Try his fiancé!”

“Ugh, I've always hated that guy.”

“Then, I had to climb a fence, but left my phone there and had to go BACK IN and GET IT,” I said, adding points out of order in my effort to spit them out as fast as possible.

“Okay, we’re going to need to go back over that one in a minute, but keep talking.”

“Then, I go back in to get it and find out that he’s looking at the house to buy for them to live in together! I was so furious when I got back to the office that I was complaining about it to Colton, who told me that Jon is the one who told him to offer me this job. Jon is the reason why my life has been ruined by this big-eared psychopath!”

“Holy shit. I mean, I knew he was the human equivalent to a soggy tuna sandwich, but this is a new low, even for him.”

“I KNOW!” I screeched.

“Do you think Jon got you this job so that you would drop out of dental school and pay more attention to him?”

I paused, realizing I hadn’t even considered that yet. “I do now!” I yelled, a mixture of anguish and anger washing over me.

“He’s disgusting.”

“If he was actually in love with me and wanted a future with me and my kids, that’s one thing. But to do this when he’s cheating on his fiancé with me? I can’t let him get away with this,” I said.

“And you won’t. We are going to come up with a way to get back at him. I read a lot of books; I have plenty of ideas.”

“What do I do?” I said, my voice starting to shake. The adrenaline was starting to wear off and the pain of this betrayal was coming to the surface.

“Right now? You go back in and act like everything is fine, because you need this job. So, get in there, give him your best Oscar winning performance, and then we’ll come up with a plan to get back at Jon AND Colton.”

“How are you so good at this?” I said, hot tears starting to fall.

“Years of practice.”

“I am so embarrassed,” I said, covering my face and sobbing.

“Millie, you are the writer of your own life story. Who do you want to be? Do you want to be the girl who keeps getting screwed over by dudes and never stands up for herself or do you want to be the girl that gets revenge?”

I stopped crying and looked up, my eyes blazing. She was right. I’d been through worse than a couple of selfish idiots who didn’t care about me. My breathing started to slow down as I felt a deeper fire burning in me. “Revenge. Definitely revenge,” I said flatly through shaky, gritted teeth.

“Go get ‘em, tiger.”

We hung up and I got myself together, ordered some coffees, and strolled inside like nothing had happened. Colton looked up at me like he was half-prepared for me to murder him, but I smiled sweetly and said, “Colton, I brought you a coffee,” before placing it gently on his desk.

He didn’t move to take it, but glanced over at it and said, “You didn’t poison it, did you?”

“Poison it?” I laughed, swiveling in my seat towards my desk, “No way, that would show up on an autopsy.”

As I opened my email, I noticed Chloe’s area was quiet. “Where’s Chloe?” I said, not looking back over at him.

“I took care of it,” he replied, clearly forgetting his fear of death and slurping his coffee noisily.

Just then, I saw an email from Colton to Chloe.

Chloe,

Moving forward, I’ll need to know exactly what you’re working on every hour of the day, hour by hour. You’re leaving the office at odd hours of the day and saying you’re “working from home” when your phone tracker places you at a local bookstore.

All tracked working hours need to be from the office, and I need a breakdown of what you're spending your time on.

Regards,

Colton

Then, underneath his email was a response from Chloe:

Colton,

I'm not feeling well and will be taking the rest of the day off. If I'm not feeling better tomorrow, I will not be at work.

Chloe

“Well, that’s one way to get rid of somebody,” I said, resting my face in my hands. I may not like the girl, but I really didn’t like the way he was dealing with her. There were a lot more respectable ways to let someone go than this.

Of course, I was learning more every day about what Colton was or wasn’t willing to do for the sake of his business.

11

Now that I was almost out of school, I was working from home more often than not. I needed to pass my dental test on the first try so I could get a job in the dental field whenever I needed—which felt sooner than later given how things were going.

Meanwhile, instead of slinking away embarrassed like the philandering pig that he was, Jon was trying to redeem himself by apologizing profusely and sending a constant stream of gifts. Every couple of hours my doorbell rang and another bouquet, box of chocolates, balloon arrangement, or beautifully wrapped gift was delivered. No idea how he explained all these purchases to his fiancé, but he wasn't my problem anymore.

According to him, they had an open relationship and she knew he wasn't "the commitment type." My response? Did he

tell her that before or after he proposed and planned to buy a house with her? I had been naive before, but not anymore.

Paige was furious, too, and while I hated that she had been right about him, I appreciated her vehement support and pledge of revenge.

I kept texting him to just leave me alone, that I didn't want to be involved in whatever love bombing game he was playing, but that just spurned him on. At least the kids thought most of the gifts and balloons were for them. They would come home from school and dance around like it was Christmas every day.

As frustrating as it was, work continued to be a landslide of messages, questions, and demands, which gave me plenty of distractions.

“Here we go,” I said groggily as I sipped my coffee, wincing a little as my work phone powered on. I watched as the messages continued to load.

Colton: Millie, we have a new property from Rick. Need contract ASAP.

Colton: Where's the copy for the newsletter? I don't see it here. I wanted it this morning.

Colton: Where are my phone messages? Who's taking the calls now that Chloe is gone?

Colton: I'm heading over to Regalia. Interested buyer.

Colton: Why am I paying for an assistant who never works?

Colton: If my wife comes by the office, tell her I'm not here.

Colton: FYI, we got the bank owned property on Greenburrow. Need to schedule renovation. I want to flip it in 21 days OR LESS.

Colton: This is not a work from home job. I need you IN OFFICE.

They just kept coming. It was actually astonishing how long he could talk to himself. They were still rolling in when my phone rang.

“Hello, Colton,” I said, cradling the phone on my shoulder while I pulled on my slim fit, brown plaid work pants.

“When will you be here?” he barked at me, sounding panicked.

“At the time we agreed on.” I ran downstairs and slipped on my tan suede mules.

“Do you get my messages? Why can’t you just reply to my messages?”

“Because I’m not on the clock, Colton.” I put the phone on speakerphone so I could grab a giant coffee tumbler.

“You’re not making part-time money, Millie.”

“What do you really need done first, Colton?” I just needed a vat of coffee and then I could hit the road.

“Well, I’m missing a bunch of messages or calls. I feel like I should have more calls coming in. Where are all the calls?” His voice was getting edgy. I really didn’t want him to be angry before I even walked in the door.

“Chloe may have turned off the ringer or something. I’ll check when I get in.”

“I need a receptionist.”

“I don’t disagree with you,” I said, grabbing my keys and calling the kids to head out. “You know, what kind of hours did you have in mind?” I suddenly had an idea. “I might know someone.”

“Part-time, full-time, just have her call me,” he said excitedly, “I’ll make it worth her while.” He hung up as I was helping Brielle into her car seat. My lips curled into an evil smile as I put my phone on the magnetic car mount. “Siri, call Paige.”

She didn’t pick up, so I left her a message: “Paige, I have a killer idea, and I need your help. Call me back.”

When I finally got into the office, I tried to get some work done, but Colton's phone kept ringing. He was taking calls in the office again, while pacing behind me and shooting mini-basketballs.

I couldn't focus, so I got up quickly while he was distracted on a call, mumbled something about working in the conference room and bolted out.

Shortly after, I could hear the sound of Colton talking, but he wasn't in the office. His voice was kind of amplified, almost like he had an echo, so I peeked into the hallway and he wasn't there. I went back into the conference room and walked towards his voice until it got louder. It was coming from the vent that the conference room shared with the bathroom. He was literally on the phone while going to the bathroom, and I could hear his entire phone call.

"I miss you too, baby, and I'm working on seeing you soon," he crooned, his voice smoother and sweeter than I'd ever heard it.

That can't be his wife, I thought, racking my brain to think of a time he'd talked to his wife like that at work.

"The San Francisco networking event will be the perfect chance for us to catch up. No, of course nobody knows about us. How could they?"

What. The. Hell. Who was he talking to?!

"Lauren, we have to be patient. You know I'm working on it. Just make sure to sign up for the next networking event and we'll figure it out. Okay, bye," he flushed the toilet and left the bathroom and I stood there, my mind reeling. I had suspicions in the past that he was cheating on his wife, and there was one time when one of our agents said she thought she saw him with another woman leaving a bathroom at a networking event, but this was clear as day.

I started going back through his calendar on my computer, looking for random appointments I didn't add and checking his call log to see how often he heard from an agent in our database named Lauren.

He was talking to her way more often than any of the other agents we were mentoring. “That’s some one-on-one attention,” I said to myself. *Ugh, I hate this*, I thought. I did *not* want this information at all. It was all becoming a little too much for me.

Paige returned my call as soon as I left the office. As soon as I picked up, I blurted out, “He’s cheating on his wife!”

“Well, usually we start conversations with a ‘hello’ and maybe a ‘how are you doing,’ but sure, we can just dive right in,” she said sarcastically.

“That short, annoying man is cheating on his wife and is talking to her in the office,” I said again.

“In front of you?” she asked, shocked.

“No, in the bathroom, but it was broadcasted into the conference room like we were playing a game of telephone,” I clarified.

“Wait, hold the phone, he talks to his mistress while going to the bathroom? That is next level,” she said, disgusted.

“I know. Just when you think he can’t get any worse,” I agreed.

“So, this guy has you working dirty deals, has no respect for your personal time or space, and cheats on his wife. He is a real winner, I tell ya,” she said.

“Thanks for the rundown. This is officially pathetic,” I said. “Plus, he’s run Chloe out of here, so now I’m doing both jobs again.”

“Well, that’s no fun,” she said.

“Luckily, I had an idea,” I said, my voice lilting as I tried to entice her with my plan.

“Something tells me I don’t want to know,” she said.

“*You* should take the job,” I deadpanned.

“Oh, no, no, no. I don’t do bad bosses. That’s why I work for myself. When I had to work for other people, I reached a point where I would just start messing with them. You know,

for my own amusement,” she laughed. “I’m not condoning it, it’s just the way I operate. You screw with me, I’ll come for you.”

“Exactly,” I said.

She paused for a second, processing what I was saying. “Oh you’re more evil than I thought,” she said as she realized that had been my plan all along.

“How else do we get an inside look? Chloe had access to *everything* and she was the one that took all the calls and messages. I don’t have enough time to really focus on those details, but if you could, we would have everything we needed to get back at him AND Jon.”

“Destroying them would bring me joy,” she said as she mulled over the idea. “But I do have a real job that I actually like. I can’t work full-time or let this take over my life, too,” she added.

“Agree. You’ll just need to put firm boundaries in place. Plus, since it’s just a side gig for you, I think you’ll do a better job of not getting caught in Hurricane Colton.”

“Sounds good. Let me finish this book I’m editing and then I can come in for an interview sometime next week. When do you finish school?” she asked.

“Next week actually,” I said, realizing how close I was to being done.

“Perfect timing.”

We hung up, and I was flush with excitement and the rush of revenge.

12

I thought I would never finish school. Honestly, after a while, I was just going through the motions, and I felt like it would take a miracle to finish my classes and pass my RDA test.

Now that that day was finally here, I felt extremely proud of myself and also a little safer. I had a life raft now if something went terribly wrong with Colton—because if that boat sank, I was absolutely never going to work in real estate again. Of course, I was making more money now than I could ever make as a dental assistant, but at least it was something.

Paige put together a little graduation party for me and it was so sweet. The kids always loved going over to her house, where she spoiled them with endless treats and let them run wild. I don't have a large family, so there weren't too many people there, which is exactly how I prefer things to be.

“You did it, Mills. I’m proud of you,” Paige said, giving me a side hug.

“Thanks. I almost didn’t make it,” I said. “I surprised myself.”

“You’re tougher than you give yourself credit for,” Paige said.

“Yeah, maybe I am. I can tell you I could never have pictured any of this when I was still with you-know-who,” I said, referencing the quality of life I had been able to give our kids and now getting a dental certificate since their dad left.

“Speaking of baby daddies, have you heard from he-who-shall-not-be-named?”

“Not really. I used to get the occasional text that he was still alive and asking about the kids, but even that has stopped. The kids haven’t asked about him in awhile, either. I think we’ve all moved on.”

“You think he’s going to show up someday?”

“Not sure. Not much I can do if he does. If he’s stable and the kids want to see him, I’m not opposed to it. He was a pretty good dad when he wanted to be,” I said, looking away. “I’m just glad things are better now and with this dental certificate, I’ll have a backup plan.”

“Always make your own destiny,” Paige nodded in agreement. “Anything from Jon?”

“Oh yeah, he’s so sorry, please forgive me, I thought you knew, blah blah blah,” I said, rolling my eyes. “You know, when I play it back, I see it more clearly, but I still feel so betrayed. Maybe I’m overreacting.”

“No way,” Paige said, shaking her head. “He 100% failed to be transparent with you and honestly, I don’t believe what he says. That woman does not know what a hussy he is, and none of his other side pieces know, either. Now, if you see red flags like that again, you’ll know to run for the hills.”

“That’s exactly it. I just feel like a pawn in his game, which I probably was. We still need to find a way to get back

at him,” I said, giving her an evil grin.

“All in good time. Once I start working for Colton, I’ll have access to more information that can help us,” she said. “I’ll make sure to do a deep dive into all those emails he told you not to read.”

“You’re an evil genius.” I literally couldn’t wait for her to get the job. “When are you coming in for your interview?”

“This week,” she winked. This was where she shined.

We were interrupted by the kids whizzing through us, chasing each other and laughing loudly. It was so nice to see them play and be kids. I felt like I was missing more and more moments with them since taking this job.

“No running please!” I called after them.

“Don’t listen to your mom. Run as much as you want,” Paige called after them, before looking at me and flashing a sly smile. “It’s good to be Auntie Paige.”

I shook my head and pretended to be angry. “Enjoy it while it lasts. When they’re teenagers, I’ll drop them off at your place.”

She did a fake shudder and walked off to refill some snacks. I looked around the room and saw all my favorite people here. No drama. No problems.

For a short minute, life felt good again.

With school behind me now, I had a full forty hour work week to devote myself entirely to helping Colton grow and run his businesses. We were making more money than ever and the more we made, the more I saw it corrupting him. He was willing to take any deal, cut any corner, say anything he needed to make more money.

I often wondered what his wife thought of all this, because the longer I worked for him, the more I felt like I was the only voice of reason and this made him slowly start to resent me.

My questions were answered when a beautiful blonde lady came storming into the office and almost scared me half to death. She was wearing a faux fur coat, large sunglasses, and

had long, bedazzled fingernails that made every movement more dramatic. She charged straight to my open office door and banged on it loudly even though I was sitting only a couple feet away.

Stunned, I sat up straight, “Hello, can I help you?” I asked, slowly leaning as far away from her as I could.

“I don’t know, can you?” she said sarcastically, leaning towards me and snarling. “I’m looking for Colton. Is he here?”

“He was in the other office last I saw him,” I said, “but he doesn’t always tell me when he’s leaving,” I added.

“Not a very good assistant then are you?” she said with a pouty face, like she was talking to a child.

I already did not like this woman. I stood up slowly, trying not to make the motion seem like I was trying to intimidate her and casually leaned against my desk to look more nonchalant. Make no mistake, though, I was doing this in case she decided to pounce. This woman did not seem stable. “I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure of meeting you yet. I’m Millie, his business manager,” I said, putting my hand out.

She looked down at it with disgust, then back up at me with no motion to meet my hand and said, “Hello, Millie. I. AM. CHRISTINE. HIS. WIFE.” Each word that came out of her mouth was like a knife thrusting into my chest.

I felt like the air had gotten knocked out of me a little. Here she was, in the flesh, the woman he complained about all the time. I wish I could say she was a lovely woman, but no, she was a nightmare in heels.

“Lovely to meet you,” I lied, fighting the grimace my face really wanted to make, “let me text him and see if I can find him for you.” I was grateful for the opportunity to break eye contact with her to look at my phone.

Millie: SOS. YOUR WIFE IS HERE. SOS.

While I typed, she did more of her fake baby talk.

“Oh, that’s so sweet, you think he’ll respond to you instead of me? You think I haven’t tried that already? That’s so cute,”

she kept saying, her long nails sweeping all over the place with her hand gesticulations. I was about to respond when my phone pinged.

Colton: Tell her I'm not here.

Ha! This guy was the worst! I shook my head and typed back furiously:

Millie: You need to tell her yourself!

“Who is that? Is that Colton? Is he messaging you instead of me? What is he saying?” she said, leaning closer and closer to me while she yelled questions like a firing squad. I felt like I was being interrogated.

“It is,” I said, leaning further away each time she moved closer like some bizarre dance, “he’s in the middle of a deal and he’s not responding to my questions, but I let him know you’re here, so hopefully he reaches out once he gets his head above water.” I moved my phone a little closer to my chest. When she got distracted with one of her nails, I texted him again.

Millie: GET HERE NOW, COLTON!

Colton: I'm not here.

Millie: YES, YOU ARE!

Colton: You can't make me.

Millie: For the love of God, Colton, come deal with this!

Colton: ...

When I saw that he was typing, but there was no response, I knew he was up to something. Meanwhile, she kept droning on and on about god knows what, and I just couldn't deal with her anymore. I was going to find him and make him deal with this himself.

“Hold on a sec,” I said, without waiting for her to answer, and pushed around her to go look for him in the office. As I was checking the other areas, I heard his car engine rev and then peel out of the parking lot. “What the hell! I said, trying to figure out how he'd gotten out of the building without us

seeing him when I walked into the conference room and saw the window open and the curtains flowing in the breeze. “You coward,” I hissed under my breath.

Millie: Text your wife back or I’ll tell her you went out the window!

Colton: FINE!

I heard a ping in the other room and then his wife yelled out in frustration before storming back out of the office, slamming the door behind her.

I exhaled deeply and sank down into a chair in the conference room. I wanted to barricade myself in here and never come out. She was awful, and I never wanted to see her again.

After a few minutes, I pulled myself together, packed up my things, and decided to pick up my kids from after school care early and work from home for the rest of the day.

Hours later, I was sitting on my sofa still numb from today’s events, watching my kids play video games, when I started getting messages from Colton again.

Colton: Where are you?

Colton: Why aren’t you here?

Colton: I need an assistant.

Colton: I need two assistants. Have you found me another one yet?

Millie: Colton, I’m working from home. You’ll meet Paige tomorrow.

Colton: You need to be here in the office.

Millie: Your marital issues are a little too much for me right now.

Colton: Don’t worry about it.

Millie: I’m not getting in the middle of you and your wife again.

Colton: It’s not your business.

Millie: She made it my business when she screamed in my face.

Colton: It's not my job to control my wife. It is your job to be here.

Millie: See you tomorrow, Colton.

I couldn't believe he was trying to turn this around on me after what went down. "This job is starting to ruin my life," I whined quietly, but Beckett heard me.

"What's ruining your life, mommy?" he asked, still playing his game.

"Oh nothing, sweetie, just thinking about this issue at work," I said.

"Are you going to get another job again?" he asked, "now that you're a dentist?"

"Dental assistant? Yeah, maybe I will," I said to him, but then looked around the room. Everything that was in here now, from the video game console, to their new clothes, and even the comfy couch I was sitting on were products of working this job. Our quality of life was dependent on working for Colton.

Despite my best efforts, I was stuck, dependent on a man again. *Damnit.*

The next day I had a big surprise for Colton. Paige was coming in to interview for the part-time assistant/receptionist job. She texted me when she showed up at the office. I waltzed outside like I was floating on clouds and gave her a big hug.

"Welcome to the shitshow," I said, my arm out towards the door. She did not look happy to be here, but it was the perfect opportunity for us to look for ways to get back at Jon and Colton, so she was on board.

Plus, she said it was great research for a book she was working on that had a bad boss character. "If I get a bestseller out of this, that'll be worth it," she'd said.

"And you'll be helping out your friend," I said, coaching her to say something nice to me.

“Yeah, that too,” she said casually. I knew she loved me, even when she couldn’t admit it.

Now, she just had to nail the interview. If it was anything like mine, Colton would just assume she worked for him the second she walked in the door. We went inside and, as soon as Colton spotted her, he came out and said, “Wow, nice to meet you, Paige. Millie didn’t tell me you looked like that,” he laughed nervously.

“Looked like what?” Paige asked, deadpan. She was drop-dead gorgeous and racially ambiguous enough to prompt a lot of questions from guys in bars like, “Where you from, sweetheart?” She usually tormented them by making them guess, which was always a futile effort. Nobody would ever guess she was Egyptian and Japanese.

“Nothing, no problem, can I show you around?” he asked, and I could see little beads of sweat on his brow. Paige made him nervous. Or, she turned him on. Either way, it made me giddy with happiness to see his discomfort.

“Why don’t we start with an interview,” Paige coached him, before adding, “Where would you like me to sit or should I just stand here in the entryway.”

“Oh no, absolutely not, you should be sitting down,” he said, in a comforting, warm tone. *Creep*. “Let’s go to the conference room and Millie can make us all some coffee. She makes great coffee, you’ll see.” He led us down the hall to the conference room. “This is a really great place to work. I’m sure Millie has told you. All the snacks and coffee you could want. Right, Millie?” he said, peeking his head around Paige and trying to rouse my support.

“The BEST place to work,” I nodded in agreement.

“See? The best place,” he said, like a kid showing his artwork to his proud mama.

Once they were sitting at the conference table, I started to make us all some coffee and he just stared, with that big shit-eating grin of his, at Paige. Lovely Paige.

“Do you have any questions for me, Colton?” Paige asked and I could tell she was already getting annoyed.

“Yes. Why do you want to be my receptionist?” he asked, leaning forward and resting his face in his hands.

“I work from home as an editor and I’m noticing that I just need to be around people more. I think it would be good for me to be in a workplace environment, especially with someone I care about like Millie, and do something that really exercises my brain a little bit more,” she said.

“Exercise. Yes. Good. Very good. Where do you exercise?” he asked.

“Exercise *my brain*,” she clarified, “by working here. Part-time. Answering phones.”

“Yes, working here!” he agreed, sitting up straight again and nodding his head like a bobblehead. I wanted to smack that bobblehead right off his shoulders. “You’d be doing more than answering phones. You’d be doing a lot for me, as well,” he said, in what sounded a little bit like flirtation to me.

“What would the role entail, exactly,” Paige said, putting on her black-rimmed cat-eye glasses, flipping open a notebook and clicking a pen. It was a very dramatic move that somehow made her look even more beautiful, and Colton was literally salivating.

“What do you want it to be,” he said, a little breathlessly.

“HERE YOU GO!” I said loudly, bumping him in the shoulder on purpose before sliding his coffee in front of him. “DRINK UP, COLTON!” I said, at such a decibel, he adjusted himself in his seat to move his head further away from me.

“Yes, thank you, Millie,” he said, clearing his throat and taking a drink. “She makes the best coffee,” he said to Paige.

“You already told me that.”

“See, you’re a great assistant already,” he said, an eyebrow quickly raising up and down. “You have a great memory.”

“Thank you, so what are the next steps? Should we discuss hours or a compensation package if you’re interested in

moving forward?” she said.

“I’m interested. Definitely,” he said. “In moving forward.” He winked. Dear god, the man had no boundaries.

“Okay, great, so part-time, right? Send me the pay and hours then?” she said again. Was this how beautiful women felt all the time? They watched men melt into tongue-tied teenagers?

“I’ll tell you what,” Colton said, “you’re clearly highly qualified. You tell me what you’d like to make and we’ll start from there.” I couldn’t believe I was hearing these words from a man so money obsessed, he would sell condemned properties for slumlords.

“Quite the negotiator you are,” Paige said coolly and I knew she was making fun of him, but he had no idea.

“I really am,” he said, beaming with light. He soaked up compliments, even the fake ones.

“GREAT!” I said again, loudly, jolting him back upright like an electric shock. “SO THEN WE ARE DONE HERE FOR TODAY RIGHT?”

Colton jumped out of his seat to stand next to me and get away from my loud yelling right by his giant ears.

“Yes, thank you both so much! Paige, looking forward to you starting right away,” he said, putting out his hand to shake hers. She looked at his hand for a second before reluctantly raising her hand to meet his. He took her hand and then put his other hand on top, like a hand sandwich and I saw her face slowly spread into a very forced, fake smile. “I cannot wait for you to be part of our team,” he added, his voice deep and sultry.

Paige swallowed hard. “Thank you,” she eeked out, while trying to pull her hand out, “I need my hand back.” He didn’t budge.

“COLTON, THAT’LL BE ALL,” I yelled into the side of his head and it was like an electric shock to his nervous system. He dropped her hand and stepped away from me before looking back at her, before saying, “Thank *you* for

coming in.” He quickly drummed his fingers on the table like he does when he’s feeling really good about himself and strolled out of the office.

As soon as we were alone and there were no chances he could hear us, Paige looked over at me wide-eyed and stone faced, “You weren’t kidding,” she said quietly.

“Not even a little.”

“He’s a fool,” she said. “And we’re going to destroy him.”

“That’s my girl,” I said, leaning back against the counter and raising my mug in solidarity.

13

Dear Paige,

Words cannot express how grateful I am that you came in to talk with us about the part-time assistant job. I have reviewed your salary requests and agree to your terms. I ask that you do not discuss salary information with the other employees here. I'm sure you understand.

Please find the attached contract to sign and make note of the privacy clause for our clients. It is particularly important that we protect the personal information our clients trust us with.

If all looks good to you, please sign and return. I am looking forward to having you on the team as soon as possible.

With gratitude,

Colton

“OH. MY. GOD!” I yelled, when I read Colton’s email to Paige. “Who is this person?!” I was so shocked at how differently he was treating Paige than pretty much everyone else, even his wife. It was almost insulting.

Correction: it was definitely insulting.

Paige had texted me to come over when she’d gotten his email, so I packed up the kids, picked up a couple coffees and cake pops, and was there in an hour. Now, we were staring slack-jawed at the most ridiculous email from Colton I’d ever read.

“I know, I can’t believe he’s willing to pay me \$40 an hour to be his assistant when he pays you less to be his business manager. Blows my mind,” she said, shaking her head and laughing a little bit.

“It literally pays to be gorgeous,” I said, fuming. I didn’t want to hurt Paige’s feelings, but sirens were going off in my head, and I was starting to see red. Sure, with all the bonuses, I was making significantly more than that, but Chloe was paid half of that hourly rate for the same job.

“What are you talking about? You’re beautiful,” she said, her face perplexed. She just didn’t get it. There was pretty and then there was *Paige*. Still, I knew it wasn’t her fault, it just sucked to see how the stars aligned for someone like her, whereas I had to fight for everything I got in life.

“Okay,” I said, crossing my arms and leaning back against the kitchen counter. “What are we going to do to him?”

“I’m glad you asked,” she said, getting up and walking into her pantry before coming out with a big whiteboard. “I picked this up for the occasion,” she said, as she proudly propped it up on the counter and leaned it against the top cabinets.

“Yessss,” I said, coming over to look at it more closely. She’d already written down a bunch of ideas about how we could mess with him, some darker than others.

“Let’s brainstorm more ideas. I’m sure there’s things about him you haven’t told me,” she said, picking up the whiteboard

marker and taking off the cap. “Waddy got for me?”

I put my finger up to my lips and took a second to think of the best ways that we could cater our revenge specifically to him.

“He’s allergic to fragrances,” I said, and Paige immediately smiled and wrote “FRAGRANCES” in all caps on the whiteboard. “He’s also cheating on his wife with a girl named Lauren, so there might be some opportunities there.”

She wagged a finger at me and said, “Now you’re thinkin’,” before writing “MISTRESS” on the whiteboard.

“A lot of your job will be taking messages, making appointments, making sure he gets to the right bank on the right days and times to score foreclosures before they’re bank-owned. That’s a big part of his business,” I said. She was really cruising now and wrote “APPOINTMENTS” on the list.

“What about his trips or travel?” Paige asked, an evil grin spreading across her face. “Do I book all those things for him?” she asked.

“No!” I exclaimed, getting excited, “His wife, Christine, takes care of those things, but you do handle client gifts. We represent mid-size to luxury level clients and the gifts are often selected specifically for the client and their interests.”

She wrote “GIFTS” in big letters and underlined it twice. “I have a lot of ideas for this one,” she said, cackling.

“That’s all I can really think of right now,” I said, leaning back against the counter and eyeing the board. “I think we have some great ideas here, and we can add to it as we go.”

“I agree,” Paige said, nodding. “I start this week and I’ll make sure to be the best assistant ever long enough to earn his trust, and then I’ll...get to work,” she said, raising her eyebrows a few times, her hazel eyes sparkling with delight.

I laughed a little and took another drink of my coffee. Whether or not we actually did any of this was less important to me than feeling like I wasn’t alone in it all anymore.

But, if she was beautiful before, evil plotting made her stunning. Colton was not prepared for what was coming.

The next day I got to the office bright and early, singing a little song that was stuck in my head under my breath. Paige would be coming in tomorrow, and it felt like Christmas Eve. This was going to be a much needed distraction now that I was done with school, and Colton expected me to work nonstop. The deals were coming in like waves, and we just kept getting units from the slumlords. Once word got out that Colton would work with them, they started coming in droves.

I was spending a lot of my days driving from one shoddy place to the next, spraying Lysol on my shoes after each walkthrough to make sure I didn't track things into my car. I wanted to report the property owners so bad for failing to maintain their units to code, but I knew it could displace so many good people who just didn't have better options. The real estate market was insane, and prices just kept going up. What some of these people were paying for rent would buy them a nice house in the suburbs in another part of the country.

But this morning, I was looking forward to finally being in the office all day and getting a lot of work done. Colton walked into the office while on his phone, and I could tell he was making a deal. He hung up, very excited.

"Millie, we sold another one for Rick!" he cheered.

"Woohoo," I said sarcastically, as I started to pull up the documents I needed for the deal.

"Hey, enthusiasm please," he said. "That's more bonus for you, too!" He sat in his chair and immediately started tossing his mini-basketballs.

"Thanks for rubbing money in my face, but I'm really struggling with the types of properties we're dealing with lately," I said, turning towards him so he could see my sincerity. The emotional toll of these deals was weighing heavily on me. "I really wish we could take on more luxury, single family homes in the area."

“A deal is a deal. Stop complaining,” he sat forward and in his chair and began typing on his computer.

“I’m not complaining, I’m sharing my feelings that the money does not always justify the process. I feel a lot better when we’re working with properties and tenants that don’t leave people who are already struggling displaced.”

“Who cares. We both get paid.” He was talking like a robot, with no vocal inflection at all. He really didn’t care.

“Sometimes the money feels dirty, though,” I continued, on a roll. He ignored me, moving his many post-its around his messy desk like it actually helped him or something.

A few seconds later, he started up again, “You know, you’re so ungrateful, just like my wife. In therapy this week, she was complaining that I don’t help enough with the kids and that she has to drive them all over the place. I said, ‘I bought you the car you wanted and you don’t have to work, what else are you supposed to do with it?’”

His take on everything was just wrong. I spun around in my seat and spat out, “I am not interested in hearing about your marital problems, Colton. I am not your personal assistant, I am your business assistant,” before spinning back around to work.

A few seconds went by before he said, “Then as my business assistant, you should be helping me sell any property that I list as the owner of this brokerage.” Then, he grabbed his computer and got up to go to his other office, but before he turned the corner, he stuck his big face back in and said, “And if you don’t like it, you can quit.”

I took a few deep breaths in and out. In and out. In and out. It usually helped lower my stress levels, but it wasn’t working today. This man had no boundaries in his relationship OR his business.

Just then my phone started ringing. It was my kids’ school. “Hello?” I answered, immediately concerned.

“Hello Ms. Barlowe, we have Beckett in our office today. We need you to come pick him up,” she said.

“Beckett? What happened? Is he okay? He’s scared to be in the office alone,” I said, already in motion to leave.

“Well, there was an incident in PE. He got upset, so he was sent here to cool off, but that hasn’t been helping. We think it’s best for you to come get him.”

“Absolutely. I’m on my way,” I said, jogging over to Colton’s office to let him know. I opened his door without knocking and he jumped in his seat. “Colton, I have to go get my son at school. He had an outburst. I’ll finish up from home later,” I finished, about to close the door, before I heard his voice.

“Don’t you have someone else that can go get him?” He said, annoyed.

I stuck my head back in. “My autistic son? No. You know I don’t have any family around here that can go get my son.”

“What about a friend of yours or something?”

“You mean the one you hired? No, I can’t ask her to go get my kid and babysit.” I started to leave again.

“Millie,” he said, causing me to pause, “your childcare issues aren’t my problem. This business is my problem and when my assistant isn’t here, I don’t like it. You need to figure out an emergency childcare situation for when this happens.”

I closed the door, probably a little too hard, and fumed all the way to my car. Once I was safely down the road, I started smacking my palm on my steering wheel and screaming in my car, “I HATE YOU, COLTON! I HATE YOU AND YOUR STUPID FACE AND YOUR MEAN WIFE AND THE CRAPPY PROPERTIES YOU SELL. I. HATE. YOU.”

That’s when it hit me like a lightning strike. This was over for me. I could not keep working for him, not for a million dollars. And if I was going to have to leave this job, I was going to make sure his business was never the same again.

He had picked the wrong woman to screw with. That soulless narcissist was going down if it took everything I had in me.

I got to Beckett's school in record time. Turns out being angry made me one hell of a defensive driver. When I got there, I jogged into the office to find him sitting by the window just staring like he had been frozen in ice. As soon as he felt me touch his arm, he took a breath and came back to life, looking over at me as his face crumpling up and he started to cry.

"Oh, buddy, come here," I said, kneeling down so I could hold him. He was not emotional like this very often, so when he was, I knew that he was really feeling it.

When he pulled away, I wiped his eyes and kissed his cheek and said, "Why don't we get you something to eat. Are you hungry?"

He nodded and I stood up to sign him out before heading to the car. We were lucky he was at a school that was kind and patient with him. They didn't really understand how to best work with him, though, so as he got older, I was starting to wonder if a public school was the best place for him. If I didn't have to work full-time, I might be able to explore other options, but that just wasn't a possibility for me at this point.

As we walked to the car, I rubbed his back and asked him what happened. "Well, we were playing a game in the gym where you kick the beach balls with your feet and your hands are holding you up."

"Like a crab walk?" I asked.

"Exactly. It's crab soccer. I hate that game. We take our shoes off, so it's very unsanitary to have people's feet all over you, plus your hands are on the floor, plus I'm afraid someone is going to kick me in the head the entire time," he finished.

"Well, those all sound like really reasonable concerns to me. Maybe you just don't play crab soccer next time," I said.

"I don't want to, but Mr. Wickams says I don't get PE points if I don't play the game. I have a perfect record right now and I don't want to lose points. So, I tried to play, but I just kept getting more and more upset and then when someone accidentally kicked me in the back of the head, I just lost it,"

he said, starting to cry again. “Why can’t I be like the other kids, Mom?”

I pulled him close and hugged him. “Beckett, listen to me, you are amazing. You are the most brilliant kid I’ve met. You don’t have to love everything, or even play everything. The points are not more important than how you feel,” I said. “Plus, everybody has something, Beckett. We just don’t always know what it is. Whether they’re wearing glasses to help them see or they struggle with anxiety or something else, everybody is unique in their own way. There is no such thing as ‘normal’.”

I could feel his body relaxing and knew he was calming down. Sometimes, when life got too busy, he just needed some time to reset. Brielle could go nonstop and was a true extrovert, but Beckett and I were the opposite. We needed a lot of downtime, and life just hadn’t been that way lately.

“Becks, is there something I can do to cheer you up?” I asked him.

He was already in the car and buckled up. “I just want to relax, Mom,” he said. I leaned over and kissed the top of his head before getting into the car to take us home.

As soon as he was settled on the couch with his tablet and a blanket, I pulled out my laptop and my phone to see if I could catch up on work. I genuinely didn’t want to see what Colton had sent me since I had left, but he was still my boss, for now.

But, when I went to check my phone and email, it was radio silence. Not a single message or email from him. Nothing.

“That is so weird,” I muttered, refreshing my email again and making sure my phone wasn’t on airplane mode.

That’s not good, I thought, taking a deep breath so I wouldn’t start to stress out.

I didn’t hear a thing from him for the rest of the night.

When I went to bed, I tossed and turned all night with nightmares that I was missing messages from him, and he was

getting angrier and angrier with me until he turned into a giant, fire breathing dragon and shot flames at me before screaming, "YOU'RE FIRED!"

I might be watching too many Disney movies.

14

Despite the weirdness with Colton the day before, I strolled into the office excited to come to work. Today, Paige would be coming in and I wouldn't be alone with Hurricane Colton. I literally couldn't wait.

“Good morning!” I chirped cheerily, as I walked into our office and saw him sitting at his desk. “Are you looking forward to seeing Paige again today?”

“I am actually,” he answered, without even looking up from his desk. “Glad you decided to grace the office with your presence today,” he added.

I chose to ignore him. Nothing was ruining my good mood. “Should we take a few moments to discuss the board?” I asked, getting up and grabbing a whiteboard marker.

He turned around in his seat, crossed his legs so one foot was resting on the other knee, and looked at the board. That's when I noticed that he was dressed nicer than usual. It even

looked like he had gotten a haircut. Someone had been primping for pretty Paige's arrival.

"Sure, we have a new property with Rick to add," he said. "Which you would've known if you had been working yesterday."

"Oh great, we love Rick," I said, starting to make some space on the board. "Do you want to give me the details for that one?"

"Did you check your email when you were 'working from home'?" he asked snarkily, making air quotes with his fingers. He was really trying to push my buttons today.

"Of course, but not after hours, since you told me not to work after hours."

He spun around without saying a word and started clacking on his computer. He pulled up his email and checked the time stamp. My heart started beating faster as I fought back the fire breathing wrath starting to boil inside me. Deep breath in; deep breath out. He spun back around and looked at me, his face a blank slate.

Well, must've sent that email after work hours now, didn't you? "What was the time stamp on the email Colton?" I asked calmly, wishing I felt as calm as I sounded.

"5:02pm," he said, putting his fingertips together in front of his chest and staring right at me.

"Then I just *barely missed* it," I said, nodding. "Would you like me to check the email and then fill in the board or should we just finish this now since I'm standing here?"

He started to say something rude when the door opened and Paige came in like she owned the place. I almost laughed out loud, because she was dressed very differently than what I was used to. There was absolutely no way Colton was going to get any work done with her showing up like that.

When she came into the office, Colton immediately shot up as if his chair ejected him and said robotically, "Hello Paige, welcome to the office. Thank you for coming. You look...ready to work!" he said, a gigantic grin on his face.

You are such a pig, I thought.

“Good morning,” she said, a sly smile on her face. Her hazel eyes more beguiling than ever, thanks to her perfectly applied eye makeup. She’d even styled her curly brown highlighted hair and it was the perfect halo around her caramel colored skin. The knee-length leather skirt hugged her curves and had a side slit that was suggestive, without being inappropriate, and her red v-neck silk blouse had a small ruffle trim that made it business appropriate, while still showing her figure. She was a vision, and he was drowning in her beauty.

Colton was staring and not speaking. I think the sight of Paige might’ve made his heart stop. “Colton, what would you like me to start on today?” Paige asked. “Colton?”

“COLTON!” I yelled loudly from behind him, jumpstarting him back to life.

“Yes, hello, so glad you’re here,” he said again, “I think we should have you start on some things. Millie, why don’t you give Paige some responsibilities. She can return calls, look at our client gifts roster or whatever is needed.” With that, he grabbed his phone and practically ran out of the room towards the bathroom.

Paige slowly looked over at me, her eyes big. We were both trying really hard not to laugh. “This is going to be more fun than I thought,” I whispered to her, before we both broke into silent, girlish giggles.

Before Colton could come back in the room, I showed Paige how to check the messages on the voicemail, how to access client information, and where we kept the spreadsheet with closed listings. Colton walked back in, acting like he was on a work call, while I showed her how we order client gifts and the types of things we usually buy for clients in each category.

“You can see here how we’ve tracked the gifts we’ve sent. Single property owners are here, luxury property owners receive a separate gift, and then our property investors who sell many properties with us are in this category here. We don’t want to send them the same gift over and over, so we

track what we send each time to keep it fresh,” I explained. Paige nodded along, her eyes smiling. I knew she was thinking of what she could send these people on Colton’s behalf.

“Colton,” Paige asked, looking at him with her big, innocent, hazel eyes. “I have a lot of great ideas for gifts. Do you feel comfortable with me mixing up these gift ideas? Some of these are a bit old school,” she finished.

“Anything you want, Paige,” Colton responded, almost breathlessly. That boy needed to start exercising more or this girl was going to put him in an early grave.

“There you go,” I said, “Now you can be more creative with gifts.” We smiled sweetly at each other and went back to talking about her new responsibilities.

When she was ready to start working, I went back to my desk and worked on contracts for a while. With Paige here, Colton was significantly nicer to me, and it felt amazing.

Things were going swimmingly when the phone rang and I heard Paige’s upbeat greeting, “Hello, thank you for calling Colton Homes, how can I help you?”

She stammered and I could hear the woman’s voice on the other end of the line from halfway across the room. There was no mistaking it once you’d heard it. Paige was meeting Christine.

Finally, Paige put the phone on hold and said, “Colton, your wife is on line one.”

Colton didn’t turn around. “Tell her I’m out of the office.”

“You want me to lie to your wife?” Paige asked, turning around to look at him.

“Tell you what, I’ll take you to lunch, and then we’ll both be out of office,” Colton said back.

“I packed a lunch,” Paige said, before picking up the line and saying, “So sorry Christine, but Colton is unavailable. You’ll have to ask him about that. Have a nice day,” she said, before ending the call while Christine was still screaming on the other end of the line.

I bit my lip almost until it bled in an effort to stop myself from laughing. This girl was gold, and I was so glad she was here.

Later that day, Paige was packing up to leave and Colton looked like a lost puppy. “You’re leaving so soon?!” he said, getting up to walk her out.

“That’s right! Just four hours a day, right Colton?” she said, not slowing her pace as she talked. “Talk to you later, Millie!” she called over her shoulder as she walked out the door.

As soon as she left, his whole demeanor changed and he started throwing his mini basketballs again. The repetitive sound of the hoop smacking the wall after the impact of each bounce was making me slowly go insane. I was really close to just working in the conference room when the front door opened again, and I thought Paige was coming back to get something she forgot.

Wrong. “So, you think it’s funny to hang up on me?” Cruella Christine’s snarling face was just a few feet from mine. I leaned back in my seat and took a deep breath before responding.

“That was our new receptionist, Christine,” I said. “She was being trained this morning.”

“Well, now she’s being *fired*. Right, Colton?” she said, spinning to turn her giant eyes on Colton.

“Well, I think we should give her a chance,” he stammered, clearly nervous to upset Christine, but needing to defend his true love, Paige.

“Listen, you two can work this out and just let me know what you decide,” I said, as I slid my coat off the back of my chair and wedged my body around Christine’s unmoving frame to slip out the door. I was not getting caught in that crossfire.

I could hear them yelling at each other all the way out to my car. Just a guess, but I’d say therapy isn’t working.

Once I was safely inside my car, I checked my phone and saw a text from Paige.

Paige: Tell me when you're ready to go to Scent Story.

I giggled as I let her know I was on my way.

"Well you look scent-sational," I said to Paige as she walked up in her work outfit.

"You should do stand-up," she joked, falling in step beside me as we walked into a popular local candle store. The second you walked in, you were smacked in the face with pungent fragrances, all competing for your attention at the same time. "Oof, there is a lot going on in here," Paige murmured to me as she started picking up different candles and fragrance sprays and smelling them.

"Alright, remind me again what the game plan is?" I laughed as I picked up a spray called "Winter's Child." The smell was so bad, I reeled back in shock, my face scrunching up in disgust. "Wow! That is truly special!" I said, handing it to Paige.

"Oh yeah," she said, taking a sniff and then having the same visceral reaction I did before smelling it again. "That might be perfect."

We threw a few of them in our basket and kept walking around. "The goal is to find something truly horrifying," Paige said, picking up another option called "Perfect Gentleman." She handed it to me and I think one whiff burned the little hairs in my nose to a crisp.

"Smells like a Christmas tree farm that's burning to the ground," I said. "Not so delightful."

"Add it to the collection?" Paige asked as she hovered the fragrance spray over the basket.

"Are we mixing fragrances or sticking with one overall? Because if it's one, I think Winter's Child is the way to go. If I had to describe it, I would say it smells like a dead animal left to rot on a snow-capped mountain."

She put the burning tree farm spray back on the shelf. “I will never understand how these things pass product testing. Who is actually looking for something like this?” she asked, as she grimaced again while smelling one called “Friday Night Cuddles.”

“Holy moly,” I said, as I took small sniffs, pacing myself. “It’s truly disturbing that some people want to smell wet dog all the time. I’m adding it to the cart.” I dropped the fragrance spray into my growing basket.

“So, we’re going with two fragrances then. What’s the plan? Do we just spray them all or try them one at a time?”

“Hmm, that’s a good question,” I said. “We’re really going to have to think about this one.”

We headed towards the register, snickering gleefully as we imagined Colton’s response to walking into an entire office blasted with Winter’s Child.

15

The next morning, I made sure to get to the office before Colton arrived. I hummed happily as I sprayed Winter's Child all over the place.

After dousing every area with it, my eyes began burning from the smell. But, I needed to tough it out, because I wasn't done yet. I went into his separate office and sprayed down his upholstered chair—front and back. There was no way that was coming out.

I giggled as I thought of him collapsing into the chair exhausted, releasing a huge cloud of stench that would envelope him and inflame his senses. Sure, there was a small part of me that felt guilty, but it was just a smelly spray. It wasn't like I was actually ruining his life the way he was ruining mine.

After I saturated the entire office with the rotten meat smell of Winter's Child, I took a break outside with my coffee

to get some fresh air. I'd have to be tortured right along with Colton until the smell wore off, but it would be worth it to watch him suffer.

When I finished my coffee, I went back inside and got to work. I wanted to look completely relaxed when he showed up.

Right on cue, I heard him talking loudly on his phone as he came walking into the office. "I'm just walking in, Rick, and we'll get that paperwork done for you right away, oh wow... no sorry, that wasn't for you," he paused, covering his mouth for a second while he coughed a few times. "Rick, let me call you back." He hung up the phone as he walked into our office. "Millie, what the hell is that smell? Did something die in here?"

"What smell, boss?" I asked innocently, looking up at him like it didn't smell so bad in here that my eyes were watering.

"How can you say that? It smells like roadkill. Are we being pranked?" he started coughing again. "I can't handle it. I have to go in my office." He grabbed his laptop and a few post-its and practically ran out of the room towards his other office. I smiled to myself as I waited, counting quietly out loud, "3...2....1."

"MILLIE!"

I stood up slowly and took my time walking over, knocked on the door and opened it slowly. "Hey, what's up?" I leaned casually against the door jamb.

"I can't breathe. The smell...it's all over me," he was dry heaving and making a choking sound now.

"Colton, your face looks pretty red. Are you feeling alright?" I feigned actual concern. Truth be told, I was enjoying watching him squirm. Every time he moved in his seat to try to get away from the smell, more of it would plume out of the cushions, assaulting his sinuses.

"Where is it coming from? My god it's bad. I've never smelt anything more disgusting in my life. Millie, find the smell," he could barely talk through his coughing and hacking.

“Sure thing, let me start looking around,” I said, pretending to peek around his office a little before saying, “I don’t see anything plugged in anywhere. Let me check the rest of the office.” I closed the door behind me and before I could walk away, I heard Colton scream, “Leave the door open! My god, are you trying to suffocate me? I’m being asphyxiated, Millie!”

I pushed the door back open and my eyes glowed as I started walking around the office, pretending to look for something.

After a few minutes, Paige walked in the door and immediately stepped back for a second when “Winter’s Child” descended upon her. “Wow!” she mouthed to me, before we quickly looked away from each other before we lost it.

“Paige?! Paige is that you?” Colton came running out of his office. His eyes were puffy and watering and he sounded congested. His body did not like Winter’s Child. At all. “Paige there’s something horrible in here. We have to find it.”

“Really? I think it smells nice,” Paige said, straight-faced. “If you don’t like it, though, that’s what matters. I’ll call the cleaning company and see if they switched cleaners.” She put down her bag next to her seat and sat down with purpose. She was really playing this off.

“FRAGRANCE FREE, Paige. They are supposed to only use fragrance free cleaners!” His face was turning red from coughing. “I can’t work in here. I’ll try the conference room.” He ran down the hall, bumping into the walls a couple of times since he couldn’t see.

Paige and I maintained eye contact as we heard him sit down in a chair before yelling, “GAH! IT SMELLS IN HERE, TOO!” We tried to keep a straight face as he came running back down the hall, tears running down his face and blurring his vision. “I have to work from home. I’ll be calling you on Zoom.” He was clutching his things as he ran out the door. I watched as he stumbled into his car, wiping his eyes before peeling out of the parking lot.

“Step 1: fragrances,” I said to Paige, before turning around and giving her a big high-five.

“We’re just getting started,” she laughed, before pulling up the list of realtor gifts and adding, “because I’m going shopping.”

She started working on finding the absolute worst gifts for our high profile clients and I was working on some contracts when Colton called me to video chat. I answered on my computer and his puffy face filled the screen. “Millie, where are we at with our boards?”

“Oh, sure, let me turn the computer so you can see them and I’ll walk us through it.” I fixed the camera and Colton started yelling at me through the computer.

“To the right. Move it to the right.”

“The right?” I asked, confused, as I pivoted the computer a bit to his right once, then twice. By the third request, I realized what was happening. He wasn’t interested in the boards, he was interested in the hazel-eyed beauty on the other side of the office.

“Colton, you can’t see the boards over there, I can see what you see. Let’s talk about the boards and then you can check in with Paige.” I broke down where we were at with each property in between his sneezes and coughs. When I was finished, I had Paige come over and chat with him for a couple seconds.

“Take a Benadryl, Colton, you’ll be fine,” she said, while he tried his hardest to look fine for her. “Also, I wanted to get your approval for the gifts. I am looking for something truly unique, especially for Rick. Do you want to see what I’ve come up with or should I just send it?”

“I trust you, Paige. You have great taste. Send the gifts,” he said, before sneezing again. “I’m going to do some work and will call you two back later.” He ended the Zoom and we finally relaxed in our seats.

A few seconds later, I said, “Paige, that was fun, but I think maybe we should stop.”

“A little too late for that.” She had turned back towards her computer and I couldn’t see what she was doing.

“Why do you say that?” I asked, leaning to the side to try to catch a glimpse of what she had done.

“I just ordered Rick a gift.”

I didn’t have time to ask her what she’d sent, because Colton started texting me rapid fire messages.

Colton: I need you to check if a tenant is out of a property ASAP.

Colton: When are you leaving?

Colton: Have you left yet?

Colton: This is priority one. Our photographer is headed there now.

Colton: Do you have something more important to do, other than your JOB?

Millie: Just saw these, Colton. Which property are we discussing?

Millie: Hello? Which property?

Colton: You should know what I’m talking about. A good assistant would know what I’m talking about.

“Oh my god!” I exclaimed, beyond frustrated with him. Before I could tell Paige what had happened, her phone was ringing and she picked it up.

“Oh, hey, Colton,” she said. “Let me find out for you right away.” She paused and I saw she was looking up some information before responding, “Yup, they’re open. Walk-ins can go to the city permit office anytime this afternoon...great, talk soon.” She hung up and didn’t say a word to me about what was going on, so I focused on going through contracts to find the tenant occupied property that was supposed to be vacant by now.

Colton: Did you leave yet?

Millie: Just tell me the property Colton.

Radio silence. What a jerk. I was about to saturate this place with more Winter's Child.

When Paige was done for the day, she started packing up to leave. "I feel like today was very productive," she said, smiling and giving me a big wink.

"You look like you feel good about the work you did," I laughed, wondering what evil plans she had set into motion. "Are you going to fill me in?"

"Nah, you like surprises," she said over her shoulder as she started heading out. "Hope the rest of your day is fun!" I could hear her cackle all the way to her car. *What the hell did she do?*

An hour later her phone started ringing. Then, it rang again. I was letting it go to voicemail, since Paige was following up with people who called that line. All of our current clients called my phone, so I was on top of active deals anyway. As soon as her line stopped ringing, my phone lit up.

It was Colton. "Hey Colt—," I started, before he cut me off, screaming at me.

"I drove all the way down here to get a permit and the place is NOT open to walk-ins! I have to have an appointment to be here! I spent two hours of my day driving around in circles, because you two can't work together to make one fully functional assistant!"

"Whoa, Colton, stop yelling, please. What happened?" I asked. "Paige has already left, so fill me in so I can help you."

"There's nothing you can do unless you have magical powers and can make the city permit's office take a walk-in on a day when they require appointments. This has SCREWED my entire afternoon and it is totally YOUR FAULT!" He hung up on me, and I sat there stunned, staring at my phone for a few seconds.

As much as I wanted the guy's car to explode with him still inside, I needed a paycheck, so I texted him back.

Millie: Colton, sorry about the confusion. I'll show Paige how to check all of the requirements for the city permit's

office moving forward. Please remember she's brand new.

Colton: This is your fault. It's your job to train her.

Millie: Noted.

Colton: If you want a job tomorrow, get to the property and make sure the tenant is out.

Millie: Do you want to tell me which one?

Colton: If I have to do your job for you, why am I paying you?!?!?

"I hate you, Colton!" I yelled, as I threw my phone in my bag, packed up my things and left, locking the doors behind me. If I had to drive around checking multiple properties to find the one he was talking about, I wasn't coming back to this place that smelled like rotten meat.

Since Colton had said our photographer was headed to the property, I figured he must know which one it was, so I gave Jason a call and got the address. He let me know that it wasn't a neighborhood I should be walking around alone at night, so we agreed to meet there together and leave together. When I rolled up, I saw a house with bars on every window and a shoddy chain link fence around the perimeter. While I handled most of the properties that Colton took on, he had been taking care of this one on his own, so this was the first time I had seen it. It wasn't a bad piece of land, actually, and with some TLC, the property and grounds could really shine. The home was built in the Spanish style used prominently in the 1950s, and the square-shaped, flat parcel of land gave the home a large front, side, and backyard to work with.

Unfortunately, the grass was all dead and it was pretty much just dirt and potholes around the property. The outside of the home had been badly maintained and the wood was stained and rotting in some areas. The new owners would likely need to put in a roof and new siding. From a distance, the windows looked original, too, but they were covered up behind bars, so it was hard to see the condition. Based on the outside, I wasn't thrilled to go inside and see more.

It would be great if the new owner would give this property the care it deserved. It was unlikely, though. Despite the potential the property could have, the most important thing in real estate is location. No matter what you did with this property, you couldn't change the fact that it was in one of the worst neighborhoods in Sacramento. The new owners were probably going to rent it out as is.

Jason pulled up shortly after me, and I tossed my work jacket in the back of my car, so I was just wearing a nice shirt, slacks and some flats. We got out of our cars and I helped him gather his basic photography equipment. There wouldn't be time to set up videos or anything lengthy. This was a quick snap-and-go situation.

"It doesn't look like anyone is home," I said. "I hope they received a notice that we would be entering the property."

"I hope so. Colton said it was ready. That's why I'm here. I'll do the exterior first, before we lose the good light." He set up his tripod and camera in the front of the house. While he took pictures, I noticed a group of people get into a car a few houses down and start to slowly head our way.

"Incoming," I said, under my breath, trying not to make eye contact with the people in the car.

"I see it," he said back, picking up his tripod and walking through the little metal gate. I followed him in and we headed for the front door. I felt the hair on the back of my neck stand up when I heard the car stopping by our cars. *Don't turn around. Don't turn around.* I turned on my phone camera and flipped it so I could see over my shoulder. They were still in the car, but parked out front and watching us.

Before we could make it inside, one of the guys called out, "Hey, what are you doing?"

We turned around and Jason said, "We're just taking pictures so the house can be sold."

"The owner deserves to be shot," another guy in the car called. "They don't take care of nothin'!"

“I agree,” I said. “We’re hoping the new owners do a better job.”

“Don’t leave your cars out here at night,” the driver yelled. “People here don’t like strangers wandering around.”

“We won’t be long. We’ll be gone in under an hour,” Jason said.

“Thank you!” I called and the guys put their hands up to say goodbye and slowly drove away.

“Guardians of the street, I guess.” Jason started pushing on the door to open it.

“They have to take care of each other,” I said, feeling a twinge in my gut.

While I was lost in thought, Jason was trying to get in the front door, but it wouldn’t open all the way. He pushed on it as hard as he felt comfortable. “We’ll have to squeeze in,” he explained, “there’s something stuck behind the door.”

It was dark and dingy inside and we couldn’t see very well, so I started feeling for the light switch on the left and felt something fuzzy.

When I hit the lights for the entryway, I looked over and saw that I was petting a wolf spider the size of my palm.

“OH MY GOD!” I screamed, jumping inside. Just then, Jason hit another light switch which turned on the lights in the living room, although they weren’t as bright as we would’ve hoped.

“Did you make a friend?” he laughed, seeing my reaction. My skin was crawling. I wanted to get out of this place, but waiting outside alone was even worse. “Wolf spiders aren’t poisonous, at least,” he said, eyeing our furry friend.

“Can we just get pictures and get out,” I stammered. He set up his light and when he turned it on, we could see more clearly what we were dealing with. There was trash and old furniture everywhere. The bright light also caused the unmistakable sound of bugs scattering to hide themselves. There was no flooring, except for plywood, and it creaked

under most of our steps. I thought my foot was going to just go through the floor in some places where it was worn pretty thin.

Behind the front door was more trash and when we closed and locked the front door behind us, the bag on top fell down and spilled all over. The whole place smelled like a dirty diaper that had been left out in the sun to bake.

“Here,” Jason said, handing me a face mask. It was a kind gesture and I eagerly put it on, thankful to smell my own minty breath instead of the horror movie set we’d just walked in on.

He started snapping pictures of the living room and I moved ahead into the kitchen where every appliance was gone and the cabinetry was falling apart. Some of the doors were not on the hinges anymore, and the drawer or two I tried to open were stuck and you could hear the wood chafing against itself when you tried to open it. Old food and dishes were left in the sink and out on the counters. I cringed when I saw plastic plates and cups with cartoon characters on them. I didn’t want to think of children in this place.

When he moved into the kitchen, he took a deep breath in and out before standing up his tripod and snapping some photos. There was no sugar coating this. The house needed to be torn down.

The bedrooms and bathroom were not much better. In the bathroom, the feathers and carcass of a dead bird was stuck in the vent in the ceiling, some of its feathers sprinkling the floor. The toilet and bathtub were sinking into the floor and the grout along the bathtub and shower walls was black.

Each room looked like it had been inhabited by an entire family and they’d all left like they were running from a natural disaster. We could barely enter some of the rooms, so Jason took pictures from the doorway. I could see moldy food, used condoms, old underwear, and other disgusting signs of life left behind.

After we finished the interior, we only had the backyard left to do so we headed back towards the kitchen to go out the sliders. The door was sticky and only opened after several hard

pushes, but before we could step outside we looked out and saw several dog houses.

“Do you think we have a friend out there,” I whispered to Jason, as we looked around. If there was a pet, they weren’t moving very quickly.

Then, I spotted them. An unmoving, black shape to the side of one of the dog houses. “Right there,” I said, pointing towards it.

“Oh no, they just left them,” Jason said, his voice catching.

“There’s bags of food—or what used to be food—over there,” I pointed to where they were. “Who knows how long they’ve been out here alone, though.”

“Probably a couple of days, based on when Colton called me to get over here.”

“I’m going to go check on the dog.” I headed over in that direction. When I got about halfway there, the dog slowly looked up and I could see the stress in its face and body as if it wanted to come running over to me. It was clearly weak and maybe even sick. I slowed down and moved in carefully, not wanting to surprise or scare the dog. Jason was close behind me, and when he got closer, the dog looked like it tried to lunge towards him, but couldn’t.

“Shhh, It’s okay,” I said, almost reaching it. “Jason, he may be scared of men, so stay back a little.” I approached the pup and was able to very carefully reach over and pet its back, and it relaxed under my touch. Despite food being left outside, the poor thing was thin and looked unwell.

“Looks like they took the other ones, but ditched this one. Maybe he’s sick or old?”

“It’s a girl,” I said, “and she’s definitely sick.”

“What do we do?”

“Only two choices: call animal control or take the dog to a vet. If they’re chipped, they’ll call the original owners, but I don’t think they deserve this dog back.”

She was breathing more deeply now in response to my gentle touch. Jason got up and looked around for any leftover food or a water bowl. He brought back a small handful of food he had rummaged for in the dead grass and poured the rest of his water bottle into a bowl he found. We brought it right up to her and she slowly pushed forward to lick the water.

“Sweet girl,” I said, my eyes starting to well up with tears. “Who does this? Who treats an animal like this and then abandons them? If I had a way to cut the chain off, I’d take her with me.” The collar was digging into her skin and was connected to a chain attached to the dog house.

“Let’s get someone out here who can help this dog,” Jason said, standing back up. “We’re losing light and I don’t want to be here after dark.

I hated leaving her there like that. I started googling local shelters and animal control as we made our way back inside to lock up and get out of there.

Animal control said they’d send someone out as soon as possible when I let them know that an abandoned dog was friendly and chained to a doghouse at this address.

Before I left, I shot a text to Colton to give him an update.

Millie: Tenants are out. Photos are done.

Colton: Good.

Millie: They left a dog in the back. I had to call animal control.

Colton: Oh, don’t do that, we don’t want any negativity around the property.

Millie: Well, a dead dog would’ve definitely dampened any potential buyer’s interest.

Colton: Just call the tenants to get the dog.

Millie: You don’t get it. This dog deserves a better life.

Colton: Not for us to decide. Not your dog. Call the tenants.

Millie: You call the tenants. This is your listing and you should've been the one there today, not me.

By the time I got home, I was emotionally and physically exhausted. It broke my heart to see the way people had lived in that home and the way the dogs were cared for and then left behind. When I got into real estate, I didn't think I would be dealing primarily with situations like this or with someone like Colton.

I found myself drifting off in thought while Beckett was explaining his new favorite video game, and Brielle could tell I wasn't really watching when she did her dance routine for me over and over again.

I was just going through the motions now. Living like a zombie, my body in motion, but my mind somewhere else.

I couldn't go to bed until I knew the dog would be okay. I finally got a call from animal control saying they'd found her and were taking her to the vet immediately.

While this provided enough relief to finally fall asleep, I didn't feel good about anything. I knew I needed to make some changes, starting tomorrow. It was time to find a new job.

16

Waking up is hard when you hate your life. I slept right through my alarm and my body felt like lead. I finally woke up when I heard Beckett yelling from my doorway, “Mom! We’re going to be late for school!”

“No you’re not!” I yelled, swinging my blankets off and getting up to throw on some clothes. I knew Beckett’s whole day would be thrown off by being late, so I would be late to work before I’d let that happen.

I ran downstairs, throwing my hair up into a messy bun and got a quick breakfast ready. While their breakfast sandwiches warmed up, I grabbed clothes for both of them and dressed Brielle, while Beckett got himself ready.

I made myself a coffee while the kids finished eating and then we raced to school. Right on time.

“I’m going to be late,” Beckett said again as we pulled in to the drop-off line, his little mind reeling from the change in

pattern this morning.

“No, we’re right on time, Beckett,” I explained, pointing to the clock. “You’re just feeling anxious because I wasn’t up before you today.” I put the car in park. “Actually, we’re two minutes early,” I said, as I turned around to look at his sweet face.

“Thanks, Mom, I love you.” he leaned down to hug and kiss me. I hated the stereotype that autistic kids weren’t affectionate. Beckett knew who his people were, and they were the only ones that were given approved access. Frankly, I was just fine with that.

Brielle, on the other hand, loved everybody. “Bye Mommy!” she squealed, while locking my neck in a death gripping hug.

As I watched them run off, I was reminded again of why I’d do whatever it takes for my kids.

When I walked into work, Colton wasn’t there yet. He hadn’t told me about any appointments this morning, so I double-checked his calendar and didn’t see anything. *Cool, way to communicate buddy.*

I took the opportunity to make some fresh coffee and opened the top of the pot to see that he had just poured coffee grounds inside without using a filter. Coffee grounds were all over the place and I had to deep clean the entire thing before I could use it.

“You’re disgusting,” I sang to myself, until I heard the front door open and close. “Speak of the devil.”

“No baby, it’s not like that,” I heard him coo. Wasn’t his wife then.

“You said you were going to be there, so I already bought a ticket,” a woman’s voice whined.

Wait a second, why could I hear her voice? Was he talking to his mistress *on speakerphone?*

I slid back a little, so I was tucked behind the wall and sipped my coffee while I listened in on their conversation.

“I know, and I will be, Lauren,” he said, placating her. “Christine said she needed help with the kids that weekend because two of my kids have tournaments. I’ll find someone else that can take my son and I’ll be there. Christine schedules all of my travel, so I’m waiting for her to get me the details.”

“Well, if you don’t go, I’m canceling. Unless you’d like me to just spend that time getting to know the other male agents.”

“No, that is not what I want. No. But, this will be a great opportunity to focus on growing your client base. How else are you going to be able to come out here and work with me?”

“I already told you I’m not moving to Sacramento. I like it here. Christine isn’t here.”

“Okay, we just need to talk about this in person. I’ll find a way to get to San Francisco for the event. You can trust my word.”

“Call me when you have your plans.” She hung up and I heard him loudly exhale as he dropped his phone on his desk. I didn’t want him to know I’d been eavesdropping, so I tiptoed down the hall and then loudly opened the hall closet. Once I looked inside, I realized he had stashed all of his Costco sized snacks in here instead of the kitchen. I was about to start carrying them over when I heard Colton down the hall, “Oh, hey Millie. How long have you been standing there?”

I acted like I couldn’t really hear him. “Hold on Colton, I can’t hear you. Trying to organize your snacks.”

“Oh ok, no problem. I’m going to film some videos,” he said, going back into his own office and shutting the door. I dropped the flat of beef jerky once I heard his door close and shut the closet door.

With Colton likely avoiding me most of the day, he wouldn’t even notice I was dressed more casually than normal. Once Paige was here, he wouldn’t notice me at all.

He stayed in his office until Paige showed up and then magically felt it was important for us to work as a team. Paige was wearing a fitted black dress that was very Jackie O, but on

her curves, a little Marilyn Monroe, too. I could tell that Colton was going to have a very hard time thinking clearly with her sitting in the office like that.

“Paige, did we ever find out what happened with the fragrances,” he asked, staring at her like he was undressing her.

“Sure did. The cleaners were sick and outsourced to another company that they swap with and they used a cleaner with a scent. I made it clear that can never happen again,” she said firmly. Give the girl an Oscar. She didn’t even crack a smile.

“Excellent work. Very good.” He was staring straight at where her cleavage would be if the dress was lower cut.

“Also, apologies again for the city permit issue. My mistake,” she said, batting her eyelashes a little.

“Oh, it was nothing,” he said, his eyes moving down her legs. She crossed and then uncrossed them. Oh, she was just torturing him now. She finally turned back to her computer and he looked like someone had knocked the wind right out of him. He was a mess.

“Colton!” I said, getting his attention. “Should we look at the boards?”

“No,” he said, not even making eye contact with me, “I need to make calls. Record what I say so you can turn it into scripts for my videos.”

“You got it,” I said, pulling my mini recorder out of my desk and turning it on. I type 100 words per minute, but I had learned the hard way that it’s easier to just record him and then type out the useful information later. He rambles, so much of what he says isn’t actually useful. I put my headphones on so I could listen to music and drown out the sound of his voice.

When I felt a tap on my shoulder, I pulled them down. “What’s up?”

“I need you at the retreat that’s coming up,” he said curtly, “Paige will set up your accommodations,” before strolling out of the room. *Oh hell no*, I followed him.

“Colton, I already told you I can’t do retreats. I have the kids,” I was talking at his back. He didn’t even slow down to respond.

“Not my problem,” he said, turning into the bathroom.

“Seriously, Colton, you’d have to pay me my hourly rate for the entire time I’m there. I can’t afford to pay for 24/7 childcare at \$20 an hour.” I was practically pleading with him.

“Figure it out,” he said, while closing the door in my face. I wanted to pound that door into the ground and then choke him. I went straight back into the office and Paige turned around when she heard me breathing like I’d run a mile.

“He’s making me go on this stupid retreat!” I shrieked.

“Oh, it gets better,” she turned back to her computer and clicked on a tab on her computer, “Yup, just wanted to double-check before telling you, but Jon is confirmed as well.”

“WHAT?!” my mouth dropped as I collapsed into my chair. I could not get stuck there with Colton *and* Jon for four long days. This was my absolute nightmare. “What do I do with the kids? My parents don’t live in the area. You know I don’t have any family here. Nobody knows Beckett well enough. I’ll have to quit. I have to quit. I can’t do this job anymore. Oh my god,” I started to panic and was ready to cry.

Paige exhaled long and slow. “I’ll watch the kids. You won’t need me here if you are both gone,” she said, looking at me like she knew this was my only option.

“You can’t do that. You have work. You have books to edit.”

“Your kids go to school, right? I won’t have to entertain them the entire day, will I? Also, when they’re out of school, it’ll be the weekend for me, too. Listen, I love those kids, and I’ll stay at your place, so nothing is out of the ordinary for Beckett.”

“Except for his mother being gone?” I dabbed my fingers at the corners of my eyes.

“Except for that.”

Colton came back in the room and looked like he hadn't just harpooned me between the eyes with the worst news ever.

"Colton, I'm serious about the pay. You'll need to pay me for all the hours I am there." My stomach was in knots over this and he plopped down in his chair like he had no cares in the world.

"Whatever," he said, before turning towards Paige and saying nicely, "How are the RSVPs coming for the event? Are we going to have a good turnout?"

"Yes," she said matter-of-factly. "In fact, I just received confirmation from several more agents. It should be a full house."

"Great, you'll need to be there as well." He turned back to his computer and started clacking on his keyboard.

"No sir, I will not. Per my contract, I do not travel. You'll have a great time, though. I'm taking my break," she said firmly, before picking up her purse and heading out. "Millie, want a coffee?"

"More than ever!" I said, jumping up. "Colton, I'll be taking my lunch."

We rushed out of there before he could say anything, leaving him looking like he'd seen a ghost.

My guess: he hadn't read a word of that agreement Paige had sent him and we cackled all the way to Starbucks about it.

17

The next day held another delicious surprise. We were all sitting in the office working, when Colton got a call.

“Hey Rick, what’s up?” he started, before stopping and listening. Paige turned halfway and glanced over at me and we made eye contact. She seemed to have an idea why Rick was calling.

“Wow, that’s interesting. What did you think about that? Mm-hmm. Okay. Sure. Well, I think it’s creative. Right. I’ll share this feedback with my team. Please know how much we truly appreciate your business, Rick. Thanks for everything,” he said, before hanging up the call and turning around. “So, let’s talk about the gift you sent Rick.”

We both turned to face Colton and I got into a comfortable position. This was going to be good.

“Did he love it?” Paige said, smiling.

“Well, he found it interesting.”

“So glad we could surprise him,” she said, widening her fake smile.

“I’d like to know what the thought process was behind sending our best client a giant watercolor painting of the property we sold for him.”

I snorted, loudly, before covering my mouth with my hands and holding back my laughter so hard, my eyes started watering.

“People love paintings of their properties,” Paige explained, maintaining a straight face. “What’s wrong with giving him a little memory of the property he sold with us?”

“That’s a lovely idea for a family that is leaving a home with sentimental value, Paige,” Colton said, like he was talking to a child, “but he’s a *major* property investor. He owns *thousands* of properties and he doesn’t care to look at them after he’s sold them. We need to be showing our appreciation with a *more appropriate* gift.”

“Hmm,” she responded, looking displeased. “That was a commissioned painting by a well-known artist. He doesn’t even take projects like that anymore, but because I edited his new book, he made an exception for me. That’s a *once-in-a-lifetime* gift.”

“Well-known?” Colton asked, his face started to register what she was saying. “Paige, how much did you...” he didn’t finish before he turned around and started pulling up his bank account information. She flashed me a girlish grin behind his back. *Oh shit, what did you do?*

“WHAT?! You spent \$5000 on a painting of a piece of shit property?!” he yelled at his computer, his eyes bugging out of his face as he leaned closer like it would change the numbers.

“You said he was our best client. I didn’t think he’d want another watch. Come on. How many of those can you wear?” she snickered a little at her own joke. I knew her better than anyone, and she knew exactly what she was doing when she spent thousands of dollars on a property painting for a

slumlord. What was he going to do, hang that painting in his office to showcase the condition he kept his properties in?

“Okay,” Colton said, turning around, a strained smile on his face. “I appreciate the effort. That was....creative. Mmkay. Moving forward, gifts will need to be approved by me.”

“Sure, sounds good,” Paige said, turning back to her computer, before adding, “after the other ones that I already sent.”

The blood drained from his face and his eyes got wider. “How many did you send, Paige?”

She responded without turning around. “Hmm, let me see, I did all of the closed listings from this month. That would be 10 clients.”

“Oh my god,” his voice was muffled by his hands rubbing his face. “Okay, thank you Paige.” His voice was as strained as it could be. I knew he was pissed, but he didn’t want to yell at his princess Paige. “I’m going into my other office to do some work.” He grabbed his computer and stormed out without another word.

I couldn’t wait to hear what she had sent everybody else.

Coming to work was becoming a lot more fun now that Paige was around. It was like living in an advent calendar. What little treat was behind the door for today? Besides the random client gifts that cost Colton a small fortune and offended everybody, she was also sending him to the wrong address for appointments, forgetting to take down important, time sensitive messages, and constantly sent emails and contracts to the wrong clients. Colton would try to get mad at her, but then would forgive her completely as soon as she walked in wearing tight dresses and high heels. He’d finally resorted to just trying to avoid her, which meant he was hiding in his own office more and more.

Before she came in this morning, I kept busy by organizing all of Colton’s snacks that he had stashed in the closet. I was relocating them to random places where he would likely never

find them and giggling to myself with each new hiding spot I found.

When Paige arrived, I joined her in the office and waited for the next landmine to explode.

“Excuse me for one second,” Colton said, as he walked into the office with a look on his face I had never seen before. He muted the call, seething with rage, nostrils flaring, and said, “Paige, did you send an oral sex simulator to Beth Edmington?!”

“Well, women deserve pleasure, too, Colton,” Paige chuckled, before adding, “Obviously.”

“Okay, listen, you CANNOT send sex toys to clients. You CANNOT.”

Paige pretended to look offended. “Sex toy? I sent her the CORAL 3. It’s the best oral sex simulator on the planet. It’s way more than, like, a vibrator, Colton.”

Colton cut her off, “OKAY, oh my god, I need you to stop talking about oral sex and sex toys, right now!” he was practically screaming. He looked like he was halfway between furious and aroused and the combination was not a good look. Thankfully, he was so distracted, he didn’t even notice that I had pulled my jacket up and over my head and was covering my face to stifle my hysterical laughter. This was easily one of the top five best moments of my entire life.

“Fine, Colton. I’ll send her a boring gift like a food basket next time or something. Wow, what a prude. I mean, she seemed uptight when I talked to her, but I didn’t think she’d get all turned up about a very generous gift. I mean, this is not a cheap oral sex simulator.”

“STOP SAYING ORAL. STOP SAYING SIMULATOR! GAH!” He raked his hands through his hair and ran out of the office.

The minute he left, we lost it. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d laughed that hard.

“Just wait,” Paige whispered in between sobs, “there’s more coming!”

The next couple of days were tough. None of us could really focus, but we pretended that we were working anyway. There were a few more calls about strange gifts, like the vegan couple that was gifted a large crate full of exotic animal jerky and the former marine biologist-turned-property investor who was sent a delivery of very expensive seafood that was left sitting on his doorstep in the heat, ruining the seafood and making his whole house reek like spoiled fish. They were both extremely offended and told Colton they would never work with him again. Can't say I blamed them. Of course, Paige feigned ignorance on both counts, even though we both knew she'd spent hours researching them to find the most insulting gift possible.

We all knew there were still a few more calls like that coming and Colton looked exhausted. He started taking long lunch breaks outside the office. In the past, he would ask Paige to schedule someone for a lunch date, but since she could never get the person or the restaurant reservation correct, he rarely asked her to help and would just vanish for hours at a time. When he was in the office, we could hear him on the phone periodically with various people, but it didn't produce any new listings for the boards.

Sure, the boards were still full with active deals for now, but we didn't have anything in the pipeline behind it, so I kindly checked in with Colton, "Hey, we need to keep things going. What do you have in the works?"

"The works? Um, well, I've been making a lot of videos," he started rambling, while rifling through papers on his desk as if he was looking for something, when I already knew there was nothing there that led to more business.

"Okay, so let's put more time into some leads maybe?"

"Yes, Mom."

"Great, thanks," I said sarcastically as I turned back to my desk.

That afternoon, Paige's phone lit up and she answered it on the first ring before patching it through to Colton's phone. He was actually in the office with us today. "It's the wife of the

guy that bought Regalia,” she said. I saw him cringe as he picked it up.

“This is Colton,” he said. Then, he listened. We heard him say a few “uh-huhs” and a “sure” before ending the call with, “Well, I very much appreciate your business and hope the two of you enjoy the gift.”

He hung up the phone and I bit my lip to keep myself from laughing. *What did she do now?*

“So, we are sending married couples gift certificates for body waxing now, are we?” he said, without turning around.

“It’s 100 degrees for half the year here, who wants to worry about body hair,” Paige said casually. “BodyZap is the best hair removal spa in the area, so it’s really the gift that keeps on giving.”

“Sure. So, here’s the thing, though, what if we just sent them like a really nice restaurant gift card. These people are moving, and they’re tired and hungry. A gift card for a private chef to cook them dinner in their new home would be nice. Sending them to get zapped with lasers is not so nice, especially when they are in their 50s.”

“Colton, that’s very ageist. People in their 50s still care about themselves. But, I will definitely send a more boring gift next time.”

“If there’s a next time.”

Paige and I side-eyed each other quickly before looking back at our computers. I had an image in my head of the older couple in adjoining rooms at BodyZap, yelping as their body hair was zapped with lasers.

“Excuse me, I need to use the restroom,” I eeked out, as I raced out of there before I burst into laughter.

18

Another few days with phone calls about random gifts, more strange smells we just couldn't get out of the office, and Colton not being able to find any of his favorite snacks, and he started to look pummeled by life. Everything about him, from his appearance to his moods, was just a little off.

I also started noticing that when we erased closed deals from the boards, we still didn't have anything to replace it with. The boards were the least packed I'd ever seen, and it was creating a baseline of anxiety in the office that all of us could feel.

"Millie, where are my nuts!" he yelled from the hall closet.

"Colton, your nuts are not under my purveyance," I said calmly, staying at my desk. He peeked his head around the door jamb and clarified, "My almonds, Millie."

“Again, Colton, your nuts or their size is not my responsibility.”

“The snacks. You know what I’m talking about. Where are my snacks.”

“Oh, it’s all in the kitchen,” I explained. “I didn’t want to risk having any pest issues, you understand.” I stood up and walked towards the kitchen, Colton following me like a hungry child. I opened a cupboard to show him where the nuts were stashed. “Here you go!”

As I was walking out of the kitchen, Colton started talking. “Do you think Paige is doing it on purpose?”

“Doing what?” I asked innocently, turning back around to look at him and acting casual.

“The gifts. It just feels odd, like who would do that, you know?” He didn’t make eye contact and popped an almond in his mouth.

“You know, Paige doesn’t have a ton of industry experience. She’s worked for herself for a long time. Plus, she’s been editing books for years, so I think she was just thinking outside the box, and her version of that is way outside the box.”

“Yeah, good point. Okay, thanks, Millie,” he said, as he popped a small handful of smoked almonds in his mouth.

Thanks, Millie. That was odd. As I walked back to the office, I couldn’t help but think about how he hadn’t been that nice to me in a long time. Maybe the key to working with Colton was just being mean to him.

I was almost to our office when I saw the front door open, and a woman walked in. *Well, that is interesting,* I thought, as I approached her and said, “Hi, what can I help you with?”

“I’m Lauren. I have a lunch scheduled with Colton?” She ended everything she said with a question, so I was never sure if she was asking or telling me something.

I tried not to look too shocked and was about to introduce myself when Paige walked over, “Thanks for coming, Lauren.

Colton will be right out. Why don't you have a seat in the waiting area. I just refreshed the magazines. Can I get you something to drink?" she asked nicely.

Lauren gave her a cursory glance, and I saw her jaw tighten. It didn't matter if you were a perfect ten, you were going to feel like a troll next to Paige. "Sure, how about a Diet Coke, with ice?"

"Coming right up." Paige smiled sweetly and headed for the kitchen. I turned and followed right behind her.

As soon as Paige walked into the kitchen, I heard Colton say, "Well, look at us, all alone in here." I rounded the corner seconds after.

"Hey, do you need any help?" I asked Paige. Colton cleared his throat and stood up straighter after he saw me come in. I grabbed a glass out of the cupboard while she grabbed a regular Coke.

"Sure," she said, snapping the top and pouring it into the glass. "The lunch date you asked me to schedule is here, Colton," she added, before turning and walking down the hall. I heard Colton ask, "Which one?" but Paige pretended she couldn't hear him. I followed her back down the hall.

"Here you go!" Paige handed the drink to Lauren who took a sip and then had an immediate reaction to the Coke not being diet. She started to say something when the door opened again and Christine walked in.

"Christine?" I asked, a little surprised. None of us were expecting her. Well, except for Paige.

"Hi Christine, thanks for coming," she said, before acting like she realized her mistake. "Oh shoot. Wait." She put a finger to her lip like she was trying to figure out what happened when Colton came walking down the hall, slowing down as the scene unfolded before him.

"Whoa, what's happening here," he said, looking back and forth with a stiff, fake smile on his face. "Full house today!"

"Who is this woman, Colton," Christine snapped, pointing her long, sparkly fingernail at Lauren. Lauren looked angrily

at Christine before adding, “What is happening here? You had me come all the way down here for this?”

“Paige, what is going on?” Colton asked, his face grimacing as he realized that his mistress and his wife were standing a foot apart.

“Oh, you asked me to make lunch dates with both of them, but I think I made a mistake and scheduled them on the same day,” she said slowly, as if it was just an honest mixup. “But, now you can just go with both of them and hit two birds with one stone!” She finished with a smile as if this was exactly the solution everyone was looking for.

“Colton, tell me now who this woman is!” Christine said angrily. “WHO ARE YOU?” she yelled at Lauren, who jerked back from Christine’s breath and spit flying in her face.

When she regrouped, she glared at her and spoke through her clenched teeth. “Don’t get loud with me. I don’t want to be here with YOU, either!”

“Ladies, I can explain,” Colton said, his hands out like he was soothing an angry child. “Let’s just all calm down.”

“Calm down? You’d like me to *calm down*? I’ve been married to your sad ass for twenty years and now you’re having secret lunch dates with another woman and I’m supposed to *calm down*?”

“Business partner, Christine. Not another woman. A business partner. We are business partners,” he said slowly, sounding out each syllable like he was talking to a child, which only infuriated her more.

“So now I’m your business partner? That’s all this means to you?” Lauren shouted, causing Christine to look like she was ready to explode.

“WHO THE HELL ARE YOU?!” Christine bellowed into Lauren’s face, the force of her words causing Lauren to lean away from her and close her eyes a little. When she bounced back, she looked even more angry.

“ME? I’m just the other woman who is SCREWING your husband!” she screamed back at her.

Christine let out an ear piercing laugh that raised the hair on my arms and then looked at Lauren with her eyes blazing and said, “You think you’re the only one?”

That’s when Lauren swatted at Christine’s face, barely missing it, and then Christine tried to slap her back, but also missed.

I grabbed Paige’s arm and pulled her backwards out of the way, so that Colton and his two women were the only ones in the waiting area. “Wait, I want to watch,” Paige hissed at me.

“Oh we are, I’m just getting us out of the line of fire,” I said back as we huddled behind the doorway of our office.

“Please! Stop! Ladies! Please stop!” Colton was yelling, while Christine and Lauren kept trying to slap each other and grab each other’s hair. They got a few weak hits in there, each of them acting like they’d been brutalized by the other, before attempting to retaliate. At one point, they were just slapping each other’s hands out of the way repeatedly. Neither of them had any future in cage fighting. I wanted to see one of them just clock the other, full-fisted, but when Christine’s nail broke and Lauren got scratched, they both started crying.

“Is this how rich women fight?” Paige asked me, trying to make sense of what they were doing.

“I think so.” I nodded, my eyes glued to the scene unraveling before us.

“Christine, Lauren, please stop and listen. I can explain,” Colton started, his hands up like he was surrendering. That’s when they both turned on him.

“Go to hell, Colton!” Lauren screamed, slapping him hard across the face and storming out of the office. Colton’s hand went up to his face in shock. As soon as he let his guard down, his voice softened and he looked at his wife, “Christine, I’m so sorry...”

“Fuck you, Colton!” Christine yelled at him, slapping him on the other cheek so hard, his head swung to the right. “I’ll see you at home,” she seethed, before charging out the door and peeled out of the parking lot in her car. He looked more

upset at that last line than at anything that had come before. If he was cheating to get out of his marriage, it didn't look like it was going to work.

Colton had both hands on his face as he slowly sank down into a chair. His cheeks were bright red from the slaps, and he looked disoriented and stunned from the impact.

We slowly went back to our seats and started working, giving him a few minutes to process what had just happened.

Not too long after, he came trudging into the office like his feet were tied to bricks. From the doorway, his voice was small, like a light inside him had been blown out. "Paige," he started, his voice catching a little. "You're fired."

He turned around and walked towards his other office as if he were walking the plank and then slammed his office door.

"Oops," Paige said, turning and looking at me, her eyes sparkling with delight. "He made it longer than I thought." She was already packing up her things.

"You really went out with a bang," I said, giving her a generous bow from the comfort of my desk chair. "Pretty sure you've left a mark."

"Well, they sure did," she cackled on her way out. "Oh, by the way, let me know what he thinks of the other gifts when they land," she said, winking at me as she walked out the door. She skipped to her car without a care in the world.

I sat back in my seat and surveyed the wreckage. This was one disaster I wasn't sure he was equipped to crawl his way out of. He was getting a taste of his own medicine, and he did not like it.

19

I angrily shoved clothes into my bag for the trip. “Can’t believe I have to spend four days with these morons in San Francisco,” I muttered to myself as I continued packing. I was so upset about this stupid trip, I didn’t even hear Brielle come in behind me.

“Mommy, do you want to see my dance?” she asked, before twirling a few times in her dance costume.

“Not now, Sweetheart, I have to pack,” I said, without even turning around. *This trip is going to be a nightmare. This job is a death sentence. Colton is a disaster.* With each thought, I jammed another packing cube into my bag.

Brielle bumped into me from the back, “Hey!” I said sourly, before turning around and seeing her shrink away, embarrassed for ramming into me. My heart softened as I realized that the whole reason I kept doing this damn job was

to give them the best of everything. That also meant the best of me.

I exhaled, took a seat on the edge of my bed, and beckoned her over for a hug. “I’m sorry, Brielle. I didn’t mean to snap at you. I really want to see your dance. Will you show it to me?” She pulled out of our hug, her beautiful eyes sparkling. “Yes!” she cried happily, before stepping back and getting into her starting pose. She sang the parts of the song she knew while she sashayed and spun around the room. I hadn’t really watched her dance classes for awhile, and she had really come a long way.

Clapping proudly at the end, I let her know how much I loved her performance. “That was amazing, Brielle! Five stars! Encore! Encore!” She looked a little bit sheepish before barreling into my arms for a big hug. “I’m sorry I have to go on this trip,” I said to her, kissing the top of her head. “Auntie Paige will take good care of you, and we’ll talk on the phone every day. I’ll be home before you know it,” I said.

“You promise to come back, Mommy?” she asked, her little eyes full of concern. Damn that man who left these precious babies and put this fear in their hearts.

“I *always* come back.” I said firmly, hugging her again.

Brielle helped me lug my bags downstairs, where Paige and Beckett were waiting—she was getting him set up to play one of his games, and I could see the same concern in his eyes.

“Beckett, it’s just four days—or less if I quit, haha—and I’ll be back. Auntie Paige has a detailed itinerary of your schedule, as well as what you eat for each meal and she knows to call me if you have anything you want to talk about, okay?” I said, reaching my arms out in the hopes of a hug goodbye.

He gave me a nervous smile and came over slowly, eventually hugging me back and stuffing his face into my sweatshirt. “I’m going to miss you. What if Auntie Paige gets me to school late?”

“She won’t be late,” I said confidently, glancing up at Paige who added, “Definitely not, I’m never late, Beckett.”

“What if she doesn’t make my breakfast sandwich the same way as you?”

“I’ve given her exact instructions, so she will get it as close as possible. Beckett, what’s the worst thing that can happen?” I asked, using my favorite strategy for helping him walk back his anxiety.

“The sandwich tastes a little different.”

“Would it still be okay to eat, do you think?”

“Probably.”

“If you try it and you don’t like it, what can you do?”

“Ask Auntie Paige to make another one.”

“Or, you can get your favorite cereal, instead.”

“Mom,” he started, his voice shrinking, “what if something happens to you?”

“Nothing will happen to me, Beckett. I promise you.” I gently lifted his chin so he could look me in the eyes, and I said it again, with emphasis, “Nothing will happen to me. I’ll be back soon.”

We hugged again and Paige and I made eye contact. She nodded, understanding the full weight of this responsibility, and on my way out, she told me again, “I will follow the instructions exactly. I will do my very best to keep things as normal as possible. If they get nervous, I’ll have them call you, so keep your ringer on.”

“Oh, you bet I will. Even in the mastermind groups or presentations when we’re supposed to turn them off, I’ll have my phone on me,” I confirmed.

“How are you going to deal with Colton?” Paige grabbed my small bag and followed me outside.

“Avoidance. 100%. That’s my strategy.” I loaded my small suitcase into the back seat and reached over to get the bag from Paige.

“Good call. Let me know how it goes.” She gave me a hug and headed back inside.

I groaned as I forced myself to get in my car and drive away. Anger simmered right beneath the surface and I hated Colton more with each passing mile. This was the last time I let him take me away from my babies.

A couple hours later, I arrived at the Palace Hotel in San Francisco to check in and was a little relieved to see that they had at least picked a nice place for the conference. The girl at the front desk handed me my printed itinerary for the retreat, and I barely looked at it. I couldn't have cared less what they had us doing; being here was just a formality for me.

I did like the hotel, though. I couldn't help but look around on my way to the elevator. The entire place was gilded with gorgeous furnishings, incredibly detailed millwork, huge marble pillars, and ceilings dripping with stunning chandeliers. It was hard not to stare like a kid in a candy store while walking down the lavishly decorated hallways.

I found the elevators and squeezed in with a bunch of tourists to head up to my room on the 4th floor.

"Not too bad," I said, as I sat my bag on the bed, looking around. Despite the grandeur of the lobby and meeting areas, the single rooms were small, but well appointed. The age in some of the finishes and design was showing, though, and there was a little hint of a haunted mansion vibe. It could've been the largest suite in the place, and I still would've hated it. I wanted to be at home with my kids.

I scanned the night's itinerary and saw that our first meet and greet event was in just one hour. "At least there's an open bar and food," I muttered, tossing the itinerary on the bed and hearing my stomach growl. In the past, I had noticed that most people barely ate anything at these events. They were solely focused on wooing each other and trading business cards. I didn't even want to be here, so there was no way I was going hungry. I had nothing to prove to any of these people.

I just needed to get through this retreat, get home to my kids, and start blasting out resumes to every single dental office within driving distance.

I reluctantly slipped on some cocktail attire—a fitted black dress, my favorite leopard print kitten heels, and some dangly earrings—before sprucing my hair and adding a little sultry eye makeup. When it felt like it was as good as it was going to get, I shrugged, grabbed my small, sequined clutch and headed downstairs for the event.

I found the meeting room assigned to our group and strolled in confidently. My only reason to be here was to keep my job—and that was only temporary until I could find something better. My survival plan was to eat and drink my way through this nightmare, so when I spied a waiter with a tray full of champagne flutes, I quickly snagged one, and said, “Don’t go far, I’m going to need another one.” They smirked and I glanced around to find the waiter with the best looking tray of food.

“Gotcha!” I said, setting my gaze on a waiter with something that looked like shrimp cocktail. I took a big gulp of my champagne while I went in for the kill. Once I had my hands on the prize, I was happily munching and lost in my own thoughts, when I noticed someone walking over to me in my peripheral vision.

“Nope, not today,” I said, swerving to my right and heading towards another waiter with some kind of mini puff pastry I needed to eat immediately.

While I was reaching for one of the hour d’oeuvres, a man’s hand reached for the one right next to it and I became uncomfortably aware of a person standing far too close to me.

“Have you had these before,” he asked and I didn’t look up, pretending to be fascinated by what was hiding inside the puff.

“Not yet, but I’m looking forward to it,” I said, before shoving the whole thing in my mouth to signal to the stranger that I wasn’t here to make friends.

“Are you a new realtor? I haven’t seen you at one of these things before,” he asked, still not leaving my side.

I chewed slowly and signaled towards my mouth. Doesn't everyone know it's rude to talk with food in your mouth? I took my time, hoping he'd get bored and walk away.

Nope, he waited. Damn it. "Not a new realtor. I'm an executive assistant and do the occasional deal on the side, and I was forced to be here," I said in one breath, before snatching what looked like a skewer with popcorn chicken off the tray of a waiter walking by. I still hadn't made eye contact with the talkative stranger.

"I'm being forced to be here, too," he said, laughing a little and taking another drink. He didn't have champagne, though. That meant there was an open bar here somewhere. Finding out where was worth some eye contact. I looked over to him and then up to meet his gaze. He was significantly taller than my 5'4 frame and had to be around 6'4. Even in my kitten heels, he was towering over me. Once we made eye contact, my mouth opened slightly as I realized how handsome he was. He looked like a young George Clooney, tan skin juxtaposed with kind, brown eyes with the longest eyelashes I'd ever seen. His square jawline was dusted with a light five o'clock shadow and his hair was dark, with a few slivers of gray. When he smiled, his almond shaped eyes became squinty, and light lines around his eyes became more prominent. It only made him more handsome.

Oh boy, this was not on the itinerary.

I didn't even realize I'd been staring when he added, "I'm less upset about it now, though," and he smiled again, the sight of it caused my stomach to flip flop and my face softened in response, my lips curling up into a smile. "I'm Luca, by the way. You are...?"

"Not sure I believe you," I said. "You don't look like the kind of guy who could be forced to do anything."

"Okay, maybe forced is a strong word," he agreed, stopping for a second to lift his glass in a brief greeting to someone he knew from across the room before looking back down at me. "It's good for business, so I'm here, but I'm

getting tired of just going through the motions,” he paused, his face turning a bit more serious. “Do you ever feel that way?”

“Every day,” I said, swallowing hard. *Hot and soulful?* Nope, they didn’t exist.

We stared at each other for another second, before I needed an exit strategy from this conversation. “So, tell me,” I started, his eyes sparkling like he thought something sexy was coming, “where did you get that drink?”

His face folded into a warm smile and he snickered a couple of times before lifting his glass in the direction of a small bar in the back of the room. The crowd parted for just a second and I spotted my redemption. “In that case, excuse me,” I said, nodding in gratitude, “I have a date with a bartender that I must keep.”

He looked amused and said, “Lucky man.” I walked away, not looking back and not particularly concerned if he was watching me. I was just here for four days. Four long ass days, and then I was going home. Nobody, not even a hot realtor, was going to distract me.

I finally got my turn at the small bar and looked over the drink menu. “I’ll take a Backup Offer. Strong.” The bartender nodded and began expertly mixing something that looked like a lychee martini. He served it up and I took a quick sip. “Perfect, thanks.” It burned going down. “Glorious,” I said, taking another big sip. A few more of these and I wouldn’t remember any of this in the morning.

“There you are!” Colton’s voice came from behind me, causing me to freeze mid-sip. A chill raced up my spine.

“Are you trying to ruin vodka for me?” I asked, as he walked around me until we were facing each other. “Because I won’t let you do it.”

“Millie, you shouldn’t even be drinking like that,” he said, pointing to my drink and admonishing me despite the fact that he was holding what looked like a whiskey neat. “We’re here to do business and I need you at your best.”

“Who’s to say vodka doesn’t bring out the best in me?” I said, daring him to respond while I took another sip.

“Alright, just don’t drink too much. There are some huge property investors here and we could really use that kind of clientele. I need you to be on your A-game this weekend.”

“Shouldn’t you be on your A-game?” I challenged, glancing towards his drink.

“I’m always on my A-game. This is just for looks.” He started walking towards someone behind me. “Hey Ben, how are you?”

I finished the rest of my martini and turned around to set it on the bar. “Another one, please.” The bartender swiped the glass and started doing the Lord’s work, placing it back down full again in record time. I nodded in gratitude, “Bless you, child.”

I raised my glass in salute and walked away in search of more appetizers. Some kind of bread thing was not too far off in the distance, and I needed it in my mouth. I was almost there when I felt someone staring at me.

“Hello, Millie.” My mouth went dry. *Can a girl catch a break?*

I didn’t look over, but kept reaching for the bread. It had fancy cheese and maybe some prosciutto? I loved prosciutto. Once I’d scored my snack, I turned to greet Jon. *Rip off the bandaid, Millie.*

“Jon, how have you been?” I said flippantly. I really didn’t care how he’d been.

“Missing you,” he responded. *Liar.*

“Well, everyone does,” I said, with a flash of fire in my eyes, before strutting away. *There, I said hello, what else does he expect from me?* I took a big gulp of my drink to wash down the bread and tried to find a quiet spot where I could be alone. I spied a group of men regaling each other with real estate stories in the corner. I could stand behind them and nobody would see me.

“So, you’re just going to avoid me for four days?” Jon asked, and I realized he’d followed me.

“Not avoiding, just not caring,” I said, avoiding eye contact.

“It’s over with her. I ended it.”

“I really don’t care,” I retorted, turning to face him. “Let’s call this what it was: a hookup. We had our fun. It isn’t fun anymore. I’m done. Capiche?”

“It wasn’t a hookup for me,” he lied. *Cheater.*

I looked him dead in the eye. “Okay, so are you ready to be a stepdad then?” This man was ruining my buzz.

“Is that a prerequisite to being with you?”

Was he serious? “That you have any interest in the humans that exited my body? Yes, yes it is, Jon.” My eyes narrowed and my body tensed.

“Why can’t our relationship be separate?” He stepped closer to me and lowered his voice. Proximity might have worked on me before, but now it made rage pour like hot lava through every inch of my body.

“Ha! It was separate, just not in the way I thought it was. It was separate as in, I was one of multiple relationships you were having. And, since you’re so good at separating things, let’s separate now. Why don’t you just stand over there,” I said, pointing off in the distance.

“That’s not what I meant.” He took another step closer. Oh, this man had a death wish.

“Too bad, that’s what you said, and for the first time, we agree with each other. So, off you go,” I said, signaling legs walking with my fingers. The vodka was really catching up to me now and my filter was razor thin.

“I’m going to win you back. Before this retreat is over, I’m going to win you back,” he said, his eyes narrowing like this was a game. Jon loved a good challenge. It was actually all he loved, just the game. Not the real people.

“I hope you like to lose,” I said back, stepping forward until our noses were almost touching and I could feel his warm breath on my skin.

“I never lose.” He said low and deep.

“Neither do I,” another man’s voice said, before he cleared his throat, causing both of us to stand up straight and jump apart. He stuck his hand out to Jon and said, “I’m Luca...how do you know my girlfriend?”

My eyes shot wide open and I instantly felt a fraction more sober than before. What the actual hell was happening right now? Luca was the hot guy from earlier and now he was here and he was...pretending to be my boyfriend?

“It’s really okay,” I said, backing up a few steps and putting my hands up like I surrendered. I was about to tell them both how I didn’t need any man to be with me or help me or *do anything for me at all* when I saw something really strange flicker in Jon’s eyes. I’d never seen Jon back down from anything, but he actually seemed a little scared of Luca. Why, I had no idea, but one thing was for sure—if Luca was my path to getting back at Jon, then I was on board. *Game on, Luca.*

I stepped forward and looped my arm through Luca’s, the surprise of my touch getting a small, but noticeable reaction out of him, and I softly draped my body against his, resting my head just briefly against his impressively muscular upper arm before making eye contact with a very shocked Jon and saying, “Sorry for the surprise, Jon. I hope you understand.”

“Of course,” he said, backing away a little bit at a time, “Very happy for you both.” He furtively glanced at me one more time, his eyes blazing with jealousy and confusion, before he turned around and walked away. It was like watching a lion back away from a fight.

I slowly extricated myself from Luca’s arm and stood back, looking up at him again. “Why did you do that?” I asked quietly enough so no one near us could hear.

“I saw you telling him to leave and he wasn’t listening. It was a knee jerk reaction,” he said, unblinkingly.

“But you don’t even know me.”

“Well, we have four days to fix that, don’t we... girlfriend?” he said, a sly, side smile lighting up his face.

Well played, Luca. Well played.

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The next morning, I video chatted with Brielle and Beckett while I got ready. Auntie Paige nailed the breakfast sandwich on the first try, so I got two thumbs-up from Beckett, and Brielle was very pleased with Paige's braiding skills, in fact, I was told that, "Auntie Paige does better braids than you."

"Paige, if you're there much longer, I'm going to become obsolete," I teased. She laughed a little too hard at that one.

"What's the plan for today?" she asked, while refilling her coffee mug.

I put on my navy blue dress and tweed cardigan while I filled her in. "Let's see, there's a breakfast buffet, followed by lots of meetings, a dinner at some point and then I'll cry myself to sleep."

"Sounds exciting. Hey, we've gotta head out. Say goodbye to the kids," she called the kids over and I grabbed my purse to

leave, too. We were still blowing each other kisses and saying 'I love you' when the elevator opened. Luca was already inside, leaning casually against the back wall and reading a newspaper.

"That's sweet of you, but maybe it's a little too soon for 'I love you'?" he joked, standing up as I ended my call and joined him in the elevator.

"I move fast, Luca," I said, laughing it off. "Try to keep up."

"Well that's not fair," he replied, folding up his newspaper and putting it under his arm.

"How so?"

"You know my name and I don't know yours."

"Oh," I said, turning to look up at him, "Millie. Millie Barlowe."

"Nice to meet you, Millie. Millie Barlowe," he teased, his eyes smiling.

"So, what kind of real estate are you in, Luca?" I asked, changing the subject and ignoring the fluttering sensation I got in my stomach when he looked at me like that.

"Oh, I'm a dabbler," he said coyly. "Quite honestly, I've been at the game for awhile and I've been thinking of pivoting a little."

"Yeah?" I said, a little surprised. "Same here. What's drawing your interest?"

He quickly gave me a once over and I felt like the elevator dropped three floors in a second. Thankfully, the doors opened right then, and as we left the elevator, he fell in step beside me and said, "I'm thinking of doing some charity work. I'd like to give back and leave a legacy I'm proud of."

"That's big of you," I said dryly, my mind immediately thinking of the business Colton was building. "What sort of charity work?"

“I’d like to build a foundation for kids. Foster kids. They’re kicked out of the system at eighteen, usually lacking important life skills or even a basic understanding of how to be successful. Very little financial literacy. I feel like we need a program to fill the gap,” he explained, and my heart melted a little. Okay, fine, a lot.

“Do you have kids?” *A man who wants to help kids this much must be a father.*

“No.” He almost whispered it and then nothing else. He was unusually quiet, but there was no time to inquire as we turned the corner into the meeting room where breakfast was being served. “Should we sit together?” he asked kindly, offering me his arm instead of his hand.

“I’m not sure that’s necessary,” I giggled a little, forgetting about our fake relationship for a second. I needed a little space from this guy, before he became a huge distraction. Then, I caught a glimpse of Jon, who was already getting out of his seat and walking towards me like a man on a mission. I quickly picked the lesser of two evils.

“On second thought,” I looped my arm through his, “let’s get this show on the road.”

He put his hand on top of mine and the electricity from his touch caught me off guard. I took a deep breath and tried to ignore the adrenaline coursing through my body. We walked over to a table to pick up our meeting materials for the day and then found a couple of empty seats. I noticed a few people looking at us strangely before turning away.

He’s probably a playboy. Don’t get confused. This is just about revenge, Millie, I reminded myself.

Once we were seated, I felt my phone vibrate.

Colton: How do you know Luca?

Millie: Why do you ask?

Colton: This is a huge deal, Millie.

Millie: I’m not sure how.

Colton: We need to talk about this ASAP.

I groaned, putting my phone away. I had no idea why Colton cared, but I figured it had something to do with Jon and maybe the position it could put him in. Frankly, he and Jon didn't seem that close, but I couldn't risk telling him that Luca and I were just pretending to be together to get back at Jon. I needed Colton to believe that this was real.

Luckily, before he could ask any more questions, I saw Lauren storm into the meeting hall like a dog sniffing for meat. I half expected her to march up to Colton and slap him again, but to my surprise, they hugged and then whispered things into each other's ears until they were both giggling like horny teenagers.

"Unbelievable," I muttered, shaking my head. These people had no morals.

"What is?" Luca asked, leaning towards me, reminding me he was sitting so close to me, I could feel the warmth emanating from his body.

"Oh, just my boss and his mistress. They got caught last week by his wife, but here they are, canoodling like they're living in La La Land. I don't get it," I said.

"Such a shame," Luca agreed. "So, tell me more about Jon?"

I looked over at him more sharply. Why was this guy digging into my past relationship? He saw my reaction and added, "If I'm going to be your fake boyfriend, I need a little bit of information," before giving me one of those award-winning smiles again. He had such a calm energy, but I could tell he was enjoying this. I, on the other hand, felt flustered by everything, including how good he smelled and the sparkle in his eyes when he was talking to me.

"Well, we were dating for a little while, but things just weren't progressing and I couldn't figure out why," I began, and he listened carefully. "Then, I was in between jobs and he didn't like the direction I was going, so he used his friendship with Colton to get him to offer me a job with him, and my life has gone consistently downhill from there." I finished, boldly

displaying the wreckage of my former relationship for this handsome stranger.

“Why didn’t the relationship work out?” he asked, digging a little deeper into more humiliating details. I was probably never going to see this guy again, so I said, “Because apparently he was engaged. I walked in on him and his fiance at a listing. Of course, now that he can’t have me, he suddenly wants me. Go figure.”

His jaw tightened and his nostrils flared. He was about to say something when someone at the front announced that our first speaker was going to be starting their presentation in five minutes. That gave me just enough time to grab another really big coffee. “Excuse me,” I said to Luca before tossing my napkin on the chair and rushing over to the coffee bar to inject caffeine straight into my veins.

While I was waiting by the bar, Jon came out of nowhere. I exhaled audibly and glanced up at the ceiling like some deity might take pity on me and strike him dead.

“Is this your first or second coffee of the day?” he asked, trying to strike up a conversation with me.

“Third, but who’s counting?” I said bluntly, without making eye contact, before swiping my coffee off the bar and heading back to my seat.

“When did you meet Luca?” he asked, trailing behind me. I spun around to look him in the face when I said, “What difference does it make to you?”

“Are you doing this to hurt me?” he asked, and I saw it again, a flicker in his eyes when he talked about Luca. Why was he acting like this? He was one of the best realtors in the business, and one of the most successful people in this room. Why did he look like a pimply, insecure teenager when he talked about this guy?

“Jon, you might find this hard to believe, but I don’t even think about you anymore, let alone let thoughts of you govern my choices.” I walked away before he could respond and got

back to my seat right as they lowered the lights and the first presenters took the stage.

Supposedly, the three panelists were very successful realtors who had a lot of great advice. If I had any desire to learn more about real estate, I may have cared what they had to say, but considering I was leaving real estate as soon as I could get a compelling job offer in the dental industry, I didn't.

Luca seemed almost as disinterested as I was and started writing me little notes on his notepad and then scooting it over so I could see.

Coffee or tea? Circle one, please.

"Easy," I whispered, putting a big circle around "coffee". He nodded in agreement before scratching down the next question.

Movies or TV shows?

I thought for a second before circling "movies". Then, I added next to it, *with popcorn!* He drew a couple lines under "with popcorn" and then started on the next question. I expected another fluffy question, but this time, he sent me:

Memories or Money?

I thought for a second. I valued memories—especially with my children—over anything else. But, as a single mom, I was painfully aware that money was often required to make those magical memories a reality. I circled both and he glanced over at me a little surprised. I took the notepad back and drew an arrow from money to memories and then he nodded again.

He wrote another note and pushed it back over to me.

Realist or Dreamer?

I didn't like either of those options, so I wrote underneath it:

A dreamer turned realist through life experiences.

He smiled softly and then wrote underneath it:

Same.

Before he could take the pad back, I pulled it over to me and wrote my own question:

Cats or dogs?

He thoughtfully considered it, before circling “cats”. I was very pleased with that answer and then sent him another one:

Messy or clean?

A very quick circle on “clean”, but then he wrote underneath it, *but the best moments in life are messy!* With two kids, I knew that better than anyone, and it made me laugh a little to myself. The person next to me caught on to what we were doing, so Luca hid the notepad under the table for a few moments and pretended to pay attention.

I looked over at Colton and he had a stupid grin on his face. Both he and Lauren looked like they were keeping a big secret. Since I couldn’t spy her hands, I had a feeling what it was. *Gross.*

I felt a nudge to my right, and the notepad was back.

Lunch or dinner?

I glanced over at him, not sure if this was another silly question or a request. Was he asking me out to lunch or dinner? He saw my face and added underneath the options:

With me.

I felt my face warm and tried not to react. The last thing I needed was everyone around us to get a little show. Every time a good-looking guy like Luca paid attention to me, it took me

right back to high school. I wanted to say no, but I was intrigued. I circled dinner and wrote next to it:

For research purposes only.

He put the notepad away and we stared at the presentation. I caught exactly zero words from the panelists now that my heart was beating out of my chest. When it was time for a break, I slipped out before he could say anything and hustled to the bathroom to call Paige.

“The kids are doing great and Medusa is fine,” Paige said, before I could ask her anything. It was possible I had been bothering her a little too much for updates.

“Good, listen, I have a situation,” I started, peeking around the bathroom to see if anyone was hiding in one of the stalls.

“That sounds promising,” she laughed. “You’ve got my attention.” I heard the wheels of my desk chair at home moving and I suspected she was getting up from my desk to walk around. I loved knowing she was at the house.

“So, Jon wasn’t leaving me alone last night and this guy named Luca that I had just barely met came over and pretended to be my boyfriend. I wasn’t going to go along with it, but Jon seemed a little uncomfortable around the guy, and I thought it was a good opportunity to get back at him, so now I have a fake boyfriend.”

“Wow, you’ve been busy.” I heard the sounds of drawers opening and closing and figured she was in the kitchen now. “Where’s the pour over filter?”

“Top shelf to the left of the sink,” I said, before continuing. “Well today, we’ve been sitting next to each other at breakfast during the keynote, and he’s been passing me little notes. You know, like pick coffee or tea, etc.”

“How very high school of you.”

“It’s been cute, actually, and a welcomed distraction from the boring presentation, but then he sent the question ‘lunch or dinner.’”

“Like, for a date?”

Just then a few women came in giggling and I tucked myself into one of the stalls and stopped talking for a second. Why women always went to the bathroom in packs was beyond me. This was not a group activity.

“So did Jon say anything to you?” one girl asked and it sounded like she was standing at the sink—the other women in a stall now. One of them answered, “Not yet, but I’m playing hard to get. Can’t make it too easy.”

“Jon likes ‘em easy,” the third one said, giggling.

“Who was that woman he was talking to last night, though?” and one of the women responded, “I’m not sure, but it looks like she’s with Luca.”

“Lucky bitch.”

“No kidding, I’ve tried and failed with that one.”

“Who hasn’t?” a girl in the stall next to me answered. “As far as I know, he hasn’t dated anyone.”

“What a shame,” the girl at the counter answered, before zipping her bag and washing her hands. The others came out of the stalls, and they all started touching up their hair and makeup.

“He doesn’t even have to date me, if you know what I mean,” the girl next to me said.

“Everyone knows what you mean,” her friend teased her.

They finally left, and I waited to hear the door close before relaxing and exhaling loudly.

“Did you hear that?” I asked Paige.

“Every word.”

“So what does that mean?” I asked, wondering if this meant he was an eternal playboy or just not interested in women? “And why is he helping me?”

“I don’t know, but I really want you to find out.”

With my curiosity piqued, I went back to the meeting room and saw that the next session had already started. I looked around for my seat, but Luca wasn't where we were sitting, so I stalled for a second to see if I could spot him. I skimmed the many rows of tables packed with people, but it was hard to see with the lights dimmed. Before I gave up and just sat in the back, I felt the warmth of someone beside me and turned to see Luca there, reaching out his hand. "We should go in together, don't you think, girlfriend?" he asked playfully.

"I think you're enjoying this a little too much," I whispered back, taking his hand and trying to ignore how my body instantly responded to his touch.

"It's fun to keep people on their toes," he said, no doubt referencing the curious eyes that were glancing our way.

"So do you have fake girlfriends regularly or is this a special occasion?" I teased, secretly hoping I could get a straight answer out of him.

"I don't have very many girlfriends, real or fake," he said, looking at me with those chocolate brown eyes again, his steady gaze making me feel like I was slowly dissolving, the walls I had built up tumbling down.

"What's in this for you?" I asked, so quietly he had to lean closer to hear me. I saw his eyes glance down to my lips and then back up to my eyes. He slowly leaned to the right so that he was whispering in my ear when he said, "Isn't it obvious?"

The warm and spicy scent of his cologne coupled with the overtly flirtatious response made me inhale sharply, my senses gasping for air. He gently squeezed my hand and led me to our seats. I was grateful that it was dark, because my brain was all fuzzy and my body felt like it had been run over by a motorcade.

Get yourself together, Millie! I chastised myself. If this guy was going to play some kind of game with me, then bring it. Despite the fact that this meeting room seemed increasingly full of landmines, I was done backing away from challenges. Not anymore.

He held my chair out for me and then sat down in the chair to my right. I could see him looking over at me like he wanted my attention, but I wasn't going to make things that easy on him anymore.

Without looking in his direction, I copied a move from Paige and slowly crossed my right leg over my left, exposing the deep slit on the right side of my skirt, slipped on my reading glasses and then took out my notepad and clicked my pen like I was ready to take notes. I could see him staring at my leg in my peripheral vision, but didn't give him the satisfaction of meeting his gaze.

Class was in session, and Luca was my student.

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Luca had a lot more trouble focusing during the second session and the lunch that followed. He kept moving in his seat, leaning forward and then leaning back. When I slowly slithered out of my blazer and turned towards him to hang it on the back of my seat, his pupils dilated and his eyes turned almost black. Anytime I moved and my perfume curled in his direction, he raked his hand through his hair and kept looking over at me, only to get frustrated that I wasn't paying him any attention.

When I gently rubbed my exposed leg, I saw him stare down at my hand unabashedly and unblinkingly. Seeing him so distracted brought me a great deal of satisfaction and I loved that I had the same effect on him that he had on me.

At lunch, I noticed several women trying to talk to him, but he practically swatted them away like gnats. He wasn't interested in talking about anything other than business with

anyone here, and even that was a hard sell. Several different realtors came up to him, gave him their business cards, and then broke into their spiel. He was always polite, but seemed to extricate himself from those conversations as quickly as possible.

I was beginning to wonder why he was even here. If he wasn't sure he wanted to stay in real estate, why did he come? If he hated relationships so much, why was he flirting with me? I couldn't make sense of any of it and it was becoming all I could think about.

During lunch, I let my guard down and we chatted and laughed like old friends, but the sizzle between us was impossible to ignore. The more I learned about him and the longer I stared into his eyes, the more I felt myself swoon—and that was just not a part of my plan. To give myself a break, I would entertain the person next to me, who made a lot of effort to interject themselves into our conversation. Anytime I started to humor them, though, Luca would start fidgeting and look for any opportunity to bring the conversation back to just the two of us.

Truth is, the longer we sat there, the more the rest of the room began to take on a haze, and I lost track of what anyone else was doing or saying—except for Luca.

After lunch, we were given a short break before the afternoon sessions, and I decided to retreat to my room to regroup. If I was going to survive the next couple of days, I needed to focus.

“I'll see you back here in a bit,” I said to Luca with a smile as I stood up to leave. He jumped out of his seat in surprise and said, “Do you want some company?”

“No, I'll be just fine,” I said, before turning to walk away. I didn't have to look to know he was going to follow me. Men are so predictable.

Before we made it out of the meeting room, Colton caught up to us and excitedly introduced himself, “Luca, it's so nice to finally meet you. I'm Colton, and Millie works for me,” he

talked quickly, trying to keep up with the pace we had set. I slowed down and allowed the two of them to greet each other.

Luca politely took Colton's hand and said, "Millie has told me a lot about you."

Colton gleamed like a praised child, "Well, it's all true, I assure you." I started snickering despite my best efforts and then realized they were both staring at me.

"So glad the two of you could finally meet," I said, swallowing my laughter and smiling politely.

"You know, Millie didn't tell me the two of you were....were..." Colton's voice trailed off. We both stood there, staring at him, waiting for him to finish his sentence. I certainly wasn't going to be the one to help him.

"Together?" Luca offered, a smile playing on his lips.

"Yes, wow, how did the two of you meet?" Colton asked. I could tell he was going to drill us until he got whatever answers he was looking for. I just couldn't figure out why he cared so much.

"That's a long story, isn't it Mills?" Luca asked, as he stepped closer to me, his right hand wrapping around my waist and gently pulling me into him so that the sides of our bodies were touching. We fit, like lock and key.

"Sure is," I said, trying not to react to his sudden nickname for me. I quickly laid my head against his arm to try to sell the lie and reveled again in the fact that his body felt firm. Very firm. My mind immediately began imagining what he would look like shirtless.

Nope, this has to stop, I thought, stepping away from him and saying curtly, "That's a story for another day, though. If you boys will allow me to slip away, I need to head to my room for a bit." I walked briskly toward the elevators. I needed to get away from Luca, his cologne, his deep brown eyes, and the warmth in his voice before my whole body burst into flames.

When I turned the corner to go into the elevators, I glanced back quickly and saw Luca trying unsuccessfully to get out of

the conversation. In this one instance, Colton did not disappoint me.

I collapsed onto my bed, exhausted. I needed to rest for a few minutes and get my racing thoughts to slow down. There was just one more short session for the afternoon before we were all released to dinner at our leisure, and I would be going to dinner with Luca.

“Shit,” I said, my hands covering my face. I had forgotten about our dinner date. This was a terrible idea. The last thing I needed was to start having feelings for my fake boyfriend, especially when there seemed to be a lot of unanswered questions between what was going on with him and Jon. Anyone mixed up with Jon was unquestionably off the table for me.

Closing my eyes and trying to rest, I made every effort to relax my body and allow the meditation app on my phone to transport me to my happy place. I was almost starting to feel better when the phone in my room rang. “Go away!” I yelled at my phone, waiting for it to stop ringing. Unless my room had a gas leak, I didn’t want to hear from anyone right now.

A few seconds after it stopped, it started ringing again. A small fear popped into my head that this was the kids trying to reach me and I rolled over to answer the phone.

“Is this how you treat all of your fake boyfriends?” Luca’s deep voice asked. I was so surprised it was him, I was laughing before I thought better of it. I did not want to encourage this guy.

“Are you saying you *didn’t* enjoy talking with Colton?”

“Oh no, we’re best friends now. In fact, I may work some deals with him.”

“He will be thrilled,” I said sarcastically, realizing that if this were true, that meant I would also be working some deals with him. *Fan-fucking-tastic.*

“Are we still going to dinner?” he asked, his voice turning serious. I didn’t know what to say. Part of me wanted to go, in fact, part of me wanted more than dinner tonight. The other

part of me was scared. Scared to have feelings, scared to trust, scared to want something from another human who was bound to let me down again. My long pause eventually led to him add, “If we’re going to keep our fake love alive, it’s the least we can do.”

“At least you’re an optimist,” I replied, relieved at the lighter mood. Now it was his turn for a long pause. I tried to think of something else to say, something that would fill the space. He beat me to it.

“See you soon, Millie.” He hung up the phone before I could respond. I slowly dropped the phone onto the receiver, my body buzzing with energy. There was very little doubt in my mind that I could make it through dinner without wanting more with Luca. Add in the fact that I was also avoiding my crazy boss and my cheating ex-boyfriend and I needed to come up with a plan if I was going to make it through this retreat without having a mental breakdown.

I tried to strategize while I forced myself off the bed and towards the bathroom to freshen up before the next session. Then, I went back downstairs to sit next to the guy I was pretending to date, but was secretly attracted to.

When I got to the meeting hall for the afternoon session, I looked around to find my fake boyfriend before my real ex-boyfriend found me. While I scanned the room for Luca, I went over to the snack bar to get an afternoon pick-me-up to get me through the rest of the day.

Unlike the other hall where the tables and chairs were in rows facing the front, this one had a more organic vibe with what looked like areas for breakout sessions and small groups, each table outfitted with its own mini coffee and tea station. *Just what I need right now, small talk!* I grumbled, before spotting Luca as he was heading towards me from the front of the room where several brokerage owners and presenters had been chatting.

As he made his way over to me, I tried really hard not to notice that he had taken off his suit coat and was just wearing the French blue dress shirt he had underneath. He had rolled

up his sleeves and his shirt was tucked crisply into his pants, emphasizing the strong V made from his broad shoulders to his waist. This guy worked out. No doubt about it. *I wonder what he looks like naked. Nope, stop thinking about that.*

“Hey, there you are!” he said smiling, as he leaned forward to kiss me on the cheek. I tried to hide my surprise at both his more casual appearance and how comfortable he was acting with me.

“Hello!” I said back, smiling casually on the outside while fighting like hell to get my bearings on the inside. *Damn he smells good!*

“Are you ready for this?” he asked, the light dancing in his eyes, making them look more amber than brown.

“Not hardly,” I said, trying to be flirtatious, but my mouth felt like it was full of chalk.

He reached over and took my hand and started walking towards a table. I instinctively followed him, but couldn't ignore the fact that people were staring at us and a group of women to the left looked like they were pointing and whispering. This was moving too fast. The room seemed to be spinning. I pulled my hand away and reached for the nearest seat, pulling it away from the table and announced to Luca, “I'm just going to sit here. I like it here.” I put my purse and folder down on the table before plopping down into the seat.

Luca looked shocked, but he collected himself and grabbed the seat to my left just as another realtor was about to sit down and said firmly, “I'm sitting here.” The other realtor started to give a snarky reply, but when they looked up to see Luca standing there, they quickly picked up their things, apologized, and scurried away.

I felt a little relieved now that we had a little space between us and was staring straight ahead and trying not to make eye contact with Luca. My heart was pounding in my chest and I was starting to sweat. I rested my arms on the table and tried to relax.

That's when a man's hand rested on my right forearm and my whole body stiffened. I quickly looked to my right and my heart sank. *Oh shit!* "Jon?"

"I'm so glad you sat here. We need to talk," he said, leaning closer until he was just inches away from me.

Oh hell no, this was not going to work. Nope. I started to gather my things and make a run for it. Luca saw my reaction and whispered, "Let's get out of here. I'll go with you." Just then, the lights went down and the afternoon panel of presenters took to the stage. There was no getting out of here now—not without making a huge scene. For the next couple of hours, I was going to be stuck sitting right between my ex-boyfriend and my fake boyfriend.

Time could not have gone slower. Given the choice, I would have preferred to be in active labor than to have to sit there between these guys. Jon took this as some kind of demonstration of my desire to reconcile and repeatedly tried to get my attention by touching my arm or my leg, which made me shake with rage. Luca responded by pulling my chair closer to him to give me more space from Jon. However, being closer to Luca made my heart beat so fast, I thought I might just have a heart attack. Jon reacted by sending me text messages saying how much he loved me, so Luca grabbed my phone and texted back telling him I wasn't interested and to leave me alone.

The more unabashed Jon's efforts, the more jealous and protective Luca became, two traits I wasn't expecting from my fake boyfriend. Meanwhile, I was stuck in the middle of a tug-of-war between two men who hated to lose. As their petulant behavior became more dramatic, the people sitting across the table from us began to notice and started whispering amongst themselves. My cheeks burned with embarrassment and I prayed they couldn't see my red face in the dimly lit room.

My anxiety was building by the second. I needed to do something with my hands, so I grabbed the coffee pot, poured myself a cup, added cream and sugar, and downed the damn thing. When Jon tried to talk to me again, I made myself

another. I strongly considered stabbing his hand with an appetizer fork.

Nothing helped. I had to get out of this room. Professionalism be damned, as soon as there was a break in the presentations, I grabbed my purse, got up, and walked out without giving anyone an explanation. Once I got to the women's restroom, I immediately went to the sink to run cold water and stuck my wrists under the icy stream. I'd heard somewhere that it tricks the body into cooling down and can even stop a panic attack. I would've stuck my hands into a sheet of ice if it were available.

After I could breathe again, I walked out of the bathroom and saw Luca right outside, leaning against the wall, with his hands in his pockets. Instantly, the butterflies were back. This whole thing was so exhausting.

When he saw me, his eyes lit up. "You okay?" he asked, concerned, not a hint of games in his voice.

"I don't know," I said honestly, standing a few feet from him. He needed to stay there and I needed to stay here. Space was good.

"Do you want me to stop this whole thing," he stood up and stepped closer.

"If that's what you want," I said, trying to get my bearings. My mind felt like a cart that was going off the tracks.

He slowly walked towards me—with each step, the faint smell of his cologne grew stronger and my breath quickened. "I know this started as a game. But, it's becoming more real for me with each passing second. I feel like a teenage boy saying this, but I have a crush on you, Millie," He was standing right in front of me now and was slowly reaching for my hand.

"How do you know Jon? And why does Colton know who you are?" the questions came tumbling out of my mouth before I could stop them.

His hand dropped. "I told you, I've been at this game a long time. People start to recognize names they see over and

over again. It's just business. I don't even care about that right now." He was looking down at me like he wanted to kiss me. If I was going to stop this, it needed to happen right now.

He stepped closer and reached up to move a few hairs out of my face. Oh shit, he was going to kiss me—and I wanted him to.

We were leaning towards each other, our lips like magnets, pulling us closer.

"MILLIE!" Colton's voice yelled, as people flooded out of the conference room and into the halls. We jumped away from each other in shock and I blinked a few times as I tried to get my feet back on the ground.

"Millie, what are you doing for dinner?" Colton asked in a panic, reaching us before either of us had even responded. Was he sweating? Why was he sweating? Lauren came out of the conference room like a bloodhound tracking her prey.

"I'm going to dinner with Luca?" I said, leaning away from Colton and his big eyes full of terror.

"Great! I'll go with you!" he said, pulling my arm, and turning me to walk in the opposite direction of Lauren. Luca was following along behind us and he said, "Colton. We only have a reservation for *two*."

"No problem, I'm sure they can squeeze me in!" he said, before walking so quickly, he was now in front of me and we looked like his security guards flanking his body. He was running from Lauren, for sure, but the question was, why?

He pushed open the door that took us out of the hotel and onto the cold, dark streets of San Francisco. Once outside, we stopped on the sidewalk and I looked up at Luca, "What's the plan?" I asked, the fresh air filling my lungs and helping me think more clearly.

"I guess we all go to dinner," he said, annoyed. I turned toward Colton to ask him why he was running for his life from Lauren, but he was already texting on his phone. Behind me, Luca quickly stepped out onto the street and signaled a car. A

sleek black town car pulled up a few seconds later and Luca opened the door, motioning for us to get in.

Wow, they've really upgraded the cabs around here, I thought, flashing back to the ugly yellow cabs of my youth, before Colton charged in front of me to go in first. Of course, that meant I was going to be stuck in the middle.

Squeezed in between Colton and Luca in the back of the car, Colton immediately took a call on his phone and Luca leaned forward to show the driver an address. I immediately realized what a terrible idea this was. I needed to just get through this dinner without Colton embarrassing me or Luca slipping and saying something that would let Colton in on our charade.

I turned towards Luca and mouthed, "I'm sorry."

He shrugged his shoulders, "It's okay."

I tried to tell him that we had to keep pretending that we were together, but Luca couldn't figure out what I was saying.

"Let me see your phone," he said, and I unlocked it, handing it to him. He typed quickly and handed it back to me a few seconds later. I looked down and saw that he had sent himself a message from my phone. Then, he sent me a text from his.

Luca: Now we can talk.

Millie: We have to keep this going, at least for one more night.

Luca: Done and done.

Millie: You don't really know anything about me, though.

Luca: We'll figure it out. He's not that smart.

I snorted out loud at that last one and Colton gave me the side eye. He was still on the phone, though, and didn't press.

"It is customary to give a gift to clients, yes, and I always try to choose a gift for each client that will reflect their interests. However, I recently employed a new assistant who took over gift giving for me for a very short time, and she

made some very strange choices, including this gift. I am so sorry, please do not take this as a reflection of my feelings towards you or how I run my business.” He paused. I could hear the person on the other end talking loudly. “No, this was not supposed to be offensive. I’m sure my *former* assistant was just trying to do something nice. I hear you that this is not a gift you appreciate.” He waited. More yelling. “I’m really sorry to hear that. I hope you will reconsider. It has been my pleasure serving you as your realtor.” He was cut off by them again. Then, the call went dead. He lifted the phone away from his ear and checked it to make sure and then breathed in and out angrily.

“Well, Paige just cost me another client,” he said, shaking his head. “She has cost me so much business and now she’s almost cost me my wife.”

“Pretty sure that one wasn’t her fault,” I said.

“No? Her job was to assist me. To support me. To have discretion. To protect my business. She did none of those things. *You* recommended her; this is all *your* fault.”

“My fault? You’ve got to be kidding me?!” I couldn’t believe this. And now, he wanted to reprimand me on this stupid trip I was forced to go on? “I didn’t even want to come here. If you’re going to talk to me like this, I’m going home.”

I felt Luca’s body tense up next to me. “Colton, what happened?” He was trying to take the pressure off me by distracting Colton.

“Oh, my former assistant *from hell* sent inappropriate gifts to clients and this time, she went too far. Too far. She sent a couple that was selling their home due to divorce a gift certificate for a couple’s boudoir photo shoot with a local photographer who works in the adult film industry.”

Luca stifled a laugh. That made me snort, which made Luca laugh again. I tried really hard to hold it in, but the sound of him laughing made it impossible. It was too late. We exploded with infectious, high pitched laughs that made our body shake and our eyes water. We turned towards each other

in an effort to hide it from Colton, but we were smooshed into the backseat and there was no hope he wouldn't hear it.

“Wow. Thanks guys. I lose a client and you both find it funny. Luca, of all people I would think that you would understand the gravity of this situation.”

The more he scolded us, the harder we laughed. Stopping would have been like holding back the tide. It was pouring out of us.

“You have to give her credit for thinking outside the box,” Luca could barely get the words out between sobs. I covered my face and buried it into his chest, my body heaving with laughter. He put his arm around me and pulled me in close, gracing me with a few precious inches of space between myself and Colton.

“Unbelievable. Fuck you both,” Colton said childishly, only prompting more side splitting sobs from us both.

“Colton, there are things more important than clients,” Luca said, when he had finally gathered the strength to pull himself together.

“Like what? You know, this is rich, coming from you. What a hypocrite. I'd love to hear the second part of that statement. Hit me,” Colton was taunting him, but Luca didn't care. It was like watching David try to bully Goliath.

“Integrity, Colton. It's integrity.”

I caught my breath and lifted my face, looking him in the eyes and seeing the goodness in them. Maybe I had read the guy wrong the whole time. Maybe there was a sliver of possibility that he was a good guy.

He leaned down and kissed me gently on the forehead and my whole body relaxed. I rested my head on his chest until we got to the restaurant.

If Colton hadn't been sitting there next to me, it would have been the most perfect moment I'd had in a long time.

I can write “go to dinner with Colton” on the list of things I never want to do again. He oscillated between complaining about his wife, to complaining about me, to begging Luca for real estate advice like he was on some kind of acid-induced merry-go-round.

Watching him self-destruct made me so uncomfortable, yet neither of us could look away—not only because we were stuck at the same table, but because it was like watching a twelve car pile-up happen right in front of you.

“Luca, let’s do some deals together. I have a property I bet you’d love. Great investment,” Colton was like a puppy that nipped at your heels.

“Appreciate the effort, Colton, but we don’t need to talk shop tonight. I would love to talk to you both more about my foundation idea, though. That’s my passion project. I really think that’s the future for me.”

“I think it’s a great idea,” I said, turning towards him and leaning on the table in his direction. The closer I got to Luca, the more space I put between Colton and me. “Where are you at in the process?” I asked, giving him my full attention and trying to drown out the sound of Colton chewing.

“Not as far as I’d like. Honestly, being here and realizing how much I’m really losing interest in real estate has been the push I needed to pursue it. I need a catchy name, though. Any ideas?” He leaned towards me, too, and if we didn’t have a table between us, we’d be practically kissing.

“Hmm, foster foundation, friends of foster kids....I got it! The Foster Friend Foundation!” I sat up straighter in shock. The idea had come to me like a lightning strike.

“That’s it!” Luca’s face broke into a knee-buckling smile and he snapped his fingers twice in my direction. “Millie, you’re a genius! Do you have some secret past in marketing I should know about?”

I laughed as I tried to avoid answering that question. Nope, no secret success in my past. Just dropping out of college to marry a boy I had no future with and then popping out two kids before he left me. Guessing that’s not the resume builder Luca was looking for. “If only,” I finally got out, mustering as much coy confidence as possible.

“This is Colton.” We both slowly turned towards Colton, who had just loudly answered his phone at the table. “Yup, we can absolutely show you that building. I think you’ll really like it. Tons of potential. Already bringing in renter’s income... Yes, it’s occupied.”

Luca leaned towards him and said, “Hey, Colton, you can take that call outside if you need.”

Colton waved his hand dismissively in Luca’s direction, before shoveling another bite of food in his mouth and then continuing to talk. “My assistant can meet you there as soon as we’re back in town. Don’t drive by at night, unless you have a bulletproof vest. I’m kidding. Not really, though. Don’t go at night.”

Luca's face turned towards me in disgust. "What kinds of properties is he having you manage?"

"You don't want to know," I said, looking away in embarrassment. Colton was such a buffoon.

Luca was still staring at me and he looked upset. "You don't deserve this, Millie."

I hated comments like that. They implied you were better than your circumstances, but also the underlying meaning was that you were settling or allowing these things to happen to you. If I left Colton, I'd be making pennies on the dollar and my kids would suffer the most from that drop in income. If I stayed, I was the doormat assistant, building a business for a clown. I was tired of these lose-lose scenarios. Plus, with little job experience and an email inbox full of post interview rejection letters, I could actually prove that I could not do any better than this.

"Excuse me," I said, putting my napkin on the table and getting up to use the restroom.

Colton had clicked over to yet another call and started talking even louder—and I was going to go hide in the bathroom. I was halfway down the hall when I heard Luca's voice behind me. "Psst, hey, Millie, slow down."

I turned around in time to see the sexiest man alive lightly jogging towards me. He slowed to a walk a few steps before he got to me. If we were going to talk about things I didn't deserve, it was this man right here.

"Hey, did I say something wrong?" he asked, his eyes full of concern. With him standing this close to me, it was hard to have a coherent thought.

"It's not you. It's me. I just... I hate how Colton runs his business and the kinds of properties he takes. But, I feel stuck, and I don't know how to fix it. And now I'm complaining to a guy I barely know in the hallway of a restaurant," I covered my face with my hands. This was beyond mortifying.

"Listen it's not your fault he's like this. There's nothing I hate more than people who take advantage of others for their

own gain. You don't need to be that guy's assistant. You should be the broker. You should be running that business." I looked up into his sincere brown eyes. I wanted to be the person he was talking about. I wanted to be that girl. But, I wasn't.

"You don't get it. It's different for me. While you and Colton and Jon are running around working 24/7 building your businesses, I have kids I have to get home to. Kids that only have me. The day they were born, what I deserved took a back seat. So, if that means I have to assist a guy like Colton, so they can have the life that *they* deserve, then that's what I have to do." I spun around and stormed into the bathroom, giving myself enough space between us to breathe again.

The bathroom was large and split into two parts, with one area set up like a little lounge. I collapsed onto a couch and tried to relax. My heart was beating out of my chest and I felt like I was going to have a panic attack. Grabbing my phone, I called Paige, praying she would pick up.

"Howdy."

"Wow, I'm gone for two days and you've gone country?"

"I'm editing a Western, sue me."

"Listen, I'm in a predicament. I've been stuck at dinner with Colton and that guy I told you about. Colton is, well, being Colton, and Luca is, understandably, horrified. He told me that I don't deserve this and that I should do my own thing. Be a broker. Run my own business. Just, unbelievable, you know, how these guys forget how privileged they are. They build their businesses on the backs of people like me. People who don't have that luxury. People who have others relying on them. You know, then they act like I'm settling, giving up, accepting this garbage. It's so humiliating to have to tell someone like Luca that I can't be any better than this."

"Wow, Mills, I'm so sorry you're dealing with this. But, I have to say, for the first time—I agree with one of these guys."

I took a couple short breaths, trying to keep myself from crying. "What?!" Paige wasn't supposed to agree with the

guys. She was always supposed to side with me. That was girl code.

“I wouldn’t be your friend if I didn’t tell you that I agree with this guy. You should be the boss. You should run your own business.”

“Oh yeah? And who’s there to catch me when I don’t make enough commission for the month? Who’s there with the kids when I have to do an evening showing?”

“Your business; your rules. Take the kids with you. Find clients who like kids. I don’t know. I don’t have all the answers, but I can tell you that working for Colton has to be harder than working for yourself.”

“I can’t believe you’re agreeing with him,” I said angrily, standing up and pacing back and forth across the small room. My anxiety was at an all-time high. It was literally seeping out of my pores.

“A guy that actually believes in you? Yeah. I’m with him.”

My mouth dropped. What the hell was happening? I felt like my head was going to spin off into another dimension.

“And you’ve got me, Mills. If you need a safety net, you’ve got me.”

“I have to go, they’re waiting for me.” I ended the call and went to run my wrists under cold water for the second time today. I would splash it all over my face right now if it wouldn’t ruin my makeup. While I stood there, feeling the ice cold water dissipating the fury in every cell of my body, I looked up and met my own reflection. I didn’t see the weak, broken down woman I sometimes felt like. In my eyes, I saw a fighter. A survivor. A worthy opponent in life and love. A badass.

For the first time in my life, I saw strength. “I could be the boss,” I said to myself, testing it out. I smirked a little, a fire flashing in my eyes. I liked the way that sounded.

Standing up straighter, I turned off the faucet and shook the water off of my hands. My jaw set and my shoulders drew back. “I’m going to be the damn boss.”

Walking out of the bathroom, I felt supercharged. I was done with men taking advantage of me and profiting on my brokenness.

This shit ended right now.

When I got back to the table, Luca was checked out on his phone, and Colton was talking about some wild fantasy business idea of his where he and Luca became partners. As soon as I sat down, Luca put his phone down and turned towards me.

“Hey, are you ok?”

I sat down, my back as straight as steel. “I’m good, actually. I feel much better now,” I said, meeting his gaze before turning towards Colton. “I’m ready to go. Let’s get the check.”

On our way back out to the parking lot, I offered to get us the cab, but Luca was texting something on his phone and the same type of black car pulled up. “I’ll sit in the middle this time,” he smiled, blocking Colton so I could get in first. Once we were inside, I thought I noticed the same driver as before, but Colton started jabbering about our networking strategy for the next day and I began rubbing my forehead. This guy was a headache in human form.

“Colton, do you have an off button?” Luca joked and I snorted in surprise. Not many people called Colton out and it was a sight to see.

“No. I never turn off, I barely sleep, I don’t stop running. That’s what it takes, right Luca?”

“Not necessarily,” Luca disagreed. “Plus, as I get older, I am learning that there are things we miss by being so singularly focused on success.” He turned and looked down at me. A thousand butterflies fluttered in my stomach.

He leaned down towards my ear and whispered, “I’m sorry if what I said upset you,” and the touch of his lips on my skin shot through my entire body, making it come alive with energy.

I looked up at him, our faces so close we were almost kissing. “It’s okay,” I whispered, “You’re right. I need to take control of my own life.”

He was slowly leaning forward, our lips almost touching, reaching for each other. The desire was so overpowering, it drowned out everything around us.

Colton cleared his throat from behind Luca and it interrupted our reverie. “You really are together, huh? I thought you were just faking it.”

Our eyes flew open in shock. “Sometimes he surprises you!” I whispered, before he kissed me on the cheek. I laid my head on his chest for the rest of the drive and the sound of his quickly beating heart was like white noise muffling whatever nonsense Colton was talking about.

When we pulled back up to the hotel, Colton practically ejected from the car and took off, already on his phone. Luca got out and held out his hand to help me climb out. Before he closed the door, he peeked inside and said simply, “Thank you, have a nice night.”

He didn’t let go of my hand and walked side-by-side with me into the hotel. It had been a long time since a man had proudly held my hand in public like this. I knew we were supposed to be having a fake relationship, but it was feeling more real with each passing minute.

We walked towards the elevator, both of us quiet. My mind tried to make sense of the situation I was in. I went along with Luca’s fake boyfriend game to get back at Jon, but I was starting to become entangled in the web I had created. Was this thing with Luca real, or was this just karma for all of the revenge plotting I had been doing?

Once we were inside the elevator, we were both immediately and instinctively aware that we were finally alone. He turned towards me and we locked eyes. He stepped closer, one hand wrapping around my waist and pulling me towards him.

The feeling of his hard chest pressed against mine took the wind right out of my body. He leaned in just close enough to kiss me, but stopped.

Breathlessly, I tried to come up with some kind of witty or sarcastic response, but I had nothing. I hooked one finger over the top button of his shirt and pulled him all the way in, his lips crashing against mine, our desire washing over us like a thousand waves. My hands moved up his chest, around his face, and then plunged into his hair, pulling him closer. His hands tightened around my waist and his lips moved to my neck. The elevator settled on my floor and the doors pinged as they shot open.

“This is my floor,” I forced out, exhaling and gently pushing him back.

“Do you want to come up to mine?” he asked, but I had already started to walk around him, catching the doors before they closed. I looked back at him, my whole body wanting to take him up on his offer—but knowing that to change my life, I needed to change myself first.

“I don’t sleep with my fake boyfriends,” I teased, before letting go so the doors could close. He leaned against the back wall of the elevator and put his hands into his pockets.

“Goodnight Millie.”

The next morning was Saturday, so the kids weren't awake before I was expected downstairs for breakfast. I missed seeing their little sleepyheads in the morning while I made pancakes. Another reason why I needed to go home as soon as possible.

"Don't get distracted by cute boys today, Millie," I said to myself, while putting on my lip gloss. I had renewed my focus and desire to get through the remainder of this event without any more boy drama. The kiss was a mistake and was only going to complicate things.

"No more kissing," I said out loud, before tossing my lip gloss in my purse. The itinerary said to dress comfortably for some kind of team building activity they were forcing upon us. Why company retreats still insisted on doing these loathed activities was beyond me. And, since it was such a large group, I assumed they'd have to break us into smaller groups

and there was no way to know who I was going to be stuck with until it was too late.

My mind was mentally preparing for some kind of disaster today. The chances of ending up on a team that didn't include at least one of the men I was trying to avoid was unlikely. I pulled my wine colored shirt over my head and grabbed my mustard colored coat, since it's always a little cold in the city. Sunglasses, brown leather boots, and a crossbody handbag finished the ensemble. I checked myself in the mirror and felt ready to deal with whatever awkward situations the universe was going to serve me today.

I walked down the hall towards the elevator and flashed back to how I had laid in bed the night before thinking through everything. I realized I'm always waiting: waiting for my husband to come back, waiting for a great job opportunity, waiting for Colton to be a better boss, waiting for someone to save me.

I needed to save myself. The elevator doors opened and I breathed a sigh of relief that the elevator was empty. *Finally.*

Once I got downstairs, I walked into the lavish breakfast buffet and beelined straight for the drinks. Nothing good was going to happen before I got my coffee. While I was waiting in line, I smelled him before I saw him. I'd know that cologne anywhere.

"Good morning, Millie," Jon said, his deep voice tinged with frustration.

"Well, it *was*," I said sarcastically, before looking at him and giving him a tight smile.

"I'm glad I caught you without Luca. I really want to talk with you about everything. We have lunch on our own today, can I take you to lunch?" His fingers lightly brushed against my hand and I moved it away, crossing my arms. I stepped out of the line to look him dead in the eye and say exactly what was on my mind.

"Jon, I'm sorry if I've been unclear, but I don't want to talk with you. I don't even want to see you. I'm only here

because it's my job. It's not a cry for help or rooted in some deep desire to make up with you. So, let's just treat this like the unfortunate business event that it is. I am sure there are a hundred girls here who would be thrilled to get screwed over by you." I had never been that direct with him before and it caught him off guard. He rocked slowly back on to his heels, before springing right back up like one of those carnival games. Go figure that the guy was turned on by rejection.

"Millie, we have something special. Even when you're mad at me, I can feel it," he was getting closer now and I could feel his breath on my face. Despite my best efforts, my body responded even though my mind screamed. Short of punching this guy in the face, I wasn't sure how to get rid of him.

"There you are," another voice joined the chorus. My body relaxed when I saw Luca walking over. "I hate to interrupt, Millie, can I get you something? Coffee or tea?"

Jon looked over at Luca and then back at me, before resting his eyes on Luca again. "Millie never drinks tea. Ever."

Luca steadied his gaze, but Jon's eyes narrowed. This was the worst possible time for Jon to catch on to our little ruse.

"You don't know me as well as you think you do," I said to Jon, before getting back in line, "Excuse me," I said to the person that I had been in front of. I grabbed a disposable tumbler and filled it with hot water, two black tea bags, and a squirt of honey. I forced the lid on it, my nostrils flaring, and turned around to face Jon. "Cheers!" I said, lifting my cup and then walking away, leaving them both there to fend for themselves.

I sat down with my stupid tea at an open seat and popped the lid off to squeeze out the tea bags and try to make this drinkable. Tea was not a comparable substitute for coffee.

Before I could feel too sorry for myself, another tumbler appeared on the table next to me and as Luca sat down, he whispered in my ear, "Trade me." I looked over at him while I reached over for the tumbler and took a big drink. Coffee. Sugar. Cream. Perfection.

“How did you know?” I asked, shocked that he made my coffee better than me.

“Millie, you drink five coffees a day, you think I didn’t notice how you made it?” he laughed, taking a sip of black tea. “I just didn’t know that you never switched it up.”

I laughed under my breath, “Doesn’t matter,” I said. “We just have one more day of this and then we can go back to our regularly scheduled programming.”

He got quiet, his smile fading. He looked at me with something in his eyes. I couldn’t put my finger on it. Before I could ask what he was thinking, the event moderator started talking into a microphone.

“Good morning realtors! We have a very exciting treat for you today. In lieu of our morning session, we will be doing an exciting team building activity. A powerful key to building a thriving real estate business is networking and working together. Plus, knowing a thing or two about the local area. That’s why we’ve set up a special San Francisco scavenger hunt!” The crowd reacted with a mixture of excitement and surprise. “We’ll be splitting you into small groups and you’ll work together to solve clues that will not only guide you to the winning clue, but also teach you a thing or two about real estate history in the San Francisco area!”

The room broke out into applause. I seemed like the only person inwardly groaning. “The winning team will get a spectacular prize. A special black tie, Dining in the Dark experience curated by a local chef whose creative cuisine has earned three Michelin Stars!” More applause from the realtors.

“Why do you need to dress in black tie if you’re dining in the dark?” I said as an aside to Luca, who had to cover his face to hide his laughter.

“To find out what team you’ll be on, we have a small notebook for each of you. The first page has your team number. Find your number posted around the room to gather your team. When everyone is assigned, we’ll give you more details on where to go next. Happy hunting, and we look forward to seeing which team wins!”

People got up to go grab their notebooks en masse. They were actually excited about this. I would rather get a root canal. Having grown up near San Francisco, I didn't see the city with the starry eyes of the short-term traveler. To me, it was just home. A city scavenger hunt felt like a cheap way to experience the rich history and culture in this vibrant community.

Once the group had dissipated, Luca and I walked over and looked for our notebooks. I found mine and cracked the cover, seeing a large number "3" written inside. I looked around the room to find the number three and spotted my group in the back corner of the room.

I headed straight over to join them. I just needed to get this over with, so I could get home to my kids. When I got to my group, I was grateful there was nobody I knew, and turned around to watch the whole room start to organize based on their numbers. The only people who seemed exempt from this activity was the small group of realtors and investors who were speakers at the event.

A few seconds later, my blood pressure rose as I watched Jon slowly and smugly head in my direction. *Maybe he's in group four*, I hoped, as he started to approach group four.

He kept walking. *Damnit!* He kept walking until he was right next to me and raised his eyebrows a couple times taunting me. "Together again, I see," he said, his eyes drinking me up. I suddenly realized how much I hated him.

"We meet again," Luca said, sneaking up to me on my right side. He and Jon made eye contact and I half expected them to challenge each other to a duel.

"You've got to be kidding me," I said flatly. Staring straight between them.

"Great job finding your groups everyone!" The MC praised us over-enthusiastically. "Each group has a designated leader who knows the rules to the game. You'll be following their first clue to a nearby landmark or structure. Then, you'll find your next clue there as well as have a small bus waiting to help you get to the next place. There are ten different clues in

each path, and the final clue will be the same for all of you. If you're the first team to reach the final clue, you'll win the coveted dinner reservation for the sold-out Dining in the Dark experience with Chef Lowell. When the scavenger hunt ends, you are free to go to lunch at your leisure, hopefully with some new friends!" The room broke into applause and I stared around the room in bewilderment. How were these people actually happy about this?

"It's time to get started. Everyone, let's count down together. THREE...TWO...ONE...GO!"

My group turned to huddle together and a lady I'd never met said, "I'm Sara, and I have our first clue!" Participating was the only escape I had from Jon, so I decided to give the game my full attention.

"Rooted in Peru, but came to SF in 1852. While it's known for a square, there's one closer to you."

"Closer to you...closer to you," I mumbled. The whole group was chattering and vibrating with ideas. I heard suggestions like a museum or a statue.

"Ghirardelli Square!" I shrieked, everyone in the group turning to stare at me.

"Yes, she's right! But it's not the square, where's the one closest to you?" the guide asked.

"There's a small Ghirardelli shop on the corner of the hotel," Luca added, and everyone turned to stare at him.

"You're on our team?" A younger guy in the back asked.

"Sure, why not?" Luca said, acting casual.

"Are you not supposed to play?" I asked him quietly.

"Are you saying you want to be alone with Jon?" he teased, subtly pointing in his direction.

"Good call," I said, before we followed the group through the hotel and outside. When we spotted the Ghirardelli's on the corner, we started walking faster, racing to find the next clue. Despite my disdain for forced bonding, this game was actually a little fun. Everyone, except for Jon, started looking for clues.

He was busy doing something on his phone, but another girl in the group yelled, “FOUND IT!” and held up a small yellow envelope.

We all huddled around her while she opened it, revealing the next clue.

“Designed by a famous architect in 1893, but didn’t become famous until 1993. Most recently sold for 1.4 million, it’s become synonymous with Robin Williams.”

“Come on!” Luca said, his hands out like this was too easy. “Somebody answer this before I do!”

I laughed and looked at him, “You know your San Francisco history, huh?”

“I lived here for a bit as a teen,” he said. “You never really forget it.” He smiled, and I couldn’t help but imagine all the times that we could’ve crossed paths and never known it.

“The Mrs. Doubtfire House!” another person on the team yelled. We all cheered and looked for our bus to head to the home featured in the popular movie. A little yellow party bus was waiting for us and we all piled in. Luca squeezed in next to me and the male realtor on the other side of him stuck his hand out and said, “I’m Jimmy, sir. It’s nice to meet you.” He stared at him like he was sitting next to a celebrity.

Luca shook his hand and smiled kindly. “Same to you, Jimmy.”

The party bus jolted us up and down the treacherous streets of San Francisco, dodging angry cab drivers and clueless pedestrians. When the bus took a tight corner, I involuntarily grabbed Luca’s leg to hold myself steady and he reached down and took my hand in his. “If you wanted to hold my hand, you could’ve just asked,” he whispered into my ear. I giggled and blushed, glancing up just in time to see Jon’s cold stare from across the way.

The bus finally lurched to a stop outside of the infamous Mrs. Doubtfire house. We all piled out of the van and raced to find the next clue, which Jimmy found clipped to the fence.

“I got it!” He yelled, holding it in the air. We all huddled around him as he read it.

“You won’t believe your eyes, these galleries are full of surprise, find the museum of weird, before your next clue has disappeared.”

“This is juvenile,” Jon complained. “It’s obviously the Ripley’s Believe It Or Not! museum.”

We all celebrated when he said it and he grumbled a bit under his breath. I’d never seen Jon when he wasn’t the center of attention and it wasn’t a good look on him.

Everyone started to get back into the bus, but Luca motioned for me to wait until everyone was already inside. “You doing okay? I know this is probably a little awkward for you.”

I looked into his sincere, brown eyes. “I am.” I smiled, reaching for his hand and giving it a squeeze. “I’m so glad you’re here.” His face softened and he wrapped his arms around me in a big hug. I closed my eyes, appreciating the feeling of being totally content—even for just a second.

Before the group noticed, we jumped in the van and Jimmy let the driver know where to go.

While we were navigating the ups and downs of the San Francisco streets, I turned to Luca. “Where in the area did you live? We came here a lot when I was younger. My mom was obsessed with it. I wonder if we ever crossed paths?”

He looked out the window and then back at me, “I doubt we did. I mostly just ran around with my friends. Then, I moved to a different area and never came back. This is the first time I’ve been here for more than just a couple hours since I was a kid.”

His answer felt dodgy, but I didn’t want to press. Just then, a middle-aged woman sitting on a bench across from us chimed in. “I read one of your interviews on your childhood. It was heartbreaking. It’s incredible what you’ve accomplished.”

I swallowed hard. How did this random lady know more about Luca than I did? Granted, I’d only known him for a

couple days, but clearly I was missing something. I looked up at him inquisitively, but didn't say anything.

He noticed my expression and leaned down to my ear and whispered, "Let's go to lunch after this and I'll explain everything."

I nodded, and when I looked back up, I saw Jon watching us from the other side of the bus. He had a mischievous expression on his grumpy face.

When we pulled up to the museum, everyone immediately started looking for the clue, but Jon beelined to me and said, "We have to talk. NOW."

"I'm not interested," I said flatly, starting to walk away.

"I know you and Luca are faking it and let me tell you why. We can do it here or we can walk over there privately."

Shit. He had me at that one. Luca looked over and started to head our way, but I waved my hand and shook my head. Jon and I turned and walked a few steps away from the group and he said, "You're telling me you didn't know about his childhood? I saw your face. There's no way you didn't know about that. Google him and it comes up in every interview."

I steadied my face and tried to look convincing. "I know about his childhood, I just didn't know every single detail about where he had been in San Francisco. He didn't know that I had spent so much time here as a kid, either. What does that mean? It means nothing. Also, I don't google my boyfriends. Maybe I should, though. If I had googled you, maybe I would have learned that you were engaged." His mouth dropped and I took the opportunity to get away from him and walk back over to Luca, who immediately pulled me in for a side hug.

"Did we solve the clue yet?" I asked, looking up at him.

"I know the answer, but I'm letting them figure it out," he said, laughing a little.

Just then, the group surrounding the clue burst out in cheers and started chanting, "PIER 39! PIER 39! PIER 39!"

“Oh come on,” I said, laughing with them, “this is like the most obvious landmarks in the city. They need to give us a real challenge!”

We got back in the bus and headed straight for the Pier. While we were driving, I saw Jon flirting with the young, pretty girl sitting next to him. She was blushing a little, but loving the attention. She was too young for him. He would crush her. He looked up at me briefly and I saw a glint of satisfaction in his eyes when he saw me watching them. He thought I was jealous, but really, I was just feeling protective of her.

“Do you think I should warn her?” I asked Luca quietly.

“Up to you,” he said, exhaling. “That’s exactly what he wants you to do, though.”

I fought my inner turmoil over wanting to help a young girl out, while also not playing into another one of Jon’s selfish games. When we got to Pier 39, the rest of us immediately went on the hunt for the clue, but Jon pulled the girl aside. They talked for a few minutes and then Jon flagged a taxi and they hopped in.

“Guess she’s making her own choices,” I said to Luca, who was standing next to me and watching them leave.

“You know, it’s not a bad idea...” his voice trailed off as he looked over at me sheepishly.

I tried my best to look shocked by this idea. “Luca, how dare you. I am in this to win this now. I’m getting that Dining in the Dark reservation and you’re coming with me.”

He wrapped me in a big bear hug and kissed me on the top of my head. “In that case, we are going to need to help these people out or we’ll be doing this all day.”

We went back to the group and quickly solved the next riddle. After that, with Luca and I both fully engaged, we quickly breezed through the rest of the riddles and made it to the very last one.

Once we got to the Coit Tower, we’d find out if we were the winners. As the bus pulled to a stop, we saw another little

yellow bus pulling up behind us.

“Run everybody! RUN!” Luca yelled, as we all poured out of the bus and raced up to the tower, spreading out to search for the card in all directions. We couldn’t find anything, so several of us ran inside, where we found Chef Lowell himself holding a plate with a stainless steel cover.

“Are we first? Are we first?” I yelled, as we ran up to him. He lifted the cover off the plate with a flourish and we all gasped as we saw the little yellow envelope sitting on the plate.

Our entire team started jumping up and down together, cheering, high-fiving, and hugging each other. As much as I had been dreading this, I realized that it felt good to be part of something—even if it was just a game.

I was the first to take the envelope, and I opened it to find our reservation for dinner. I read it out loud dramatically for my team and added, “I would be honored to dine in the dark with all of you—and you, too, Chef Lowell.” The chef cracked a smile and the team all started cheering again, as other teams began showing up.

When we walked back outside, the other teams that had just missed it were clapping for us. Luca hugged me again from the side and said to me, “You did this you know. You solved most of them.”

“Does that mean you’ll have dinner with me?” I asked him, looking up at his handsome face. Right there, in front of everyone, he leaned down and kissed me gently on the lips.

“Anytime you want,” he said, squeezing me again into a big bear hug.

Now that the game was over, it was time to eat. Our group was spending dinner together, so for lunch, the group started fractioning off into smaller groups that were looking for certain types of food. Luca waited to see what everyone else was doing and then said, “Oh, bummer, nobody wants Chinese?”

I knew exactly what he was doing, because I was trying to do the same thing myself. “I love Chinese food!” I said.

“Well, then, I know the perfect place!” He grabbed my hand and we headed for the street. I was about to flag down a taxi, when the black town car pulled up again. He opened the door for me and said, “Ladies first.” He quickly showed an address to the driver and then slid in after me.

Once he was beside me, I turned to him. “So, this is your car then?”

He looked a little embarrassed. “At my age, I like to be prepared. I arranged for a car service while I was here.”

Okay, we were getting somewhere now. “I get that. I’m really looking forward to getting to know you better. I feel like everyone here knows more about you than I do.” Yet, despite only knowing him for a couple of days, I felt like I knew his soul, who he was at his core. The rest was really just details.

“Of course,” he said, his face turning a bit more solemn than normal. “It has actually been nice talking to someone who didn’t feel like they already knew me, because they read some interview I did years ago. While our past shapes us, it is not who we are,” he looked up at me and I could feel that whatever there was to tell, it wasn’t happy memories.

In my own way, I could relate to this. Take me as I am, today, and you’ll see a more confident, strong, self-sufficient woman than I have ever been in my whole life. Dig into my past? You may not like the woman you see. I wasn’t thrilled about the prospect of having to share my history, either, but I was determined to learn from my mistakes with my ex and with Jon. This needed to be real and honest or I didn’t want it.

The rest of the drive was a quiet one. He put his arm around me, pulled me in close, and I rested my head against his chest. His warmth flowed through me and while I felt comforted by his touch, it also made my whole body tingle with desire for more. This wasn’t fake for me anymore. There was no denying that I had real feelings for this man and they were growing with each passing minute.

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After we were sitting down and enjoying our food, I realized how nice it felt to be alone with Luca, nobody staring at us or trying to talk to him. It made me painfully aware of how limited this time was and I wanted to make the most of it.

“So, tell me more about you,” I asked casually, opening up the conversation for something deeper and more personal.

“Well,” he started, before taking a sip of his drink. “My story sometimes surprises people. It’s all *I’ve* known, so for me, it’s just what it was.”

“That makes sense,” I said, nodding along.

“When I was a toddler, I was removed from my parents’ home. I didn’t have any family that could take me, so I went into foster care.”

“Oh my god.” He was right, I was shocked. I’m not sure what I was expecting to hear, but it wasn’t that.

“Because my parents didn’t release their parental rights, I was four before the court finally revoked them, and by then, I was older than what most people wanted for adoption. I had already been in six different homes, and then after that, I can’t even remember how many. I read my file at one point, but I really just bounced around. I don’t think I finished a single school year at the same place I started until I was older,” he paused to take more bites of food.

I was astounded and heartbroken. “I’ve heard stories like this, but never from someone I personally knew. I hope...” my voice caught on my emotion. I couldn’t stop seeing the faces of my own babies. “I hope the homes you were in were kind to you.”

He paused. “Some were, some weren’t. It’s a lot to ask people to raise a child that isn’t their own. I was...just in survival mode for so long that even when a family was kind to me, I didn’t know how to accept it. I didn’t know how to be loved. When I was a junior in high school, I was transferred to a home with an older woman who took in kids my age and kept them until they exited the system. She was known for having a home for older kids. She had dozens, maybe hundreds, of placements. She was the last stop for a lot of us. She was my favorite. She wouldn’t immediately kick us out after we aged out, as long as we weren’t violent or disruptive. So, I was with her until I was 19 or so.”

“Wow, what an angel. Are you still close with her?” I wanted to meet this woman and hug her.

He cleared his throat. “She passed away when I was in my 20s. She had been the closest thing I had ever had to a family. I would go over to help her with things around the house or to take some of her new foster placements to things. Her home was where I went for my birthday and the holidays, so when she passed from cancer, it seemed cruel. Cruel for the universe to take her, not just from me, but from all the kids who only had her and all the kids that could have benefited from her love and support.”

“Unbelievable,” I exhaled, my eyes welling with tears. This guy just never caught a break.

“Anyway, I met a girl in her home. We became very close and when I moved out, she moved out with me. We got a place together. It was the first time I had lived on my own terms with someone I chose. We were both pretty broken by our life circumstances, but we really tried to heal together. We did our best...” He cleared his throat again, got another drink and then stopped to eat for a few minutes.

I felt the heaviness of where this was going. As if the conversation up to this point hadn't ripped my heart out, I intuitively knew that where it was going would be worse. There was a heaviness on him, his shoulders literally folding under the weight of the painful memories.

He looked up again and I could see in his eyes that he was being transported to the past, reliving these painful memories, “When we were in our early 20s, we found out that she was pregnant. With our child. We were going to be a family. For the first time in our lives, we would both have a family. We belonged. We were somebody's.”

“Oh no,” I said, my eyes filling with tears. I picked up my napkin and started dabbing the corners of my eyes.

“I was at work when I got the call. I rushed to the hospital. There had been a bad accident. Neither of them made it.” He paused, tears slipping down his cheeks. He swiped them away, but didn't try to hold them back. “It still feels like it happened yesterday.”

I reached across the table and took his hands in mine. The grief he felt engulfed us both. “I'm so sorry,” I whispered.

“After that, I felt that love was not for me. The love and family I had wanted my whole life was just not in the cards for me. I decided to put all of my energy into being successful. I spent every spare minute at the library reading books on business. I kept reading about how people made their wealth in real estate, so I studied, got my license, and attended every single free lecture and networking event I could find. I was obsessed with being the best. Without the distraction of a

personal life, I became successful very quickly,” he paused, taking a few breaths.

“It’s incredible that you channeled your energy into changing your life, though.”

“It is, but it was no replacement for things we all need. As I got older and the business grew, I felt the need for something else in my life. So, I’ve had the occasional relationship, but whenever they reached a certain point, I couldn’t keep going. The fear of losing someone again has been debilitating for me.”

“I think that’s understandable, particularly in your case,” I assured him, but couldn’t help but think about my own pain if I fell in love with him and he left me. I would be shattered.

“I always left before things got too serious, but I knew it was a pattern that wasn’t healthy. So, in my late 30s, I actually invested in therapy. I found someone who specialized in situations like mine, and I spent a lot of time working on myself. I also traveled a lot, particularly to places with spiritual significance. I don’t lean in any particular religious direction, but really appreciate the concept of caring for our souls.”

I literally couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “You are such an incredible person.” This guy was like a unicorn. I’d heard stories of people like this, but never, ever imagined they actually existed or that I’d be sitting across the table from one of them.

“So, that’s where I’m at now. I’m in a good place with my business, where I feel I can take time off to travel and also pursue more charitable endeavors.” The waiter came and Luca handed him his credit card before even asking for the bill. “It probably makes more sense now why I am so passionate about helping foster kids and young people be successful.”

“It definitely does.”

After our plates were cleared, he leaned forward a little, his arms resting on the table, and he fixed his gaze on me.

When Luca focused all of his energy on you, it felt like being blasted with light and goodness.

“Now, Mille Barlowe,” he started, his eyes looking clearer and his whole energy lighter. “I have somewhere I’d like to take you before the afternoon session, if you’d like to go with me.”

I put my napkin on the table and grabbed my purse. “I’m all yours.” And I meant it. I really did.

The black town car pulled up to a tall hotel I’d heard of, but had never been inside.

“Have you ever been to the Top of the Mark?” he asked.

“Never.”

“You’re going to love it,” he stepped out of the car and held out his hand for me. We walked into the hotel and took the elevators all the way up to the 19th floor. He requested a table right by the windows and as we walked into the restaurant, I was blown away to see panoramic views of the San Francisco skyline.

“How have I never heard about this place?!” I gasped, turning to take it all in. Windows wrapped around the entire room for an almost 360 degree viewing experience.

“It’s one of my favorite places. I’ve had some business meetings here over the years, and it never fails to wow me.” He pulled out my chair for me as we sat down.

I couldn’t stop staring. The view was incredible. “Do you know what’s good here?”

“I thought we could get a drink or two. Whatever you want. Everything is good.”

His voice pulled me back to the best view of all. Sitting here with him was like a dream, and I never wanted it to end.

We ordered some cocktails and enjoyed the live piano and breathtaking views in peace. No bad bosses or ex-boyfriends

in sight. The more I got to know him, the more it pained me to think that he could ever think he wasn't deserving of love.

“So, what can I learn about you, Millie Barlowe?” he asked and I felt my cheeks get warm. The way he looked at me and gave me all of his attention was going to take some getting used to.

“Well, I don't have a story quite as inspirational as yours. In some ways, I feel like my life is really just beginning. I'm still trying to make sense of it all, honestly.”

“I understand that. Time passes; I get older. I don't *feel* older, though, in a lot of ways. There are moments when I even feel young again,” he reached over and took my hand. “Like when I'm with you.”

I felt my chest expand with oxygen. Of all the women in the world, why was he picking me? He needed to know more about me, so he knew what he was getting into. “Well, I grew up in a small house in a decent neighborhood. Nothing really special or unusual about it—at first. I had a younger brother named Gabriel. When I was five and he was three, he was diagnosed with neuroblastoma, a rare form of cancer. For years, our lives were all about his treatments, his appointments, his illness. It absorbed every minute of every day.”

“Wow, I'm so sorry. That must have been really hard,” Luca said warmly, hanging on every word.

“When he passed away, I was nine. My parents were crushed. I was devastated, too, but I also felt some relief for him. I knew he wasn't suffering anymore and I couldn't bear to see him in any more pain. My parents were never the same, though. They were like ghosts in the house. They were there, but not really.”

“I can't even imagine,” he squeezed my hand and the sweetness in his eyes made my heart ache. With him, I was no longer the invisible girl.

“Sometimes, they would forget I was even there. I would go to my friends' houses to eat or to celebrate holidays. I was

lucky to have a few friends that I was close to and a next door neighbor lady was always happy to have me over. She was an artist and we would sit and paint for hours. Then, when I was older, I met my best friend, Paige, and we became each other's family."

"It's important to have those people, if you can find them," he agreed.

"I started working as soon as I turned 15. Any odd job I could get. Saved my money and moved out at 18 to go to college and live in the dorms. I just needed to get out of my house and start fresh. But, as luck would have it, I met a cute boy that first year and by my sophomore year, I had dropped out of school and married him," I shook my head, still so disappointed in myself. "I had never had that kind of attention from anyone in my life and I had no idea what to do with it. I didn't see or even think about red flags or warning signs. A cute boy wanted me? That's all I needed to know. It was a huge mistake."

"We all make mistakes."

"I planned to go back to school, but had to work to help us pay our bills. Then, I got pregnant. Had a baby boy. A few years later, had a baby girl. We were struggling. He couldn't keep a job; would quit or get fired for the oddest reasons. He was really erratic and unstable, sometimes disappearing for days at a time. But, for me, that was normal. My parents were like that. They barely even knew I was there. So, I didn't see it for what it was and wasn't prepared when he left one day and didn't come back."

His jaw tensed and I could see the anger flash in his eyes. "He had what everyone wishes they could have, and he screwed it up. I have no respect for that."

"He called me a couple weeks later. Said he was alive, but he wasn't coming back. He needed to find himself. I said, 'Good, I'm done.' That was it."

Luca's eyes were fiery. "So he left you and the kids. What did you do?"

“After that, Paige was all I had. When I left for college, my parents divorced and moved to other parts of the country. I don’t really talk to them, and when I do, there’s nothing of substance there. Neither of them ever recovered. I hope someday they can move past their grief, because life is passing them by. I think seeing how they responded to loss made me work even harder to give my kids a good life. I knew when my husband left, I had a choice. I could let it break me, or I could stand back up and keep moving forward.”

“They’re lucky to have you,” he said and he looked at me with such respect and admiration it floored me. I was the girl guys left or kept on the side. I wasn’t the girl men like this took to fancy top floor restaurants and held hands with in public.

My insecurities bubbled out of me. “What do you see in me? I’m just curious, because there are a million girls who have more impressive resumes, better personalities, or are just prettier than me. Why did you pick me?”

He sat back and thought for a second. “Because you didn’t care.”

“What?!” I laughed a little, my mind going back to that first session.

“I saw this stunning woman walk into a room full of people that were clawing each other’s eyes out—in a professional way—to network, drum up business deals, or schmooze the big dogs, and then you walked in and just went straight for the food. You didn’t look around. You didn’t even care about anything that was going on. I watched you for a few minutes and then just needed to know—who you were.”

“You’re kidding,” I laughed a little. “Wow, that’s funny.”

“Then, when I finally got your attention, or so I thought, you asked me where I had gotten my drink. That’s when I knew that I needed to get to know you better. I was hoping for an opportunity, but then I saw Jon talking with you.”

My heart sank. Stupid Jon. “Yeah, that was a big mistake.”

“I saw the conversation turn contentious. I could see that you were uncomfortable. I saw that whatever he was saying was upsetting you. I don’t like bullies. I really don’t like people who pick on women, so I just made a quick decision to see if I could help.”

“That explains the fake boyfriend thing,” I said, nodding and smiling a little. I didn’t like Jon, but he had led me to Luca, so at least there was some good that came of it.

“Then, I met Colton and saw that disaster unfold. You know, you may not think that you stand out from the crowd, but for me, you were the only person in that room that I wanted to spend any time with, and the more I learn about you, the more I like you.”

I took a deep breath and tried to slow my heart rate down. I’d never had someone see so much good in me. Ever. It was an intoxicating feeling.

“I know this started as a revenge plot against Jon—and while I’m grateful it was successful at that, I also feel really lucky to have met you,” I said, rubbing his hand a little with my fingers and fighting back the feeling that I wasn’t worthy of him.

Just then, the waiter arrived with the tab and it broke the bubble we were in. I checked my phone and realized that not only were we late for the afternoon panel, but Colton had sent me a zillion messages. “Did you want to head back for the afternoon session?” I asked.

“We can if you want,” he said.

“*Want* is a strong word,” I joked, “but my boss is going to blow a fuse if we don’t, so it’s probably a good idea.”

He nodded and came around to take my jacket off the back of the chair and held it while I put it on. Then, he offered his hand and I slipped my hand into it, our fingers intertwining.

“Thank you for spending time with me today,” he said as his eyes softened and he leaned closer to me.

“I loved every minute of it.” I kissed him on the cheek and we headed towards the car.

When we walked into the session late, we were grateful that the lights were dimmed and we were able to find a few chairs in the back. As soon as we were sitting down, someone came over and tapped Luca on the shoulder, whispering something in his ear. “Please excuse me,” he said to me quietly, before getting up and walking away.

The girl next to me watched him leave and then leaned towards me. “How did you land that one?”

“I’m sorry?” I asked, confused.

“Luca. How did you meet him?” She asked. I froze like a deer caught in the headlights. I didn’t know how to answer that question. Luca had always made a joke or changed the subject when people asked, but right here, right now, I was all alone and I had to come up with something on the fly.

A few, long awkward seconds went by and she added, “Do you speak English?”

“Through a friend,” I finally said, swallowing hard. I turned back to the front and stared at the panel like I was intensely interested in it. Luca was gone for longer than I would’ve liked, so I actually started paying attention to the panel. They were talking about the difference between working for a brokerage and being the broker. If I was ever going to get out from under Colton, or any other boss who could fire me at a moment’s notice, I needed to start my own brokerage. I took out my notebook and took notes on what they were saying.

At the end of the session, one of the conference hosts went up to the microphone. “How about a big round of applause for our panelists!” He paused to let everyone show their appreciation. “Now, dinner will look a little different tonight. If you were on the winning team for the scavenger hunt this morning, you’ll have an hour to prepare for the Dining in the Dark experience with Chef Lowell!” He waited again for more applause. “The rest of us will be enjoying a themed dinner of our own. On your way out, please pick up a bag and use what’s inside to put together a look that will obscure your identity for our masquerade ball! We look forward to seeing you all there.” More clapping. “And finally, the panel we have all been waiting for. Tomorrow morning, after breakfast, we will be talking with one of the most successful real estate investors of our generation. The magnitude of the business he’s built is staggering and we know it’ll be worth the wait. How many of you came to this event simply because of our keynote speaker?” The room broke out into ear shattering cheers and applause. It was so loud, I jolted back into my seat from the shock of it.

I leaned to the girl on my left and said in surprise, “Wow, I guess we have a real celebrity in our midst, huh?”

She looked at me really confused and said, “Well, yeah...”

I turned away from her, rolling my eyes at her rude response. Maybe I should have paid a little more attention to the itinerary for the entire event. Even still, I was looking forward to hearing from this big shot.

A couple minutes later, Luca was back and sat down next to me. “So sorry I missed it, was it good?”

“Oh yeah, I actually took some notes,” I said. “Who knew I’d learn a thing or two without you distracting me?” We both chuckled a little and he said, “Yeah, I guess they just needed my help with something. It’s all taken care of now, so we can go to dinner.”

The announcer released us, and Luca and I walked out side-by-side, talking and laughing. On our way out, I caught a glimpse of Colton and Lauren arguing in the corner. She was unhinged, and he was an idiot. They deserved each other. I was so glad I didn’t have to deal with them at dinner tonight.

We stepped into the elevator with a bunch of other people who slowly drifted off onto each floor. When it was just me and Luca left, we drew closer instinctively, and he looked down at me before kissing me on the forehead, and then the cheek, and then the lips.

The doors rudely pinged as they opened on my floor and I peeled myself away from him. “I should go get ready,” I said, starting to walk away, but Luca held on to my hand. “Do you have to?” His eyes were dreamily staring at me.

“I think Chef Lowell would be offended if I showed up like this,” I motioned towards my casual outfit.

“It’ll be dark, so how will he know?” He teased, pulling me back in for a kiss, as the doors started to close. I quickly hit the ‘doors open’ button, buying myself a few more seconds to make a decision.

I took a deep breath. I couldn’t mess around with a guy like Luca. He wasn’t just a fake boyfriend, he was a real person, an incredible person, who had been deeply hurt. I stepped away and held the door open.

“I’ll see you in an hour?”

“Can I pick you up at your room?” he asked.

“Sure. 402,” I let go of the door and walked away, glancing over my shoulder just one time to see him watching me, a soft smile on his face.

When I got back to my room, I pulled out my dress and immediately called Paige to catch up with her and the kids.

Brielle was so excited to talk and immediately wanted to know everything about what I was wearing to dinner. Beckett had a lot of questions about what it meant to dine in the dark and was very worried I would accidentally eat a non-food item. I assured him they must have a way to ensure that people did not accidentally eat a napkin or break a glass.

Once they were playing again, Paige came back on. “How you holding up?” she asked me.

“Me? I am pretty sure I should be asking YOU that!” I retorted.

“Oh—these kids? They’re a breeze. The best. We’re having a ball,” she said emphatically. I believed her. They were great kids.

“I’m glad. Things are good here, too. My group won the scavenger hunt today, so our prize is a special dinner, as you’ve heard. I don’t know if Jon is going, because he left the game early with a young girl. I’m hoping they’re busy with extracurricular activities and we don’t have to see each other anymore. Tomorrow is the last session, the keynote speaker is after breakfast, and then I can finally come home.” I was so relieved to be saying that. Meeting Luca had been amazing, but I was a mother first and needed to get home to my babies.

“Well, don’t rush home. We’re fine, and I don’t want you to run away from Mr. Right.”

Huh? “Mr. Right?” I asked.

“The fake boyfriend. He sounds like a great guy. Don’t blow it.”

“I’m sorry, what?” I asked again, shocked.

“You run from the good ones, Mills. You know this. You are much more comfortable with unattainable guys. You know the whole thing—red flags don’t look like red flags when they feel like home. I don’t want you to push him away because he doesn’t seem like a red flag.”

I was flabbergasted. I mean, I knew I wasn't the most put together, healthiest person on the planet, but I didn't think I was that much of a mess. "I don't really think that's true," I stammered.

"Okay, I'm sorry. Wasn't trying to upset you."

"I'm not upset," I started explaining. "I just don't think it's true. I mean, let me think, I am sure I can come up with a really solid, good guy I've fallen for..." I was racking my brain, but coming up blank.

"Sure, I'll wait."

"Oh my god, I can't think of anyone," I stammered. "This is frustrating. I can't...this can't be my MO...no," my train of thought running away from me.

"Don't overthink it, Millie," Paige said. "I wasn't trying to ruin your night. Please don't stress about it. I was just trying to say that I think this guy is a catch, and I'm happy for you."

"Just don't screw it up, right?" I said defensively.

"You won't."

I exhaled in frustration. "Okay, I need to get ready. Please text me with any updates."

"I will...No, Brielle, please don't jump on the couch," Paige was already distracted before she hung up, but I couldn't stop thinking about what she had said. Did I really gravitate towards red flag men? Did that mean I was a red flag, too? If that was the case, I didn't want to hurt Luca. He didn't deserve that.

I needed to stop the spiraling thoughts and focus on getting ready. I freshened up my hair and makeup first, so I didn't get anything on my dress. A little more smoky on the eye and light contouring finished my makeup. I curled my hair and then brushed through it for soft waves, before parting it to one side and pinning a small beaded comb into the shorter section. I spritzed a shine spray all over which made my highlights glow in the light. "Super helpful when dining in the dark," I joked out loud, and then laughed at my own joke.

I used my portable steamer to smooth out a few light wrinkles that had settled into the shimmery black fabric. My dress had a bit of a Grecian vibe, with fabric pulled together on the right shoulder only and then draping and ruching across the body and down the torso in a very figure-flattering way before pulling together on the opposite hip. From there, it flowed gently down to the ground, a high slit going all the way up to mid-thigh where a jeweled clip similar to the one in my hair rested. Paired with clear, open-toe heels that created the illusion that I was taller, with much longer legs, than I actually had. Once I was put together, I stood back and snapped a quick selfie to send to Paige.

Millie: Best I can do.

Paige sent back five fire emojis and then a gif of someone's jaw dropping.

Millie: You're hilarious.

Paige: If I were into girls, I'd do you.

Millie: Wow, I'll take that as a compliment. Thank you.

Paige: What do you think will happen tonight? Are you going to go back to his room with him?

Millie: You know, I think I've made that mistake enough in the past.

Paige: Go with your gut.

I sat down on the bed and waited for Luca to arrive. Sometimes, I didn't really agree with the advice to "go with your gut." My gut had told me my ex-husband was a good guy and dropping out of school was a good decision. My gut had also told me that Jon was safe, when he wasn't. Then, my gut told me to take the job with Colton. As far as I could tell, my gut had been misleading me for most of my life.

Maybe it was time to stop trusting my gut and just start using my brain.

I heard a knock on the door. I opened it to find Luca standing there in a black tux holding a bouquet of flowers—of

course he was able to find a florist without even living here. He was so handsome it almost bowled me over.

“It’s not fair for someone to look that good,” he said, shaking his head and gently picking up my hand to kiss it. “How will I be able to focus on my food?”

“It’ll be dark, so...” I teased, cocking an eyebrow for effect. He laughed, his face widening into a huge smile. “I don’t know how I got so lucky, Millie. You are stunning.”

“You’re not so bad yourself,” I replied, kissing him on the cheek before setting the flowers inside the room and then taking his offered arm and walking down the hall towards the elevator.

Once we were inside, he pulled me close and went to kiss me. I stopped him with one finger to the lips, “I’m wearing lipstick. You’ll have to wait until later.” He groaned, burying his face into my neck, “You smell amazing.”

I giggled girlishly. “Did you want to go to dinner or...” I laughed, before slowly pushing him away to give us some space.

“Millie, when this weekend is over and we go back to real life, I want to see you. I want to be around you. I don’t want this to end.”

I felt warm all over. “I want that, too,” I said, before the doors opened and we stepped out into the hallway where people dressed to the nines filled the space. It looked like our event was not the only one here tonight. The place was crowded. Luca guided me through the maze of people, many of them turning to look at him, and then me. Once we navigated our way down to the street, the black car was waiting, and we slipped inside to go dine in the dark.

In the car, I crossed my legs so the slit fell open, my fair skin glowing in the dark car.

“I am less hungry for dinner by the second,” he said, leaning towards me and trying to kiss me again, his hand resting on my knee and then following my leg up to the top of

the slit. The feeling of his warm hand on my bare skin made me lose my train of thought.

“Well, you won’t have me to distract you tonight,” I said, putting one hand on his cheek and stopping just inches from his lips. “Since you won’t be able to see me.” We both snickered.

When we arrived, we saw some of our other teammates there and more pulling up behind us. Everyone looked excited to try out this new dining experience. I glanced around anxiously, hoping Jon and his date didn’t show up.

Once it was time for our reservation, the doors opened and we were allowed inside the lobby of the restaurant. The hostess informed us that we needed to leave any light emitting objects in the provided lockers, which included cell phones and watches. Then, she explained that we’d be led into the pitch black dining area, where a guide would assist us in getting seated and ready for dinner. The five-course meal would be served and then we would be escorted back to the lobby. If we needed to get up for any reason, we needed to request a guide to come and help us safely leave the room.

“This is like the beginning of a horror movie,” I whispered to Luca, and he stifled a laugh.

Just then, the guides came in and had us line up, each of us putting our left hand on the top of the shoulder of the person in front of us, and then walked with us into the pitch black restaurant.

Relaxing music was playing, but it did nothing to calm my immediate anxiety. When you’re not accustomed to being in such darkness, it’s incredibly jarring at first. All of your senses go haywire as your body acclimates to losing the sense of sight. Since I am the kind of person who always has a light on, even in the middle of the night, I found it extremely unsettling and had to fight the urge to bolt right out of there. My body must have started tensing, because Luca came up closer to me from behind, his other hand wrapping around my waist. “It’s going to be okay, just let your eyes adjust.”

I leaned back a little closer to him, comforted by his calm confidence and the warmth of his touch. “I don’t like being in the dark.”

“We may have picked the wrong restaurant then.” We both laughed quietly as we continued to follow the train of people. When we stopped, our guides began talking to us.

“Miss, please place your hand right here on the chair. Do you feel that? Now, I’ll be touching your arm to guide you around to sit down.”

As each of us was seated in our chairs, we were given a quick explanation of where to find things on the table.

“Your place setting is similar to a traditional restaurant, except a new plate will come with each dish. You have a fork and a spoon on the right. You will not need a knife. Also, you have a glass in front of your plate that will only be half filled with your choice of beverage to help prevent spills. Please don’t hesitate to ask for refills.”

My eyes still weren’t adjusting, and I was starting to panic. Luca was sitting to my left and must have sensed my anxiety, because he reached his hand over, finding my knee and gave it a gentle squeeze. Then, as he leaned over towards me, his hand slowly moved up my leg. “Are you doing all right?” he asked quietly.

The second he touched me, my mind switched from scary movies to romance novels in a flash. Maybe the secret to getting through this dinner was Luca.

“Feeling a bit better now,” I said, exhaling and feeling my body relax. My hands slowly reached up until they found his face and then we leaned forward until our foreheads were touching. My thumb gently touched his lips and in a second we were kissing, the warmth of our touch even more electric in the pitch black restaurant.

The others at the table were already regaling each other with scary stories, but Luca and I were in our own little world. We were trying to be quiet, but the sensation of touch when

you can't see anything at all is so overpowering and it was all I could think about.

When the wait staff brought out our first course, we pulled ourselves apart to try the first dish. Eating without being able to see your food is an adventure all on its own, and after a couple of bites, I started fumbling around to find my wine glass, finding someone's hand instead.

"That's mine," a voice to my right joked.

"I'm sorry, I'm looking for my glass," I giggled, finally feeling the glass with my fingertips.

As the courses continued to be served, each dish built on the flavor profile from the one before, like a symphony of food. We all noticed the dark less as the sense of taste and sound became much more profound.

"Is it just me or is this food amazing?" I asked as I took another spoonful of a mushroom risotto that was literally changing my life.

"Maybe I should have been eating in the dark all along," Luca joked jovially. "Next time I'm eating at home by myself, I'll turn all the lights off."

The image of Luca sitting alone in his house eating in the dark was so hilarious, the entire table burst out in laughter.

Usually not one to draw attention to himself, Luca must have sensed his captive audience and began telling stories from his craziest real estate deals. The other guests encouraged him to keep talking, asking questions, and listening intently. I had never heard any of the stories and was amazed at the depth of experience he had.

"So, one of my first deals was buying this abandoned house that nobody wanted. I got it for this insane price, because the wife had murdered her husband on the property and everyone thought it was haunted. I fixed it up, learning to do most of the work myself, and then tried to sell it as a refurbished home that was ghost-free. Nobody wanted this house. I couldn't get a single person to even look at it. Finally, I changed my tactics, decided to market it as a haunted house,

as the site of a murder—literally used its negatives as selling points—and found where people who loved horror movies hung out. I had tons of people show up for the haunted open house and got a dozen offers from people that day. I ended up making \$50,000 on the property which I used to buy another distressed property, that was not haunted, that I flipped for even more.”

“That’s insane, man,” Jimmy said from across the table.

“It’s all in presentation. That’s brilliant,” Sara agreed.

Even the restaurant staff was coming in from the kitchen to listen to his stories. From some of his crazy first deals, to ridiculous stories of dealing with crazy commercial clients, Luca seemed perfectly comfortable poking fun at his own mistakes over the years.

“So how did you go from single homes to the large projects you invest in now?” A guy asked from across the table. “I think scaling is one of the hardest things to do, at least in my experience.”

“You’re not wrong,” Luca started. “It’s difficult to know how to scale and when to hire, especially in the beginning. I bootstrapped all my early projects, but with more capital comes more opportunities for investors to get involved, and then you can slowly start leveling up. The key is knowing where you want to go. Look at the careers of other investors that inspire you and see how they’ve moved from something like small flips to owning commercial buildings. These leaps don’t happen overnight unless you’re born into wealth. For the rest of us, it can be a slow crawl. Add one person to the team at a time to take over jobs you don’t like to do or just aren’t good at, and add one property to the portfolio at a time. These moves, when made consistently, translate to huge growth in your portfolio and business over years and decades.”

The table broke out into half a dozen side conversations and I could hear little bits and pieces of what they were saying.

“He’s amazing.”

“I know, I can’t believe I’m having dinner with him.”

“This is literally exactly why I came to this networking retreat.”

I leaned towards where I thought Luca was. “These people really look up to you. You clearly have inspired so many people. You’re amazing.”

He kissed me on the forehead and then leaned towards my ear so only I could hear him. “I’ve been successful in business, yes. I’d like to be successful at love, too.” He began kissing my neck and down to my shoulder. My heartbeat picked up and my whole body flushed with heat. I wanted to get this beautiful man out of this restaurant so we could finally be alone.

Luckily, it was time for dessert. They served us a delicious chocolate mousse with fresh whipped cream and some kind of berry glaze. The flavors were the crescendo to an exquisite menu that aroused all of our senses—but one. When it was time to go, our guides returned and helped us get out of our seats and escorted us to the lobby.

“When you enter the lobby, please give your eyes time to adjust. It may take a few moments.”

They weren’t wrong, as soon as we walked into the dimly lit lobby, it felt like the sun was shining two inches from our faces. After our eyes adjusted, we got our things from the lockers, and everyone took a few minutes to say goodbye. Once we were outside, Luca signaled to his driver who slowly drove up. He got out of the car and held the door for both of us. “Thank you, Kevin,” Luca said, as he allowed me to slide in first.

On our way back to the hotel, I soaked in the sight of his face again. “How is it possible that I missed looking at you when it was just a couple of hours?”

He leaned forward and kissed me softly on the lips. “I know we go back to our lives tomorrow, but I sure am going to miss this.”

My heart sank when I thought about leaving Luca and going home. But, the thought of missing any more time with

my kids hurt more.

“Will I see you again?” I asked. “I don’t even know where you live. I don’t really know what your life is like.”

“Well, right now, I live in Newport Beach,” he said, and that jolted me back to reality really quickly.

“Wait, Newport Beach?” I asked. “That’s like six hours away, maybe more. That’s a whole day of driving.” My mind started racing.

“It’s not so far. We can figure it out,” he said, looking a little nervous at my reaction.

“How? I have kids.”

“Wouldn’t your kids love the beach?” He asked. My thoughts immediately turned to Beckett and how uncomfortable he was with any changes to his routine. He was finally adjusting to life without his dad. There was no way I could be flying to Newport Beach all the time and disrupting his routine.

“My son, I can’t. He’s autistic, and change is very hard for him,” I started to ramble, my thoughts coming at me too quickly for my mouth to keep up.

“We don’t have to figure this out right now,” Luca said, kissing me again, more urgently.

That wasn’t an answer, though. And, after what I had gone through with Jon, I couldn’t do the blinders thing again. We lived a day of travel apart. How could that ever work?

I pulled away and stared out the window, a deep ache in my chest. I had let myself get sucked into this fantasy. That’s all this was. A fantasy. A few days of feeling young and free again, but the responsibilities of life were going to catch up with me and that would be it. This would be over. I would be heartbroken and alone again.

“What are you thinking about...?” Luca’s voice was husky and heavy with emotion.

“I don’t know. I think I’m just tired,” I lied. My gut was telling me this could never work out. Just my luck that when I

finally met my Prince Charming, the clock was going to strike twelve and it was all going to end as fast as it began. Girls like me didn't get the prince.

When we got back to the hotel, the walk to the elevator was a quiet one. Once inside, Luca looked over at me and said, "I don't want you to worry about the future. I know you have the kids and your life is in Sacramento. I have the time and means to come to you. I want to at least try to make this work. Mille, what do you think?"

I looked up at him, those beautiful brown eyes swimming with questions and concern. Knowing I was making him feel that way made the ache in my heart grow. I reached up and softly stroked the side of his face, feeling where his stubble was starting to grow in, and then without thinking, my fingers gently moved down his neck and towards his black tie. When I met his gaze again, his eyes were saying something different. They were full of fire.

The doors opened on my floor. Without breaking my gaze, he reached over and hit the door close button. "Come upstairs with me, Millie. Nothing has to happen. I just want more time with you."

Something primal rose up in me and I didn't think and just pulled him closer to me by his tie until his lips touched mine, electricity shooting through my body. He picked me up and I wrapped my legs around his waist as he pushed me against the back of the elevator, the kiss becoming deeper and more passionate.

When the elevator doors opened on his floor, I glanced over his shoulder and saw there wasn't a hallway. The elevator opened right into his room. He had the penthouse. On the top floor.

He put me down and followed me into his room. "What..." I tossed my clutch on a chair and went straight over to the windows that looked out over San Francisco. Before I turned to look for him, he was behind me, his arms around my waist, kissing my neck. "They put you up in this room?"

“Yeah, it’s too much for one person,” he took one of my hands and spun me around so I was facing him. “Do you want to watch a movie or order some food and drinks?”

Seeing him standing there, a little sheepish, looking much younger than he was, melted me. Deep inside, we’re all still little kids just looking for love.

This was a guy I could absolutely fall in love with. Hell, I think I already was.

“Why are you smiling,” he asked bashfully—I had been smiling at him without even realizing it.

“Luca.” I said, pulling him closer, “I don’t know what the future holds, but I know we have tonight. I don’t want to watch a movie with you.”

26

I woke up before Luca. I tried not to wake him and just rested my head on his chest, listening to his deep breaths in and out. It had been a very long time since I'd slept all night with a man, and part of me had forgotten what it felt like.

It blew my mind that I had only known him for a few days when I felt like I'd know him forever. We were kindred spirits, I guess.

When he started to stir, I realized I had been mindlessly tracing shapes on his bare chest. Sleepily, he leaned down and kissed me on the top of the head. "I'm so glad you're still here," he said sweetly, squeezing me closer.

"I need to go get ready, though," I said, looking up at him. "It's the last session today."

"I know it is. I'm dreading it a little bit, because then I know it's over."

“I know,” my mind drifted. I wanted to go home, but just thinking about leaving Luca made me miss him. Another lose–lose scenario.

“Millie, we’ll figure it out. Don’t worry, okay?” He looked at him with his sleepy, brown eyes and I wanted to believe him. But history had taught me that people leave, and they don’t jump through hoops of fire to come back.

I kissed him on the cheek and moved to get out of the bed. He held on to me as long as he could, groaning. “You know we have to be at breakfast,” I laughed.

“I’ll order breakfast here.”

“I don’t like walking in late.”

“Ahh, you’re right.” He rubbed his face a few times and started getting up. I threw on my dress and carried my shoes, ready for my walk of shame. Hopefully I could get down to my room without seeing anybody.

Leaving him was physically painful, but I finally got in the elevator and headed to my floor. I groaned out loud when the elevator stopped a couple floors above mine and leaned against the back of the elevator in frustration.

The doors opened and there was Jon and his new friend. Just my luck. They looked bedraggled and hungover. In fact, she still seemed a little drunk and was giggly and burping. *Gross.*

I was contemplating taking the stairs when Jon walked right up to me and said, “You smell like a booty call.”

“You would know,” I said flatly, recoiling inside, as the doors closed and I was stuck.

“Good for him. Getting my leftovers.”

I glared at him, my face crumpling in rage. I wanted to scream in this man’s face, but that would just give him what he wanted: power over me, power over my emotions, power over women.

Behind him, I noticed the girl bending over, starting to dry heave. She was going to be sick soon. When the doors opened

on my floor, I stepped out quickly, turned to him and said, “You two deserve each other.”

Just then, she threw up all over the floor and his shoes. I had stepped out just in time, and I let the doors close with both of them stuck in there with her vomit.

I went straight to my room, my whole body buzzing with anger over what he had said. “He’s just trying to hurt you,” I muttered, trying to get his words out of my head. My body was in motion, getting showered and ready, but my mind was somewhere else, hopping from Jon’s words to thoughts of Luca.

Once I was dressed in white slacks, a blue button down shirt and a navy pinstripe blazer, I headed downstairs for breakfast. I felt strangely anxious about seeing Luca again. This weekend had been a whirlwind of emotions that I hadn’t really been prepared for. He’d stepped in as my fake boyfriend, who had become more like my real boyfriend, and now we were just hours from saying goodbye. It was almost too much to process.

Luca was standing in the hallway, outside of the restaurant, a constant stream of people coming up to him to shake his hand or give him their business card. When he saw me, it was like a celebrity waving away their adoring fans. His face broke out into a huge smile, and he came walking towards me. “Thank God you’re here, I was worried you weren’t going to come.”

I looped my arm through his and glanced at the disappointed fans he left behind. “Don’t let me interrupt.”

“Millie, I’d leave right now if you wanted to.”

We walked into the breakfast buffet, and Colton stood up and called to us, waving us over.

“Do we pretend we don’t see him...?” I glanced around as if he didn’t exist.

“I have an idea,” Luca said, turning me towards the right and waving at a person I hadn’t met yet. He walked me over and introduced me to one of the panelists from the event, a

major player in real estate investing. In fact, his panel was the only one I had paid attention to.

“Millie, meet Khalid, he’s a colleague and friend.” We shook hands, and Khalid looked back and forth between us a couple times, amusement playing on his lips.

“Nice to meet you, Millie, what brought you to this event?”

“Well, I’m here by force,” I joked and luckily, he got the humor in it. “But, once I was here, I actually learned some really good tips. I’m strongly considering getting my broker’s license and starting my own brokerage, so your panel was particularly useful for me.”

“That’s great to hear,” he said kindly. “I’d be happy to answer any questions that you have sometime.”

Luca took this opportunity and said, “Now would be great. Let’s have a seat and chat some more.”

Once we were all seated across the room from Colton, I started picking Khalid’s brain about the process of going from realtor to broker. It was so nice to talk to someone who didn’t patronize me or treat me like an idiot.

While we were chatting, someone came up and tapped Luca on the shoulder. He excused himself and walked away, but Khalid and I kept talking.

Then, a few minutes later, one of the event organizers stepped up to the microphone and said, “I’d like to take this opportunity to thank everyone for attending this event. We have one more session for you today, and I know it’s what you’ve all been waiting for. Please finish up your breakfast and meet us in the meeting hall for our last and final panel. We start in just ten minutes.”

I quickly finished eating and drinking my coffee, while chatting more with Khalid about what he thought the most important first steps should be when starting out on my own.

“Use what you have. Everyone has their own secret sauce. Find what that is for you. Who are the people you are especially capable of serving? What type of clients are drawn

to you and your style? Find them, build relationships with them, and you'll start to see that network grow.”

As we moved to the conference room, I glanced around for Luca, but didn't see him. I briefly considered looking for him, but Khalid was really on a roll and I didn't want to interrupt his train of thought. When we walked in, a table was at the front with our folders for the morning. I took one, but didn't glance at the itinerary, because Khalid was making some really great points about how his wife used the fact that she was a woman to attract particular business. “Use whatever is at your disposal. Don't shy away from it.”

“That's really interesting that you say that. I really want to be a resource for women, specifically single moms, who struggle to find people that take them seriously or won't work with them if they can't find childcare.”

“What about a kid's play area in your office then?”

“Khalid, you're a genius!”

We found a table and I looked around again. “Should I save a chair for Luca?” I asked Khalid, and he looked at me quizzically before someone on the other side of him tapped him on his shoulder and he turned around, “Hey! Good to see you!”

“I guess I'll just sit down then,” I mumbled, glancing around before the lights dimmed and it was showtime.

The announcer stepped to the microphone. They were gyrating with excitement. “I know we are all ready to get started. The keynote speaker barely needs any introduction at all. We are all so excited that he's here for this event. We have never been able to bring them to one of our events before, so this is a once-in-a-lifetime experience for all of you today.

As you know, Mr. Mansini is one of the foremost real estate investors of our generation. Not only is he one of the most successful real estate investors in the country, with a net worth *in the billions*, but he is one of the top 25 real estate investors in the world.”

I was only half listening until I heard Mansini. Why did I know that name? “Mansini? Mansini...” I said out loud, my brain wracking itself trying to place the name.

Oh my god. It hit me like a lightning strike: Mansini. The account I had made a mistake on that had led to my getting fired from Debbie’s office. The keynote speaker was the same person? What were the chances of that happening?

The ass kissing continued. “His property holdings are expansive, spanning residential to commercial, and his reputation for always leading with integrity has positioned him as a leader with serious influence.”

“Ha!” I retorted, louder than I expected. A few people around me heard and looked over at strangely. Whatever. I’d like to know more about the “leading with integrity” part. They walked away from a big deal because of a small mistake and then got me fired. Compared to them, I was a nobody. Who does that?

The announcer still wasn’t finished. “You are going to get all of your questions answered today for how he’s been able to achieve this magnitude of success.”

“Are you going to wash his feet, too,” I said sarcastically, but nobody around me laughed and someone shushed me.

“So, without further ado, please put your hands together for...LUCA MANSINI!”

The blood drained from my face as Luca walked on the stage. Luca. My Luca. Luca *Mansini*? Luca was the keynote speaker?

Luca was a BILLIONAIRE?!

All the pieces started coming together from the last four days. The black car, the penthouse, the constant stream of people trying to get close to him. Colton and Jon idolizing him. It all made sense.

One of the richest men in the world had walked right up to me and I asked him where he got his drink.

“Oh shit,” I moaned to myself, as I started thinking back to all of our moments. The way the girls talked about him in the bathroom. The way he always avoided talking about work. The way people looked at us when we walked around holding hands. The way he kissed me.

The fact that I didn't know how preposterous it was that Luca was with a girl like me must've been the running joke of the entire event.

I blushed, my body shaking, humiliation running deep to my core.

Luca was sitting up there on stage, looking so relaxed and so handsome, just talking in front of a packed room full of people like he was at a table, just the two of us. He was so unaffected by all of this, but I felt sick. Sick to my stomach. I couldn't even hear what he was saying through the ringing in my ears.

I needed some fresh air. I turned to look behind me and it was standing room only and everyone was watching Luca intently, savoring every word. Everyone in this place knew who this guy was. Everyone except me. I felt like such an idiot.

I softened when he started talking about his past in foster care and then losing his partner and unborn child. How these life events caused him to focus obsessively on learning everything he could about success. How with focus and drive, anybody can transform their life, and real estate is an industry that welcomes all types of people from any background.

Listening to him, I felt swept up by him all over again. Despite my insecurities, I believed him when he said that anybody could do this.

I was going to do this. I was going to make something of myself so I deserved a man like Luca. Right now, I was just a nobody who worked as some joker's assistant. I did paperwork and told tenants their homes had been sold right out from under them.

The voice in my head telling me I wasn't special and I wasn't enough was so loud, it was all I could hear.

I knew what I had to do to feel like I could deserve someone like Luca.

"It's really important to separate business and your personal life," Luca was saying, and I felt like he was talking straight to me. "I didn't have balance for most of my career. Business was all I had, but there is a day of reckoning that will come if you live that way. It's important to feed the other parts of your life, too."

"Are you saying there's a special someone?" The interviewer asked, looking delighted with this juicy train of thought.

I held my breath. Would he admit it right now in front of this whole room of people? Or, was he just another Jon, hiding me in dark corners and out-of-the-way restaurants.

"I'd like to think so," he said, looking out into the crowd in my direction. "I hope I'm that lucky."

I knew he couldn't see me because of the lights, but my breaths became shorter and I felt stuck between crying out of joy and having a total panic attack. It was a very confusing place to be and I suddenly needed some oxygen. Right now.

"Excuse me," I said to my table, their faces breaking into bewildered expressions, as I grabbed my coat and bag and walked quickly out of the room.

The crowd of people practically swallowed me, immediately moving back into position as I passed through. My seat was filled in a second. I was literally the only person who was trying to leave. The greatest real estate investor of our time was speaking and I was running to the little girl's room.

I raced to the bathroom, my heart beating wildly in my chest. I went straight to the sink and ran icy cold water on my wrist. Not cold enough.

"Damn it!" I yelled, banging one of my palms on the counter. The breaths were coming faster now. I felt faint and

thought I might actually pass out.

I sat on one of the benches in the lounge area, bending over and trying to control my breathing. I took long, shaky breaths in and out. I tried to clear my head, but couldn't stop seeing his face and the looks from everyone around us over the last few days.

This had all been a joke and I was the punch line.

I needed to get out of here before the conference was over. I jogged down to the elevators and rode up to the 4th floor.

"I just need to get out of here. I need to go home. I need to see my kids," I said under my breath, walking swiftly to my room and getting in as fast as I could, my hands shaking so much it took me a few tries with my door key. My heart was still pounding and I was on the verge of a total breakdown.

Whirling around my hotel room, I grabbed clothes and shoes and beauty products. I shoved them back into the little storage cubes before giving up and just throwing things straight into the bag.

I shot Paige a quick text saying I was coming home, then called the front desk and asked for my car to be brought to the front.

Paige: It's over, already?

Millie: It is for me.

Paige: What does that mean?

Millie: Guess who was the keynote speaker? The celebrity of the event?

Paige: Oh shit.

Millie: The billionaire himself! Luca MANSINI!

Paige: Wait, why do I know that name...

Millie: Because Debbie fired me over the Mansini account.

Paige: That's it! Oh. Listen, I'm sure he doesn't oversee every single deal. It probably had nothing to do with him or

with you personally.

Millie: Well, it felt personal.

Paige: So, what did he say when you told him you were leaving?

Paige: Millie?

Paige: MILLIE?

My phone started ringing. I didn't need another lecture from Paige. I could ruin my life all on my own and didn't need her opinion, thank you very much.

She sent a voice text when I didn't answer. "Millie, you're running. I know you are. You know you are. Here's the deal: hot, nice, soulful billionaires don't just walk among us. They're not a dime a dozen, okay? You can even take the money out of it, good people aren't beating down our doors. Don't leave without saying goodbye. At least give him that much respect. If you do ever want to hear from him again, you need to talk to him."

I sat on the edge of the bed, stopping for the first time since running out of the conference. I sat there, fighting the instinct to run. The desire was so strong, it was like life or death.

My phone pinged.

Luca: Hey, where'd you go? Is everything okay?

"Shit," I felt on the verge of tears. I couldn't do this in person. I needed to get out of here without anyone seeing me leave, and I could just deal with Luca later.

Millie: I'm sorry, I have to go.

Luca: WHAT? I'm coming up to your room!

"Oh hell no," I yelled, jumping up and grabbing my bags, heading for the elevator.

I was relieved to see the elevator empty when it opened. If Luca was already out of the session, then everyone else was leaving soon, too. I needed to get out of here now.

When the elevator opened on the bottom floor, I raced out, turning the corner into the hallway and ran smack into Luca.

“Oh no,” I exhaled, hanging my head in embarrassment.

“What is going on?” His face was shocked and concerned. I looked up and started stammering through a pathetic excuse when he saw my bags.

“Wait a second, what is this?” He took one of the bags out of my hand, “You are leaving *right now*? Were you even going to say goodbye?”

“I don’t know what to say,” I finally got out, my chest heaving. I didn’t want to cry. Not here.

“Listen, I need to know what’s going on. I am so confused. I was stuck on stage when I saw you slingshot out of there like a bullet and immediately thought there had been an emergency of some kind. I rushed through the rest of the questions and practically tore off my microphone to get out of there. Pretty sure I broke it. Don’t really care. And now it looks like you’re just running?”

People were starting to trickle out of the room and into the hallway. This was not going to be a spectacle. Not anymore.

“I have to go. We can talk later. I need to get home to my kids. I need to get out of this hotel. My car is outside.” I started walking around him and he turned and followed me, matching my step.

“At least let me get your bags.” He grabbed the other one from my other hand. “Can you talk to me while we’re walking? Millie, I’m not in the habit of chasing after people, but I thought we had something. I thought this was real.”

“Please keep your voice down,” I said sternly, when I noticed people looking our way.

“That’s what you’re worried about right now? Optics? I feel like I’m having the rug pulled out from under me and you care what people think? I don’t care about any of these people, Millie. This is just you and me right now.”

We stepped outside into the brisk San Francisco air. He dropped the bags and turned my body so I was facing him. “Please stop for one second. Tell me what’s going on, please.”

“Mansini. That’s your last name.” A single tear slipped out. Ugh. I was so pathetic.

“Okay?” He looked confused.

“The Mansini account. That’s why I was fired. That’s why I ended up working for Colton. Debbie Malone—does that ring a bell?”

“Absolutely not. I don’t get people fired, Millie. I also don’t run every deal. I have a huge team and they’re working deals all the time. I am going to find out what happened, though, that’s for damn sure.”

“I just feel like you were real dodgy about what you do and then it just smacked me in the face when suddenly, there you are, the biggest real estate investor, a billionaire, on stage, in front of everyone. I felt like a joke,” more tears. There was no stopping them now.

“Oh my god, what? Millie, forgive me, but I thought you knew at least a little about me. I figured if you were looking at all of Colton’s emails and event details, or even just one of them, you’d have at least seen my name. You really didn’t know—anything about me?”

“Was I supposed to google you? Stand in line for your autograph?” I was really rolling now. *Shit.*

He looked like he was going to throw up. “Absolutely not. You know I don’t care about any of that. I thought, of all people, you saw there was more to me than all that.”

People were starting to stare. I saw my car and went for it. He swiftly picked up the bags and jogged to catch up to me. When we got to the car, he dropped the bags for the valet and I went straight for the driver’s side door. He met me there. “Just tell me one thing: was this all a game for you? It was all fake? None of it was real? This felt pretty damn real to me, Millie.”

I looked up at him and saw it in his eyes. I was confirming for him, yet again, that he was unlovable. And it crushed me.

“No. It wasn’t fake.” Here we go. It was all coming out now, like word vomit. “Luca, I’m falling in love with you. I’m just not ready for you. I’m not ready! I’m still the assistant who gets fired for making a dumb mistake and then takes a job assisting a psychotic narcissist. I’m going home so I can prove to myself that I can do it. By myself. For my kids. For me. Then, maybe, I’ll be a woman that deserves you. If I do this right now, I’m just going to ruin it.”

I got in, put on my sunglasses, and started the car. He closed the door, looking resigned with my decision. He knocked on the window and I rolled it down.

“For the record, none of this was a joke for me, either. It was a done deal the second you walked into that room and beelined for the shrimp cocktail. You may be falling, but I’m already there. I’m in love with you, Millie. I haven’t felt this way since I was a kid. So, if you change your mind, I’ll be waiting.”

He leaned in and kissed me on the cheek before standing up and waving at some cars that were honking at us to move. He walked back up on the curb and waited as I pulled away and drove off.

I tried to hold back the sobs as I drove away, but the crushing despair flooded every inch of my body. I looked up at my rear view mirror a few times and saw him still standing there on the curb, his hands in his pockets. I almost went back. I really wanted to go back.

I almost couldn’t make the last turn. I knew that could be the last time I ever saw Luca Mansini again. I forced myself to get on the freeway, then I hit the gas, wiped my tears and sucked it up.

Turns out, driving away from the best person you’ve ever met has a sobering effect. There was no way I was going to give up on what I needed to do now that it had cost me what could’ve been the greatest love of my life. It was time to go home and get my house in order.

Getting home and hugging my babies was exactly what my soul and my heart needed. Even anti-social Medusa came out for some welcome home cuddles with the family.

Four days was too long, and I vowed to myself it would never happen again. Paige did a great job, but she looked exhausted, so I let her make a quick exit, and I took over at the helm of my ship.

I gave the kids my full attention until they were sound asleep and then slipped into my bedroom to get to work. There was no time to waste. I figured out where to take the courses I needed before I could take the broker's license exam. Signing up felt bittersweet. For the first time in possibly ever, I was taking control of my own circumstances, rather than constantly feeling like a victim to them.

The fact that figuring this out very likely cost me a future with Luca weighed heavily on my thoughts and the memories of the last four days washed over me repeatedly. The pain in my heart threatened to break me, but I used it to drive my determination.

While I would have loved to tell Colton to go to hell, I needed to keep my job until I finished my classes. That meant strict boundaries would be in place for work and personal hours. He would get exactly what he hired me for and nothing else. No more taking the stress and frustration of the work day home with me. It was time to focus.

The next work day, I was at the office before Colton arrived. It had been impossible to sleep. I was either reliving every moment I'd had with Luca or I was plotting my grand escape from Colton. My body was tired, but my mind was hungry for the distraction of work. I was getting caught up on emails when Colton came in looking like he'd dragged himself out of bed.

"Well, boss, you're looking worse for the wear," I teased, referencing his slightly disheveled suit and messy hair.

"That's going to happen when your wife kicks you out." He plopped down into his seat and turned towards his computer.

Christine wasn't a winner, but he did do it to himself. Hard to feel sorry for the guy. "I bet getting some more deals on the board will cheer you up. What can I do to help?"

He turned and looked at me and I saw the bags under his eyes and his slightly vacant expression. "You know, part of our deal was that you would be bringing in the deals as well."

"Hmm, can't say I remember that one. Usually, the job title Executive *Assistant* speaks to that," I said dismissively, turning back to my desk. If he was going to act like this today, I would just focus on what I could control.

"Well, I can't just serve all the deals to you on a silver platter. You'll need to get deals on your own."

“Should I do that during my work hours for you then?” I asked, pulling up a lead site that we received contact information from. “I can start making cold calls today or work off a list you’d like me to use.”

“I can’t hold your hand anymore, Millie. The market is changing and I need to keep every lead I find for myself. It’s time for you to work your own sphere and bring in some business.”

I bit my lip to keep myself from screaming at him. *Don’t get upset, Millie, you’re out of here in just a few months.* “Sounds good, boss,” I said casually, pretending my rage wasn’t bubbling beneath the surface.

A few minutes of awkward silence and the phone rang. I was actually relieved to pick it up for once, until I heard a disgruntled client on the line. This was not a great time for a complaint. At all. I tried to turn the volume down, but Colton heard it and walked over and hit the speakerphone button. He was standing way too close to me.

“I thought this was a done deal, but you did not come through. We have no choice but to take a different buyer.”

“Wait, what’s going on?” Colton barked into the phone. “What deal are we talking about right now?”

“I just said it. Aren’t you listening? You are a mess over there. I can’t say I will ever recommend an offer from your brokerage to any of my future clients. We thought this was a done deal.”

“I just came on the line, please share your name or the client’s name so I can find the deal.” Colton sounded polite, but his body was as stiff as a board. He was wound so tight, he was ready to blow.

“The property on Greenburrow. The single family home. Ring a bell?” The agent was getting sassy. I could understand their frustration, but it wasn’t helping the situation that they were getting personally involved.

I got up and went to the board, tracing my finger along the line for 218 Greenburrow. It showed as “offer out and

accepted”. This didn’t make any sense. I turned and looked at Colton, shrugging like I had no idea what was going on.

“We are showing that deal as accepted. I don’t understand,” Colton said back to the agent.

“Then where is the paperwork? Verbals are great, but we have to actually receive the contract.”

Colton’s eyes got big. I mouthed, “Oh shit.” We knew what this meant: Paige.

I jumped on the computer and pulled up whatever we had for Greenburrow. There it was. Clear as day. The offer was accepted and Paige said she’d send out the paperwork.

Then, Colton had fired her and the paperwork never went out. We had left for the retreat, and neither of us had thought about it.

“We had some turnover recently and it looks like that paperwork wasn’t sent out in a timely manner. This is not how we do business. Our reviews speak for themselves. Please let us send it over ASAP. We won’t let you down again.”

“Too late. This wasn’t a request for paperwork. This was a call to inform you that you lost this deal and any future deals with me as the agent. I’ll tell every client I meet not to do business with you.”

“That is not necessary...” Colton started, before noticing the person had already disconnected the call.

“Wow, that was unusually aggressive,” I said, a little surprised by the vitriol in that agent’s voice. “Things happen, real estate changes fast, doesn’t seem right that they’re so worked up.”

Colton’s eyes got big. He knew something I didn’t. He went and sat down and just got to work.

I looked back at the email and the agent’s name and it didn’t ring a bell, but I was guessing they either knew his wife or his mistress. Colton’s reputation was finally catching up to him.

Later that day, an unexpected email popped up in my inbox from Luca Mansini. My heart leapt into my throat.

Subject: Commercial Building in Sacramento

Hi Millie,

I sure hope this email finds you well. As soon as I got back in the office, I had my assistant track down the deal that fell through in Sacramento.

I was able to find the following emails regarding the commercial building. I'm forwarding you all of the correspondence that took place, so you can see that the deal fell through for reasons other than your involvement, and my team had no hard feelings.

I'm deeply sorry that Debbie used this deal as an excuse to downsize her team. I want you to know that we do not operate our business that way.

You don't have to respond, but I needed you to know.

Warmly,

Luca

I sat back in my seat and exhaled as I clicked on one of the attachments. It showed the initial contact from one of Luca's realtors who reached out regarding a vacant commercial property that had become available. They were requesting more information.

A few emails went back and forth. Then, there was reference to a meeting at the property.

After they reached a deal, I had sent over the paperwork—which is where I messed up by accidentally confusing it with another deal—and then there it was. The response.

Subject: Montgomery Ave./Sacramento

Thank you for the paperwork, unfortunately the numbers don't match our agreement. Please update and resend.

Thank you,

Parisa Hadid

Mansini Properties

“Wait, that was it?” I said, incredulous. How was that possible? Debbie had lost it on me. She had acted like I had destroyed the whole deal. “Not possible,” I said out loud, scrolling down and finding Debbie’s response, blaming it on me.

Then, there were requests for inspections. That’s when the deal actually went sideways.

Subject: Montgomery Ave Inspections

Hello Debbie,

Unfortunately the inspections have shown considerable damage to the property, including —but not limited to—the presence of black mold from extensive leaks.

The mold and pest issues will need to be resolved by the seller for this deal to move forward.

Thank you,

Parisa Hadid

Mansini Properties

That’s when the deal went off the tracks. A series of emails show that Debbie neglected to respond in a timely manner, followed by Debbie negotiating on behalf of the seller, who was not willing to make enough reparations to make the deal worthwhile.

When she failed to find a compromise that worked for both parties, Mansini dropped out of the deal with a kind email that extensively lists the reasons, and none of them included my name.

That woman let me think I deserved to get fired. She let me walk out of there with my tail between my legs, when her business was failing because of how she ran her business. She had the opportunity to just stick to the facts, to say it was a slower season, but she let me blame myself.

And then I had blamed Luca for it.

I closed my eyes and my memories immediately went back to his smile, his laughter, his touch. I had never believed in soul mates and made fun of romantic comedies when the people fell in love at first sight. Yet here I was, being proven wrong yet again—not only could it happen, but it had happened to me.

I needed to get my life together so I could get him back before someone else won his heart first.

I wrote him an hour later:

Dear Luca,

Thank you for your email. While I believed you when you said you had no knowledge of the deal, this confirmed for me that I did not deserve how I was treated by Debbie.

Yet another reminder of why I need to work for myself and make sure to never treat people the way I have been treated by my bosses.

I love you, Luca. I think about you all the time.

I stared at the email for a second, the screen blurring because of the tears in my eyes. I wanted to tell him I'd made a huge mistake. I wanted to beg him to forgive me and take me back. But I wanted to change my life even more. I hit the delete button and finished the email with:

I miss you, Luca.

Love,

Millie

I was lost in thought for a while. Hearing from him had disintegrated the paper thin facade I had constructed to mask my grief and now it consumed me. When I came back to the present, I realized that Colton was having some kind of meltdown in the other room. There was yelling and the sound of the basketball repeatedly hitting the walls. I took this as a great opportunity to mind my own business and go get a coffee.

Things started getting worse at the office, which made me grateful every day that I was working as fast and as hard as I could on my exit strategy.

I started taking every lead he didn't, did cold calls on my breaks, and built my own social media accounts for real estate. Slowly, but surely, I was making more and more commissions from my own deals. Sure, I had to split them with Colton, but it was still a nice chunk of change in my bank account each time.

More importantly, I was building relationships with the kind of clients that I wanted to work with in the future, and I was winning them over with the way that I did business.

Colton was more distracted than ever, his moods highly unpredictable, and he worked less and less. His list of properties in action got smaller until there was nothing from him at all.

Some days, he wouldn't come in until noon and then would leave hours later. Other days, he was in before sunrise and texting me asking me why I wasn't there yet.

Every time he barked an order at me or asked me to help him work a deal that was borderline illegal, I would just dream about the magical moment when I could tell him I quit.

It was going to be glorious.

One of the last days I was in the office with him, I heard him on the phone yelling at a woman. I couldn't make out her voice. He started threatening her with moving out of the country. I couldn't help but say under my breath, "Please, please go."

Not too long after, he stormed into my office and let me have it. He was mid-scream when he saw a small heater I had plugged in near my feet.

"Why is it so warm in here when I'm freezing?" He screamed.

"You must be talking about this," I pointed towards my mini-heater. "When you said to stop running the heater, I picked this up at Costco." Even with my space heater, I still had to wear a big coat, keep a warming blanket on my legs, and wear UGGs on my feet under the desk.

"Well, I need it in my office, because I have to make money," he yelled, ripping the cord out of the wall and starting to take it with him.

"Stop right there," I said, grabbing the cord. "I bought that with my own money, not office funds. I can go pick one up for your office if you like, or you can work in here and we can both be warm."

He grunted and dropped the cord, going over to his other desk and collapsing into the seat. I didn't like the guy, but I also had sympathy for someone who was clearly mentally unraveling.

"What's the plan," I said. "We're not selling as much as we used to. You're gone a lot. What do you want to work on here? What are you passionate about?"

“Nothing. All I think about is closing up shop and moving to Mexico. I invested in a big hotel project there and I think I’m going to go stay down there for a while until it’s built. I hate all my clients here anyway.”

“Wow, that’s a big transition. But, if you’re passionate about it, then I say go for it.”

“What happens to you? I mean, I know I have to feed myself and my family first, but what will you do?”

“Boss, not sure if you’ve noticed,” I said, pointing to the board, “but all those properties are mine right now. I’ve been building my own real estate business on the side. Don’t worry, you’re still making a cut on each one.”

“You know,” he perked up, “I can still be your broker if I move. So, you can take over the office, making the payments of course, and then really build your business. And, I’ll still be able to support you and mentor you, while getting a small commission.” I almost laughed out loud at that last part. I wouldn’t call a 50% cut for doing nothing “small”.

I held it together, though, because I could see the wheels turning in his eyes. He was already planning how he could lay by the beach and sip margaritas on my commissions. What a lazy piece of garbage this guy was.

But, I wasn’t a broker yet. I needed to play this game a little bit longer. “That’s right. You scratch my back, I scratch yours. What happens to all the clients here? Would you want me to take over those accounts?”

“Of course, they should be taken care of,” he agreed, money signs in his eyes.

“Can I get that in writing?” Two could play this game.

“Sure, Millie, yeah,” he nodded, looking rejuvenated by this conversation. “I’m feeling much better now. You have really cheered me up.”

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Passing the test for my broker's license was one of the singularly most satisfying moments of my life, followed by the insanely thrilling moment of watching Colton's face melt when I told him, "I quit."

He had just finalized his plans to move to Mexico, fully assuming that he would be profiting on my hard work the entire time. I had his signed agreement releasing his clients to me, and because he never assumed I had it in me to leave him and start my own brokerage, he didn't question the agreement at all.

Guess I did learn a thing or two from that shady guy.

When I left his office for the last time, he didn't let me run off into the sunset with his best wishes and warmest regards. Oh no. I received several emails and phone calls where he released all of his pent-up vitriol for his failing business and marriage on me. Like it was all my fault.

Joke was on him, because as soon as I left him and word got out that I had opened my own brokerage, I got an unexpected, but appreciated, surge of business coming from people with a lot of money who said they “received my name from a trusted referral.”

In addition, I received calls from old clients of Colton that had fired him, but liked working with me. Since they were no longer his clients, there was no conflict of interest. I wasn't going to leave serious clients and real deals on the table simply because they had crossed paths with Colton at some point, especially if he was in Mexico.

Now, I had my broker's license, a very generous salary, and a growing list of happy clients.

I had finally grown my business enough to secure a lease for my own office space. Life was good.

Add to that that Beckett and Brielle were flourishing and my new business endeavors meant that when I was with them, I was fully present and in the moment. Taking control of my own life and business was the single best decision I had ever made.

As time went on, Luca and I had the occasional interaction, but we had mostly retreated to our separate corners. He was busy working in Los Angeles and working on his foster friends foundation, and I was building a business from the ground up.

I would always wonder what could have been, but the more time that passed, the more I started to wonder if it was better to just let things be what they were. We'd had an incredible four days together and his influence in my life was the final push I needed to step into the person I was always meant to be. I was a better person for having met him and there was no limit to my gratitude for the impact he'd had on my life.

I dropped the kids off to school in my shiny new Jaguar F-Pace SUV and then cruised to my new office, where my assistant was helping unpack some toys I had ordered for the designated children's play area. I wanted my office to be a

welcoming place for parents, particularly women who were often marginalized due to their lack of childcare.

“Morning, Alex,” I said, as I strolled into the play room. “It’s looking good in here.”

“I think so, too. We have some more things coming in and then it’ll be ready to go.”

She had worked in childcare prior and had all the necessary certifications and first aid trainings, so part of her job was to provide free child care to clients if needed.

“Great work. Is Paige in yet?” Alex nodded and I headed down the hall to another office.

“Morning Sunshine,” I called to Paige, who looked up from her computer and smiled. “What page are we on today?”

“212.” She leaned back in her chair and put her hands behind her head.

When I started out on my own, Paige had been my first hire. She’d always talked about writing her own book, but needed to edit all the time to pay her bills. I offered her a very generous part-time job as my marketing writer and copy editor under the conditions that she spent the other hours working on her book. She knew so many people in the industry, the first chapter of her book alone had gotten so much attention from agents, it was an easy sell.

Having someone I knew I could trust with my life and my business was paramount to feeling confident striking out on my own, so it was a win-win.

Once I got into my office, which was decorated in black and white with punchy pops of yellow with my upholstered desk chair and a few other accessories, I sat down and turned on my computer. Yellow had always been Beckett’s favorite color and it reminded me why I work so hard.

From my seat, I could see into the rest of the office. When we renovated the office suite, I’d had a lot of the walls swapped out for expansive glass. I wanted the office to function more as a collaborative work space and less like a

stuffy office suite with agents quarantined in silos, hunching over their computers in isolation.

In another office, a few new agents who had onboarded recently were settling in for the day. They had the benefit of working under a growing and respected brokerage and I received a part of every one of their commissions. I preferred to hire women and individuals who were often snubbed at the all male brokerages I called “boys’ clubs.”

I was never going to run my business with the lack of integrity that Colton did, or destroy people like Debbie did. I hoped these people always felt supported.

Medusa hopped into my lap and purred. She had become the office pet, sharing her calming energy with all of us here in the trenches of high stakes real estate.

“Hey Millie, I have your proofs of the new signage and marketing collateral. Paige has already added her comments,” Alex pointed to the computer. “They say we can expedite it if we respond today.”

“I’ll check it now,” I said, and navigated to my email. I opened it and sat back, my face breaking into a smile as I saw the finished designs for Barlowe Brokerage. Underneath the business name and logo, it said:

Amelia Barlowe, Principal.

Using my full first name was something I went back and forth on, but to me, using Amelia symbolized my transition from a broken young girl to who I was today.

“You’ve gotta see this,” Paige said bluntly as she came into my office without knocking. She was staring at her phone and came right around to my side of the desk.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Just watch,” she pressed play on a video of a local news channel. The lady was standing outside of a building in Sacramento that looked like it had other smaller buildings around it—maybe they were trailers? I couldn’t totally see.

“This is Simone Fields with The Sacramento Eye. We’re following the story of the real estate heir who has recently taken ownership of this historic land in Sacramento after decades of being donated for charitable purposes.

This land has served as the largest homeless youth sanctuary in the state of California, also known as Halo House. The previous owner of the land donated the old structures and land to the charity to use rent free for decades, allowing it to thrive as a safe place for young teens with nowhere else to go.

Over the years, hundreds of thousands of teens have found rest, food, therapy and other important services at Halo House, a startling number of those teens runaways from abusive homes and foster kids who have aged out of the system with no resources.

Now that the original owner has passed, he has left his portfolio to his son, who has decided to clear the land and use it for high density housing. He has given Halo House a very short time to come up with the exorbitant amount they believe their other project will be worth. Halo House is desperately looking to raise the money to buy the land. Unfortunately, they are running out of time. Without proper funding, Halo House will be shut down, and hundreds of young people will be flooding the streets with nowhere else to go. Back to you Mark.”

Paige and I sat in silence, staring in shock at the video that had just ended. Halo House was an institution in this area. Teens found a way to come from all over the place to Halo House, knowing it would be a refuge for them to rest and get on their feet.

“What are we going to do?” Paige asked me, knowing full well I was going to get involved.

“We have to try to save Halo House.” I said, standing up and getting ready to call a team meeting. We needed to come up with some creative strategies right away and get moving if we were going to succeed.

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In a matter of hours, the team had brainstormed an extensive client outreach and social media strategy to try to get more eyes on the situation at Halo House.

Part of our plan was to utilize Instagram and TikTok to spread the word. The next morning, we got our real estate photographers and videographers to meet us out by Halo House, where we could take some videos and clips right on the outskirts of the property. Paige had called ahead of time and gotten permission from the Halo House directors for us to do this and we were grateful for their support.

“Whatever it takes to save Halo House,” the director had said, her voice heavy with emotion. “Every child deserves a safe place.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” I responded passionately, thinking of my own two babies.

Once we got out to the property, I stood out front with the microphone. My videographer counted me down, and then we got started. We filmed a dozen different clips from various areas of the sanctuary, each one sharing something else about the impact they had on the community and why we were so passionate about saving it. Each one had a direct, unmistakable call out for investors to contact us or the owner of the property directly. We would not be taking any commission on this project and would return any money made directly to Halo House.

We released a few videos a day, watching the metrics and trying out different hashtags to expand the reach.

Within a couple days, the responses started pouring in. The videos were getting millions of shares and attracting a lot of attention.

That's when The Sacramento Eye called us, excited. "You're getting more traction on this than we did. We'd like to have you come into the studio and do a session with us live on the morning news. Do you have time?"

"I absolutely do," I said, alerting Alex as she walked by my office. "Let me clear my schedule." I hung up and asked Alex to reschedule my morning appointments. I needed to focus on Halo House as much as possible.

I got to the studio bright and early and experienced the whirlwind of the behind-the-scenes at the morning news firsthand. Makeup artists and sound checks and a million people whirling around created a buzz in the air that you could feel. I'd never been on camera like this before, besides on social media, so this would be a new and exciting experience for me. I only wished it was under better circumstances.

"Your makeup looks great, I'm just going to add a little bit to make sure you don't get drowned out on camera," the artist said, touching me up.

"Work your magic, I need it," I laughed and she laughed back before adding, "Please, you're making my job easy."

Once I was cleaned up and wardrobe had checked my outfit, I was given a mic and sent on stage to start the show.

I didn't realize how challenging it was to stare at a row of cameras and a room full of people instead of a live studio audience. It felt like the whole room was judging me. "You're here for the kids. You're here for the kids," I whispered to myself, before a sound guy in the booth came on the loudspeaker and said, "Amelia, please stop talking, we can hear you."

I blushed a little and tried not to make a sound. The cameraman counted us down and the LIVE signs lit up in red.

"Good morning, thank you for joining us on The Sacramento Eye. Today, we are starting with a special guest, realtor Amelia Barlowe, who is working hard to spread the word about Halo House. Thank you for coming, Amelia." She turned towards me.

"Thank you for having me. This is an important cause that is very close to my heart."

"Tell me why you are so passionate about saving Halo House."

"It's simple, really. Halo House has been providing free housing, medical care, therapy, and services to homeless teens and foster care youth who age out of the system for decades. Teens come from all over to be at Halo House. They've helped hundreds of thousands of young people since they've been open, and now they may get shut down."

"Why now? Why is Halo House at risk of being closed?"

"The original owner donated the expansive land and all of the properties on it to Halo House. When he recently passed, the property went to his son, who has decided he doesn't want to use the land for charity and wants to build apartments on it."

"How long do we have to save Halo House?"

"We only have a matter of weeks left. The new owner wants Halo House to buy him out, not just for the land value, but for the profit he could make if he built apartments on the land. It's an exorbitant amount, and we need angel investors

and donations to save Halo House desperately and immediately.”

“How can people reach you?”

“They can call my office, Barlowe Brokerage, or find us on social media. We are doing this commission free. Anything we make on this project will be immediately donated back to Halo House.”

“You’ve been releasing social media videos to share the news. How is that going?”

“Yes, we have, and some of the videos have gone viral. We are so grateful for the exposure and it’s helped attract a lot of positive attention, but we still need more help.”

“Thank you so much for your hard work. We hope this will reach the right people who can save Halo House.”

“I do, too. Thank you.”

The LIVE lights went off and people with headsets rushed over to help me get out of the chair and off stage before the next segment.

When I went back to the fitting rooms to get my things, the makeup artist came in, tears in her eyes.

“I went to Halo House. When I had nowhere else to go. They saved me. Thank you so much for trying to save it.” Before I could say anything, she wrapped me in a huge hug, and we just stood there, feeling the gravity of the moment. It only fueled my determination to continue my fight to protect the ongoing legacy of Halo House.

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Luca

I cruised into my office feeling particularly positive about how things had been going lately. I was seeing great progress with my efforts to make Foster Friends the foremost foster kid support network across the United States. I'd been partnering with charities, local organizations, and government entities to get the word out. I had liquidated some of my assets to ensure that Foster Friends had enough funding to not only get started on the right foot, but deliver on its promises.

To be honest, it was the thing I was most proud of in my life, which may surprise some people who think building a billion dollar real estate investment portfolio should top anything.

If money can't create something positive that makes this world a better place, what's the point?

I almost second-guessed naming the organization Foster Friends after Millie left me standing there on the curb of the hotel, but the name was perfect, and I always hoped that Millie would see it and think of me.

Speaking of that night, sure, I'll just say it: I thought she'd come back. Then, I thought for sure she would call. What we had was special, or so I thought. But, you know what they say: timing is everything. I was ready; she wasn't. That was that.

At first, losing her made me shut down again. But, over time, I realized the joy I felt with her was worth the pain. Every cell of my body had felt alive again. I had gone decades

of my life without that rush, and I wasn't going to wait another twenty years to feel it again.

So, after a little bit of time, and even a little therapy (no shame in working on yourself), I actually started putting myself out there again.

There was definitely some doozies, but, after some effort, I met someone. She was a kind, loving woman with a heart of gold. There weren't sparks from day one, not like with Millie anyway, but we had started spending more and more time together, and it had grown into a really beautiful relationship.

I sat down in my leather chair and looked out the window for a couple of minutes while I did my morning meditation. My office had an incredible view of the beach. I loved it here.

When I turned around to get started, I saw my assistant, Tyler, in the doorway. I had been mentoring him on becoming an agent, but he still worked for me while he built up his client portfolio.

"Tyler, good morning, how are you?" I asked, as I turned on my computer.

"I'm okay. I have something you may want to see." He looked a little concerned. Not exactly the expression I like to see first thing in the morning.

I waved him over and he came to my desk, holding out his cell phone for me to watch some kind of video.

"Just tell me," I said, waving it away.

"Not for this one." He pushed the phone out to me again, gesturing for me to take it.

I looked again at his unusually serious expression and took the phone without another word. I hit the play button on the video and had to blink a few times to adjust to what I was seeing. "Millie?"

The video was short, maybe around a minute, but I hadn't caught most of it, because I was still stunned that I was staring at Millie on the screen. I exhaled, not even realizing I'd been holding my breath. God, she was beautiful. Her hair was

shorter and she looked different in some ways, but she still, after all this time, took the wind right out of me.

“I missed what she said. How do I play it again?” I asked, trying to figure it out. Thank God I paid people to do this social media stuff for me.

“Just hit the play button or scroll up and down.” He watched me fumble for a couple seconds and then took the phone and fixed it for me, handing it back. “Try to listen this time.”

I smirked and looked up at him quickly before looking down when she started talking. *“I’m standing outside Halo House, the largest homeless youth and foster kid sanctuary in California with a history of helping hundreds of thousands of teens. They are going to be shut down in a matter of weeks if we can’t find a buyer or donations to exceed the amount the new owner of the property is asking for. If we don’t succeed, Halo House will become another high-rise apartment complex. Please contact me if you’re interested in saving Halo House.”*

“Tyler, explain. What is this?” I asked, trying to find more videos.

He took the phone gently from my hand, navigated to her profile and handed it back. She had several more videos outside of Halo House. I watched them all, soaking in everything she was saying.

“There’s this, too,” he queued up my TV and navigated to a clip from the morning news. There she was, like a siren. I couldn’t take my eyes off her.

“We only have a matter of weeks. The new owner wants Halo House to buy him out. Not just for the land value, but for the profit he could make if he built apartments on the land. It’s an exorbitant amount, and we need angel investors and donations to save Halo House desperately and immediately.”

I exhaled loudly. Looking back at Tyler, he looked emotional. “You doing okay?” I asked. He nodded.

“Did you...do you...know about this place?” I inquired, asking a rare question about Tyler’s past. I had hired him after he had reached out multiple times, telling me he had a story similar to mine and wanted to be just like me when he grew up. I had an immediate instinct about him, so I took him under my wing, and he was doing very well for himself now.

But, like me, it was hard to face your past, especially when you were young.

“That’s where I was, before....before I came here,” he said quietly.

Another instinct kicked in. “Here’s what we’re going to do. Get on the phone with Millie—er, Amelia Barlowe. Get me all the information. Don’t tell her it’s me.”

He nodded once and walked out quietly.

I leaned back in my chair and stared at the TV, paused right when it was zoomed in on Millie.

Not long after, Tyler walked back in with the detailed information on the terms laid out by the new owner. I scanned it and immediately wanted to crumple it into a ball and throw it in the trash.

“He’s going for blood,” I said, shaking my head. Normally, I would never even consider a deal with someone like this. What he was doing was unethical. It had to be intentional, because he knew a sound investor would never touch this with a ten foot pole. It was fiscally irresponsible to take this deal. “What a jerk.” I said, rubbing my hands on my face. “I’d like to take this guy out into a dark alley. I hate bullies.”

“I know,” Tyler said, his eyes big, his voice quiet. “I knew you would say that.”

“Nobody is going to take this deal.” I tossed the papers on the desk in frustration. “He thinks this makes him look like a good guy, giving somebody a chance to save it, so he can sleep at night when he mows it down to make money. Disgusting.”

I stood up and walked around my chair to look out the window. I thought of all the kids who had been through there and now wouldn’t have a place to go back to. I thought of the

woman that took me in and then died before I could ever repay her for her kindness. I thought of all the children that now wouldn't have a safe place to go if Halo House was mowed down. My blood was boiling and my jaw clenched as I imagined what I would say if I came face-to-face with this fool.

“You could use it, Mr. Mansini, for your foundation.” Tyler's voice was small.

I turned around and looked at him. He was as close to a son as I'd ever had. “Is it worth it, Tyler? Do these people really help? Or, would we be better off finding our own land and starting from the ground up? Be honest.”

His eyes filled with tears. “They love the kids. They are the only family so many of us ever had. They host a huge Thanksgiving dinner every year where they bring in dozens of tables and all the kids that want to can come back to the one place where they felt safe and at home.” He had to stop talking, several tears slipping down his face.

The ideas started coming in faster now. This could become the home base for the foundation. I could use the Foster Friends network to increase awareness of Halo House for teens across the country. I could work with Halo House to offer the financial awareness programs and other resources that I was releasing through Foster Friends nationwide.

Plus, I could show this selfish piehole that there was someone who wasn't going to let him get away with this.

I choked up looking at him. “Call Amelia. Offer below ask, but not too low. Cash. Thirty day close. Do it under the trust.”

He rushed out, wiping his tears. My heart started pounding and all of my senses were heightened. I felt the typical thrill of the hunt, but layered with a determination to save Halo House before this entitled little rich boy demolished a place making a difference in the lives of kids.

I could hear Tyler in the other room, so I walked over to his desk to see if I could overhear any of the conversation.

“We’d like to make an offer. Cash. Thirty day close.” He paused and I could hear talking on the other side. “Yes, we can show proof of funds. I’ll send it over.” I heard more talking, maybe some cheering. “How soon can we get an answer?” Finally, after what seemed like forever, he hung up the phone. “She’ll deliver the offer to the owner and see what he says. She isn’t exactly sure how long it’ll take him to respond, because he wasn’t expecting anyone to cough up the money.”

I didn’t like the possibility that this guy could screw around on this deal. There weren’t very many, if any, real estate investors who were going to take him up on this, so he probably wasn’t prepared to even entertain an offer.

“Let me know when you hear back,” I said, walking back into my office. I tried to work, but I couldn’t get my mind to focus. On my desk was a picture of my girlfriend from the Christmas party... and on the wall, my TV was still paused on the image of Millie.

I barely got any work done while we waited. I kept checking in with Tyler to see if anything had come through. Finally, after what felt like days, Tyler walked back in. “He responded.” He didn’t look happy about it.

“What did that sad excuse for a human do now?” I could feel it. We were playing chess. He was going to push this to the limit.

“He wants full ask, 7 day close, all cash, no inspections or contingencies.”

“Of course he does.” My voice was flat, and my patience was running thin.

I took a deep breath in and out. The best way to get back at a bully was to beat them at their own game. “Take the deal. Get it done.”

Tyler nodded, holding back a smile, and left my office quickly to get the paperwork drawn up. Just then my office phone pinged and I pushed a button to connect with my receptionist. “Mr. Mansini, your lunch meeting is waiting in the conference room.”

“Thank you, Cyra.” I got up and headed to my next meeting. Another deal is usually just another day in real estate. This time, I’d have to try to stay focused with the image of Millie in the back of my head.

The next seven days were a little crazier than normal, due to the purchase of Halo House. The seller tried a few other things to screw with me, but luckily, we knew the laws better than him, and our lawyers were able to shut the imbecile down.

Finally, Halo House was ours and I felt the satisfaction that only comes with knowing you did the right thing. Halo House would continue to be a place of safety, hope, and restoration for generations to come.

Now that it was mine, I called Tyler into my office. “Close the door, please.” Once we were alone, I sat back in my chair. “I need you to do a favor for me.”

“Anything.”

“Set up a meeting with Amelia Barlowe at the property. Book the jet to take me straight in and car service on both sides. I don’t know how long I’ll be staying, so book a local place for the night and leave room to stay longer if needed.”

“Absolutely, Mr. Mansini.”

“Oh, and when you set up the meeting, don’t say my name. Say that the new owner wants to meet her at the property to get to know more about it from a local who understands its value.”

He was scratching notes down on his notepad, nodding and listening. “Is there anything else?”

“Yes, please book the chef to prepare a private dinner with Catherine at my home for tonight.”

“Of course, I’ll do that right away.”

“That’s all for now. Thank you, Tyler.”

He nodded and left my office. I had spent the last week with my heart torn between my past and my present. I couldn’t

lead Catherine on—I needed to let her know that my heart just wasn't in the relationship the way it should be. The respectful thing to do was release her to find the right person for her. The minute I saw Millie again, I knew what my relationship was missing. Catherine was amazing, but she wasn't Millie.

I turned back to the window and stared at the ocean waves rolling in, one after the other. The expansiveness of the ocean always put everything in perspective for me. We were each just a grain of sand in this massive universe. We were only here for a short time; there was no time to waste.

I had managed to save Halo House. Now, I needed to find out if I could save my relationship with Millie.

32

Millie

Alex came into my office with a big smile on her face. The whole office had been buzzing with excitement ever since we'd gotten an incredible offer for Halo House and the owner had accepted the terms. It was a great feeling to be able to make such a difference.

"Hey, I need to talk to you about something," she said, holding a tablet.

"What's up?" I leaned back in my chair and smiled.

"The assistant to the trust that bought Halo House called. The new owner would like to meet you at the property. Can we look at the schedule and send back some times that would work for you?"

"Hmm, sure," I started to say. "What was the name of the owner again?"

She navigated to something on her tablet and said, "Let me see, it was through a trust. I have it here somewhere. Oh, it's Alpha Property Trust. Why do you ask?"

I mentally scrolled through clients from Debbie, Colton, and now my own brokerage. Alpha didn't ring a bell. "Just trying to put a face to the name. Can you find out who I'll be meeting with and why so I can prepare?"

"I will get you info. As for why, the assistant said the owner would like to learn about Halo House and the surrounding area from a local who understands its value."

“Interesting.” It was understood that the new owner maintained Halo House as a charity, so I just assumed that any person who would pay the outrageous ask of the seller was from the area or already knew about it. But, there was certainly no way I was going to turn down this good samaritan’s request.

“Sure, just check my calendar and set something up. I trust you.” Alex nodded and walked out of my office. Not too long after, I received a notification on my calendar that it had been updated—she’d added a meeting with Alpha Property Trust in a couple of days.

When that offer had come through, we were down to the wire. There hadn’t been nearly enough donations and no good offers on the property. We were losing hope when the phone rang and a young man’s voice made an offer that the owner simply couldn’t refuse.

When I called the other realtor to present it, they were as shocked as I was. They hated the young kid that had inherited an entire real estate investment firm overnight and were thrilled to deliver an offer that the board would force him to take if he didn’t want to. The best he could do at that point was screw around with it a bit more, but the good people at Alpha kept putting him in his place. Once I knew Halo House was safe, I actually enjoyed watching the back and forth.

Anyway, Halo House was under new ownership now and I was looking forward to shaking the hand of the person who saved it. Ever since I started representing Halo House, the kids and I had been volunteering there and getting to know a lot of the incredible kids. The wheels were turning for me for how I could help them even more. The deal closing wasn’t the end for me; it was only the beginning.

I clicked out of my calendar and back to the MLS where I was setting up a search for a new place. Not for a client, but for myself and the kids. I wanted to buy them a home they would be proud of and want to come home to. I wanted a home with a large enough backyard to host big events for the kids from Halo House. I wanted something that was all ours.

Paige leaned around the door jamb and snapped me out of my daydream. “Hungry yet?”

“Starving.” I stood up, grabbed my purse, gave Medusa a quick pet and went to join Paige. “Where we going?”

“Somewhere with French fries. I’m stuck on a scene in my book and need carbs.”

I laughed as I hopped in the car with Paige in the passenger seat. Working with your best friend? Not overrated.

The next couple of days flew by, and it was time to meet the mysterious new owner of Halo House. That morning, I got dressed in a snazzy red pantsuit, styled my now shoulder length highlighted hair, and went into the office to get a little bit done before it was time to meet up. Red was the new black, in my opinion. I used to think red was too “flashy”, but now I felt like it represented who I had become: a woman who was unafraid to stand out.

I peeked into Paige’s office before I left. “Hey, how’s it going?”

“Great. Just finished editing some new marketing materials and I’m updating the blog as we speak.”

“Love it. The latest post was great, by the way.”

“Thank you! We got a lot of new traffic from the Halo House videos, so it’s been fun.”

“Hey, speaking of which, I’m heading over there to meet the new owner. Do you want to come? Maybe it’ll be a cute billionaire and we can invite him to lunch after?”

Paige shifted in her seat. “I’m good, but thanks.” She went back to looking at her computer. Paige could definitely be anti-social, but this was a little weird.

“Why not? Come on!”

“If it’s a guy, and he’s cute, why wouldn’t *you* want to take him to lunch?” she asked, looking over the rim of her glasses at me.

“I don’t have time for a relationship, you know that,” I laughed anxiously. Paige occasionally picked on me for not dating anymore. “Plus, we both know my picker is broken.”

“It *was* broken,” she corrected me. “It’s not anymore. It’s your time, Millie. You gotta get back out there.”

“Okay, well that’s a separate conversation. Is that a firm ‘no’ on going with me today then?”

“Firm. But, if it is a guy, and the two of you have sparks flying, don’t run away, okay Millie?”

I exhaled. “I’ll see what I can do.”

On my way out, I waved bye to Alex and reminded her to text me the info on the new owner, and she kind of avoided me and looked away. *Why is everyone being weird today?*

When I pulled up to Halo House, I was the only one there. I felt a little anxious and checked my text to see if Alex sent me that info yet. Nothing. I liked to be prepared, so I shot her a text.

Millie: Alex, did you get that info? They should be here soon.

Alex: Oh, sure, hold on.

Millie: They’ll be here any second, text me something. Slow internet here.

No response. Dang it. This was frustrating. I really didn’t like to go into meetings cold.

Millie: Paige, Alex was supposed to get me something from Alpha. Can you get me some info real quick? My internet is slow here. I can barely get texts.

Paige: You’re going to be fine.

Millie: No, I am not fine. Can you just get me something? Please?

Alex: I sent you something via email. Did you get it?

Millie: Email? I just said I can’t get email here. Text it to me. Just give me the bullet points.

No response. Wow. The two people I trusted to help me out were just not delivering today. Why weren't they sending anything back? I sent a voice text to Paige: "Paige, I can't get email or photo here. I need text. It's like an internet black hole. I need info fast."

A black town car pulled up behind me. *Shit*. I was just standing here by my car, feeling like a total idiot. Somebody was about to get out of this car and I wouldn't even know their name.

Right before the door of the town car opened...

Paige: Just roll with it.

"What the hell," I grumbled under my breath.

Millie: Alex, hurry up. They just pulled up.

Alex: Sending...

The car door opened and a left leg came out. Okay, it was a guy's dress pant and shoe. Now I knew it was a dude.

"Thanks a lot for nothing," I complained under my breath. As his arm outstretched to hold the door open and he was about to get out of the car, I grimaced uncomfortably. I did not like surprises.

He stood up to his full height and I blinked a few times like my eyes needed to focus. I felt short of breath. Was I seeing a mirage?

"Luca?" I said breathlessly. I couldn't believe he was just a few feet away from me with a huge smile on his face.

"Millie, it's great to see you!" He walked over, put his arms out and I instinctively reciprocated. He crushed me in a huge bear hug. I exhaled heavily, a wave of emotions rolling over me as the same warm, spicy scent of his cologne transported me right back to the Palace Hotel.

We pulled away from each other and I got a good look at him. That same handsome face with the crinkly smile and kind eyes that I still saw in my dreams. A lot of feelings rushed through me and I struggled to find the right words to say.

“Wow. It was you?” I finally eeked out. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“It all happened so fast.” His eyes sparkled and my thoughts started spinning. Luca was the best man I had ever met in my entire life, and I left him standing on the curb outside of a hotel. Now, here he was, and I could barely form a complete sentence.

“It’s good to see you,” he finally broke the silence. “I’ve seen a thing or two about your growing business and, of course, the great work you did to save Halo House. I am really proud of you, Millie.”

“Thank you so much,” I said quietly, still in shock that he was standing right here, so close I could smell his cologne. “It’s been a busy year and things are going really well.”

Time might have passed, but some things hadn’t changed a bit: he was still devastatingly handsome, my heart still fluttered a mile a minute when he smiled, and when he touched me, everything around me disappeared. There was one important change since I’d seen him last, though. I wasn’t the insecure, intimidated girl I had been before. I knew it had all been in my own head, but I’d dealt with my demons, built myself up, and become a woman I was truly proud of. When he said he was proud of me too, it confirmed for me that I had made the right decision.

“Can I show you around?” I asked, turning slightly towards the property. I needed to move and breathe. “I set up a tour with the director, and she’s excited to meet you, too.”

“I would love nothing more,” he said, and he put his arm out for me to take, just like old times. It was a kind offer, and I took it. I tried to match his calm, nonchalant demeanor, but underneath, seeing him again had lit the match that set my heart on fire.

When we met with the director, she was so thrilled to meet Luca, I was afraid she was going to blast off into the atmosphere. Luckily, he had an incredibly calming effect on everyone around him and she was able to settle into the tour.

The more he saw, the more I knew he liked it. Halo House was a unique place, and it was impossible for it to not capture your heart (if you had one). I watched him as he experienced it for the first time and saw that his act of saving Halo House was healing the little boy inside of him that had no place to call home.

When she led us outside to the outdoor area where they hosted huge holiday dinners, he stood there, taking it all in, looking at the lights strung from side to side, the large picnic tables, the grassy area in the back where they played flag football and pickup soccer games, and the hammocks in the back, strung between tall oak trees, where kids rested and read books.

His arm pulled away from mine, and his hands rubbed the tears from his cheeks. “This place is special,” he said. It was a simple statement, but it was enough.

We made our way back inside, and once Luca had processed his tour a bit more, he turned to the director and said, “I’d like to get you in touch with the director for the Foster Friends Foundation. It is my hope that you’ll be able to work well together and support each other in reaching as many kids as possible.”

“Absolutely, in fact, she’s already reached out and we have some very exciting ideas of how to bridge the two.” Her eyes were lit up like a Christmas tree. “It will be so great to have each other’s support.”

“Perfect,” Luca said, nodding once. “Thank you very much for the tour. I’ll definitely be back soon and you’ll probably see more of me than you’d like.” We all laughed a little at that one. Hard to imagine anyone not wanting to spend time with Luca. He was a sincerely beautiful person, inside and out.

He turned and looked at me, “What I would really like to do now, though, is take you to lunch. Millie, do you have the time?”

I looked up into his eyes. Kindness and graciousness radiated from them. There was no one on earth like this man. “Nowhere else I’d rather be.”

This time, he put out his hand, and I put my hand in his, the warmth of his skin penetrating straight to my soul.

33

Luca

If I had a superpower, it would be to stop time. Whenever something wonderful happened, like snow falling on Christmas, a child laughing, or having lunch with an incredible woman, I wished I could freeze that moment and just sit there, soaking it all in for as long as possible. The happy moments are often so fleeting, and we are just left with the memory.

This was a moment I would freeze. Millie, standing here, right next to me, at the youth sanctuary we saved together, looking at me with her deep, blue eyes.

We walked together out to our cars and I gestured towards the town car. “Would you like to ride together?”

A smile spread across her face and I hoped it was because she was remembering our time together in San Francisco. “Just like old times,” she said.

I opened the door for her and held her hand as she slid in.

I’d had my assistant research the best restaurants in Sacramento and reserve a special chef’s table in the hopes that she would agree to go with me. Once we were on our way to the restaurant, I turned to look at Millie and found that even though time had passed, the feelings I had for her before were still there. She made me feel like a young man giddy in love.

“How are your kids doing?” I asked, genuinely curious. She looked up at me, her eyes a little surprised.

“They’re doing amazing,” she said, her whole face spreading into a beautiful smile. “Beckett has grown up so much and he loves to come look at properties with me and hang out at the office. He says he wants to code video games and sell real estate when he’s older. He’ll be fantastic at both.”

I couldn’t help but smile back. “He sounds like a great kid.”

She nodded, her eyes glistening. “Brielle is also doing so great. She’s found a love for ballet and figure skating. Of course, they are both very expensive activities, so I’m grateful to be able to do that for her. She lights up the stage when she performs.”

“Just like her mama,” I said, before I could stop the words from coming out of my mouth. Millie looked down, smiling, her cheeks blushing a little.

“Thank you, that’s very sweet,” she said.

It was quiet for a second and then she looked up at me and her eyes had changed. “Luca, I need to ask you something.” She stopped, clearing her throat.

My heart leapt in my chest. I cautiously hoped she was feeling the same way as me.

“Have you...did you...ugh. This is a hard thing to ask someone,” she paused. “Are you married now? In a relationship?”

She looked so serious. I resisted the urge to take her in my arms and kiss her. The corners of my mouth lifted into a smile. “Well, I *was* in a relationship for a little while.” I paused to see her reaction. She looked like she was trying to be supportive, but her whole body was tense. I added, “But, I’m not anymore.”

She visibly relaxed. She looked out the window and I could see the reflection of her trying not to smile in the window.

“What about you?” I asked, and my heart beat quicker. I deeply hoped I knew the answer to that question.

She turned back to me. “Me? No. I haven’t dated anyone. Or, I guess, I dated myself. When I got back from San Francisco, I missed you...so much it hurt. I thought about you every day. I knew that if I was going to walk away from what we had, I wasn’t going to waste any time. I have spent every minute building my business and taking care of my kids. There’s no one else.”

This time she put out her hand for me and I picked it up, slowly bringing it to my lips and kissing it. The soft touch and sweet smell of her skin rushed me with memories.

The car pulled up outside of the restaurant, and the driver stepped out to open our door.

For a quick second I considered asking her if she wanted to skip lunch, but I knew this opportunity together was precious.

Once we were seated inside the restaurant, the chef and staff doted on us as if we were celebrities, but to be honest, I only had eyes for one person. The food was incredible, of course, but each bite we took was just foreplay. It was impossible to focus on anything except the way Millie’s face flushed when I complimented her, or the way she groaned when a bite of food was particularly delicious. I could have sat there and watched her for hours.

When it was time to leave, we thanked everyone profusely for a job well done, even though I couldn’t tell you one thing I had eaten, and we headed back out to my car. Before we got in, I stopped her on the sidewalk. I hadn’t planned on doing this right now, but the words were about to just tumble right out of me. It was now or never.

“Millie, I...” I started, planning to ask her if we could try this again. If there was room in her life for one more. I wanted to tell her that she was the only one I wanted to go to sleep next to and wake up with in the morning. I wanted to get to know her kids and be their friend and ally.

Before I could say anything else she cut me off. “Luca, wait. I need to tell you something.” She looked concerned. My heart dropped. Was this going to be it? Were the things I felt one-sided?

I waited quietly, stoically. I wanted her to have the space she needed to share how she really felt, without any pressure.

For me, this was a done deal. I knew in my heart who I wanted to be with and I would go to any lengths to make it work. Hell, I'd move to Sacramento to be with her and leave the beach I loved so much. Or, I would fly my private jet to Sacramento every weekend and drive Brielle to the ice rink and hire the best coding tutors for Beckett.

Millie had my heart. I had searched my whole life for a family of my own, and I was willing to put all my cards on the table.

34

Millie

We stood outside the restaurant, and Luca was looking at me the same way as the night I left him outside the Palace Hotel.

I knew what he was going to say, and there was no way I was going to let this man put his heart on the line for me twice.

When I left him standing there before, the only reason was because I wasn't ready for what we could have had. I was ready now.

"Luca, wait. I need to tell you something." I paused, collecting my thoughts. He waited, patiently, his calm energy like Xanax for my nerves. I had never asked a man out before, but I knew I could do this. I needed to do this.

"Leaving you in San Francisco was one of the hardest things I've ever done, but I knew I needed to do that for me and my kids and our future. You were ready; but I wasn't. I have thought about that moment every day since. I didn't know if I would ever get this chance again, I certainly know I don't deserve it. But being here with you again has made me realize that the way I felt before hasn't gone away. In fact, for me, my feelings have only grown stronger with time."

I saw him stifle a smile, his whole face lighting up.

"I love you, Luca. I love the man that you are. I love your heart for kids and how kind and generous you are. I love that you run your business with integrity. I love that whenever I'm anywhere with you, you're the only person that I see. I want to be with you. I don't know how the details work, but I don't

care anymore. There is no one else in the world like you, and I would be the happiest girl in the world if you were mine.”

He couldn't hold it back anymore, his face broke out into a huge grin, the kind where his skin crinkles around his eyes. He pulled me close and embraced me in a warm hug.

When he pulled away, he said, “It's too late, Millie.”

I held my breath. I hoped he was kidding. *Please God let him be teasing me.*

He waited a couple long seconds, my face slowly dropping as my hope faded.

“Because I am already yours,” he added, before leaning forward, close enough to kiss me, but stopped.

“Oh please,” I burst out, “kiss me already!”

He laughed, a rich, sweet sound that filled my heart with joy. He leaned towards me again, and this time, I reached my hand around his neck and pulled him all the way in for a kiss.

Finally, after all this time, I had found my person.

epilogue

Millie

I was washing dishes and admiring the way the trees were changing color in the backyard when I heard a ping on my home monitoring system. Drying my hands quickly, I walked over to the panel and checked the cameras to find someone unexpectedly coming into the courtyard and towards the front door.

It wasn't someone I immediately recognized and a hat obscured their face, so I clicked on the next screen to see the camera views from the front of the house.

A motorcycle was parked out front. "Interesting," I muttered to myself, before making my way down the hallway adorned with Carrara marble tile. You wouldn't believe what a nightmare it had been to have this tile installed. We'd gone through three different tile companies before we found someone that could get it in just right without damaging it. The end result had been worth it, of course, but the journey was an arduous one.

When I got to the arched double doors, I unlatched the top lock, but before opening it, I peeked through the peephole to confirm my suspicions, and my heart started palpitating in my chest.

I opened the door and made eye contact with the man that had left me and my children years before.

"You're alive," I said flatly. Were pleasantries expected for the man who abandoned you? I don't think so.

“I had a hard time finding you,” he said back. I noticed then that he looked older. He also looked a lot more unkempt, like he’d been sleeping on the side of the road. He probably had been. Who knew? I didn’t see much remaining of the man I had fallen in love with in college.

“Well, you could’ve called.” My number had been the same, but he hadn’t bothered to try it.

“I was hoping it would be a nice surprise,” he said sheepishly, looking down at the ground and then glancing backward at his bike as if he were planning on making a quick getaway.

“You can go if you like,” I said. It was fun to see him squirm a little. When he’d said he was leaving me, I’d begged and cried for him to stay, terrified I couldn’t make it on my own. I much preferred this scenario to that one.

He looked back up at me, took off his hat like he was at church and his eyes looked sad. “You look different, Mills.”

“I am different,” I said, “and honestly, I have you to thank for that. When you left us high and dry with nothing, I thought we might starve to death. Luckily, I proved myself wrong. Now, what can I help you with?”

He shuffled around a little, awkwardly. I stood stone still. The stronger I was, the more uncomfortable he became. “I was hoping that the kids might want to see me.”

Well, nothing can prepare you for that one. He left the kids devastated, and now wants to waltz back into their lives? “You know, I’ll need some time to talk with them and prepare them. It took them a long time to adjust to their father abandoning them. They’re happy and healthy now, and it’ll be their decision how we move forward.”

He glanced back at his bike, “I just don’t know how long...”

“In that case, why don’t you head out. If this is a one-time thing, you can go.” My blood started boiling. He really thought I would just let him crush their world and then take off again?

“That’s not it, Millie. That’s not it.” He was rocking back and forth from his heels to his toes. “I’d like to make amends. Are they here?”

“They’re not home.” I was grateful that of all mornings, this was the Saturday that they were off at a big event at Halo House. I was supposed to be there, too, but I’d been feeling more tired than usual and decided to hang back and rest.

Unfortunately, just then, a white SUV pulled into the driveway and I heard the large garage door opening. Before I could tell him to hit the road, Luca came through the courtyard while the kids went through the garage into the house.

“I saw a motorcycle out front, do we have a visitor?” Luca asked, his voice tinged with concern as he rounded the corner.

“We sure do,” I said flatly, even though just the sight of Luca made everything feel better. He walked up to stand next to me, kissing me on the cheek and resting his hand on my growing belly, before asking me quietly, “How are you feeling?” He gave me his full attention before turning towards Mike, putting out his hand and saying, “I’m Luca, Millie’s husband. You are?”

Mike swallowed hard and put out his hand, “Mike.” I was grateful he didn’t finish that statement with any particulars. Luca was already well aware of who he was anyway.

The kids, as soon as they went inside, raced around to the door, and when they saw him, I could feel their energy shift behind me.

“Dad, is that you?” Brielle’s sweet voice asked as she wedged in front of me.

“What are you doing here?” Beckett barked at him and that was my cue to wrap this up.

“I’m going to take the kids inside,” I said, shifting into mama bear mode.

But Luca put out his hand and said, “Hold on for one second.”

He looked at the kids and said, “It’s alright. You’re safe. You’re loved. We can do this.” The kids softened. I softened. He looked at Mike and said, “Why don’t you come in for some coffee?”

Mike looked relieved and I stepped back when he stepped inside. Once he looked up at the full height of the expansive foyer, he snickered a little and then looked at me again. “Second time’s a charm, right Millie?” He nodded in Luca’s direction.

“Millie bought this house before we were married,” Luca said kindly, before adding, “now let’s get inside and find out what it’s like to ride a motorcycle across the country. I’m sure you have some stories the kids would love to hear.”

I watched them walk down the hall. Luca treated him like any other guest who would come to our home. Thanks to his confidence and warmth, we all eventually relaxed, and Mike began regaling us with tales from his travels. The kids laughed and asked questions and I could see that their little hearts needed this closure. Luca had known that we all needed it.

At one point, we were all sitting in the living room together, Luca and I cuddling on the sofa where I would occasionally grab his hand so he could feel the baby kick in my stomach. The kids were moving about the living room, Brielle showing off some of her dances and Beckett proudly showing him some of the games he had finished designing. Mike’s eyes were big and watery as he watched the children he hadn’t raised so proudly display who they had become while he was gone.

He didn’t run from it, though. He sat in the discomfort of his choice to have this moment with them. I had no idea how long it would last or if it would ever happen again, but for right now, it was just right.

I knew, sitting there, that I would never have become who I needed to be if things hadn’t happened just as they did. Luca wouldn’t be sitting here with me, in this house, with our baby girl on the way. I let go of the illusion that things could have been any different.

We were home.

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Elise Eliot is a highly-caffeinated wordsmith who loves writing funny, romantic stories that offer readers a mental vacation. She grew up watching classic romantic comedies over and over until she memorized all the lines, and they have inspired her to write her own. When she isn't plotting her next novel, she can be found chauffeuring tiny humans or stopping her dogs from mass destruction. Game On is her second novel. Follow her on social media to find out what's next!