



Tangled

TRUST

a secret pregnancy second chance nanny romance

LYDIA HALL

TANGLED TRUST

LYDIA HALL

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BLURB

To do list to escape my abusive ex & change my life:

(✓) Find a new job as a nanny

(✓) Find a new man

(x) Don't get pregnant

When I realized just how abusive my ex was, I left everything behind and started a new life far away from home. In the UK, I was a doctor... Now, I'm au pair to a grumpy billionaire's son.

I thought the hardest part of the job would be working with kids, but Carter Moore's son, Jagger, is adorable. The *real* problem is his handsome, recently divorced dad.

Our connection is electrifying and we both do our best to avoid it for Jagger's sake. Until one moment of tension blends with pure, irresistible lust, leaving me pregnant...

With my past knocking on my door, I realize Carter has secrets, too... His ex wife hates me, and wants to ruin us both for being together. And Carter has *no freaking idea* I have an abusive ex, too.

As our exes plot behind our backs, our connection only grows stronger. And the baby in my belly is growing, too... The question is, will my child have a happy family?

***Tangled Trust* is a full-length, standalone secret pregnancy, second chance nanny romance. One-click now if you want more single dad billionaires!**

ELLA PARKER

Sebastian is so handsome. When he looks at me with his intelligent, pale blue eyes, I instantly forget the world around me. No one has ever made me feel as special as I do when those eyes radiate with approval and admiration.

But taking Seb at face value is a mistake. I learned that the hard way. Even now, in this crowded room, I know that somewhere in the cosmos a switch is about to flip, and soon the very eyes that make me believe I can accomplish just about anything will cause me to cower inwardly with fear.

“Stop it, Seb. You’re hurting me,” I whimper as he twists my wrist.

“Why were you talking to that manwhore?” he hisses at me, careful to keep his voice low.

I feel as if everyone at the party is about to stop and stare, but, unfortunately for me, no one notices. As always, I’m all alone in my insulated pocket of hell.

“I’ve told you. Ryan and I are just colleagues. That’s all,” I say while maintaining a happy facade.

“We’re leaving,” he barks and yanks on my arm.

“Wait. I have to say goodbye to...” I attempt, but Sebastian has other plans as he pulls me along steadily like I’m a ragdoll.

“Ella!” I hear Anna calling to me from the other side of the room. She looks confused.

“Uhm, sorry Anna,” I wave my hand, “Seb has an emergency. I’ll call you in the morning.”

Lying has become second nature. I often astound myself at the speed at which I can conjure up an excuse when Seb gives me that look. My boyfriend smiles from ear to ear as he waves at Anna and the rest of the guests. His smile frightens me because I know what's coming. He digs his fingers into the inside of my upper arms as he leads me out to his car.

There's no point in trying to defend myself now. The die is cast. It will be better for me not to resist, so I don't even bother.

"You're such a slut," he vomits out his vile words at me as soon as we are alone in the cold night air.

He opens the passenger car door for me and half-shoves me in. I stumble onto the plush leather seat of his expensive, German-engineered vehicle and fumble for my seatbelt. That way, if he breaks unexpectedly, I won't hit my face on the dashboard again.

Sebastian starts the car and revs it into the red before we speed off into the darkness. The farm road is lit by a pale moon and I hold my breath as my boyfriend takes the corners as if he's on a rally track.

I count the streetlights as they whizz by once we're back on the main road. How many will pass by this time before my nightmare begins in earnest? Six? Eight? I try to switch off my mind while the monster next to me yells obscenities at me and gesticulates with his hands. It's nothing I haven't heard before. I'm a slut. He doesn't know why he puts up with me. I'm worthless. No one else could ever love me and he doesn't even know what he bothers. Blah, blah, blah.

In the midst of his rage-fuelled tantrum, Sebastian takes a swipe at me and the back of his left hand connects with my right cheek. He's wearing his class ring, which leaves its telltale mark as it grazes my skin.

I'm not sure how long this one-sided attack will last. If I'm lucky, he'll be tired before we get home. Thank God it's a long drive, so there's a glimmer of hope. I close my eyes and go to the place inside where I'm lying on a beach and the waves are lapping my toes.

* * *

“Hey, there. Where did you two lovebirds disappear so fast last night?”

I keep to the right of Anna as we do our patient rounds, so my right cheek is hidden from her gaze. As always, I’ve done a bang-up job of covering up the mark, but I’m not taking any unnecessary chances.

“Sorry, Anna. Drama, drama, drama,” I say while maintaining a light disposition. “One of Seb’s patients was threatening to do a dive off a tall building. You know the drill,” I lie through my teeth.

“Honestly, I don’t know how he does it. It must be so frustrating dealing with mentally unstable people day in and day out.”

“Yup. It’s a challenge.”

If only she knew the half of it.

“So...is it just me, or does Ryan have a huge crush on you?” Anna grins.

“Don’t be ridiculous!” I snap at her before I can stop myself.

Anna stops walking and looks quizzically at me.

“What’s with you? I was just joking.”

Damn it! I didn’t mean to do that. I’ve just had my fill of being interrogated about bloody Ryan.

“Shit. I’m sorry, Anna. I’m tired. I had a lousy night’s sleep, and I think I’m about to start my period.”

“Alright. I’ll let it go. Are you okay? You seem a little jumpy lately.”

I know I’ll eventually have to tell my best friend everything. I can’t believe I’ve hidden the truth from her so successfully for so long. It turns out that self-preservation is quite the motivator.

When Sebastian hit me the first time, I was sure it was a once-off. He's a very passionate man, and everyone knows that A-type personalities are highly strung. Besides, he was so sweet and vulnerable when he begged me for my forgiveness. He swore to me then that he'd never done that before to anyone, and he made a promise that it would never happen again. And, being the lovesick fool that I was back then, I believed him.

By the second time he punched me, I was hopelessly in love with him and, as such, probably a little too keen to believe his excuses and platitudes. Who knows how I fell so deeply into the rabbit hole? But here I am in the bowels of the earth, looking up at the light beaming from above through an opening as small as the head of a pin.

All it takes is the piercing sound of a bed pan hitting the cold, tiled hospital floor, and, suddenly, the world is too much for me. The panic I've been holding in for months and months rushes to the surface, and I'm on my knees.

"Ella! What's wrong? Ella!"

I can hear Anna's voice as she calls my name, but the darkness pushes past everything, and before I can stop myself, I black out on the cold floor.

* * *

"What happened?"

I'm in a hospital bed, and Anna is standing next to me. She's holding my hand.

"Ugh, my head."

"You scared the crap out of me, Ella! Are you okay?"

My friend touches my arm too hard where Sebastian's fingers dug in the night before, and the pain makes me jump.

"Ella, what's going on?"

I'm deadly tired. Tired of lying and pretending. Tired of hiding. But, most of all, I'm tired of being Sebastian's punching bag. If I don't tell Anna now, I fear I will fade away

until there's nothing left of the woman I worked so hard to become.

"Can we get out of here?" I ask. I don't want the nurses and the patient ogling me while I share my tale of woe with Anna.

"Sure. Come on. Slowly," she says as I get up and swing my feet onto the floor.

I have to do this now before I lose my nerve. The shame of it all is as heavy as if an elephant were sitting on my chest. I cannot remember the last time I took a deep breath. Shallow breathing seems to be my thing now. That, and willing time to pass quickly.

Anna and I walk out of the hospital, where she and I are attending physicians, toward a coffee shop around the corner. She orders a double espresso, and I order a laté. I hope the milk doesn't curdle in my washing machine-like stomach.

"Okay, Ella. Spill it. What's wrong? And don't give me this tired and getting your period crap. What's really going on with you?"

I open my mouth to speak, and I'm shocked at the volume of pain and anguish that flows out like thick, liquid tar. I watch Anna's eyes as she takes in the information I've been hiding from her for nearly twenty-three months now. What must she think of me? What a weakling I've become. I'm so ashamed. The words keep coming. It's like a flood, and I cannot stop it until it's all out.

"Say something, Anna."

"I..."

Is she disappointed in me? Is she going to tell me off? Is she going to call the police?

"Why? Why haven't you said anything to me? You should have told me the first time he laid a finger on you."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"Oh, my dear friend. Come here," she says, throwing her arms around me.

Her embrace is tacit permission for my body to relax, and with it come rivers of tears.

“You have to get away from him, Ella. He’s a bastard! I’ll kill him.”

“No! Please, Sebastian can’t know that I told you, Anna. Please.”

“I can’t just do nothing!” she insists.

“I’m doing something. I’m leaving him.”

“Good! Thank God you’ve come to your senses. When?”

“I’m working on something.”

“Do you want to stay with me? You know you’re always welcome. We can get a place together if you like.”

“No. I have to do this my way.”

I tell Anna about my plan to leave London. She’s not happy about it.

“Why should you leave? You have a career. You’re a doctor, for goodness sake. You’ve worked so hard to attain your goal, Ella. You shouldn’t have to give that up.”

“You know Sebastian is well connected. He’s never going to let me walk away. His family is powerful. I’ve given it months of thought, Anna. Leaving London is my best chance. It’s my only chance. “

“But where will you go?”

“The States.”

“Bloody hell, Ella. That’s a big move. It’s a bit extreme, isn’t it? “

“I don’t think so. I need a clean break. I’m raw, Anna, and I need time to heal.”

“Oh, Ella,” Anna sighs, and squeezes my hand. “I’ll miss you terribly.”

We talk for a while before we return to our duties at the hospital. I feel better. Someone else knows. It’s the first step, I

reckon. I can do this. The only person left to tell is my aunt, Sue. Nothing is ever real until I tell her.

It's 6 p.m. when I dial her number from my cell phone.

"Ella, my darling. Your ears must be burning. I was just talking about you to Peter."

"Hi, there. Oh? Good things, I hope."

"Of course. What else?" she laughs.

"Do you have dinner plans?" I ask. "I thought we'd have a good old English stew and a bottle of something."

"That sounds lovely. Is everything alright?"

"Could be better."

"Of course, Ella. I'll be here. I'll have the G&T on ice."

"Excellent. See you soon," I say, ending the call.

This is going to be hard. Sue has been my guardian angel since my parents died so unexpectedly. She's the only family I have. How am I going to tell her that the last two years of my life have been a lie?

My phone rings. It's Sebastian. I don't have the strength to deal with his syrupy-sweet, bullshit excuses and apologies right now, so I let it go to voicemail. I'm sure the bastard will make me pay later tonight, but I don't care anymore.

For now, I will bide my time and make my plans. It will be over soon. Freedom is in sight.

I stop and buy my aunt a bouquet of lilies on the way to her house. Lilies are her favorite flowers. She and Mom had that in common. The thought of not being close to Sue for the foreseeable future is causing me great distress.

She's been my fortress for the longest time. I don't even know how I'm going to tell her about Sebastian's abuse. I hope she doesn't try to do something about it because Sue is the kind of woman who doesn't suffer fools or take crap from anyone.

She's particularly protective when it comes to me. I buy an extra bottle of tonic. This is going to be a long evening, and I

think I'm going to need a G&T or three to get me through it.

You've got this, Ella. You're almost there. Keep your eye on the prize.

Okay, Seb. I'm about to leave you. You'd better pray I can convince Aunt Sue not to cut your nuts off and feed them to her pet potbelly pig, Fergus!

ELLA

“I ’m going to miss you,” Sebastian coos as he gives me a glorious bouquet of blood-red roses.

I’m so sick of this. Beatings and insults meant to be forgotten because, hey, he got me flowers. I suppress the urge to slap him with the thorny stems.

“I’m going to miss you, too,” I lie, swallowing the bile that rises as he touches my cheek with his perfectly manicured fingers.

“How long is the conference?”

“A week. I’ll be back by Friday. But, we’ll talk over the phone every night,” I smile sweetly.

I know what he’s dying to ask me. I’m sure the controlling bastard wants a list of the men going along to the conference. He must be gagging to know. But he’s trying to worm his way back into my good graces, so he doesn’t ask. I imagine it’s taking a herculean effort on his part not to.

“Of course, we will. I have to leave now, or I’ll be late for my first appointment. Have a safe trip, my love,” he says, kissing me. “Don’t forget to put the flowers in water.”

Even his kisses have become more possessive. As if I don’t have a say in the matter. ‘You’re mine,’ his tongue is saying as it invades my mouth.

“Okay. Have a good day. See you in a few days.”

I watch Sebastian leave our apartment, and I stand at the window until I see his car disappearing down the street. Thank

God! My heart rate is sky-high as I let out a desperate breath. It's time to move. It's as if my body has been waiting to exhale for months. Today's the day I finally turn my back on this misery—this poor excuse for a life I've been tolerating for no good reason.

Today, I declare myself free. Free from tyranny. Free from Dr. Sebastian Drake, doctor of psychiatry, blessed with a beautiful smile, and equipped with a master's degree in manipulation.

My bags are all packed and ready, but I wait half an hour so that I'm sure the man I've grown to loathe is at his office before I leave for the airport. There is no conference. I'm getting the hell out of England, and I'm not coming back.

Anna wanted to see me off, but I insisted that we say goodbye last night at the hospital. It's going to be difficult enough for me without seeing her in tears on the other side of the glass partition.

I take an Uber to the airport. Heathrow is buzzing. It's a crappy day, with toe-numbing temperatures and lots of rain. The good old English weather strikes again. It will be a long time before I freeze my ass off again like this. I hope. Sunny California, here I come.

"Good morning, Miss Jones," the woman at the counter greets me with a friendly smile. "You must be looking forward to California's glorious weather," she comments after she's looked at my ticket.

"Very much," I smile back.

A few months ago, I arranged with someone to help me get an alternative passport. It took some doing, but I managed just in the nick of time. There's no point in traveling under my own name. Sebastian is no fool. He'll check the airlines when I don't come back, and I don't intend on making it easy for him to find me. So, for the next few days, I'm Elizabeth Jones, traveling to the United States of America, instead of a conference in Scotland.

I check in my luggage and move to the coffee shop for some tea while I wait for my flight to board. My stomach is

churning. I haven't eaten since dinner, and at best, I was merely pushing the food from one side of the plate to the other. Even so, I'm not hungry. I keep looking around to see if Sebastian is watching me. It's ridiculous, I know, but I can't help it.

I replay Aunt Sue's words in my head as I sip on my hot, sweet tea. She was in a state when I shared my story with her.

"What? Why haven't you said anything before?" she demanded with tears in her kind eyes.

"Truthfully? I was ashamed. How can I, a doctor and successful professional, fall for the manipulations of a psychopath? There it is. My own bloody ego made me vulnerable, Aunt Sue."

"Oh, my sweet girl. You're not to blame."

Sue calls me her sweet girl, even though I'm nearly thirty. I love that she does that. She's my rock.

"America! Are you sure, Ella?"

"Yes. I need a clean break. A new start. I'll send for you once I'm settled, Aunt Sue."

"Oh, my love. I'm so sorry."

"So am I."

I hear the crackle of the overhead speakers. My flight is boarding. Still no Sebastian. Thank God. I pay for the tea and make my way to the boarding gate.

This is it, Ella. You're almost there. Freedom is so close.

* * *

I check the time on my phone. I'm eight hours into an eleven-hour flight. I feel like I have to pinch myself to make sure that this is real. I know the jetlag is going to have its way with me later, but for now, I'm excited.

Thank God for Google Maps. I wonder how the folks who came before us made their way around new towns and

countries without getting hopelessly lost. I can't imagine myself hunched over the bonnet of a car, thumbing over the known routes on a giant map. I'm most certainly one of those directionally challenged people who couldn't find their own asses with a flashlight. Give me a scalpel and an X-ray, and I'll diagnose and cut the crap out of any patient, but ask me to find a destination without Google, and I'm screwed.

You'd think that living in London for so long would have helped me garner some sense of direction, but the underground is so easy that finding my way around became a reflex. I hope I don't get lost in LA.

I booked myself into a pretty little guesthouse near the beach before I left home. My plans are all sorted. I'm going to apply with an agency I researched that places Au Pairs with American families in LA. I sent them my credentials before I left London, so all that is left for me to do is conduct a face-to-face interview, and I'm set.

I have enough money in savings to last me at least six months, so no stress there. I opened a new account and transferred all my money about two months ago.

It's 1 p.m. in LA when we land. It's still Monday, so I feel as if I've traveled back in time. It's an odd feeling. My legs are stiff and my body is tired, but my mind is wired. It may have something to do with the four coffees I did have and the sleep I did not get.

The skies are a perfect blue. I can tell before I disembark the plane that it's a warm day. It's summer here in California. Anna and I did a fair amount of traveling before we enrolled in medical school. I remember the island climate of the Caribbean fondly. I've always wanted to live somewhere warm.

I'm sure I can smell the ocean when I walk across the runway to the bus that takes us to the main airport building. I know Santa Monica Bay is just around the corner. Thanks again, Google.

"Welcome to LAX, Miss Jones. Are you here for business or pleasure?" an officer asks me in a thick American accent.

“A little of both?” I smile.

He looks at my papers for a while and then returns them to me.

“Enjoy your stay.”

“Thank you.”

This is real! I’m here. I’m free. I can hardly believe it.

I promised to call Sue and Anna as soon as I land, so I head for baggage collection and dial Anna’s number while I walk. It rings three times before she picks up.

“Are you safe?” she asks without saying hello.

“Yes. I’m here.”

It’s almost 11 p.m. in London, so she’s probably snuggled up in bed.

“Oh, my giddy aunt, Ella. I’ve been so nervous all day. I even imagined Seb finding you and dragging you back home.

“Yeah, sorry. I would have called sooner, but it took me a while to get through customs.”

“I’m so happy you’re alright. What’s the weather like?”

“Brilliantly warm and gloriously sunny.”

“Ugh, you cow. I hate you.”

“No more sleet and rain for me, thank you very much.”

“Oh, please. You’re going to miss London.”

“I know. I’m going to miss you, Anna.”

“Don’t set me off again. I’ve been on the brink of hysterical tears the whole flipping day. The nurses kept asking me if I was okay. It’s not every day your best friend moves halfway around the world to get away from you, you know.”

“Oh, Anna. I’m trying not to think about that right now. At least you still have all your peeps with you. I’m a lone English lass in cowboy land.”

“You’re in LA, you drama queen. It’s hardly the Wild West,” Anna chuckles.

“Uh-huh. Palm trees all the way.”

“Are you leaving for your temporary home now?”

“Yup. As soon as I get my luggage. I’ll call you later. Get some sleep. I love you.”

“Me too. Be careful, Ella.”

“Of course.”

Next, I call Sue. She’s weepy but wishes me well. We don’t talk long, as it’s late at night over there and I’m about to find a taxi to take me to the guest house.

“I’ll call you tomorrow,” I promise.

“Send me photos of your new place.”

“I will. Love you. Sleep tight.”

“I love you too, sweet girl.”

* * *

It’s been a month since I arrived in LA, and I love everything about it. I’m on my way to meet a very wealthy client for an interview for the position of Au Pair for his young son. Mrs. Digby at the agency called and said she thought I’d be a good fit for the family.

I don’t know why, but I’m a little nervous. Perhaps it’s because it’s been a while since I interviewed for a job. It’s not that I’m unsure that I’ll be a good Au Pair because I love kids and they seem to like me. I guess it’s the whole new life and all that has me at a disadvantage.

Come now. Pull yourself together. Queen and country, Elizabeth...do it for the queen and good ole England.

I chuckle to myself. It seems that the voice in my head has a sense of humor all of its own.

I check the map on my phone one more time before I pull into the driveway. Bloody hell. This house is huge. New money, I guess. There are never any doubts about England and those

with old money. Castles, country estates, etc. New money owns more than half of London. California has a distinct air about it. It's new money all the way.

I steel my nerves before I get out of the compact car I've hired for now. The house is recessed on a large property, and I can hear the waves breaking onto a beach at the rear of it. I switch off the engine and percolate in the silence that follows. I wonder about the family that used to be a unit behind the grand doors that lead into the palatial home. How did it all go wrong? I learned at a young age that money isn't the cure-all that those who don't have it think it is. Even the super-rich aren't immune to heartbreak.

The front door opens, and out rushes a boy with curly hair. He's followed closely by a Golden Retriever puppy. The two appear to be thick as thieves as they rush about. That must be Jagger. He's very cute. His cheeks are plump and pink, and he has a smile that must make his parents' hearts melt. He stops abruptly when he spots me walking toward him.

"Hello," I smile and wave at him from a distance.

"Hi."

The puppy barks a greeting before the pair rush off and disappear around the side of the house.

"You must be Ella," I hear a man say, so I turn around toward the front door.

I'm a little taken aback. Dark, wavy hair, perfectly quaffed stubble, dark, almost black, brown eyes, and a larger version of the smile I just saw on the little boy's face. Mr. Moore is exceptionally handsome. The kind of handsome that makes my knees tingle.

"Yes. Hello," I smile and walk toward him.

"Welcome, Ella. I'm Carter Moore."

Mrs. Digby gave me the rundown on the billionaire Real Estate Mogul, but she omitted to tell me how gorgeous he is. I feel as if I've been ambushed.

"It's a pleasure meeting you, Mr. Moore."

For God's sake, don't curtsy, you fool!

The voice snaps me out of my funk.

"Please," he says as he smiles and shakes my hand, "call me Carter."

Carter smells heavenly. His hand is warm and strong, and I could have sworn I felt a slight quiver in the old sweet spot as he held my hand for all but three seconds.

"Was that little Jagger?" I ask, employing a new topic to distract me from the fireworks going off in my body.

"That's him. He isn't usually in such a mad rush, but his new puppy Dash has him all crazy."

"Ah, man's best friend," I smile.

"Please, come inside."

I follow the handsome man into the house and marvel at the decor in the foyer. The house is magnificent. High ceilings, plenty of California sunlight streaming through the large windows, and large openings in the walls that hide fold-away doors.

"Your home is lovely," I say, grasping for content.

"Thank you."

Carter leads me through the house to a gazebo area outside adjacent to a large swimming pool, filled with pool toys any child would go nuts for.

"Can I offer you a refreshment, Ella?"

"No, thank you," I say as I make myself comfortable in a leather-upholstered outdoor chair.

"Where in England are you from?"

His question throws me off momentarily. Do I tell the truth? Do I lie? Is he the sort of person who will do a thorough background check on me, or does he trust Mrs. Digby's integrity?

I have to be careful now as to how I proceed.

CARTER MOORE

TWO WEEKS EARLIER

“I don’t understand how this can be, Greg. Sales are at an all-time high, yet the branch is struggling. Something else is going on. I’m heading out there tomorrow.”

Is it my imagination, or is Greg acting squirrely? My instincts tell me that he has his fingers in the till, but I can’t afford to make that kind of accusation without concrete proof. But I didn’t get to where I am by allowing people to pull the wool over my eyes either, so I have to keep digging.

“Mr. Moore,” Sandy says as she enters my office. “Here are your flight confirmation details. I’ve arranged accommodation for you at your usual hotel.”

“Thank you, Sandy. Would you ask Thomas to pop by before he leaves?”

“Of course. Have a pleasant flight. And, congratulations, again, on the award.”

“Thanks, Sandy. We’re a great team, aren’t we?”

“The best.”

I’m annoyed. This was supposed to be my weekend with Jagger. How do I explain to my six-year-old that his and my fishing weekend has to take a back seat because some greedy asshole is stealing from me?

My plan was to fly out, collect the award for Realtor of the Year, and be back by Friday so that Jagger and I could have

some much-needed fun time together. Now that idea's all shot to hell.

I'd better call Amanda. I hope she's not going to give me lip about changing plans. I'm not in the mood. My ex-wife has a short fuse, and these days, it doesn't take much to set her off. Granted, she and I have been mostly civil with one another since the divorce, if only for Jagger's sake, but it's a tenuous stalemate.

"Hello, Carter."

Oof, did the temperature in the room just plummet?

"Hi, Amanda. I need a favor, please."

"I'm listening."

"Something's come up, so I'll be out of town this weekend. Would you be okay to take Jagger?"

"Damn it, Carter."

"I know. I'm sorry, Amanda. This is a rare occasion."

"Fine."

"Thank you. Is he around? Can I talk to him?"

Amanda puts her hand over the receiver and calls our son's name. It isn't long before his sweet little voice beams through.

"Hi, Daddy."

"Hey. How's my big guy?"

"Where are you, Daddy? When are you fetching me?"

My heart aches as I explain to Jagger that I won't see him until next week. I hate this. I keep the conversation short. No sense in hanging around the lion's enclosure for too long.

* * *

"How's Amanda?"

I'm having drinks with Charlie. He and I have been friends since college. He's a good guy—one of the few who haven't

sought me out because of my billionaire status. Friends like Charlie are a rarity in my world. I'm grateful for him.

"As well as can be expected, I suppose. You know Amanda. She's not the easiest woman."

"I still don't get why she asked for the divorce. I thought she was so in love with you."

"Yeah. It's a mystery. I think she's just too used to having everything her way. Her parents didn't do her any favors by spoiling her rotten."

"I'm sorry things didn't work out for you guys, Carter. How's Jagger taking it?"

"He's only five. I suppose he'll get used to his new life. I'm not going to lie. It's hard. He and I were supposed to go fishing this weekend. Instead, I have to deal with a thieving employee. I tell you, Charlie, sometimes I wonder if this job is worth my sanity."

"Come on. That's the frustration talking. You're a brilliant entrepreneur, pal. You're good at what you do. Don't allow one asshole to spoil your success."

"You're right. Thanks, Charlie. I miss you. Why did you move across the country again?"

"Because there's no saying no when your wife wants to be close to her family," he chuckles.

"How is Claire?"

"Perfect. I still can't believe she said yes. Imagine choosing someone like me to marry. If I didn't know better, I'd say she was nuts."

"If you're fishing for compliments, you're shit out of luck," I laugh.

"That's it. You're paying for dinner."

"Gladly."

New York City is noisy, crowded, and completely different from California. But you can't argue with the thrill you feel when you're negotiating your way through its pulsating

streets. Here, it's all business. There's no time for LA's green juice breaks and sun-soaked lunches here. Not a palm tree in sight. Just yellow cabs and steam rising from the scattered manholes in the asphalt.

I'm on my way to the new office I opened about six months ago. Real estate in NYC is always at a premium. That's how I know that dear old Greg is fudging numbers at my expense. I should have listened to the voice inside me when I met him. He was too perfect. Too keen. Slimy bastard.

I meet my forensic auditor, James, outside the upmarket building where the office is located. There's no point in bringing a knife to a gunfight, I always say.

"Good morning, Mr. Moore."

"Hello, James. Thank you for meeting me. Are you ready?"

"Indeed. Let's take this guy apart."

James enjoys the thrill of the chase. He is, after all, one of the best in his field. Some people are born with a killer instinct.

"I couldn't have said it better myself."

Greg looks nervous. His shirt under his armpits is stained with sweat.

"Good morning, Carter," he smiles.

That's Mr. Moore to you, you bastard.

"Greg," I nod. "This is my accountant, James. He's going to take a look at the books. See where he can assist you in cash flow."

"I see."

James walks straight past Greg and into his office, where he makes himself comfortable at the computer. Greg looks like a deer caught in the headlights, but he doesn't say a word. Before the day is out, I plan on laying charges against him. I can't believe he'd be so stupid.

The other agents in the office go about their tasks. Nevertheless, they look nervous. I would be too if my manager was stealing from the company. I plan to reassure them of their

positions once I've dealt with Mr. Long Fingers. All I want to do is get this done so I can go home and be with Jagger.

This man is going to be sorry he took me for a fool.

It's been a long day. I'm back at the hotel. The concierge packed my bags, and I'm having one final drink with Charlie before I fly home.

"So, the weasel was pocketing a third of the commissions. He must have some sort of death wish," Charlie says before he downs his whiskey.

"Can you believe the gall?"

"He's an idiot. I hope it was worth it."

"Worst of all is that I lost time with Jagger. And I had to ask Amanda for a favor."

"Sounds to me like you'd benefit from hiring an Au Pair for the little tike."

"That's not a bad idea, actually."

"Claire and I made use of an excellent agency when we were in LA. I'll forward the details to you if you like."

"Thank you, Charlie. Amanda and I are pretty busy with work. Well, I'm busy. Amanda's charity work isn't that strenuous, I don't think. But, she does keep busy. An Au Pair would be a Godsend."

"There you go. Another problem solved."

"A productive trip all around, hey."

"Cheers! To better days, old pal."

"To merciless forensic accountants," I grin.

* * *

"Hello. This is Mr. Moore. I'd like to arrange a meeting. I'm in need of an Au Pair for my son," I tell Mrs. Digby over the phone.

“Of course, Mr. Moore. I’ll send someone over with our portfolio.”

We chat for a while, discussing specifics. I feel better once the call is made.

I’m back in LA. Jagger is coming home later, so I instruct my chef to prepare his favorite dinner. Come hell or high water, I plan on spending the evening with my son. Jagger’s been bugging me for weeks about getting a puppy. He should have one. The only reason I haven’t relented is that Amanda has allergies. But, now that she no longer lives with us, I don’t see why I shouldn’t make a young boy’s wishes come true.

I’m in my office when I hear Jagger’s footsteps as he runs down the passage.

“Whoa, slow down, little man,” I laugh when he jumps into my arms. “Goodness. Have you been eating elephants on toast again? You’re heavy,” I say, burying my nose in his halo of curls.

“That’s silly, Daddy,” he giggles. “Elephants don’t fit on toast.”

“Hey, I’ve got a surprise for you.”

“Oohh. What is it, Daddy?”

“Let’s go for a drive.”

“Okay.”

Jagger skips next to me as we head to the car. I think he should choose his own puppy. He’ll know when he sees the right one. I remember fondly when my dad took me to the pound. I just knew that Skipper and I were meant to be as soon as he pressed his cold, wet nose against my leg.

“Where are we going?”

“I can’t tell you that. It’s a surprise.”

“I hate surprises,” he says with a fed-up look.

“Well, you’re going to love this one. You’re just impatient,” I chuckle.

Kids. What I would give to be this free and innocent again.

CARTER

The Au Pair is stunning. It never occurred to me that she would be. For some odd reason, I assumed she'd be a Nanny McPhee type when Mrs. Digby told me she was from England. What can I say other than, I blame the film industry for my blunder?

So, here I am, sitting next to the pool with a woman who looks like a goddess. I have a quick talk with myself to remind me why she's here. This is all about Jagger, and I would be wise to remember it. It's not Ella's fault that she's ticking all the boxes on my list of very doable outside appearances.

I decide to focus on her personality. If she's going to spend time with and take care of Jagger, she'd better be perfect. Although what I'm seeing here is as close to perfect as I could ever imagine.

Cut it out, Carter. Think with the other head.

"I was born in Oxfordshire," she tells me in answer to my question, "but I moved to London when I was in high school."

"I enjoy London. Perhaps not the weather so much, but there's plenty to see in the exciting city."

Honestly, Carter. You sound like a travel agent. Get to the point.

"Yes, England could do with a little less rain and a lot more sunshine, I suppose," she smiles.

"LA must be a pleasant change for you. Weather-wise, I mean."

“It’s wonderful. It’s no wonder the streets are filled with walkers and runners. It’s really easy to be outdoorsy here.”

“How long have you been in our sunny paradise?” I ask.

“Just over a month.”

“It’s quite a change from London. What prompted the move? If you don’t mind me asking,” I add quickly so as not to make it sound like an interrogation.

“I’ve always wanted to live and work in a better climate, and California ticks all the boxes.”

Jagger and Dash rush into view. I can see from the fresh mud on their messy little forms that they’ve been in the flower beds. Poor Mateo is going to be pissed. The patient gardener just replanted the flowers that the tiny terrors destroyed last week, and I don’t have to take a walk around the side of the house to know that’s exactly where they’ve been.

Jagger’s the first one to dive bomb into the pool. Dash, determined to live up to his name, is quick on his master’s heels. Soon, the water around them is a soup of mud, leaves, and broken petals.

“I hope you have a high tolerance for dirt,” I chuckle as I watch the messy trail my son and his new dog have created.

“I’m an expert in dirt management,” Ella grins.

I like the way she looks at Jagger. Her eyes are kind. I can usually spot a fake—not always, but most of the time. Ella seems to be genuine in her affinity for kids.

“I’m sure Mrs. Digby’s given you all the details, but I’ll run them by you again if you don’t mind.”

“Of course.”

“Jagger’s mother and I have been divorced for roughly six months now. He spends most of his time with me, as Amanda travels a lot.”

“Yes, Mrs. Digby said as much.”

“Good. I have a pretty predictable schedule, barring a few fires here and there, but even so, I need help with Jagger. He’s a

very busy boy.”

“Noted,” she smiles.

“Mrs. Digby provided me with your general details. I don’t recall any allergies or food preferences. Are there any personal details you’d like to discuss with me?” I ask, moving the conversation back onto safe ground.

“No. I’m healthy as a horse and not particularly fussy when it comes to food.”

“I’m glad to see that you don’t smoke.”

“Nasty habit.”

“Indeed.”

“Does Jagger have any specific needs I should know about?”

“Not that I can think of. He’s headstrong but not bratty. Busy, but adorably so, and completely besotted with Dash, so that’s new. He goes to school until 2 p.m., so afternoons are pretty crazy around here. His mother enrolled him in the music academy at his preschool, so he attends twice a week.”

I watch Ella as I list the activities. Her intelligent eyes take it all in while she looks across to the pool often. Good. She’s paying attention to Jagger. At this stage, the Au Pair candidate is doing brilliantly. This is when I throw a curveball.

“Jagger’s life has been upended. I would prefer to introduce him to someone who’ll be around for a while. Do you have any plans that may take your life in a different direction from Au Pairing, Ella? I apologize if I’m blunt, but divorce is hard on kids.”

“I assure you, Carter. My focus is now on Jagger and his well-being. I have no plans other than this.”

“Excellent.”

I check my watch. Jagger must be hungry by now. He nibbled on a banana at breakfast before he disappeared with Dash.

“Would you like to join us for lunch, Ella? The true test is whether you can stomach the table manners of a six-year-old boy and his canine companion.”

Ella laughs out loud. She's even more beautiful when she does that.

"Well, if it's a test, then I accept your gracious invitation," she smiles. "I'll scoop the duo out of the pool, shall I?"

"That would be some feat."

"Nothing to it," she grins and gets up from the table.

* * *

"Hello, Mrs. Digby. Carter Moore."

"So nice to hear from you, Mr. Moore. How did your meeting go with Ella?"

"Good, thank you. I think she's going to fit in well with our family. Is she available to start immediately?"

"She is. I will contact her with the good news. I'm very pleased that we were able to place her with you successfully, Mr. Moore."

That was the easy bit done. Now I have to tell Amanda that I've hired an Au Pair for our son. I know it's only a matter of time before the two women meet, and I can already see my ex-wife's face. Amanda is most certainly the jealous type. If I so much as looked in a beautiful woman's direction while we were married, she'd hurl a snide comment at me.

But now that we're divorced, she can say what she likes. I'm done tiptoeing around her fragile ego.

I call her as soon as I end my conversation with the agency.

"I'm about to board a plane, Carter. Is Jagger okay?"

"Yeah, he's fine, Amanda. Call me when you land, please. I'd like to talk to you about something."

"Okay."

Knowing my ex, she's probably on her way to a spa in Zurich. I don't know why she is so obsessed with her health. There's

nothing wrong with her that a decent therapist and a dose of reality can't fix.

Amanda and I met after I'd made my first billion. I suppose I was in the right place at the right time. Being in real estate gave me a keen insight into the property market, and investing in large developments catapulted me from a fairly wealthy salesman and principal into the world of high earnings.

Amanda's parents aren't short on cash. She and I met when she was looking for a luxury home in LA. I'll say one thing about my ex. When she sees something, or someone, she wants, there's very little that will get in her way. She pursued me with dogged determination, and I have to admit, I was flattered at first. There's a side to her that is so endearing, and I seemed to bring it out more successfully than most.

We dated for a year before we got married. Jagger was born soon after, and then we were three.

I often wonder where it all went wrong. Pregnancy and motherhood change some women. It certainly changed my wife. She became sullen and altogether tragic. I tried my level best to compensate and help where I could, but it did little to remedy the situation. I can't say I was completely shocked when she started divorce proceedings. I was somewhat relieved, to be completely honest.

My only concern was our son. Jagger bore no fault in the matter, yet his family was split apart. He was then, and will always be, my primary concern.

It's Tuesday afternoon, late, and I'm about to leave to meet Ella at the house. She's moving in today, so it will be her first evening with us.

Jagger is very excited. He sees her as his new playmate. As if Dash wasn't extravagant enough in his eyes, he now has his very own 'person' as he called her while we watched Ella drive away after lunch the Sunday before.

Amanda's nose is out of joint, as I had neither consulted nor included her in the process of hiring an Au Pair for our darling

son. A fair point, I concede, while she was cutting me a sizable new one during the return phone call the day before.

Before I leave, I call the NYC branch and chat with the new manager, Cara, who, by all appearances, is making small work of increasing sales and profit. Young Greg is currently enjoying the hospitality of the state. He was arrested as soon as I obtained the evidence of his thievery and handed it over to the police.

I love LA in the summertime. I drive home with my car windows down so I can take in as much fresh ocean air as possible. My house in Paradise Cove Bluffs, Malibu, is one of the sweeter fruits of my success. The property enjoys private beach frontage, and Jagger and I spend most of our time there on the white sand when the weather is good.

I wonder what it's going to be like to have such a beautiful woman living in my house. Sure, I have a full complement of domestic staff, housekeepers, chefs, and gardeners—it comes with the lifestyle. But none of them are quite as stunning as Ella. The English accent is irresistible. I love the way her mouth moves when she says certain words.

What the hell are you doing, Carter? Are you trying to sabotage this professional relationship?

I know. I have to snap out of whatever this is. Perhaps it's time I started dating again. It isn't good for men to be alone. I miss having someone to share my life with, and to laugh at my damn ass jokes. Only a partner can give you that sort of interaction. People in my employ will do as I say, however crazy my requests are. It's all bullshit. Being fabulously wealthy can be a lonely place.

What? Now you're feeling sorry for yourself? Dude! Get laid.

I hear Jagger and Dash playing out back when I pull up in the driveway.

"Daddy!" he shouts and runs to me with the kind of enthusiasm that only a child can manage.

"Hey, my boy. Did you have a good day?"

“Yeah! Billy fell off the swing at school and broke his arm. He says he wants a green cast. Neat, huh!”

“Wow. That must have been sore,” I smile, amused by my son’s casual take on a broken limb.

“Uh-huh. He cried like a baby. Suzie tried to kiss his arm better, but the teacher said she shouldn’t touch it.”

“Sounds like you had quite a day.”

“Yup. Can we go to the beach, Daddy? I wanted to take Dash, but Ella said I have to wait for you.”

“Ella’s right. I don’t want you in the ocean without me, my boy.”

“Come on, Dad! I can swim.”

“Yes, I know. You swim like a fish, but even so.”

“Ugh! Fine. Come on, Dash.”

I watch as Jagger rubs Dash behind his ear and then runs off.

“I’ll see you in a bit!” I call after the two hooligans.

I’d better get out of my suit. I wonder if Ella is settled in her room. I think I’ll check on her too.

ELLA

My room at Carter's is bigger than my first apartment. There are certainly serious perks to working for a billionaire. I had to restrain myself when the housekeeper showed me to my new accommodations. I was tempted to ask her which small family I was going to share my plush new home with. I know they say they do everything bigger in Texas, but LA is no poor relative.

I jump when there's a knock at the door.

"Come in."

"Hi, Ella. I see you're all settled in. Is the room okay?"

Damn it. Why is he so bloody gorgeous?

"Hello, Carter. Yes, thank you. The room is lovely."

"This used to be Jagger's nursery before we moved him into the 'big boy room' next door," he smiles.

"Well, it's very nice."

Nice? Really?

"Jagger and I are going down to the beach for a swim. Would you like to join us?"

"Uh, sure."

"Good. I know you start tomorrow, officially, but will you get him ready for me, please?"

"Of course."

"Great. See you downstairs in a few minutes."

I wish my spine would stop tingling every time my boss smiles at me. What am I? Thirteen? I really need to focus.

* * *

The beach is magical this time of day. I cannot think of a better place for a child to grow up. The air is clean, the weather is superb...it's no wonder little Jagger has such a healthy glow about him. I'm used to seeing children with translucent, pale skin. Light blue, I believe.

I must say, he is the sweetest little boy. His enthusiasm for life is quite contagious. Speaking of enthusiasm. Everything about my life has changed for the better. I feel like a new person. It's crazy what a change of scenery and circumstances does for the soul.

I haven't thought of Sebastian for at least a full day now. I was at the store a few days ago, and I suddenly felt panicky when I smelled his cologne. It was as if someone slapped me across the face. I was cemented to the spot for a minute, staring out at the free-range eggs in the large wicker basket as if they were going to somehow protect me from danger. Clearly, I'm suffering from PTSD. I'm a doctor, so I recognize the signs. I'm hoping the Malibu sun will burn away the awful memories of London.

"Look, Ella. I can do a cartwheel!"

Jagger interrupts my thoughts by kicking up a whole bunch of sand, baptizing me from head to toe. I laugh at his attempts to do a full cartwheel while Dash is digging his way to Middle Earth.

"They're a handful, aren't they?" Carter chuckles as he takes off his shirt.

H...O...L...Y...

It's hard to sneak a peek at his chiseled chest without him noticing, but I give it a go anyway. His olive skin is without blemishes, and I swear I can feel the heat radiating off it. I wish I could run my fingers over the ridges of his six-pack. I

can't help wondering what it would be like if he and I had met under different circumstances. Would he see me as more than an Au Pair with a London accent?

"Jagger's a treat," I manage.

"Do you swim?"

An odd question.

"Yes."

"Sorry. I forgot to ask you that earlier."

"Do you two come down here often?"

"Jagger and I practically live down here in the summer. The private beach access is one of the reasons I bought this place. I love the ocean."

"Who can blame you? It's a damn sight warmer than the oceans I'm used to," I smile. "I spent a summer learning how to surf on the coast in Eastbourne when I was a teenager. I'd love to try that here."

"Oh, there are a few surfboards in the bungalow. You're welcome to use them whenever you like."

"Thanks. That will be fun. Do you surf?"

"I do. I pretty much do anything that has anything to do with watersports. Jagger and I are spending some time on our yacht before summer is over. You'll see what I mean then."

Hmm. A yacht. Nice.

"Is it moored here in LA?"

"No. She's in the Bahamas."

Of course.

"Daddy. Can we swim now?" Jagger calls from the shallows.

"Coming, my boy! Excuse me. You're welcome to join us if you like."

"I think I'll stay here and keep an eye on Dash."

Carter gives me one of his sensational smiles, then runs towards Jagger, scoops him up, and rushes into the waves.

Lucky little boy. I wouldn't mind a dose of those guns around my waist.

I watch as the father-son duo play in the water.

“Aren't they lovely, Dash?”

The dog cocks his head to the side before he abandons me and rushes off to join his master in the ocean. What a stunning way to usher in a perfect summer evening.

I take a few selfies with the ocean in the background. I'll send them to Aunt Sue and Anna later.

* * *

Sebastian

I'm astounded by Ella's cunning. How the hell did she manage to plan her escape right under my nose? It's been a month, and still no word. I must be the laughing stock of her friends. I'm sure Anna had something to do with it. Bitch.

I've given up on calling Ella's phone. The number must be disconnected.

My phone rings. Oh, great. My mother.

“Hello, Mother.”

“Sebastian, darling. You haven't been over for dinner in a while. Is something the matter?”

“No. I've been busy.”

“We're all busy, Sebastian. This weekend?”

I was hoping to avoid the family for a while longer until I figure out where the hell my girlfriend has run off to. What will I tell them when they ask why she isn't with me? I know they are convinced that there will be wedding bells in our future. ‘Ella's the one’, I hear my mother's words. Well, guess what, Mother, she's a sneaky bitch. One who will have her comeuppance sooner than she thinks.

“Fine. I’ll see you on Saturday. I have to run now, I have a patient waiting. Sorry.”

“See you Saturday.”

I do not have a patient waiting. A little white lie now and again comes in handy. Wonderful. Dinner with the family. I can hardly wait to listen to my mother banging on about how wonderful Giles’s new baby is, or how fantastic Porsche’s riding lessons are coming along. Show jumping. Yee-bloody-ha! Oh, and the fun of watching my aging father drooling into his soup is super fun.

What about me? Am I honestly that repulsive because I’m single? Is everything with the gentry about procreating? Ella would have been the perfect mate with whom to do all these dreary things. Mother loves Ella. Or, perhaps the idea of Ella, if I’m honest. A doctor. Huzzah! Giles has his professional ballerina, and Sebastian has his doctor.

Except my prize has run off, and I have no idea where she’s gone. Women! You can’t please them. What a life I afforded Ella. She wanted for nothing. How dare she? The ungrateful little whore.

I look at my watch. I have two hours before my next patient. Mrs. Hollard was a no-show again, the senile old bat. Perhaps I’ll have some luck if I go see Ella’s aunt, Sue. She and I have always gotten along well. I’m sure I can talk her into telling me where her foolish niece has run off to. Surely, Sue will see the folly of hysterical Ella’s ways.

“Poppy, I’m going out for a while. I’ll be back at 3 p.m.,” I tell my assistant as I walk past her desk in reception.

“Yes, Dr. Drake.”

Poppy’s very sexy. I’d have her on my desk if she wasn’t such a good assistant. But, I’d hate to lose her. God knows there are very few assistants out there with half-decent organization skills.

It’s a wet Wednesday. Of course, it is. What else? It’s winter, and the sky is the same color as my mood. Sue lives about half an hour’s drive from my office in central London. It will most

likely take me a tad longer to get there today, though, in this sodding torrential downpour.

I practice my endearing look while I'm driving in the hopes that Sue won't sense my irritation. It's hard work maintaining this pleasant facade when you're seething with rage on the inside. I have to admit, though, that it's been one of my talents since childhood. Not even my mother knows the depths of my hatred or the lengths to which I'll go to get what and who I want. How else could I be such an excellent therapist?

Sue's compact Vauxhall is parked in the driveway, so I know she's in.

Time to play nice, Seb. Charm the old bird and get what you came for.

I ring the doorbell and wait. After a minute or so, I hear footsteps approaching. I know she's looking at me through the peephole.

"Hi, Sue," I call out. "It's Sebastian."

Is she hawering?

Open up, you old bat. I'm freezing my balls off out here in the rain.

"Just a minute."

What the hell is the hold-up? Come on!

The door opens at long last.

"Hello, Seb. This is unexpected."

I detest being called Seb. It's bloody, Sebastian. Seb sounds like a plumber's assistant or something.

"Hi, Sue. Yes, I'm so sorry for not calling first. May I come in? Just for a few moments."

I can tell she's unsure. I wonder what lies Ella has told her about me.

"Of course," she says, and she opens the door wide enough so I can step inside and out of the rain.

“Goodness, it’s coming down, isn’t it?” I say, and I remove my coat.

“Yes, lovely weather for ducks. Would you like a cup of tea?”

“Uhm, no thanks. I can’t stay long.”

“Okay. Come through. Let’s sit by the fire.”

Sue waddles down the passage toward the living room. I follow behind, looking for signs of Ella. Just in case she’s holding up here at her aunt’s.

“Make yourself comfy, Seb.”

“Thank you.”

“What can I do for you, son?”

“This is a bit delicate, but I was wondering if you know where Ella is.”

There’s no point in sugarcoating it. Besides, she probably knows exactly where my girlfriend is hiding.

“Oh. I assumed she had a talk with you.”

Talk? What talk?

“No. I’m afraid I’m rather in the dark.”

“I see. Ella did leave a letter for you. She asked me to give it to you should you pop by.”

For shit’s sake, woman! Why didn’t you call me?

“A letter?” I ask calmly.

“Yes,” she says, pulling an envelope from her cardigan.
“Here.”

I stare at the communication in my hand. I daren’t open it now. Who knows what’s written inside? I’d hate to lose my cool in front of Sue.

“I am sorry things didn’t work out, Seb.”

“I think I’d best be going. Thank you for the letter.”

“Of course.”

“Don’t get up. I’ll see myself out,” I say with as much dignity and grace as I can muster under the circumstances.

“Look after yourself,” Sue says as I walk towards the front door.

“And you.”

I’m fuming. My hands are shaking, and it feels as if I’ve swallowed hot lava. I don’t bother with the raincoat, but simply throw it over my arm as I march out to my car. I place the envelope in my pocket to keep it dry. Once I’m inside my dry car, I tear it open and begin to read.

Sebastian,

It’s over. Don’t try to find me. I never want to see your viscous face again. You’ve hurt and humiliated me for the last time.

Ella

CARTER

Amanda is away this week. She hasn't met Ella yet, which surprises me, as I thought after the fuss she'd made over the phone she would have rushed over immediately to inspect my newest appointment.

Jagger, on the other hand, cannot get enough of Ella. The two have become instant best friends. It would seem that my son has my taste in stunning women. I feel almost like an outsider these days, but I'm thrilled that all is well on the homefront. Jagger is happy, and Ella's presence takes a lot of pressure off me.

She mentioned that she was taking Jagger to the petting zoo after school, and my day is unusually uneventful, so I decide to drive over there so I can surprise my son with a bit of quality dad and son time. Perhaps I'll take the two out for pizza afterward. Like any six-year-old, Jagger is always up for a greasy pizza, and you don't have to ask me twice.

The petting zoo is awash with excited kids, either squealing with delight or cowering in fear. The stench of goats and alpacas rises up to meet me as I cross the floor to where Jagger is tickling a little billy goat's beard. Neither he nor Ella have spotted me yet, so I hang back a while and watch them.

Ella throws her head back and laughs from her gut as the feisty goat leaps away and bounces onto a rock. Jagger joins in, and my heart beats just that little bit faster when the beautiful Au Pair picks Jagger up and kisses him on the cheek. Perhaps, for my own sanity, I should have hung out for a Nanny McPhee

type after all. But, it's too late now. The deed is done. I'll have to suck it up and keep my lascivious thoughts to myself.

"Daddy!" Jagger yells at the top of his lungs when he spots me.

Ella is still smiling, and I swear she grows more beautiful by the day.

"Hey, you two. Dash is going to go nuts when he smells the goats and alpacas all over you," I grin as I scoop my son up into my arms.

"It's okay," Jagger says confidently. "I'll explain to him that he's still my favorite."

"This is a surprise," Ella smiles.

"Yes, I finished early today. All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy, hey."

"Who's Jack?" Jagger asks quizzically.

Both Ella and I laugh at his innocent question.

"I was thinking we could go out for pizza. What do you think, Jagger? Are you in the mood for pizza?"

"Yay!"

His standard answer is good enough for me.

"Are there any more animals you'd like to see?" I ask him, not wanting to interfere with Ella's plans.

"I think we've seen them all. Twice," she says, and I imagine that, like me, Ella too has had enough of the earthy aroma of the four-legged attractions.

"Great. Let's get going then."

"Daddy, can I drive to the restaurant with Ella?"

Ouch!

"Why don't the three of us go in my car, and then we'll fetch Ella's afterward?" I offer.

"Okay," he answers, satisfied with my organizational skills.

“Is it just me, or have you stolen my son’s affections away from me?” I say it softly to Ella as we walk to my car.

She looks a bit flustered, but I grin so she can see I’m just kidding around.

“I’m sure the novelty will wear off soon enough. I’m thinking as soon as we start doing math homework together,” she winks.

“So next year, then,” I laugh.

“Exactly. The hourglass is emptying out.”

Ella secures Jagger’s seatbelt while I call ahead and book an outside table at our favorite pizzeria.

“You haven’t seen him covered in Mozzarella cheese yet, have you?”

“No, but I’m familiar with his peanut butter and jelly T-shirt art,” she says as she gets into the car.

“Jagger is a true Picasso. I must be the Italian blood that runs in our veins.”

“Interesting. I wouldn’t have figured you for Italian. Not with a name like Cooper.”

“My grandmother’s family is Italian.”

“Ah. Parli Italiano?”

“That would be a big no, I’m afraid. Do you?”

“A little. I spent a few summers in Italy when I was a child. It was my parents’ favorite holiday destination.”

“The Amalfi Coast is beautiful.”

“We used to go to Naples.”

“I know it isn’t Naples, but the Pizzeria we’re going to is owned by an Italian family. Their food will have you imagining that you’re right back there.”

“Eccellente!” Ella grins and adds the Italian hand gesture to authenticate.

“Oh, dear,” I say when we’re about three minutes away from the pizzeria and point to the back seat where Jagger is out cold.

“Takeaways?” Ella chuckles.

“It looks like it.”

“Poor little guy had a very busy day,” she coos.

“Let’s go home. I’ll ask my driver to fetch your car. I’m sure Chef Alex will throw something together for us.”

I carry Jagger to his bed when we get home. He must be exhausted because he doesn’t stir when I kiss his sticky forehead before I leave the room.

“Would you like to join me for dinner?” I ask Ella when I pass her in the hallway.

“That would be nice. Thank you.”

“It isn’t pizza from Naples, but is steak okay?”

“Perfect.”

It’s an easy dinner. Ella and I chat without uncomfortable silences. She’s very intelligent. I enjoy talking to someone who is well-traveled, and Ella seems to have done her fair share of globe trotting.

I catch myself staring too deeply into her eyes a few times. If she’s aware, she doesn’t say anything. I want to ask her about her childhood and the reason she’s moved so far away from home, but I don’t want to pry. Perhaps it will come up in conversation at a later stage.

For now, I’m content with perfectly seasoned and prepared ribeye steak and the company of a beautiful woman. It’s almost enough.

* * *

Amanda

I'm exhausted. It's been a long week of connecting flights and sleeping in strange beds. Not that the accommodations were scrappy by any means, but I do prefer my own room. It's taken me a good while to get used to living alone again. At first, I loved the freedom of coming and going at my own speed and doing with my time what I liked. Now, I'm not that sure that my decision to leave Carter was the right one. Despite having my long-coveted freedom, I miss being with him. I was a fool to throw away a man like Carter Moore.

Call it hormones. Call it unfulfilled dreams. Call it whatever you like. The truth is, I messed up, and I have no one to blame but myself. The fact that Carter hasn't moved on tells me I may not be the only one with regrets. He did let me go far too easily. I expected him to fight harder for our marriage. But, it's always Jagger this and Jagger that. Clearly, our son is more important to Carter than I ever was.

I'm still pissed that he hired an Au Pair without consulting me first. I'm Jagger's mother, for goodness sake. Surely I should have had a say in the matter. Who knows what sort of woman is spending time with my child?

It's close to 2 p.m., and I'm on my way to see Dr. Williams. She's been my therapist since I was a teenager. My mother insisted I see someone. That's just the way we Archers deal with life. I always use the private entrance. High society can be so judgmental.

I press the button to let the therapist know I've arrived. She opens the door and ushers me in.

"Hello, Amanda."

"Hello."

We engage in our usual routine of pleasantries before I share with her what's on my mind.

"How've you been, Amanda?"

"Not great."

"I see. What would you like to chat about today?"

"I miss Carter," I blurt out shamelessly.

Dr. Williams is the only living soul to whom I'd ever divulge such intimate information. I wouldn't even tell my mother. I certainly don't dare drop that sort of bombshell during conversations with my friends. Not even Lilly, whom I consider to be my best friend. But here in this room, safely tucked away in duck egg hues and expensive art, I feel I can safely lay bare my secrets.

"That's to be expected. You were together for many years."

"I understand that. But, I miss him more than I should."

"There is no should or shouldn't when it comes to feelings, Amanda. There is no right or wrong."

I hate it when she talks in circles. I'm pretty sure an eight-ball or Confucius would spin me the same pointless line. I'm paying this woman an obscene amount of money to help me, so she'd better come up with a clearer solution than that!

"I can see that isn't the answer you are looking for, Amanda. But remember, this is a process. You've only been divorced for a short while. It's natural to want to return to the familiar. You're out of your comfort zone, and that can't be easy."

I let out a frustrated sigh.

"Are you engaging in new activities to keep your mind occupied?"

"If I engage in any more traveling, I risk destroying the ozone layer all on my own."

"Have you made any gentleman friends?"

"You mean am I sleeping with anyone?"

"Not what I meant."

"I can't think of that now. How can I possibly entertain any other relationships when I'm still in love with Carter?"

I can see this session isn't getting me anywhere. I may as well be talking to the wall.

"How are things with your mother?"

Relationship?! Ha! Is she trying to be funny? The only meaningful relationship my mother has ever had is with a bottle.

“I don’t want to talk about her.”

That’s it, Amanda. Shut it down. There’s no point in flogging a dead horse.

“Your frustrations are rooted in your childhood, Amanda. I understand that these things aren’t easy to discuss, but they’re fundamental to your healing. You have to at least entertain the idea of forgiving your mother. Not for her sake, but for yours.”

I shift in my seat. I’m edgy. My mother brings out the worst in me. Pain buried deep in my subconscious rears its vicious head at the mere mention of her name. It is as if I’m instantly transported back to a time when I had no control over the mystery in which I was caught up.

My pulse rate is climbing, so I get up out of the plush chair and start pacing the room. My therapist says nothing, leaving me prisoner to my own thoughts for too long before she breaks her silence.

“How is Sam?”

“The same. He’s out of rehab now, but we don’t see each other that often. He’s weak. Weak like her.”

“Your mother?”

“No, the cleaning lady. Yes, my mother.”

“Alcoholism is a disease, Amanda. I’m sure it can’t be easy on any of you.”

“It’s easy enough for her. All she does is throw money at the situation in the hopes that it will fix everything. Sometimes I think money is a curse. It did nothing for Carter and me. All that money, and still we couldn’t make it work.”

“Money is an inanimate object.”

Oh, for shit’s sake! More folk wisdom? Really?

I can see that I’m getting nowhere today, so I check my watch and pray for the hour to pass.

I feel worse when I leave Dr. William's office. If I were my pathetic mother's child, I'd be plastered by now. But I'm not. I'm strong. Stronger than she'll ever be. My brother may have inherited her weakness, but I'll be damned if I piss away my life like that.

I'm going to get Carter back. That's my only option.

ELLA

“Hello, Aunt Sue. How lovely of you to call. How are you?”

“Hello, my sweet girl. I’m doing so well. How are you doing?”

It has been a week since I last spoke to her. Something in her voice tells me she wants to tell me something.

“Sebastian’s been around, hasn’t he?” I ask, knowing full well what the answer is.

“I never could play a decent game of poker,” Sue sighs. “I’m the worst fibber in the whole world.”

“Was it awful?”

I feel guilty for leaving it up to my aunt to do my dirty work for me. I was too afraid to leave the letter at Sebastian and my apartment in case he came home early. The last thing I needed was for him to drag me back from the airport. As it is, I was a ball of nerves as I sat there waiting to board my flight.

“It was uncomfortable. But Seb was keen on reading the letter, so he didn’t linger long after I gave it to him.”

“Ugh. I’m so sorry for lumbering you with such an unpleasant task, Aunt Sue.”

“Don’t be silly, sweetheart. It was the sensible thing to do.”

“I can only imagine how angry he was.”

“I sneaked a peek at him through the window while he sat in his fancy car, reading the letter. He didn’t look happy. But

don't you dare worry about that thug. Let him stew in it. He's lucky I didn't give him an earful."

Sue is such a lady. In all the time I've known her, I've never heard her say a bad word about anyone. She and my mother were so alike. I can't imagine what my father would have done to Sebastian had he been alive.

"Thank you so much for doing that," I say, and suddenly I'm feeling teary. "I miss you."

"Oh, goodness, me. Here comes the waterworks," Sue says, and I can hear the telltale sniffles on the other side of the call.

"We're not being very British, are we? Stiff upper lip and all," I announce, trying my best to change the mood.

"Bloody useless articles," she giggles. "Anyway, enough with that. Tell me about little Jagger. What's he been up to?"

"Oh, my goodness. He is so adorable, Aunt Sue. You'd eat him up."

"Thank you for the pictures. My goodness, you live in a palace."

"I know. Isn't it splendid? I still can't believe how amazing LA is. I'd love for you and Anna to see it."

"I'd love that, too."

"Once I've been here for a few months, I'll arrange it."

"That will be wonderful, sweet girl. I almost didn't recognize you. You're as brown as a berry. If I didn't know any better, I'd think you spend your days on the beach."

"I do spend a fair amount of time outdoors. Jagger plays tennis twice a week, and Carter and I take him to their private beach almost every afternoon."

"Ooh, Carter, is it?"

"Yes, alright," I chuckle. "Mr. Moore."

"Is he as dishy as his namesake used to be? You know...Bond, James Bond."

"You mean Roger Moore?"

“The very same.”

“Oh, that’s right. I forgot you had a crush on him,” I laugh.

“And?”

“Yes. Carter is very handsome. But he’s my boss, and that’s all.”

“More handsome than Sebastian?”

“Like chalk and cheese.”

“Nice darts.”

“You’re an incurable romantic, Aunt Sue.”

We talk for another ten minutes or so before it’s time for me to get some shut-eye. Being with Jagger all day is tiring. The weekends are even busier, and tonight I’m feeling it.

“Goodnight, Ella, my love. I’m so proud of you.”

“Sleep tight, Aunt Sue. I love you.”

A lone tear rolls down my cheek as I think of the friends and family I’ve left behind. My whole world is in England. Apart from Carter and Jagger, I know the greengrocer and the staff who work for the family. Yes, I’m out of Sebastian’s claws and beyond his sadistic reach, but at what cost?

Don’t dwell on the negative, Ella. It’s a slippery slope.

Instead of feeling sorry for myself, I choose to close my eyes and drift off into blissful sleep.

Seb’s hand is around my throat. He’s squeezing so tightly that I struggle to breathe. I scream, but there’s no sound. I see nothing but the pale blue eyes of a madman. ‘No’, I want to yell out, but I can’t. I watch as I float above my body. Is it over? Am I dead? Am I...

The tune chiming from the alarm clock on the nightstand beside me drags me slowly from my nightmare. I sit bolt-upright and look around frantically. I’m wet with perspiration. It’s morning. Thank God.

* * *

“Good morning, Ella. I’m glad I ran into you,” Carter says when he sees me downstairs in the kitchen.

“Good morning.”

“I have to go out of town for two days. Amanda will fetch Jagger from the house tomorrow afternoon at around 5 p.m. Would you have him ready, please?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Great. Thanks. I’m sorry to rush off, but my jet leaves in two hours. You’re welcome to call me if Jagger needs anything.”

“I’m sure we’ll be fine. Thank you. Have a good trip.”

“I’ll see you in two days. Ah, there he is. Good morning, big boy,” Carter says, picking up Jagger as he stumbles into the kitchen, still half asleep.

“Hi, Daddy. Where are you going?” he asks and looks at the bag in Carter’s hand.

“Daddy has to go to Dallas for a quick visit. I’ll be back soon. Mommy is fetching you later. I love you.”

“I love you, Daddy. Hello, Ella. I’m hungry.”

“Well, I guess he’s over it,” Carter grins as Jagger jumps onto the chair at the nook.

“How about some eggs and bacon?” I suggest to the little boy who is rubbing his dog behind its ear.

“Can I have Cheerios?”

Sugar is king, I think to myself as Chef winks at me and prepares bacon and eggs for the little man.

* * *

It’s close to 5 p.m. I’m wondering what kind of woman Amanda is. I can’t imagine how anyone would willingly give

up a husband like Carter. Clearly, the woman has issues. I guess I'm about to find out.

* * *

It is just after 5 p.m. when I check my watch. I'm in the driveway of the stunning home I used to share with Carter and my son. I wonder what's beyond the door. What's this Au Pair, Ella, like?

I imagine she's a pale English sort, dressed in tweed, sporting a thick accent. I suppose I can make an effort to be pleasant to her, as long as she's taking good care of Jagger. Still, my ex should have consulted me before hiring a stranger to watch over our son.

I don't bother knocking on the door I used to enter through and leave from for so many years, so I simply enter my former home. Carter hasn't made any changes to the place. Why would he? It's perfect just as it is.

The home has a familiar smell. It triggers my memory. Every room holds an emotional attachment for me. Carter and I painstakingly chose each piece of artwork together. We bid on rare pieces and decided where to place them. The modern architecture reflects his and my tastes perfectly. Oh, what a fool I've made of myself.

I blame you, Mother. Perhaps if you did your job properly, I wouldn't be such a disaster.

I know Carter isn't here. He called me yesterday to tell me he had to go out of town. I'm looking forward to having my son for the week. I miss his happy little face. He makes me feel better about who I am. I hope he doesn't whine about leaving the dog behind. Another decision I wasn't privy to.

"Jagger! Where are you, darling?" I call once I'm well inside the house.

It's quiet. I guess he must be outside. This truly irritates me. I specifically asked Carter to arrange to have him ready at 5 p.m. sharp. I hate hanging around like a spare part in this

house. There are just too many memories here. They hurt like a hot poker up the...

“Good afternoon. I’m Ella. It’s so nice to finally meet you.”

I turn to find an exquisite creature standing beside the large marble table in the foyer. This is Ella? I’m taken aback by her beauty. Not at all what I was expecting. Now I see why Carter hired her without consulting me first. That son of a...

“Mommy!” Jagger shouts and runs to meet me.

“My angel.”

I catch him as he jumps into my arms.

I’m momentarily distracted by my son.

“Can we stop for ice cream before we go home, Mommy?”

It’s painful to stare into his eyes. They are his father’s.

“Of course, my love.”

“Yay!”

Jagger squirms out of my arms and rushes over to the Au Pair. He throws his arms around her shapely legs and looks lovingly up into her face.

“See you later, Ella.”

“Goodbye, Jagger. Have fun with your mommy.”

“Promise you’ll take care of Dash,” he smiles.

“Like he’s mine, sweetheart,” she grins and hugs him.

“It’s nice to meet you, Ella,” I say with a frosty look before I take Jagger by the hand and leave the house.

It’s better that I leave now before I show my surprise. I don’t want the Au Pair to see how shaken I am.

The butler has placed Jagger’s bag in my car, so I strap him into his seat, and soon we’re on our way to the ice cream parlor.

“So, Jagger, tell me about Ella.”

Not very subtle, are we?

“She’s the best! Can I have strawberry ice cream?”

It’s not easy picking the brain of a six-year-old. But, I try again.

“Does Daddy like Ella?”

“Yes, they talk all the time. I like rainbow sprinkles.”

“Yes, I know you do, my love.”

All the time, hey? I imagine Carter must be quite the temptation for the young Au Pair. Does she have her eye on him?

As far as I know, my ex hasn’t dated anyone since our divorce. Men aren’t great at abstaining from sex. That I do know. Is the young Ella satisfying more than Carter’s need for an Au Pair? Why else would he hire such a stunner?

You’re not fooling anyone, Carter. Least of all me.

I’m irritated when Jagger and I get home. This is not what I needed today.

* * *

The week has dragged on. It’s 6 p.m. Sunday evening, and Carter is about to fetch Jagger. I plan on having a word or two with him about Ella. Jagger doesn’t stop talking about her, and it hurts me when he does. Ella this...Ella that. It’s all I can do not to scream at him to stop saying her bloody name.

The doorbell rings. It’s Carter. Jagger runs to the door and jumps into his father’s arms. It hurts to see the two of them together. It hurts because I know I should be with them. Instead, I’m alone.

“Hello, Amanda. How are you?”

“Not as well as you, it would seem.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, judging from your choice of Au Pair, I’d say you’re just aces. Pretty young thing. Now I understand why I wasn’t

invited to the interview.”

“Don’t start, Amanda. I don’t want to fight.”

“It’s beneath you, Carter. Courting the staff. Who’s next? The girls who clean your room? Don’t look so surprised. Jagger’s told me all about your romantic little beach sessions and fun outings.”

“That’s low. Interrogating your own six-year-old. He’s just a child. Why don’t you ask me if you want to know about my life? Not that it’s any of your business, but Ella and I are not sleeping together. She takes excellent care of our son.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Why would you care, anyway? You wanted a divorce, Amanda. Not me. I can sleep with the entire neighborhood’s Au Pairs if I choose to, and you’ll have nothing to say about it.”

“Get out.”

CARTER

I can only imagine that Amanda's nose is out of joint because Ella isn't exactly the stereotypical Au Pair. Her snooty remarks and death stare left the room rather frosty when I fetched Jagger from her on Sunday. The woman drives me insane. It's astounding how irrelevant her possessiveness over me is now that we are no longer married.

On the plus side, it's been a week of bliss at home. Ella has made such a positive change in my son's and my life. Not only is she wonderful with him, but she brings positivity that's been sorely lacking in our home. Amanda was moody. I never knew where I stood from one moment to the next. Ella is completely different. She's constant in her demeanor. I'm enjoying that side of her very much.

It's Friday, and I know I'm not going to make it home in time to drop off Jagger with his mother, so I call Ella to ask her if she would do it for me.

"Hi, Carter."

"Hi, Ella. Could you do me a favor, please?"

"Of course. How can I help?"

There it is again. The congeniality that's so attractive.

"Would you drop Jagger off at Amanda's, please? I'm running late today."

"Uhm..sure. No problem."

She recovered fairly quickly, but I can tell from her initial response that she isn't terribly keen.

“Is something wrong?”

“No. What time shall I drop Jagger off with his mother?”

“5 p.m., please.”

“Of course.”

“Thank you, Ella.”

“Only a pleasure.”

Sweet of her to say, but I know it's bull. I imagine Ella's had a small taste of Amanda's cold shoulder. I wish I'd been a fly on the wall when my ex met the infamous Au Pair. I imagine there are hairline cracks in the ceiling after Amanda hit the roof.

It's 7 p.m. when I open the front door, ready to put a long and hard week at the office behind me. Contrary to popular belief, even billionaires have to work their tails off to maintain the proverbial empire.

“Good evening, Mr. Moore.”

“Hello, George.”

“Did you have a good day, Sir?”

“A bit longer than I would have liked, but yes. Thank you.”

“Chef is ready when you are, Sir. Shall I pour you a whiskey?”

“George, you read my mind.”

“My pleasure, Sir.”

George is quite the find. An old-world butler I took over from a friend who relocated to Europe. At first, I thought a butler would be a tad much. However, I learned on the path to success that there were small pleasures that were expected of someone with wealth. I'm glad I relented. If only to give old George a purpose and appreciate his flair for the finer things in life.

It's such a beautiful evening, so naturally, I decide to get out of my boss' gear into something more relaxed. I wonder where Ella is. Hopefully, she made it back safely from the dragon's

lair. I hope Amanda didn't char the beautiful Ella's blonde locks with her fiery breath.

My cell phone interrupts my amusing mental picture.

"Andrew! How are you, big brother?"

"Caboose Baby!"

"You know I hate it when you call me that."

"Oh, come on. It's your own fault for hogging all the limelight as a kid."

"You're just jealous because I'm still young and virile and you're in the midst of a midlife crisis."

"Oh, balls! I'm only ten years older than you," Andrew laughs.

"Only..."

"I miss this," he says.

"Well, you're the one who moved away, dumbass."

"LA couldn't handle two Moores, Caboose. But, all is not lost. I'm in town for a week."

"Excellent. Where are you staying?"

"With you."

"Lucky for you I'm in town this week."

"I'm just yanking your chain. Carly and I are staying at The Conrad. A little romantic getaway."

"You're welcome to stay here, Drew. There's plenty of room."

"That's very kind of you, Caboose. But, the old ball and chain has her eye on the spa."

"Okay, but the offer stands if you change your mind."

"Great. Thanks. We'll see you in about an hour."

Even with the age difference, Andrew and I grew up being great friends. He's always good for a laugh, and his wife, Carly, is an angel. They were never the biggest fans of Amanda—not that they would ever admit it, but I knew.

I have enough time to enjoy a quick splash in the ocean before my brother gets here. It feels odd without Jagger, but Dash is beside himself with excitement as he follows me, without an ounce of hesitation, into the surf.

I'm refreshed and ready for a good evening with my family.

"Was that Dash I heard barking hysterically down on the beach?"

"Oh, hi, Ella. Yes. He's missing his partner in crime, so I thought I'd help him get rid of some energy."

I marvel at how stunning Ella is, even when she's in jeans and a T-shirt. Her hair is loose and cascades around her shoulders and down her back.

"How did it go with Jagger?" I ask nonchalantly.

"Fine."

"I know his mother can be a tad intimidating."

Ella smiles, and without saying a word, I can tell that she knows exactly what I mean.

"But you're still standing, so I guess she was in a good mood when you dropped Jagger off."

We're in the kitchen when I hear a familiar voice.

"Where are you hiding, Caboose?"

"In the kitchen," I call out to Andrew.

"Ah, there you are! Come here," he says, locking me in his signature bear hug. "You're bony, Caboose. Isn't your fancy chef feeding you?"

"You gave up your gym membership, did you?" I counter.

"Good one," he chuckles.

"Hello, Carter. How are you?"

"Hi, Carly. I'm good. You're looking lovely, as always."

"Oh, you charmer, you," she smiles and hugs me.

"Where's our little fart in a can?" Andrew says and looks around.

“Jagger’s with Amanda, I’m afraid. I’m sure she won’t mind if we pinch him back for a day while you’re here.”

“I’d love to see the little guy,” Carly coos. “He must be growing like a weed.”

“You won’t believe how,” I smile.

Andrew and Carly don’t have kids of their own. I never pried into the details of Carly’s affliction, but the couple has taken on the role of doting aunt and uncle to my sister, Sophie’s two children, and Jagger. My son will never forgive me if he finds out they were in town and I didn’t get them together.

“So, what are your plans for the week? Carly, Andrew tells me you have your heart set on lavishing at the spa.”

“Their full body wrap is legendary. I need a bit of TLC. Old Father Clock is trying his best to get his paws on me.”

“Oh, stop it. You’re gorgeous.”

“Oi! Get your own woman,” Andrew grins. “This filly’s mine.”

“He talks like that now,” Carly says, rolling her eyes. “I had a feeling moving to Dallas was a bad idea.”

“Yeah, where’s your cowboy hat, Bro?”

Andrew looks behind me and spots Ella.

“Oh, where are my manners? Andrew, and Carly, meet Ella. She’s Jagger’s Au Pair. Ella, these are my Texan connections.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Ella says.

“British. How very Californian of you, Carter,” Andrew teases. “How are you, Ella? Nice to meet you.”

“Hello, Ella. It’s a pleasure,” Carly smiles.

“Where in merry old England are you from? And what on earth brought you to La La Land?”

“You’ll have to excuse my brother,” I say to Ella. “He has, what you Poms call, verbal diarrhea.”

“Oh, balls!”

“Oh, yeah, you do,” Carly chimes in.

Ella laughs. “I’m here for the weather, of course.”

“I can’t fault your logic. Are you enjoying LA?” Carly asks.

“Loving it.”

“Isn’t Jagger just a hoot?”

“He’s a pistol, alright. I adore him.”

Dash comes rushing onto the scene.

“And who is this?” Andrew says and bends down to give the dog a good scratch behind the ear.

“This is Dash, Jagger’s new partner in crime.”

“He’s lovely, Carter,” Carly chimes in.

“I think the gardener may disagree with you. Jagger and his sidekick love to terrorize his floral creations.”

“Sounds familiar. As I recall, you and your scruffy mutt did the same to Mom’s roses, Caboose.”

“And I still have the scars on my buttocks from the thorns.”

“Caboose?” Ella asks.

“Carter here is the family’s Caboose baby because he was born so late in my parents’ lives,” Andrew explains.

“Oh, I see.”

“The boys are a little nuts, but you’ll get used to it,” Carly grins.

“I’m jealous,” Ella says, “I wish I had a sibling.”

“Do you guys have plans for dinner?” I ask Andrew and Carly.
“Because I’d love it if you would join me.”

“That would be lovely. Thanks, Carter,” Carly answers.

“Join us, Ella,” Andrew insists.

“If you don’t mind,” Ella says, looking at me.

“Of course. Please join us,” I answer.

“I’d love to.”

Andrew gives me the look and winks. He's teasing me, I can tell.

"I'll get the Chef to whip us up something."

"I wouldn't mind nice seafood or something. I've had my fill of Texan steak for a while," Carly sighs. "I miss pulling lobsters from the bay."

"Then Lobster it is."

Dinner with my brother and his sharp-witted wife is something I always look forward to. Andrew is a barrel of laughs, and Carly and Ella chatter away as if they're old friends. They talk about England and its wonderfully diverse theaters and culture, and Ella talks about her adventures with Jagger.

I sit back for a while and watch my guests as they interact. It feels so natural, as if Ella's been a part of the group for years. She is so easy to talk to, and I listen with half an ear to her conversations with Carly.

It's close to 11 p.m. when Ella calls it a night.

"You'll have to excuse me, but I've had a long day. It's been an absolute pleasure meeting you both. Thank you for dinner, Carter."

"Hmm, nice girl," Andrew grins once Ella is out of earshot and Carly goes to the bathroom.

"Stop grinning at me like that, Drew."

"Was I?"

"Yes, you were. Ella is Jagger's Au Pair. That's it."

"Come on, Caboose. Are you blind? She's gorgeous. And, if I'm not mistaken, which I rarely am, she's up for a bit of slap and tickle, as they say in her homeland."

"Did you come here just to bust my balls, or what?"

"Look. You and Amanda were never suited for each other. I'm sorry if I'm being a dick, but it's true. Ella, on the other hand, is delightful. More your speed."

"She works for me, Andrew."

“Oh, I see. Far be it for the master to not diddle the help, is it?” he says in a posh English accent.

“Don’t be ridiculous. You know I’m not a snob. But that’s not the point. The point is that I hired Ella to be my son’s Au Pair. I’m not going to take liberties just because she’s living in my home.”

“Fair enough. But I wouldn’t be too quick to write this thing off if I were you. That’s my final word on the subject.”

“Andrew, you will always have just one more thing to say on any given subject. But I love you anyway.”

“That was a wonderful meal. Thank you, Carter,” Carly says as she joins us in the living room. “Ella is delightful.”

“See,” Andrew winks, “it isn’t just me.”

“What did I miss?”

“Absolutely nothing,” I laugh.

ELLA

Carter and Jagger are away for two weeks. The two are spending some vacation time with Carter's sister, Sophie, at her beach house. Jagger's cousins will keep him busy, so Carter suggested that I take some time off to explore LA.

It's been four months since I was hired to take care of little Jagger, and I can hardly believe how quickly the time has passed. It's odd, but I feel at home here in LA, as if I've been here for years. I do miss practicing medicine, but I know my hiatus won't last too long.

In the meantime, I'm making hay while the sun shines and enjoying the opportunity by taking a walk in the park around the corner from the house.

It's Fall now, and the leaves are slowly changing colors. I plan on taking a hike through the Santa Monica Mountains, as the trees there are simply otherworldly beautiful. I wish I didn't have to go alone. It would be nice to share my life with someone. Someone who won't slap the shit out of me if I step out of line.

I wonder what Sebastian is doing. I haven't thought about him for a few days. He's always in the back of my mind. I have few regrets in my life, but falling for a manipulator like him is most certainly at the top of my shortlist. Will I ever be free of him?

"Hi. I've seen you around for a while now. I'm Hannah. I live next door," a woman's friendly voice breaks into my thoughts.

“Hi, yes, I’ve seen you too. I’m Ella.”

“A fellow European, no?” she says in a thick French accent.

“It would seem we’re rather exotic around here,” I smile back.

“Where is your little boy?”

“They’re away on vacation, so I’m free to do a bit of exploring. How long have you been in LA?”

“This is my second year in America,” Hannah says.

“Do you like it?”

“Hey, what’s not to like? Beautiful weather, super luxury—everything a young woman like me enjoys. How about you?”

“It’s my fourth month, so I’m still a newbie. But, I’m glad I decided to move here. LA is special, for sure. Would you like to walk with me?”

“Oui.”

“Your family is new to the neighborhood,” I comment.

“Yes, the Taylors moved here from New York. Everyone wants to live in LA. It’s a wonderful lifestyle for the children.”

“What was New York like?”

“Very busy. I prefer it here.”

“Would you like to join me for a hike in the Santa Monica mountains?” I ask on a whim. “I’m dying to see the fall trees, but I don’t think it’s a good idea to go alone.”

“Oui! I would love that.”

“Great. When can you go?”

“The family is away on Sunday. Will that work for you?”

“Perfect.”

And there you have it. My first friend. Hannah and I walk and talk for a long time before she leaves. She’s a nice girl. Outspoken, like most French women I’ve met, but sweet nonetheless.

It's time to think about what I'm having for dinner. The chef at home is amazing, and I eat very well, but I feel like getting out and sampling some local cuisine for a change. I feel a bit like one of the Californian rich bitches in the car Carter gave me to use. I've practiced the resting-bitch-face look, but I'm afraid it just doesn't suit me. Hey, I tried.

I grin as I think about the fall temperatures that never drop below 70 degrees in La La Land. That's about the average summer day where I'm from. It's hysterical to see the locals donning sweaters. I'm proud of my Americanized lingo. On occasion, I slip back into the English vernacular and realize my faux pas soon enough when the locals look at me as if I'm balmy, aka, nuts. My best is when they speak louder when they hear my British accent. It's a trip.

The beachfront is buzzing despite the season, so I find a place to park my fancy SUV and head for a restaurant that isn't full. I'm unashamedly looking for the biggest cheeseburger and fries I can find. The beef tastes different here. I suspect it's all the sunshine local cattle get to soak up.

The waiter smiles at me when I start speaking. At least this one isn't yelling at me. It's a good burger. Not as amazing as the one Carter's chef makes, but, then again, this isn't nouvelle cuisine but rather a shot of good old-fashioned comfort food. I down the last sip of beer before I pay my bill and then walk the beach. It's postcard-perfect. Three cheers for California!

* * *

It's nearly midnight when my phone wakes me up. I sit bolt upright, fearing the worst. It's never good news at this time of night. It's Anna.

"What's wrong?" I blurt out, half asleep still.

"Nothing. Oh, crap, sorry. I didn't mean to scare you."

"Ugh. I forgot about the time difference. I forgot where I was for a second," I say, yawning. "What's up, Anna?"

"What's up? Listen to you, Miss California," Anna giggles.

“Hey, when in Rome...”

“I miss you. That’s what’s up.”

“I miss you too.”

“Good news. I’m coming to visit.”

“Really? When?”

“Yesterday, if I could. How about next week?”

“Amazing! Let me chat with Carter and check if it’s alright for you to stay here.”

“Brilliant. Let me know as soon as you can.”

* * *

Carter was more than accommodating when I called and asked if Anna could stay with me for two weeks. I’m at the airport, waiting for her flight to land. I’m so excited, I can hardly sit still. LA is amazing, but there’s nothing like having someone with you who gets you without any effort.

LAX is crawling with visitors. It isn’t Heathrow, but it’s busy all the same. I spot Anna immediately. Her face lights up when she sees me. I wave and wait for her to come closer before I rush up to her and throw my arms around her.

“Oh, damn it,” she says, her voice muffled in my shirt, “I swore I wouldn’t bubble.”

“I’m balling too,” I sniff.

“Look at the two of us, for goodness sake. What a bunch of wet girls’ blouses.”

“I’m knackered! It feels like I haven’t slept in days.”

“How about a cuppa?”

“How about some wine?” Anna grins.

“Wine it is! I’m just chuffed to bits to have you here, Anna. I’ve missed you so much.”

“Enough talk. Get me to a pub.”

“You mean a bar,” I grin.

“I don’t care what they call it. Just get me liquored up, woman.”

It’s wonderful having Anna here.

“We don’t need a pub. Wait until you see the one we have at home.”

“Oh, of course. My apologies. I forgot I’m in the presence of LA royalty. Okay, take me to your mansion, Your Ladyship.”

* * *

“Bloody hell, this place is ridiculous,” Anna gasps as we drive into the estate. “It’s going to take me a while to get used to all this space.”

“Crazy, isn’t it?”

“It’s like summer here. I started peeling off layers of clothing as soon as we disembarked. You’re one spoiled cow, Miss Ella,” Anna grins.

“Don’t I know it? Come on. Let’s get you settled in.”

I take Anna to the guest cottage. Cottage isn’t really the right word, as it’s large enough to house a small family. I’ve decided to share the cottage with her for the time she’s here, so I’m already settled. I’ve given Anna the main en-suite. It has a fantastic view of the ocean and access to the private beach. I’m in the room that overlooks the stunning garden.

“So, basically, I work my ass off every day, surrounded by people with runny noses and all kinds of disgusting ailments, and you play with a kid and live in a mansion on the beach. And, to think I felt sorry for you.”

I laugh at the expression on Anna’s face as she takes in the opulence.

“This is ridiculous, Ella. I can’t believe your boss let us stay here. Wow!”

“I know. Carter is very generous.”

“About that. What does the man with the magic lamp look like?”

“There are photos inside the main house. I’ll show you around tomorrow. Are you hungry?”

“Starving.”

“What are you in the mood for?”

“I’d eat roadkill at this stage.”

“No need. I’ll see what’s on the dinner menu for tonight.”

“Ella, you’ve got it sorted, my friend. Hats off to you.”

I call the kitchen and find out what’s available. Before long, Anna and I are enjoying a delicious pasta verde on the deck that overlooks the ocean.

“I could get used to this,” she grins and sips on her Pinot Grigio.

“It is lovely, isn’t it?”

“You deserve a bit of luxury after what you’ve been through the last two years. I’m happy for you.”

“I’m afraid to ask, but have you seen Sebastian?”

“Afraid so. He came by the hospital a few times, asking about you.”

“Of course he did.”

“No one knows anything, so you have nothing to worry about. How are you really coping, Ella?”

“I’m fine. I have the occasional nightmare that leaves me all panicky when I wake up, but apart from that, I’m well. I miss my friends and Aunt Sue terribly.”

“We miss you very much, my friend. Have you made any friends here?”

“I have, actually. The Au Pair next door is a hoot. She’s from Paris. We hiked the mountains a few days ago.”

“That’s good. You need friends.”

“I don’t have that much free time, to be honest. Jagger keeps me pretty busy. But, yes, it is nice to have someone. Hannah and I are the European anomalies on the block, so we have that in common, I suppose.”

“So, tell me more about Carter.”

“He’s lovely. And the way he adores Jagger is very sweet.”

“Uh-oh.”

“What?”

“You forget I’ve known you for a very long time. I know that look,” Anna grins like the Cheshire cat.

“Oh, nonsense. He’s my boss. All I’m saying is he’s a nice man, and that makes my job a lot easier.”

“I’ll give you my verdict when I see a photo of the ‘nice Carter’, okay?”

“I think you’ve had enough wine, you troublemaker.”

“I can drink you under the table, Ma’am. But, tonight, you may be right. This jet lag thing is too real.”

“I think I’d better tuck you in. We’ll resume our differences in the morning.”

“Nicely sidestepped, Doctor,” Anna winks.

“Sleep well, my friend. So happy you’re here,” I say and hug her.

“Good to be here. Don’t let me sleep the day away. I want to see the beach tomorrow.”

“You’re in luck. The forecast is for sun, sun, and more sun.”

“Don’t you just love California?”

“No conversion is needed here, sister. You’re preaching to the choir.”

* * *

It's a beautiful morning, and the sun is doing its best to show off for Anna.

"I could spend the whole day out here," she purrs.

We're on the private beach, on a picnic blanket, enjoying sandwiches and wine.

"I'm sorry to see the last days of summer. It's been glorious."

"I can't believe you have access to a private beach. It's so over the top."

"I know," I say with a superior grin, which makes Anna laugh.

"I'm yet to see a photo of my temporary benefactor."

"I snuck one out," I say, and I retrieve it from the bag.

"You're having me on. This is Carter Moore."

"The very same."

"I'm sorry, but we can't be friends anymore."

"Oh, stop it."

"I'm serious. Now, whenever you call, I'll be pissed imagining you spending time with this beautiful man."

"You're a nutter."

"I'm not joking. We're done, Parker. I may even hate you now."

"It is rather distracting at times."

"Distracting! How are you not all up in this? Ugh! The restraint you must have. You poor girl."

"Perhaps in another life," I sigh.

"I say, screw the job. Bang him, and we'll make a plan to smuggle you back into London."

"Oh, Anna. I'm going to miss you."

"Oh, rubbish. The second he's back, I'm a distant memory. You lucky tart!"

CARTER

“I haven’t seen Jagger this tired since the first few days we got Dash. He looks like he’s running on fumes.”

“Well, I’m not surprised. Ollie and Garth are keeping him pretty busy,” Sophie laughs. “It’s so good to see the cousins together.”

“Yeah, I miss this. We don’t see enough of each other, Sis.”

“It’s been a crazy year for you with the divorce and all. How are things with Amanda? Is she playing nice?”

“She’s alright. It’s been an adjustment for all of us, especially Jagger. I feel rotten about it.”

“Why? You didn’t do anything wrong?”

“I know. But, I can’t help feeling that Amanda and I have made his life more difficult than it should be.”

“There are plenty of divorced couples in the world, little brother. Kids adapt. Jagger is more resilient than you give him credit for. Come on, don’t beat yourself up. I know you’re doing the best you can. You’re a brilliant father.”

“Can’t I bottle you up and take you home with me? You always know just what to say to make me feel better, Sophie.”

“It’s my job. I’m your big sister,” she smiles, squeezing my hand. “Jagger sure talks a lot about Ella. I take it she’s a nice girl.”

“She’s lovely. Just what we needed. She’s very good with him.”

“I see. Where’s she from?”

“London.”

“Age?”

“Twenty-eight.”

“Is she cute?” Sophie smirks.

“Yes, but that has nothing to do with it.”

“Oh, dear. I don’t imagine Amanda is too impressed. She always did have a case of the green-eyed monster where you’re concerned.”

“Yeah, she did give me plenty of lip about the Au Pair, and then some.”

“Carly says she’s very nice.”

“Okaaay, hold on. When did you talk to Carly about Ella?”

“You know, we ladies like to keep abreast of things.”

“So, if you already know about her, why are you busting my chops? What’s with the inquisition?”

“I wanted to see your eyes when you spoke about her,” Sophie says nonchalantly.

“You sneak. Honestly, I can’t trust you and Carly with anything, can I? Don’t get any ideas. Ella works for me, and that’s that.”

“So Carly said,” Sophie winks.

Trust my sister and sister-in-law to stoke the fire. They are obviously in cahoots, trying to fix me up with someone. Not that Ella is a terrible choice, mind you. In fact, I catch myself thinking about her far too often, and I’d like to say that the thoughts are as pure as the driven snow. But, they aren’t.

“Have you met anyone yet that you like?” my sister pries some more.

“I’m not looking. I haven’t even been divorced for a year.”

“Honestly, the monk lifestyle doesn’t suit you, Carter. You need a woman. Men are useless on their own. Especially men

with small children. No offense to your capabilities, of course.”

“Oh, I see. Is that how it is? Thank you. Dr. Phil.”

“I’m not saying you need another wife. All I’m suggesting is that you get back on the horse.”

“Jeez. Cool it, Sis. I’ll date when I’m ready.”

“Alright, chill. I’m just saying.”

“Chill? Really?”

“That’s right. I’m the mother of teenagers. I hear things,” she laughs. “Gotta keep up with the times, bro.”

“You’re crazy.”

I hate to admit it, but my sister is right. I agree that it’s time to move on, but it isn’t so easy to meet someone new. The moment they know you’re loaded, you’re a target. Amanda was already wealthy in her own right, so I didn’t have to worry about her motives.

But LA is a minefield of gold diggers and wannabes. Women who sleep their way to the top are a dime a dozen in California. I have to be careful with Jagger. I don’t want to expose him to a woman who isn’t genuinely interested in being part of our family for the right reasons.

Ella is genuinely different. But, who knows? Perhaps I’m fooling myself. She works for me. Would she be different if we were dating?

“This is a moot discussion, Sis. Ella is Jagger’s Au Pair. Nothing more.”

Jagger rushes at us when he hears Ella’s name.

“Is Ella coming, Daddy?”

“No, my boy. Aunt Sophie and I were just talking about how much fun you two have back home.”

“She’s way cool, Aunt Sophie. I miss her. Can we call her, Daddy?”

“Uhm. Sure. I guess so.”

“Just an Au pair, hey?” I hear Sophie mumble under her breath. She winks when I give her the stink eye. “Why don’t I give you boys some privacy?” She smiles and gets up.

“Yeah, why don’t you?” I smirk.

“Cheeky monkey,” she laughs and leaves the sundeck.

“Come on, Daddy. Call her,” Jagger nags.

“Yes, yes. Give me a second.”

I dial Ella’s phone. It rings a few times before she answers.

“Hello, Carter. How’s my little tornado?”

“Great, thanks. Jagger’s good too.”

She laughs, and my stomach turns all tingly.

“Jagger wants to say hi,” I say, handing the phone over to my impatient little guy.

I listen for the next few minutes as he rattles on about his cousins and what they’ve been up to. I can hear Ella talking excitedly to Jagger. After a while, I tell Jagger that it’s time to hand back my phone. He and Ella say their goodbyes.

“Wow. It sounds like he’s having fun,” she says.

“His cousins are running him ragged. Jagger may sleep for a few days once we get back. Or, not.”

“Boundless energy. Wouldn’t it be nice if we could bottle their enthusiasm?”

“If only. I’d buy a bottle or two, for sure. How’s your visit with Anna?”

“Wonderful. It’s so good to hear the accent again. Are you enjoying your vacation with your sister?”

“Very much.”

“I’m glad. It’s too quiet around here. Dash keeps rushing to the front door when he hears a car in the driveway. He’s missing his master.”

“Don’t tell Dash, but I don’t think Jagger’s had time to even think about his sidekick.”

“Mum’s the word.”

“Enjoy your break. We’ll see you soon.”

“Thanks, Carter. Oh, and thanks for the call.”

I’m alone on the sundeck, contemplating my current situation. It’s damned if I do, damned if I don’t with Ella. Is Sophie right? Am I the kind of man who can’t be happy without a woman?

Once bitten, twice shy, I guess.

I thought Amanda was right for me, and look how that turned out. Can I really trust myself to choose better the next time around? Oh, who the hell knows?

But right now I’m on vacation. This isn’t something that happens too often, and I’m determined to enjoy Jagger and rest my brain. No immediate decisions for the future with regard to my business or personal life are allowed.

* * *

“You’ll never guess who I ran into this morning,” Sophie says when she gets home from the market.

“How about a clue,” I suggest.

“Let’s see. Uhm...this person used to semi-stalk you when you were in high school. She had a serious crush on you.”

“No! Not Samantha.”

“The very same.”

“Really? Should I be worried?”

“I think you may be okay. She is wearing a large rock on her ring finger. Looks like she found her Mr. Right after all,” Sophie says with a mischievous wink.

“That’s a relief.”

“I suggested we meet for drinks at the club.”

“Why would you do that, Sophie?” I groan. “What did I ever do to you?”

“Oh, come on. Let’s have a bit of fun. I want to see if she’s outgrown her obsession with you. What else is there to do around here?”

“We could stay here and enjoy the peace and quiet.”

“And miss seeing you sweat a little? Hell, no.”

“You’re meaner than I give you credit for, Sophie.”

My sister laughs and pats me on the shoulder.

“Oh, don’t worry, you big baby. Big Sis is here to protect you.”

“I’m going to tell your husband what a meany you are.”

“Don’t bother. He knows.”

“When is he coming, anyway?”

“He’ll join us in a few days.”

“Thank goodness. Then he can deal with your mischievous side.”

* * *

“Coop! So good to see you,” Samantha greets me enthusiastically when Sophie and I arrive at the club.

She’s married well, from the looks of it. The girl who used to send me a ton of love notes is draped in expensive jewelry and couture. She’s had a bit of work done, too. Gone are the flat chest and buck teeth.

Unfortunately, her shriek is still lethal.

“Hey, Sam. It’s nice to see you too. How are you?”

“So good. I couldn’t believe it when I bumped into Sophie. What are the odds?”

“I know,” I smile politely.

I give my sister the hairy eyeball. I can’t believe she’s talked me into doing this. Samatha used to terrorize me to no end.

“So, I hear you’ve done alright for yourself, Coop.”

“Yeah.”

“I always knew you were destined for great things,” Sam coos.
“Keep your eye on that one, I used to say to Cathy. Remember Cathy?”

“Uh-huh. I remember Cathy. How is she?”

“Cath is good. She’s married to a senator. Very hotsy-totsy.”

“I see you’re married too.”

“Yup. I snagged a darling of a man,” she grins.

“That’s great.”

We spend the next hour listening to Sam go on about her fabulous life while Sophie eggs her on. Clearly, my sister is bored. She’s a terrible tease, Sophie. She enjoys taking the piss when it comes to me.

“You’re in trouble,” I whisper when Samantha’s distracted.
“I’m going to find a way to pay you back for this torture.”

“I’m shaking in my boots,” she counters.

* * *

It’s time for me to get my revenge. Sophie’s going down, the shitstirrer.

“Come on, gang! I call from the front door. “Let’s go!”

Sophie and I are taking the boys out on the yacht. I’m itching to try out the new selection of watercraft we bought. The jet skis in particular.

Sophie is an excellent waterskier. She used to take part in competitions back in her heyday. Today I plan on putting her skills to the test. She made me suffer last night with Samantha, so now it’s my turn to give her a bit of uphill.

“Alright, hold your horses,” she calls back from the living room.

“Come on. The captain is waiting for us.”

“Daddy, can I go on the donut?”

“Sure, buddy.”

Jagger rushes off and jumps into the car. He loves his water sports as much as I do. He’s been swimming since he was just a pup.

“Ready, Sis?” I ask when Sophie gets into the car.

“What are you planning, Caboose? You’ve got that evil glint in your eyes.”

“Who? Me? Never.”

“If you’re planning on getting me back for last night, don’t bother,” she grins.

“Come on, Soaps. Never!”

“You’re such a liar,” she laughs.

“Feel like placing a friendly bet on who hits the drink first?”

“You’re on, Caboose. No tears when I whoop your butt.”

“You wish.”

* * *

The holiday is coming to an end. Jagger is saying goodbye to his cousins, and Sophie and I are saying our final goodbyes too.

“Apart from the ambush with Sam, I had a great time, Sis.”

“Funny, watching you squirm was the highlight of my holiday,” she chuckles.

“Like I said. I owe you one.”

“Come here, Caboose.”

Sophie locks me in a bear hug.

“I’m going to miss you, Carter.”

“I wish we didn’t have to part,” I agree.

“Look after my little nephew. He’s growing way too fast.”

“Don’t remind me.”

“Oh, and keep me posted on the Au Pair front, will you?”

“You’re like a dog with a bone, Sis.”

“You better believe it.”

“I love you, Sophie.”

“Back at ya, Caboose.”

Jagger and I board the jet. It’s a long flight, so he and I settle in. Jagger falls asleep before we’re even an hour into the flight. The poor kid is exhausted.

I find myself thinking of Ella. I’m excited to see her. Perhaps my sister has a point. I am lonely. I need a woman in my life. Am I thinking of Ella because I’m lonely, or is she truly someone I could fall in love with?

I guess that’s something I have to explore. I keep telling myself it’s just a crush, but this trip has proven to me that there is something more between us than pure lust on my part.

I wonder how she feels about me.

I fall asleep somewhere during the flight. Ella is in my dream. We’re making love on the beach back home, and I swear it’s as vivid as any dream I’ve ever had. I’m all hot and bothered when I wake up.

You’ve got it bad for this English woman, partner.

Yeah, tell me something I don’t know.

ELLA

“Oh, hell, it’s worse than I thought,” Anna groans as I hang up the call.

“What?”

“You definitely have it bad for your boss.”

“Are you starting again?”

“Come on, Ella. How long have we been friends?”

“Okay, fine. I’d love to have someone like Carter in my life. There. Are you happy now?”

“Not as happy as you’re going to be when he gives it to ya good,” Anna says in a fake Texan twang.

“Oh, shut up. Are you all packed?”

“Nicely sidestepped, Doc. And, yes. Sadly, I’m ready to go.”

“Ugh! I wish you didn’t have to leave. I’m going to miss you so much.”

“I can’t believe the time has gone by so fast. I feel better now that I’ve seen where you work and live. Jealous as hell, but better.”

“Thank you so much for taking the time to come here, Anna. It’s too soon for me to venture back to London. I know Sebastian will be all over me like a cheap suit. I don’t want to put myself back in that toxic place.”

“I get it. You don’t have to explain it to me, my friend. I’m just mad that he’s driven my best friend so far away. Of course,

this does seem to be a move up,” she winks.

“It’s okay. I’d rather be a doctor than an Au Pair. Don’t get me wrong. I love being with Jagger, but I miss practicing medicine.”

“I know what you mean. You’re too good a doctor to be playing Nursemaid all day. No disrespect intended.”

“I daren’t get into the medical field right now. That’s the first place Sebastian will look for me.”

“He’s made such a mess of your life. I wish I could cut off his balls. I pray he comes in for a simple procedure.”

I laugh at Anna’s expression. Sebastian better stay out of the OR if he knows what’s good for him.

“Come on. We’d better get going.”

The drive to the airport is a somber one. I hate that my best friend has to leave, but life goes on. I shed a good few tears when she boards. It’s awful. I stop off at a pizzeria on my way home and order a meat lover’s special. Drawing my sorrows in pepperoni seems the logical path. It’s a good thing I have the metabolism of a jackrabbit.

I use the next few days to my advantage. Hannah and I explore the local markets and hike as often as we can. Before I know it, it’s the night before Carter and Jagger return home. It’s been very quiet here without them. I’m glad they’re coming home.

Little Jagger has crept his way into my heart. I’ve always wondered how I would enjoy being a mother, and the practice with Jagger has been a positive one. So far, anyway. Who knows? It could turn out to be much more challenging down the line.

* * *

“Ella!” Jagger yells as he leaps out of the car and runs to me.

“Hey, you!” I laugh as he nearly knocks me off my feet.

He's talking at a hundred miles an hour, and I'm struggling to keep up. I can tell that he's had a good time from the expression on his face and the gesticulation he does as he shares tales of his adventure with me.

Dash saves me by rushing up to his master and licking him into hysterical giggles.

"Phew! That was a mouthful," I sigh when Carter eventually gets a word in.

"Yeah, unfortunately, he slept on the plane, so now he's all systems go."

"I'm sure Dash is happy about that. The rose bushes are looking far too quaffed, by the way," I grin.

"Poor Mateo," Carter laughs.

"You look rested."

"I feel it. Did you have fun?"

"Yes, I got to see quite a bit of LA while you were away. I even went hiking in Santa Monica."

"Isn't the fall foliage fantastic?"

"Spectacular."

"I didn't know you enjoyed hiking."

"I love it."

"Very brave of you to go alone."

"I went with Hannah, the Au Pair next door."

"Oh, the Taylor family's girl. Are they enjoying LA?"

"It sounds like it. Hannah says it's a much easier pace than New York."

"We have new families moving from New York all the time."

"Of course. I forgot you're in real estate. Have you met the Taylors?"

"No. I know. I'm a lousy neighbor."

"Not lousy. Just busy."

“Well, I’m glad to be home. There’s nothing like sleeping in your own bed,” Carter says.

His words are innocuous, but the thought of him in bed makes my skin tingle.

Don’t start, Ella. Smile and go about your business of Au Pairing.

* * *

It’s past 8 a.m., and Jagger isn’t galloping through the house with Dash giving chase. Something is amiss. I make my way to his bedroom and open the door softly so as not to disturb him if he’s still asleep. Jagger is still on holiday, so I don’t mind if he wants to sleep in. After the hectic vacation he’s had, I wouldn’t blame him for catching a few extra zees.

I sneak up to the side of his bed and watch as his chest moves up and down. His face is flushed, which is unusual for a sleeping child, so I place the back of my hand on his forehead. He’s burning up.

Ugh! It looks like my charge has brought home more than just a few war stories. It seems like there is a stowaway bug at work here. Poor little guy.

An hour later, Jagger wanders downstairs, clutching his Nerf gun in one hand and a blanket in the other.

“I’m not feeling well,” he moans.

“Hi, sweetheart. Yes, you’re burning up,” I coo as I bend down to pick him up. “Come, let’s have a look at you.”

“My throat is burning,” he says, putting his head on my shoulders.

I fall back into doctor mode with such ease that it’s automatic. After doing a thorough check, I make my diagnosis. Chickenpox.

“You’re going to be okay, little guy. I’ve got you. Come, let’s get you back in bed.”

Once Jagger is comfy, I call Carter.

“Hi, Ella. Is everything okay?”

“Hi, Carter. I’m sorry for disturbing you. I’m calling to let you know that Jagger has chicken pox. Please don’t worry; everything is under control. I just thought you should know.”

“Oh, shit.”

“He’ll be fine; don’t worry.”

“Yes, I don’t doubt that. It’s just that I never had chickenpox as a child. I hope I don’t get it.”

“Oh, dear. I see. Okay, well, let’s keep an eye on you too,” I say without thinking.

“Do you think I should go to the doctor?”

Why? You have one living in the same house as you.

“Uhm. Are you feeling okay?”

“I do have a scratchy throat.”

“I wouldn’t stress too much.”

Famous last words. Carter looks like hell when he gets home. Clearly, the chickenpox virus has him by the scruff of the neck. It’s a rather unpleasant experience when you’re an adult, but all is not lost. I’m well versed in how to treat the symptoms and what to look out for to avoid any nasty complications. I’m probably the most qualified Au Pair Carter could ever have hired. Ironic. I should be charging more, I think, thoroughly amused.

“Looks like the bug has you licked,” I say, placing the back of my hand against his forehead. “Yup. You have a fever.”

“Damn it. I really don’t need this right now,” he groans.

“I’ll go to the store and get something for pain and fever and some calamine lotion while you hop into bed.”

“Sounds like you’ve done this before.”

“You see a lot of colorful bugs when you work with children,” I say, hoping Carter will accept that as a reasonable explanation. “Also, my aunt had chickenpox when she was an

adult, so I know what to do,” I add a little white lie to seal the deal.

“Oh, okay. Thanks, Ella.”

“My pleasure.”

I return to the house half an hour or so later with my bag of tricks to find Carter and Jagger snuggled up in Jagger’s room. My heart nearly melts at the sight of Carter all squashed up and contorted so he fits onto Jagger’s small bed. I swear it’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.

It’s all I can do to keep myself from throwing myself at Carter. What a sweet dad he is. Carter spots me, presses his finger against his lips, and points to a sleeping Jagger. I smile and nod, and then I leave the room so the two can have a nap.

The next few days are filled with a succession of calamine patrols, encouraging talks about not scratching, and general complaining. And that’s just Jagger. Carter is a trooper, but I can see he’s not impressed with the whole chickenpox virus malarkey. Men are terrible patients, they say. Whoever they are. To be fair, though, Carter tries his best to stay upbeat.

Once the spots are out in force, the fever abates, and now Jagger is irritated. He wants to play outside and go back to school, so it takes a herculean effort to keep him all calaminated up to the eyeballs. Even the insides of his ears are itchy.

“Ugh! Kill me now,” Carter says while he rubs his skin with the palms of his hands. “I look ridiculous,” he fusses.

“How can I help?” I offer a sympathetic ear.

“I’m sorry to ask, but there’s a spot on my back I just cannot get to. And believe me, I’ve tried,” he says, pointing. “Would you mind?”

Are you kidding? Would I mind?

“Sure.”

“Oh, great. Thank you,” he sighs and lifts up his shirt.

“I’ll rub on some more lotion, shall I?”

“I don’t care what you do. Just make it stop,” he groans.

Hhmm. I could take your mind off the itch by jumping your bones.

“How’s this?” I ask, rubbing the cool lotion on the place he pointed to. Carter’s back is strong. I can feel all the back muscles as I run my fingers over the surface. Sure, there are a litany of spots there at present, but that doesn’t make him any less Greek-god-like.

“Aaahhhh...keep rubbing. Ooff, yeah. That’s the spot.”

I can only imagine what anyone walking past the room right now must think of the noises Carter’s making. They are, for lack of a better description, bang-on sexual. I’m turned on as hell as I keep rubbing and reminding myself that I’m a doctor first and a woman second.

I can’t help but giggle at the sight.

“What? Does my back look like peanut brittle?” he chuckles.

“Nope. You’re alright.”

“How’s Jagger today?”

“He’s outside with Dash. What do you think?”

“Bloody kids. They infect you with whatever plagues them and then bounce back like nothing ever happened.”

“That’s the truth of it,” I laugh. “Messy, noisy, pint-sized assassins, the lot.”

“You must have seen your fair share of ailments as an Au Pair. I don’t know how you do it.”

“Well, to be fair, I did have all my childhood illnesses when I was supposed to have them.”

“Unlike me, you mean.”

“Uh-huh.”

“You’d think an overachiever such as myself would have taken care of those, wouldn’t you?” he chuckles.

“You’re being very brave,” I encourage the poor man. “Getting the virus as an adult is serious business. I’m glad you haven’t had any complications.”

“Aint’ nobody got time for complications,” Carter says. “Not when you have a ton of work to get to.”

“There will be plenty of time for that. Rest. Au Pair’s orders.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

My hands are as warm as the feeling coursing through my body. I’d better get the hell out of Carter’s space before I do or say something stupid. This man makes me forget myself, and that’s not a good thing.

“I’d better go check on Jagger. Who knows what damage his little nails are wreaking on his spotty skin?”

“Thank you, Ella,” Carter smiles. “For taking such good care of the Moore men.”

“It’s my pleasure, Carter.”

Yeah, a little too pleasurable, I think.

CARTER

Normally, I'd be overcome with cabin fever. But, strangely, this time around, I'm content working from home. I'd like to think that it's because I'm treating this virus with the respect it deserves and being as careful as I can be. But I suspect that's a bunch of baloney. The truth is that I'm enjoying having Ella in my space.

What the hell is happening to me? My heart beats a little faster when she enters a room, and I find myself watching her every move when she isn't looking. Have I gone completely soft in the head? This woman works for me. She is not here for my sexual desires. She's here for Jagger. If I mess this up, I'll be furious with myself.

I haven't seen my son so settled since before the divorce. Ella is good for him. Hell, she's good for me, too. So, why can't I stop imagining her with her stunning legs wrapped around my waist? Not even chickenpox can dull the sexual tension that rages inside me when I'm around her.

I've been working from home for a few days now. Thank God I have that to keep me occupied, or the Au Pair would be in trouble. Jagger is much better, so he and his trusty sidekick, Dash, are getting on with doing whatever it is they do around here to amuse themselves and occupy their days.

Amanda is coming around this afternoon to fetch him, so I decide to stay out of sight. I'm too irritated to talk to her. I'm afraid if she says one skew word to me, I'm liable to bite off her head, and that's not good for our perpetually tenuous

standoff. Poor Ella will have to face the dragon's wrath this time around.

Jagger pops into my office just before 6 p.m. to say goodbye.

"You look funny, Daddy," he giggles.

"Uh-huh. And whose fault is that, you little stinker?" I smile and ruffle his hair.

"Ah, there you are," Ella says, taking him by the hand. "We'd better get you cleaned up before your mum gets here."

"Would you mind doing the handover, please, Ella? I'd prefer to keep my spotty self out of sight."

"Of course."

"Thanks."

"I'm going to miss you, big guy," I say and kiss my Jagger.

"I'm going to miss you too, Daddy."

"You'd better. I'll see you in a week, my love."

"I wish I could take Dash with me," he groans.

"I'm sure Dash would love that. But, you know mom is allergic to him."

"That's so silly," he says, folding his arms in frustration.

"I hear you, buddy."

"Come, sweetheart," Ella smiles and leads Jagger away.

"Be good!" I call after the little guy.

"I will," he calls back.

* * *

It's close to midnight, and I can't sleep. Most of the spots have gone, but the temptation to scratch remains. Perhaps that's not the only itch that needs tending to. I sit up in bed so as to better ponder my self-imposed misery.

She's just down the hall, you know. You could knock out a quick one and sleep like a baby afterward.

This isn't helpful. A glass of warm milk used to do the trick when I couldn't sleep as a child. What the heck? It's worth a shot.

I make my way to the kitchen. I love it when everyone is asleep. Sometimes I feel like I'm a guest in my own home with the staff going about their tasks. I hand-picked every one of my staff, so I enjoy their personalities and appreciate their skills. But sometimes a man just wants to roam his castle without eyes on him.

Movement from the far corner of the kitchen catches my eye. Damn it. So much for being alone. Who could be wandering around the place at this time of night? Why aren't they asl...

Oh, shit! It's Ella. My heart, along with a few other organs, leaps into action. Oh, no. She's wearing a lace ensemble that doesn't leave much to the imagination, and try as I might, I cannot control my growing admiration for her fantastic form.

Worst of all, my shorts aren't doing much to help me hide my erection. This is so humiliating. I try to move away before she sees me, but it's no good. I bump into the pots that are dangling above the cooker, causing a cacophony of metal noises as the pots bang against one another.

Ella whizzes around.

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I..."

"No, please," I mumble. "It's fine. I..."

"Can't sleep either?" she asks me. I watch in horror as her eyes roam my figure and settle, briefly, on my manhood.

I position myself behind the counter in a feeble attempt to hide my excitement, but I fear that ship has sailed. Ella looks rather awkward herself. She is pulling on her nightie, moving it away from her breasts. Even so, I can see her nipples through the gossamer material.

"Uh, no. I figured a glass of warm milk would do the trick," I waffle.

This is beyond awkward. I'd better get the hell out of the kitchen before I nail her on the counter between the fruit bowl and the microwave oven.

"Great minds think alike," she smiles bashfully. "Can I include you in my sleep remedy?" she asks, pointing to the glass in her hand.

Crunch time, Carter. Stay and bang her brains out, or leave with your dignity, or what's left of it, intact?

I choose the former, even though everything that's logical inside my mind is screaming for me to get away from the scantily clad Au Pair.

"If you don't mind."

I watch as Ella pulls a glass from the shelf and moves toward the fridge to retrieve the milk. She is so perfect.

"Sugar?"

"No thanks."

Leave, you fool. Run!

"Do you often have trouble sleeping?" I ask, hoping to distract myself.

"Not often, no. You?"

"No. I think the remnants of the virus working their way out of my system are what have me nightowling. What's your theory on your dilemma?"

"Who knows?" she smiles.

Silence. The only sound is that of the microwave doing its magic while Ella and I grasp desperately for conversational topics.

"This must be a first for you," I grin. "Bumping into a half-naked employer."

"Yup. I can't say I was planning on it," she grins back.

"Is it just me, or is this awkward?"

"Slightly."

“Okay. Let’s start over. Hi, Ella. Would you please warm up some milk for me? I’m having trouble sleeping.”

“Hi, Carter. Yes, of course. Can I add a shot of whiskey? I hear it works wonders.”

“A shot of whiskey is an excellent idea.”

I feel more relaxed. The same cannot be said for my raging hard-on, though, so I stay where I am, with only my torso visible to Ella.

“Who knew I would walk into an alcohol-fueled slumber party?” I tease.

The sexual tension is palpable. I can tell when a woman wants me, and Ella’s eyes are speaking volumes. The only question now is, what am I going to do about it?

“Here you go,” she smiles and places the drink in front of me, “one liquored-up glass of milk.”

I reach out before she has a chance to remove her hand and stroke her finger lightly. She doesn’t move away.

Ella’s lips are full, and her eyes are dancing. It’s all the confirmation I need that this isn’t just me. The sexual attraction is mutual.

I don’t want to spoil the moment with too many words, so instead of using my mouth, I allow my body to speak to the stunning woman beckoning me with her eyes. She is so sexy, I have trouble controlling my breathing. Can she see how rapidly my chest is moving as I gasp for fresh air, drunk with her scent?

Ella’s skin is soft and warm under my touch. I get up and move around the counter.

“You are so beautiful,” I manage, and I cup her face.

I pull her in slowly until our faces are so close that I can feel her breath. Ella parts her lips slightly. It’s the tacit permission I’ve been waiting for.

“I’m going to kiss you now,” I whisper.

She doesn't move away. Instead, she moves her head closer and opens her mouth. I have chills the moment our lips touch. Suddenly, I'm lost in her warmth. I pull her in as close as I can. Our bodies are touching and I can feel her heartbeat on my bare chest.

Ella moans softly as I run my hands over her back and cup her perfect buttocks. I've been dreaming of this for months, and I'm not disappointed. My hunger for this woman is deep. She tastes so good.

My lips leave hers as I taste her neck and then find her hard nipple through her nightie. She throws her head back in pleasure and digs her nails into my back. The action spurs me on.

I'm on my knees now, fumbling to rid Ella of her panties. She opens her legs slightly in anticipation. My fingers are inside her, and Ella writhes with pleasure as I explore her warmth.

"You're perfect," I groan.

"I want you," she demands breathlessly.

I'm dizzy with pleasure. I haven't wanted anyone as much as I want this beauty, and her moans ignite an urgency in me to plunge into her.

Before I know it, Ella is on the counter, and her nightie is on the floor beside her panties and my shorts. I thrust myself into her wetness, and the ecstasy I feel is indescribable. My exciting lover throws back her head as I thrust in and out of her with a driving force. I take her nipple into my mouth and nibble softly on it as she digs her nails into my back and writhes with pleasure.

I wrap my arms around her beautiful upper body to give me control of her movements. We slow down for a moment. Deep, slow, deliberate movements. Ella's eyes are dreamy and smokey. She doesn't move her gaze from me for a moment while we make passionate love. What is this power she holds over me? I'm bewitched.

I can't wait a moment longer. I must have what I desire, and I must have it right now or I'll go mad, so I pick her up, wrap

her legs around my waist, and walk her over to the wall. I'm driving hard into Ella, and she's loving it.

The passion I have for Ella that has been building up inside of me for months is pushing its way to a boiling point. I can feel my orgasm rolling to a head. My legs are weak, and my body tingles as I climax. I shudder with its intensity and am barely able to hold up my lover as I ride the wave of ecstasy.

Ella is right there with me. Together, we're staking claim to the age-old prize that passionate lovemaking delivers.

Ella rests her head on my shoulder while she's suspended in mid-air. I don't want to let go of her, so I keep her there for a few moments longer. I remain in the warmth of my lover's perfect body for as long as I can before I place her gently on the floor.

We kiss again. It's incredible. Ella is incredible.

* * *

I open my eyes and stretch out in bed. It's morning, and the California sun is out. Was it a dream? Did I really make love to Ella in my kitchen last night, or am I caught up in a strange chickenpox virus-driven delirium?

I know it's real when I can smell her scent on my skin. Ah, shit. What have I done?

ELLA

I want to shout his name from the rooftops. I want to bury my head in the sand and pray that my guilt is buried alongside it. But, mostly, I want to manhandle Carter once more in a passionate embrace and make love to him like there's no tomorrow.

What have you done, you fool? There's no coming back from this.

Okay, so throwing myself shamelessly at my boss and bonking him senseless was a tad foolish. But I wasn't the one who started it. Not that I was entirely blameless in the act. If I'm honest, one would struggle to find a more enthusiastic participant. But, holy crap! What a night.

Now it's morning, and I'm not sure what to do next. Do I greet my boss and pretend that it never happened? I could hide out in my room today. Jagger is at school until late today, so technically, I'm not required to make my presence known. Ugh! What a fine mess. I can only imagine what Anna would say if she knew. It's better I keep it to myself. Am I dying to tell her, though?

No, Ella. Not a good idea.

I manage to skulk about the entire morning without bumping into the man who made my toes curl in sexual bliss.

It's time to fetch Jagger from school and take him to music practice. I love listening to him belt out tunes while he practices the drums. He's so cute.

“You sing beautifully, sweetheart,” I praise him once his lesson is over.

“Did you like my drum solo?” he grins.

“I loved it. You’re very good.”

“I want to be in a band when I’m older,” he says enthusiastically. “Like the Stray Kids.”

“Wow. That’s cool.”

I’m not sure who he’s referring to, but I’m sure they must be all the rage.

“Can we stop for ice cream, Ella? P.L.E.A.S.E?”

“How can I say no to such a cutie? Okay. But just one scoop. We don’t want to spoil your appetite.”

“Okay.”

After wolfing down ice cream, it’s time to get Jagger ready for his mom’s pickup. I still haven’t seen Carter. But, as they say, all good things must come to an end, and around 6 p.m., while I’m on my way to the kitchen, I walk smack bang into the very person I’ve successfully avoided all day.

“Hey,” he says as I nearly knock him over, “where’s the fire?”

“Oops. Sorry about that.”

I wish he wouldn’t look at me like that. I may just lose control and molest him again.

“You’ve been scarce today. How are you?” he asks.

“Yes. I had a few things to take care of,” I fib.

“Okay.”

I don’t know what to say next. Damn this mouth full of teeth.

“I think we should talk,” he says finally.

Uh-oh. I don’t like the sound of that. Am I in trouble?

“Uhm. Sure.”

“Let’s chat in my office.”

So, this is it. One night of total abandonment, and I'm out on the street. Shit!

"Make yourself comfortable," Carter smiles and gestures to a chair.

"Thanks."

He sits down opposite me.

"About last night," he begins, and I wish the earth would open up and swallow me whole. But no such luck. I don't say a word.

"I apologize if I made you uncomfortable, Ella," he starts. "I want you to know that it's not my habit to take advantage of my staff. This has never happened before."

As silly as it sounds, his words make me feel better. I'm glad to know that I'm not just another notch on his employer's belt, as it were.

"I'll understand if you don't want to continue with us. Again, I'm truly sorry for taking advantage."

"That's very decent of you, Carter. But, you didn't exactly push me into it. I went willingly," I smile bashfully.

Carter's expression changes. He has the same sexy, irresistible, naughty grin he wore last night, and my stomach does a sudden and unexpected backflip.

"I see," he grins.

"I'd like to stay on if that's alright."

"I can't guarantee that I may not need another shot of whiskey and milk at some point in the future," he says in a husky voice.

"It's a good thing I know just where you can get one," I grin.

Am I flirting shamelessly with my boss? What the hell is the matter with me? This cannot end well. Bosses and staff make terrible lovers. It's a recipe for disaster. But, damned if I don't want him to put his hands all over me right here in his office.

"You are forbidden fruit, Ella," he says, getting up from his seat.

He's closing the distance between us, and my heart is racing faster with every step he takes. The heat radiates between my legs as I anticipate his touch. I'm suddenly aware of every part of my body. My skin is tingling.

Carter closes the door and looks back at me. I know what he's thinking because I'm likely entertaining the same lascivious thoughts.

"You smell so good," he whispers under his breath as he runs his fingers over my cheek.

I want to stand up, but my knees are jello. Like a deer caught in the headlights, I stare at Carter without moving a muscle.

"You were magnificent last night," he purrs.

"As were you."

"I have to kiss you or I'm going to explode."

I breathe shallowly as he brings his lips to mine. They're warm and soft, and I automatically open my mouth in anticipation of his skilled tongue. The same feeling of urgency rushes through me as it did last night in the kitchen when Carter and I were locked together.

I jump as someone knocks on the office door. Carter straightens and moves away from me in an instant.

"Come in," he says as soon as he's behind his desk again.

"Excuse me, Sir."

"Yes, George. What is it?"

"Mrs. Moore, excuse me, Miss Amanda is here, Sir. She'd like a word with you if you're available."

I sit very still. I'm wearing my official Au Pair face in the hopes that the butler doesn't notice my burning shame. I feel like I've been discovered with my knickers around my ankles.

"I'll be there in a minute, George. Thank you."

"Yes, Sir," he says and leaves us.

"Terrible timing," Carter groans. "Don't you disappear," he smiles and kisses me.

“I wouldn’t dream of it, Mr. Moore,” I tease.

“Irresistible,” he mumbles, runs his gaze over my body, and leaves the room.

He leaves the door open, and I can’t help but hear Amanda’s voice echoing down the passage as she talks to Carter. I can’t help but listen intently as I shamelessly eavesdrop on their conversation. Yes, I know. I’m a bad girl! But I can’t help myself. I suddenly feel invested in their relationship, however fractious it may be.

A part of me feels for the woman, albeit a part that is hidden under many layers of dislike. She must be kicking herself for having let go of such an amazing man. Does she have any regrets? It certainly seems like it if I listen to the tone of her voice. Only someone with regret could be that snarky. I listen intently for any signs in Carter’s voice that he may still be hung up on his ex-wife. I’m relieved when I don’t pick up on any.

“Why didn’t you take Jagger to the doctor, Carter? How can you be so irresponsible? Any number of things could have gone wrong,” I hear Amanda fire off the first round. Childhood illnesses are no small thing.

“Honestly. Don’t be ridiculous, Amanda. It was chickenpox, for goodness sake, not the bubonic plague. Look at him out there. He’s fine. Millions of children far less robust than our son have survived the chickenpox virus. See for yourself. He’s back to his busy self again. Besides, Ella is a very capable Au Pair. She had it under control from the very start.”

“Seriously? The Au Pair diagnosed our sick child! Are you kidding me? That’s insane! I’m not happy. What the hell does a nanny know about diseases?”

“Oh, I see. I suppose I did that wrong too. I’m glad to see you care about one of us, at least,” Carter replies, drolly.

“Oh, please. You’re a grown man. You’ll be fine. Carter is just a little boy,” she snaps.

“You know what? Whatever. I’m sorry, Amanda, but I’m busy. Was there something else you wanted to yell at me about? I’d

like to get back to work.”

“Ugh! Fine. You’re such a child. I’m going to use the bathroom, and then I’m taking our son for a checkup with the doctor before I take him home. “

“You do that. You’re only making a fool of yourself, Amanda.”

“Rather a concerned fool than a horny idiot. Yeah, that’s right. Au pair...pathetic.”

I move away from the door because I know Amanda will most probably use the guest bathroom down the hall from Carter’s office. The last thing I need is for her to bust me listening in on her and Carter’s conversation.

I make it back to the chair just in time to see her as she storms past the room. She sees me and stops dead in her tracks. She glares at me as if I’m gum stuck to the bottom of her shoe.

“The next time my son is ill, kindly refrain from playing nurse-nurse and take him to a qualified doctor, please,” she spits at me.

“Yes, ma’am,” I manage. The alternative wording flashing in the forefront of my mind is better left unsaid.

Amanda keeps staring at me. What is she waiting for? I’m not bloody curtsying if that’s what she’s thinking. I keep my eyes focused on hers. If there’s one thing you learn as a doctor, it’s how to keep your cool under pressure. There’s no way I’m backing down from this. She can glower at me until the cows come home.

I’m sure she’s going to blast me again, but she doesn’t. Instead, Amanda snorts in derision before she struts off, mincing like a drag queen on Jimmy Choos. A few minutes later, she passes the office again. This time, she pays me no mind. I remain seated until I hear the front door close. Thank God she’s flown off on her broom.

Carter returns. He’s looking rather harassed, so I hold my tongue. The poor man doesn’t need another woman chewing off his ear.

“I’m sorry about that,” he says, raking his hands through his hair. “Amanda had no right to talk to you like that.”

“It’s fine. Don’t worry about it. I’m a big girl.”

“Now. Where were we?”

“We were discussing the merits of milk and whiskey, I believe,” I grin.

“Oh, yeah. That’s right,” he smiles and sits on the edge of his desk. “So, we’re okay?”

“We’re fine,” I smile.

“Trust Amanda to spoil the moment,” he sighs. “I’m afraid we’ll have to continue our discussion another time. I have a conference call in five minutes and I’d better make sure I don’t look like a Snickers bar.”

“You look good from where I’m sitting,” I wink and get up to leave.

Carter catches me by the hand and pulls me close.

“One more thing before you go,” he says in a low voice. “You are the sexiest Au Pair on the planet.”

He kisses me, and my legs go lame.

* * *

Amanda bothers me. I know she is still in love with Carter. I’m under no illusion that he and I are now a couple, but I feel like it could become something special. However, I don’t want to flog a dead horse.

AMANDA

This is bullshit! He's sleeping with the Au Pair. I know he is, and even though we are divorced, it doesn't sit well with me. Nothing about this has been good from the start. Who is this woman? Surely, if she's spending all this time with my son, I deserve to know more about her. The whole thing stinks to high Heaven.

California is a hotbed of hussies looking to climb their way to the top via the bedroom. Carter may be a standup guy, but he's no match for a scheming hussy. No man is. If there's one thing I know, it's how a determined woman's mind works. Men are clueless when it comes to seeing through the cunning machinations of a social-climbing woman.

It's up to me to find out as much as I can about this English tart, Ella Jones, and warn Carter before it's too late—before the bitch sinks her claws too deeply into the man I love. She isn't fooling me with those doe eyes of hers!

I remember the name of the agency, so I look up the number and ask to speak to the agent that placed Ella with our family. I'm told she's ill and will be back at the office in a few days. As if I'm not annoyed enough as it is, now I have to wait. This is utter bullshit, so I demand to have her cell number.

The plucky bitch on the other end of the line wants to know if there's anything wrong with the placement. Is Ella problematic, or words to that effect.

"Look, I don't care to discuss such matters with you," I snap at the little upstart. "I want to speak directly to Mrs. Digby about

Ella Jones.”

She’s a bit taken aback when I assert myself. She umms and ahhs before she asks me to hold for a moment. The elevator music playing in the background does nothing to improve my mood. Bloody saxophone music. Honestly! I’d rather have silence than this caterwauling.

“Sorry for keeping you waiting, Ma’am. I’ve spoken to Mrs. Darcy, and she’ll call you back in five minutes. Does that suit you, Mrs. Moore?”

I don’t correct her with regard to my title. For all intents and purposes, I’m making this phone call as Mrs. Moore, seeing as Carter is too bewitched to do so himself. Bloody idiot.

“That’s fine,” I say and hang up, unwilling to waste more of my valuable time on this lackey.

I know who it is when my phone rings.

“Mrs. Darcy?” I answer.

“Yes, hello, Mrs. Moore. My apologies for keeping you waiting. How can I be of assistance?”

Her voice is professional, and I can hear she’s struggling to talk through a stuffy nose.

“Thank you for calling me back,” I say, having had a few minutes to calm down.

“Only a pleasure. I believe you wanted to talk to me about Miss Jones.”

“Yes.”

“Are you having problems with her?”

“What do you know about her?”

“I vetted her personally. She comes highly recommended. Her testimonials are sterling.”

“I see.”

“Is something wrong?”

“No. Unfortunately, Mr. Moore didn’t involve me in the Au Pair vetting process, so naturally, I want to do my own

background checks on someone who is spending a considerable amount of time with my son,” I say, careful not to rock the boat. I can’t have her calling Carter.

“Of course. I can assure you that we are always very careful when it comes to procuring and placing staff. Our reputation depends on it and our clients trust us.”

“Very well. Would you be so kind as to email me her details, please, Mrs. Darcy? For my own peace of mind,” I ask in a pleasing tone.

“Certainly.”

I give her my email address and exchange a few pleasantries to keep the wheels greased. As soon as I receive the email, I make a call to an old detective friend of the family. I think it’s high time that I find out just who and what I’m dealing with.

* * *

“What’s troubling you today, Amanda?”

“Why?”

“You seem agitated.”

That’s an understatement. I’m ready to make mince pies out of a slutty Au Pair.

“Of course, I’m agitated. Carter is sleeping with my son’s Au Pair. An Au Pair! Do you have any idea how humiliating that is?”

“How do you know they’re sleeping together?”

“Because I have eyes! A blind man without a stick can see that the two are involved.”

“What’s upsetting you about this, Amanda? You and Carter are divorced. He can have a relationship with whomever he pleases.”

Honestly! Why am I wasting my money on this stupid bitch?

“She’s my son’s nanny!”

“Is that all that’s upsetting you? Her social status?”

“Of course not. I told you I’m still in love with Carter. Don’t you listen when I tell you stuff?”

“I do listen, Amanda.”

I get up and start pacing. Therapy is useless. I don’t even know why I bother. This woman isn’t doing anything to help me.

“Take a few deep breaths, Amanda. Let’s talk about this.”

I’m dangerously close to tears. Not because I’m sad or anything, but because I’m livid. How dare Carter replace me so easily? Did he ever truly love me? What can I do now to show him how sorry I am that I left our marriage and gave him up?

The only thing I can think of to remedy my disastrous decision is to show him that the Au Pair is after his money. The detective told me to be patient while he digs around. He told me that it’s a little trickier when he has to move across continents to dig up information about someone.

So, here I am. Up shit’s creek without a paddle. Forced to wait patiently, like an idiot, while Ella Bloody Jones digs her claws deeper into Carter.

As if that weren’t bad enough, she seems to have bewitched my son too. It’s Ella this and Ella that. I don’t know how much more of this I can take before I lose it.

“I have to go.”

“We have time, Amanda.”

“You have. I don’t.”

I grab my purse and head for the door.

* * *

My search is futile. Ella has disappeared without a trace. At first, I thought I’d be able to track her down by keeping an eye on Anna and Sue, but that effort came to naught.

“Is that for me? Thank you, Sebastian. They’re beautiful.”

Emily Thornton is a stunning woman. We met at a symposium a few months ago, and I could tell that she was interested in me. I’ve been on my own since Ella flew the coop, and a man has needs, so I decided to court her. The only snag is that my parents have no idea that Ella upped and left like the proverbial thief in the night.

It’s been a harrowing affair, coming up with excuses as to why she hasn’t been with me on the few occasions I’ve been to dinner with them. I have no intention of admitting defeat where that little bitch is concerned, so I’ve kept my distance as much as possible and kept shtum on the whole runaway Ella issue.

“The roses aren’t half as stunning as you, Emily,” I shmooze the lovely Emily.

“You do know that this is our third date,” she coos.

“I do.”

“Does that mean you’re planning on taking advantage of me?” she grins.

I doubt whether this woman, attractive though she may be, could ever hold a candle to Ella when it comes to getting my motor running. What would she say if I wrapped my hands around her pretty little neck and squeezed as I came hard?

“It might,” I smile sardonically as the thought of roughing her up in the bedroom gives me an instant hard-on.

“Shall we go to dinner first?” I ask seductively, building up to the sexual crescendo in my mind’s eye.

“If you promise to be dessert,” she giggles.

Emily may be good-looking, but she isn’t Ella. No one is Ella.

I move in closer and kiss Emily on the cheek.

“After you.”

I made a reservation at one of London’s best restaurants in view of tonight’s coup. The first time is always the most exciting for me. Sex with a stranger is freeing. I plan on

training this one from the get-go. The mistake I made with Ella was that I hid my true tastes in the bedroom for too long.

Had I molded her into my perfect lover and partner from day one, I'm convinced Ella would have seen things my way. Instead, I changed tactics midstream. I won't do that again. I'll also make it perfectly clear to Emily from the start that I have no tolerance for rivals. She will be mine, whether she agrees or not. But, only until I find my Ella again. In the meantime, Emily will do nicely. I need a project to take my mind off my frustration.

* * *

It's been a month since Emily and I started dating, and already I'm bored. She's too clingy and insecure. I need an independent woman. One who knows her own mind. It makes it more rewarding to win over someone like that. Where's the challenge when they simply fall over with their legs in the air?

Ella was the perfect combination of inner strength and submission. Not too cocky, but just enough to make me feel like I was working for it, and succeeding along the way. Emily has yet to put up resistance to anything I've said or suggested. I'm over it, but I need someone by my side for outward appearances, so I continue the farce.

But, deep inside of me, I feel the flames smoldering. They're gathering momentum with each passing day. I must find Ella. If Emily has shown me anything, it's that Ella is my soulmate. She is the woman for me.

It's 4 p.m., and my last patient has just left. I spoke to a friend in confidence and told her I needed the name of a decent investigator. I'm clearly not going to find Ella on my own. Not with my work schedule. I have the PI's number loaded on my phone.

"Poppy," I say into the receiver, "you may go early today."

"Thank you, Doctor. Have a pleasant evening."

"Thank you."

I'm alone in the office as soon as she leaves. I dial the investigator's number.

"Hello. Roland Simms."

"Hello, Mr. Simms. My name is Sebastian. A mutual friend, Agatha, gave me your number."

"Hello, Sebastian. How may I be of assistance?"

"I'd like to discuss something with you. In person."

"Alright."

"Are you able to meet me today?"

"Anything for a friend of Agatha's," he says jovially.

"Good."

We agree on a time, and I suggest we meet in town. I don't want my patients to know about this, so I don't want him to come to my office.

It's 5 p.m. when Roland Simms sits down at a small table across from me. We order coffee and check each other out. I reckon he's in his late forties. He's well-groomed, has good taste in clothing, and sports an expensive watch. He must be good at what he does, as he has an air of confidence about him.

"How can I help?"

"I need you to find someone for me. I need you to do it quietly."

"I see."

Roland gives me a rundown on the information he needs on Ella, and I promise to supply him with as much as I can. I don't bother asking him for a breakdown of his fees, as I'm not bothered. I've never been short on money. Besides, this is important. I'll happily pay this man whatever he charges to get Ella back.

I feel better once the meeting is over.

I'm coming for you, Ella, my love. You can't hide from me forever. You're mine.

CARTER

I've dropped all pretense when it comes to my attraction to Ella. When we're alone, at least. It's nothing but professional between us in front of the other staff, and when we're with Jagger, of course. Not that I particularly care who knows, but I don't want to put Ella in an awkward position when it comes to the people she works alongside.

I have to say, I'm smitten. Being with Ella is unlike anything I've ever experienced. It's corny, I know, but I feel as if I've known her all my life. She's so easy to talk to, and her quick wit is refreshing. I find myself missing her when she's out with Jagger, and my heart skips a beat when I hear her voice in the house or smell her perfume in a room.

We've had a few stolen moments here and there, but I think it's time I explored the possibility of what this relationship could become, given the proper opportunity. It's time for a weekend away—just the two of us.

Jagger is with Amanda for ten days. She asked if he could accompany her on her annual ski holiday in Aspen, and I agreed. He's becoming quite proficient on the snow, and he does so enjoy building and decorating snowmen. I must admit that I have an ulterior motive for my enthusiastic altruism. This gives me an opportunity to have Ella all to myself for a few days.

As far as the rest of the household is concerned, Ella is off for a few days. Where she goes and what she does is no one's business but her own.

It's day two of Jagger's break when I call Ella into my office. Her scent wafts across the desk and envelopes my senses.

"You look lovely today, Ella," I say, no doubt boasting googly eyes. I hope I don't look too much like a lion about to pounce and ravage her sexy body.

"Thanks, Carter. Am I in trouble?"

"Why would you ask that?" I smile.

"Well, it does feel a bit like I've been called into the dean's office when I'm in this chair," she smirks.

"I hope the dean didn't undress you with his eyes the way I fear I may be doing at this very moment," I laugh.

"Not usually."

"Not that I can blame the man if he had. You are damned sexy, Jones."

She laughs and I watch intently as her chest moves up and down. What I wouldn't do to be able to leap over my desk and rip off that shirt she's wearing.

Focus, Carter.

"So," I begin, "I was thinking we could pop away for a few days. Seeing as Jagger is with Amanda, would you like that?"

"Sounds amazing. Where are we going?"

"Vegas. I want to visit a new branch there, and I thought I could show you the sights."

"Ooh, Vegas. Sounds naughty."

My rod stirs at the word.

"It could be," I grin.

"I'd love to see Las Vegas. When do we leave?"

"Tomorrow, if that suits you."

"Perfect."

"Meet me at the airport at 9 a.m. Leave your car there. We'll take my plane."

“Hmm. Cloak and dagger stuff.”

“I hope you know that I’m doing this for your benefit, Ella,” I say in earnest. “I don’t care who knows about us, but I don’t want you to feel awkward around the staff.”

“That’s very sweet of you, Carter. I agree. I can’t help but feel like a dirty little secret, though.”

“Hey, I’ll go out there now and do you in the foyer if you like,” I grin.

“Slow down, Romeo,” Ella giggles. “Okay, I believe you.”

“Great. I have to go into the office for a few hours. I’ll see you later. Have a good day, pretty one.”

“Thanks, boss,” she winks and leaves the office.

My eyes are on her until she disappears from view. Oh, boy. Vegas will never be the same again.

* * *

“Welcome back to The Palms, Mr. Moore. You look well, Sir.”

“Thank you, Geoffrey.”

“We have your suite ready for you and your guest. Welcome, Ma’am. If you need anything, please feel free to ask.”

“Thank you, Geoffrey,” Ella smiles.

The concierge smiles and leaves Ella and me to our own devices.

“Oh, my goodness. This place is breathtaking, Carter.”

“They do know how to look after their guests.”

“I feel a little underdressed.”

“Nonsense. You look beautiful. But if you’re in the mood for something a little bit special, they do have an excellent boutique downstairs. Feel free to browse while I pop out to the office for a few hours. Oh, I’ve booked you in at the spa. You deserve a little treat after putting up with Jagger’s and my spots.”

“That’s so sweet, Carter. Thank you.”

“Don’t be too grateful, or I’ll never leave this suite. You’re going to make me forget about the meeting I have.”

“Okay, I’ll show you my appreciation later,” she purrs, and I fear that I’ll be walking around with a raging hardon the entire day.

“I’ll see you later, Ella. Have fun,” I smile and kiss her luscious, plump lips.

It takes all my willpower to leave, but I know if I don’t, I’m done for. The thought of Ella waiting for me will keep me going.

* * *

This place is insane! I’ve never experienced such opulence before, and I have to be honest, I love it. A woman can get used to this alarmingly fast.

The spa is pure decadence. Marble counters and stairs, hardwood floors, soft music, and the perfect lighting create the perfect ambience. How wonderfully thoughtful of Carter.

“Good morning, Ma’am. I see you’re booked in for our signature body ritual.”

“Hi. Sounds heavenly.”

“You’re most certainly going to leave here feeling like a new person,” the perfectly put-together therapist smiles before she tells me what I have to look forward to. “We’ll start you off with a full body exfoliation, followed by a relaxing Salt Stone massage. Afterward, you’ll simply melt into the table as you’re cocooned in warm towels. Next, you’ll experience the healing effects of a detoxifying gemstone mask, revitalizing scalp massage, and calming foot massage.”

I want to say wow and do a little jig. Instead, I make sure my mouth isn’t hanging open and say something I imagine the stinking rich women she usually treats would do.

An hour and a half later, I emerged as a majestic swan. I had no idea it was even possible to feel and look this well put together. It's crazy what money can afford for the privileged. It's as if I've left the old Ella somewhere on the spa floor. Is it legal to feel this relaxed? Should I feel guilty? Hell, no!

It's 4 p.m., and I'm slothing about the suite. I had a delicious pasta for lunch and treated myself to dessert too, just for the hell of it. My phone rings. It's Carter.

"Hey, Cinderella. Did you enjoy your spa spoil?"

"Oh, my word. I feel like a new person."

"I like the old one just fine," he laughs. "Meet me in the lobby in ten?"

"Sure. Where are we going?"

"I want to check out an exclusive new listing, and I thought you'd like to join me."

"Great. See you in a bit."

I stopped off at the boutique after lunch and bought myself an outfit I thought Carter would like. I put it on and go downstairs.

"Wow!" he grins when he sees me. "You look amazing."

"Oh, this old thing," I sigh.

"You wear it well, Jones," he grins and takes my hand. "Let's go before the clock strikes midnight."

"So, tell me more about this new listing."

"It's superb. Nine thousand square feet of pure opulence, set on an acre of land."

"Nice."

"Nine beds, nine baths, a gym, a spa, golf course views, the works."

"Sounds heavenly. Price tag?"

"\$24 million."

"Is that all?" I chuckle.

“Yup. Pocket change,” he laughs.

“You’re not trying to impress me, are you, boss?” I purr.

“Perish the thought.”

“Thank you for the spa spoil.”

“My pleasure, Ella. You’re more than worth it.”

“You do know that this entitles you to bonus sex, right?”

“Ooh, goodie. I was hoping,” he laughs from his gut.

The house is next-level fabulous. Every room is a work of art, from design to decor.

“It’s so peaceful here,” I say while we’re at the pool, looking out at the desert backdrop.

“Quiet, isn’t it?”

“I don’t think you’ll have any problems selling this place.”

Carter moves in closer and stands with his chest against my back. He wraps his arm around my waist and rests his head on my shoulder. It’s as if we were molded together at the beginning of time, carefully separated, and now we’re whole again. A perfect fit.

I have goosebumps all over as he gently runs his hand over my stomach and then explores my thighs. My skin calls out for his touch, every cell exploding as his hand moves along.

I have never wanted anyone as much as I want Carter. I can feel my body melting into his. He coaxes me around slowly until we’re face-to-face before he kisses me slowly and passionately. My breathing quickens at the thought of what’s to come.

We’re all alone out here next to the blue water, under the blue Nevada sky, as my lover undresses me. Carter walks me to a chaise lounge and lays me down gently before he undresses. This is the first time I’ve seen him completely bare, and I can’t take my eyes off his perfect form. Carter Moore is utter, decadent perfection.

My eyes settle on the part of him that I've only ever felt inside of me. It stands proud, ready to send me into a helpless spiral of pure pleasure. I'm impatient for his touch. As if my lover senses my urgency, he kneels down and kisses my inner thighs, one at a time. I run my fingers through his lush, dark hair and coax him hungrily toward my center.

I'm trembling all over. My legs are shaky, and I swear I can feel every movement Carter makes.

"I want you so much," I whisper, my mouth dry with excitement.

He smiles a devilish smile as he locks eyes with me. My lover slips into me, and I cry out with raw pleasure. I come quickly. I can't hold back the shudders as I climax. Carter keeps moving inside me until my body is satisfied before he pulls out and carries me into the house. He lays me down on a bed, and I can see by his erection that he is far from done with me. I'm thrilled because I want more. I need more. I'm gagging for more!

Carter flips me onto my stomach and bites down gently on my butt cheek. The sensation sends a shiver through me, straight to my core. I gasp as he thrusts deep into me. He stays there for a moment before he starts moving, ever so urgently to and fro. The head of his penis pushes up against the wall of my swollen cervix. I want to scream out for him to push harder and faster, but I can't speak. I'm lost in pleasure, mute with excitement.

I hear my lover's labored breathing as it quickens faster and faster.

"Ah, Ella," he calls out in a crescendo as he spills into me.

I shudder through a second orgasm. It's glorious. Carter collapses onto my back, and we're the perfect fit once more. The perfectly sculptured pair. I'm not sure how long it is that we remain this way because when I wake up, it's dark outside and my lover is no longer on top of me.

"Carter," I call out, wrapping myself in a sheet.

“Hello, Jones,” the answer comes from the doorway, where Carter is staring at me. “So, what do you think? Shall we buy this place and make it our naughty little love nest?”

“Where do I sign?”

ELLA

I don't want to leave Las Vegas. It's too perfect here with Carter. We are in our own bubble without anything or anyone to distract us. But, all good things must come to an end, sayeth the bard, so it's with a heavy heart that I say goodbye to The Palms suite where Carter and I made the most of enjoying each other in peace.

The private jet is fuelled and ready to take us home when we get to the airstrip.

"This has been the most amazing three days ever, Carter. Thank you."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it. I guess it's back to keeping our distance when we get home," he sighs.

"I know we're keeping this on the down low for my sake, but I honestly don't give a hoot about who says what."

"Really? You won't feel awkward around the house?"

"Not at all. We're grown-ups. You're not married. Let them say what they like."

"That's mighty brave of you, Jones," Carter smiles. "Okay. I'm in."

"Good," I say and kiss him.

"Uhm, there's just one thing," he says reluctantly.

"Amanda?"

"That obvious, hey?"

“Yup. Call it a woman’s intuition. She hates my guts. I get that. I’m the plucky Au Pair putting the moves on her ex. I’d probably be a little miffed too if I were in her shoes.”

“Yeah, I don’t get that. What’s up with you women folk?”

“So it’s true. Men are clueless.”

“Ouch. That’s a little rough, isn’t it?” he laughs.

“A tad, but no less true. Amanda is still in love with you, Carter.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. No, she isn’t.”

“Oh, yes she is. Women pick up on these things. I can tell by the way she looks at you.”

“You’re nuts, Ella. Besides, she’s the one who left. Why would she do that if she still loved me?”

“It’s complicated.”

“No kidding.”

“What I want to know is, are you over Amanda?”

This is a tough conversation, but one that is very necessary. If I’m going to invest emotionally in this relationship with Carter. I want to know that I’m not flogging a dead horse. The fact that he’s my boss doesn’t make it any easier. If this goes south, I’m not only going to get hurt emotionally, but it will also ruin me financially. And that isn’t something I can afford. I can’t go back to the UK. This is akin to survival for me.

Of course, I can’t tell Carter any of this. As far as he’s concerned, I’m Ella Jones, Au Pair to the rich and famous, not Ella Carter MD, a runaway, abused woman with a past.

“It was over long before it was over, Ella. I was willing to make it work for Jagger’s sake, but, honestly, I’m relieved it worked out the way it did. How else would I have met the girl of my dreams?”

“Oh, you didn’t just say something that corny, did you? I giggle and wink.

“Another stab. Man! You English lasses are mean,” he grins and kisses me.

“It’s the cold. Makes us mean.”

“I’d say. Let’s see if we can warm you up a little, shall we?”

Carter looks at his watch.

“We have exactly forty-four minutes to get you nice and steamy,” he purrs. “How about it, Jones? Ready to join the mile-high club?”

“Are you kidding? I’m almost done,” I coo.

* * *

“Right,” Carter says on the car ride home. “We don’t have to sneak around at home anymore. But, let’s be cool in front of Jagger. I don’t want him reporting back to Amanda about us. I know. I don’t owe her anything, but I don’t want to upset her.”

“That’s reasonable. Okay, boss.”

“Cute.”

“The women at home are going to hate me,” I chuckle.

“Really?”

“Uh-huh. They all have crushes on you. You’re a bit of a dish, you see.”

“That’s too bad for them. Turns out you’re a bit of a dish too,” he smirks.

“You don’t say?”

“I do.”

Our word tennis comes to an end as the car pulls into the driveway. Back to normal, we go.

Jagger is a torrent of tales when he arrives at the house at 6 p.m. I listen as he regales Carter and me with stories of his snowman-building escapades and how he can ski down the hill now. He’s so adorable.

Amanda wasn't in the mood for a fight, by the looks of things, because she dropped him off and left without throwing daggers at Carter.

I'm hoping she'll be less repugnant when it comes to me, but that's probably not going to happen. But, despite her sharp tongue and laser eyes, Amanda stays out of my hair for the next few days. I'm eternally grateful for that.

All is back to normal, except that Carter and I are spending more time together. Alone time. When Jagger is at school or with his mother, we go for walks on the beach, we enjoy meals together, and Carter even manages to squeeze in a little hanky panky time.

What can I say? I'm a happy bunny.

It's late one night when I decide to call Aunt Sue for a chat. I haven't spoken to her in a while and I think it's time I share my news about Carter with her.

"Sweet girl! How good of you to call."

"Hi, Aunt Sue. Yes, sorry, I've been a little busy lately. How are you?"

"Right as rain, darling. More importantly, how are you?"

"I'm happy."

"That's wonderful, Ella. I'm so glad."

"Moving to the States was the best thing I could have done. I feel free for the first time in years."

"Ah, pet. You deserve it."

"I miss you terribly, though."

"I miss you more. How's little Jagger?"

"As busy as he is adorable. The little man has crawled into my heart. I must say, it's extraordinary how one can become so attached to the little ones."

"How's the little one's father?"

"Carter is something else."

"You don't say? I sense you have something to tell me."

“You know me too well,” I chuckle.

“Spill it, dear.”

“I’m in love, Aunt Sue. Truly in love. Am I crazy or what?”

“That depends. As long as your boss isn’t taking advantage of in-house nookie, I’d say you deserve some happiness.”

“Give it to me straight, why don’t you?” I laugh. “I guess, with my record, I’m open to a bit of scrutiny when it comes to the fellas.”

“Just a bit.”

“Speaking of bad choices. When last did you see Sebastian?”

“I bumped into his mother a few weeks ago. Horribly stuck up woman. No wonder her son has a screw loose. But, apart from that, I haven’t seen hide nor hair of the little shit.”

“Good. With a bit of luck, he’ll forget about me and get over himself.”

“So, you say you and Carter are an item now?”

“Yes. We’re keeping it low-key for now. His ex is a bit of a dragon.”

“Is that the only reason?”

“Absolutely. I know what you’re thinking, Aunt Sue. But, you’ll see what I mean when you meet Carter. He and Sebastian couldn’t be more different.”

“I just don’t want to see you get hurt again, my sweet girl.”

“I know, and I love you for it.”

“Alright, then. Tell me more about Carter.”

“He’s very handsome. Honestly, I don’t think I’ve ever met a more attractive man.”

“Well, to be fair, you are in love with him, darling, but go on,” Sue giggles.

My aunt listens while I share with her my experiences with the man with whom I’ve fallen head over heels in love. She comments intermittently and I laugh at her quirky views. This

is what I miss most about her. She's been my go-to person since she took me in as a young girl.

It's an interesting dynamic. I suppose I tell her things that I wouldn't necessarily have shared with my mother. The relationship between an aunt and a niece is different from that of a mother and her daughter.

Even as a child, I felt free to discuss anything with her. Sadly, that changed when I met Sebastian. He manipulated me into keeping secrets from the one woman who had always been there for me. So much so that there came a time when I had little communication with Sue. I'm furious about that. More with myself than with Sebastian. I'll never keep things from Sue again. She's too important to me. Sue is the only family I have.

I fall asleep after the call. Having Jagger home is tiring. Carter and I try our best to have as many late-night dinners together as possible, but as far as sharing a bed, we keep it tidy. Jagger still wanders into Carter's bed on occasion and the last thing we need is for him to find me in it. That would certainly throw the cat amongst the pigeons.

Carter will touch my hand when the three of us are out together somewhere and give me a knowing grin. His smile sends me into a tailspin still. So, this is what it feels like to be truly in love. It's grand. I clearly missed this with Sebastian. Ours was more of a congenial meeting of the minds, to torture an old adage.

Not so with Carter. I feel flushed whenever he touches me, be it intentionally or accidentally. If the rest of the staff have noticed no one has said anything. Not to me, anyway. Not that I give a hoot. Carter says he's happy, Jagger is happy, and I'm walking on air. It's all so perfect.

Carter is the best lover I've ever had. He's the perfect combination of a raging bull and considerate lover. Our favorite secret nookie spot is on his private beach. There's a section between the rocks where I can yell out as loudly as I want to during sex without being heard, and I take full advantage of it. We sneak away and go there at least twice a

week, away from prying eyes and wagging tongues, and Jagger's incessant chatter, for a bit of adult time.

Yup. Life is just peachy. I've met with Hannah a few times since we met in the park. She and I take the kids for ice cream and playdates often. She's an interesting girl. She shares her life back in France with me and I try my best not to blab about my exciting sex life with my boss.

Anna hit the ceiling when I told her. She gave me plenty of lip about how she told me this would happen and all of that, but she's happy for me. I'm jealous when she talks about her work. I miss being a doctor. It's always been my passion. I wish I could tell Carter. But, inevitably that would lead to the discussion about Sebastain and I'd have to tell my lover that our relationship started off based on a lie.

If it's a choice between losing Carter or choosing to put my career as a doctor on hold for a while longer, I have to say there's no competition. I'll drop the MD like a hot potato before I mess up the good thing I have with Carter and Jagger.

I've never seen myself as a woman who would choose love over her career, but then again, I've never seen myself as someone who would move halfway across the world to get away from a man either. I suppose it's best not to plan life too far ahead. No one knows what's lying in wait just around the next corner. Life is like that. Unpredictable. Best to hold onto what you have and appreciate it for the season you're in. One day at a time.

CARTER

It's time to upgrade my private plane. I plan on doing a lot more traveling as my business is expanding, and the plane I bought years ago is no longer big enough for my needs. I want to take Ella with me for the trip, but Jagger needs her. So, I'll be flying solo, so to speak.

"Aaah, do you have to go, Daddy?"

"I'm afraid so, Jagger. But don't worry. I'll be back soon, and then I'll have a surprise for you."

"Okay. But, you're going to miss my tennis match."

"I'm sorry, buddy."

It's always hard to say goodbye to my son. He's at such a crucial age in his development, but sometimes I have to say no. This is one of those times.

"Ella is here with you, darling. You guys are going to have fun. Plus, you have school this week."

I don't want to homeschool Jagger. I had the privilege to grow up surrounded by peers, and I think it's important for a boy to learn how to handle himself in the company of other boys and girls. Not that I have anything against homeschooling. It's just not for Jagger.

"Don't tell Daddy," Ella whispers just loudly enough for me to hear, "but we'll sneak off for ice cream."

The magic words bring an instant grin to Jagger's face. My little sugar junkie is well pleased with the prospect of sneaking in some contraband while I'm away.

“Okay, guys. I’m off. Have a good week at school, my love. Ella, can I speak to you in my office before I go?”

“Sure. Jagger, I’ll be right back, sweetie.”

Ella follows me into my office. I close the door behind her. I grab her and kiss her passionately.

“I’ve been dying to do that all morning,” I groan when I finally allow her to come up for air.

Ella’s bright smile lights up the room.

“I’m going to miss you.”

“I wish you could go with me.”

“As do I. But, I think the tongue would really wag if we snuck off together while Jagger was here. Besides, poor George and the gang would put a curse on us. And, I suspect the gardener would leave the state.”

“All is not lost. I’m planning a trip for the three of us very soon. That way, I can grope you as often as I please.”

“Sounds like you have thought this through,” Ella giggles.

“Oh, yeah.”

“Travel safely, Carter. I’ll miss you.”

“Goodbye, my gorgeous.”

* * *

“Good morning, Mr. Moore. Welcome onboard. I’m Conrad. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Hi, Conrad. I’m looking forward to the flight. Please, call me Carter.”

The owner of the company that’ll be building my new luxury jet is younger than I anticipated him to be. He suggested that I take a trip on one of the prototype planes so I can experience all the craft has to offer. It’s a niche market, so personal service is something they pride themselves on.

“This is our deluxe craft. Everything you could want in luxury air travel. We will, of course, take on board any suggestions you may have so we can custom make your jet.”

“Thank you.”

“Please, make yourself at home. I’ll show you around before we take off. May I offer you a refreshment before lunch?”

“No thanks, Conrad.”

“Very well. Follow me, please.”

The interior of the plane is impressive. Conrad walks me through the various rooms. First, he shows me the kitchen, where a private chef will prepare our meals whenever we travel. Next, he shows me an office, a bedroom with an ensuite bathroom, a second bedroom for my guests, and lastly, a lounge with an open plan dining area where we can enjoy our meals.

“This is very impressive, Conrad.”

“Thank you, Carter. The rooms are, of course, just examples. You are free to request your own design touches, and if there are other features you require, we’ll do our best to accommodate you.”

“We’re about to take off, Sir,” the pilot announces over the intercom.

“We’d better take our seats,” Conrad suggests.

“Alright.”

Takeoff is smooth, and soon we’re in the air.

“Our chef has prepared a special menu for you today.”

“Excellent.”

The flight onboard this plane is luxury overload. I make a few notes of features I’d like Conrad to include in the plane he’s designing for me. The interior designer is on board, and we discuss the overall theme I’m going for.

The whole experience is fantastic, and I’m excited once we land. Conrad assures me that they’ll start production

immediately. We shake hands before I depart, and my driver takes me to the hotel where I'm staying for the week.

I'm thinking of opening another office in Houston. I'm meeting with a few possible agents and a manager. I've already identified the area where I want to build my offices, so I meet with the seller of the piece of vacant land that I'd like to develop.

After a successful day, I call Andrew. I'm looking forward to spending time with my brother.

"I'm thinking of retiring," he announces at dinner.

"Retiring? Seriously?"

"Yeah. Why not? I'm not going to slave away at a desk until I'm too old to enjoy the fruits of my labor. Besides, I have more than enough money to keep me in the lap of luxury."

"But, won't you miss it?"

"What?"

"Chasing the carrot? The thrill of closing the deal?"

"Hell, no. I'd rather spend my time traveling from one world-renowned golf course to another. Work is seriously interfering with my swing."

"I don't think I could retire. I wouldn't know what to do with myself."

"Wouldn't you? I can think of something, or more to the point, someone you could do," Andrew says and raises one eyebrow.

"How is Ella?"

"She's fine, thank you."

"Come on. I think it's time you level with me."

"Okay, so she's more than just Jagger's Au Pair. There. Are you happy now?"

"Not as happy as you, I'll bet," he laughs.

"You got me."

"Tell me more."

“We’ve been seeing each other for a few months. She is unlike anyone I’ve ever been with, Drew. I don’t know if it’s the fact that she’s from another country, but she’s just different. It’s hard to explain.”

“You’re in love with this girl, aren’t you?”

“I am. It’s insane, I know.”

“Why would you say that? Is it the fact that she’s an Au Pair?”

“Yes, and no. I don’t mean to be disrespectful of her profession, but Ella comes across as someone who could do anything she sets her mind to. I have to wonder why she isn’t setting her sights on something meatier than being an Au Pair.”

“Why don’t you ask her.”

“Oh, yeah. That would go down a treat. Hey, Ella, why aren’t you more ambitious? Is being a nanny really the best thing you could do? Yeah, somehow I think she may take that the wrong way.”

“You’re nuts,” Andrew chuckles.

“I’m telling you, Drew. There’s something about her that I haven’t quite figured out yet. But, even so, I’m falling deeply in love with her.”

“My baby brother, the romantic.”

“After Amanda, I’m a bit more cautious about simply throwing myself into anything too meaningful.”

“Oh, bullshit. You’re in so deep with Ella that I can barely see your toes sticking out. You’ve had it, Caboose. You’re done for. You might as well sit back and accept your fate.”

“Well, you’re no bloody help.”

“I say, take a chance, Carter. Ella isn’t Amanda. Far from it, actually. And there’s nothing wrong with a woman who chooses to be with children rather than with adults. At least kids don’t turn on you.”

“True. It doesn’t bother me that Ella prefers Au Pairing. I just find it odd. She’s so bright. You should have seen her when

Jagger and I had chickenpox. She was brilliant. She knew the lingo and all.”

“You should thank your lucky stars. It’s handy having someone so capable around.”

“Oh, I am.”

“What do you guys talk about?”

“Honestly, we don’t talk a whole lot.”

“Wow! You dog!”

“That’s not what I meant, you perv. I mean, we don’t have much time for ourselves. Jagger is usually around, and I have a busy schedule.”

“Come on. You’re a smart guy. Make time to get away. Just the two of you.”

“Ella and I went to Vegas a few weeks ago. It was amazing.”

“That’s more like it. Does the dragon know?”

“Hell, no. She accused me when she met Ella for the first time, but that was before I actually slept with the gorgeous Au Pair.”

“Oh, she’s going to hit the roof. That woman is so not over you.”

“Ella said the same. I don’t see it.”

“Come on, Caboose. For such a smart guy, you can be pretty slow.”

“It doesn’t matter anyway. I’m done with Amanda. It was over long before the divorce.”

“We all wanted it to work, Carter. For your sake and Jagger’s. But we always had a feeling the marriage wouldn’t last. Amanda is just not the woman for you.”

“It would have been handy had you told me how you guys felt before I married her.”

“What? You didn’t pick up on the hints and body language? Sophie and I were practically willing you to dump Amanda’s snooty ass. If we’d been any more obvious, the dragon herself would have cottoned on. Besides, it wasn’t my place to say

anything, Carter. I'm sorry I didn't. But, trust me, I won't make that mistake again."

"I was wondering why Sophie knew all about Ella before I'd even mentioned her," I grin.

"Oh, that," my brother says, looking guilty. "Yeah, the wife and I got excited when we saw the chemistry between the two of you at dinner that night."

"I guess so. Next time, please don't help."

* * *

I miss Ella's gorgeous body. Perhaps I should surprise her with some sexy lingerie. It's a shame not to adorn such a stunning figure with the best silk and lace money can buy. I know there's an exclusive lingerie boutique in downtown Houston, so I make a turn there when I'm in town for my next meeting.

The store is filled with stunning designer pieces, and I zero in on a white negligee that will look incredible on Ella.

I can't wait to see her in it.

ELLA

Jagger looks green when he wakes up. No prizes for guessing that he's finally caught the stomach bug that's been doing its rounds at school. Great. I suppose I'll be next. All those hugs and kisses I enjoy so much from him are no doubt about to bite me in the ass.

"Oh, dear. You're not looking good, little man," I say as I place the back of my hand on his little forehead.

My words are barely spoken when confirmation comes by way of an explosive bout of vomiting—right on my shoes, wouldn't you know it?

"Okay, I guess you have the nasty tummy bug, Jagger," I grimace, stepping out of my soiled shoes and tiptoeing a very nauseated Jagger to the bathroom whilst simultaneously yelling at Dash not to partake of his master's recycled breakfast.

"I'll run you a nice, warm bath, little guy. You'll feel better soon, I promise."

"I want to lie in Daddy's bed," he groans after the bath.

"Okay. Shall we watch a movie together?"

"Yes. Can we watch Avatar?"

"Sure, sweetie. We'll have a PJ day. How does that sound?"

"Fine," he says, bravely attempting a smile but failing dismally. "Can Dash come?"

"Of course."

“When will Daddy be home?”

“He should be home the day after tomorrow. We can call him a bit later if you like.”

“Okay.”

Jagger, Dash, and I climb into Carter’s king-size bed. I fiddle with the remote and flip through the movie selection until I find Avatar. Jagger loves the blue people. It’s sweet how involved he gets in the plot.

But today, he is less interactive than usual. I end up watching the movie alone while he lays fast asleep next to me with Dash snuggled up at his feet. I wish Carter was here with us. I’ll call him a bit later, when Jagger is awake.

I think I’ll close my eyes for a bit. I’m bushed.

Jagger is awake and pokes me until I open my eyes.

“Can we call Daddy now?” he whispers.

“Sure, sweetheart,” I smile and sit up.

I dial Carter’s number and switch the call to speakerphone. I hope Carter doesn’t say anything saucy, thinking it’s me. We did talk about that once, so hopefully he remembers not to.

“Hello.”

“Daddy, I’m sick.”

“Hey, buddy. What’s wrong?”

“I’ve got a tummy bug.”

“Oh, dear. That’s not good. How are you feeling?”

“Yucky.”

“Oh, no, my boy. What are you doing now?”

“Ella and I are in your bed. Dash is here too.”

“That’s good. Are you watching movies?”

“Yes. When are you coming home?”

“Two more sleeps, my boy, then I’ll be home. I’m sure Ella will take good care of you until I get there.”

“Yeah. I know.”

“Can I talk to her quickly?”

“Sure.”

“Hi,” I say. “Let me take you off speakerphone.”

I take the phone from Jagger and switch.

“Hi, there.”

“Hey. It sounds like you have your hands full on that side.”

“Literally. I was baptized in sick earlier this morning. That was fun,” I groan.

“Oh, delish. Rather you than me,” he laughs. “I’m not good with vomit.”

“I don’t think anyone really is. But, hey, it comes with the territory when you’re an Au Pair,” I sigh.

“How is he?”

“A little peaked, but he’ll be fine. Plenty of fluids and Avatar, and he’ll be right as rain in no time. How was your day?”

“Productive, thanks. I miss you.”

“Ah, me too.”

“Ella,” Jagger interrupts the conversation, “I think...”

He doesn’t get to finish his sentence before a stream of fluids bursts from him again, covering the sheets.

“Oh, no. Sorry, Carter. I have to go. I’ll call you later.”

“Hang in there, brave human.”

“Yeah, you owe me.”

* * *

Yup! I called it. After spending an entire day in bed with Jagger and his bug yesterday, I wake up this morning feeling like crap. I’m nauseated, and no matter how hard I try, I can’t keep anything down.

Bloody, hell. This stinks. But I have no other choice but to pull on my big girl panties and suck it up. Jagger comes rushing past me as I'm on my way to the kitchen in search of a cup of tea.

"Hey, Ella!" he yells, clearly having emerged victorious in his fight with the green attacker.

It's Saturday morning, and I'm eternally grateful that I don't have to drive Jagger to school today. The last thing I need is to move around too much, so I ask George to keep an eye on Jagger and his sidekick while I die quietly in a corner somewhere in the house.

Fortunately for me, there is plenty of staff in and around the place, so Jagger will be just fine. I'm not so sure about myself. I feel like death warmed up.

"Hi, Ella," Chef says when he sees me moving along at a snail's pace. "You don't look so hot."

"You'd better not come too close. I fear I've caught Jagger's stomach bug."

"Oh, yay. Can I make you a chicken consommé? That usually does the trick."

"That's very sweet of you, but I don't think I should eat."

"No, that won't do. I'll make it, and you can have it later, if you like."

"That's so kind of you. Thank you."

"No one goes hungry on my watch," he smiles and his round cheeks pull his eyes into near slits.

I leave the happy chef to rule over his cauldron while I go rummage through the herbal tea collection in the pantry. Ginger is always a good idea when one is nauseated, so I choose ginger and orange-flavored green tea and hope that I'll be able to keep it down.

Half an hour later, I have my answer when I'm bent over the porcelain, hurling my guts out. I decide to make myself comfortable on the floor in the bathroom when the dry heaving starts. Ugh! Will this hell ever end?

I can hear Jagger's happy little voice as he runs by the window. Typical. The little carrier is in fine fettle while I lie here dying. So, this is how it ends. Not with a bang, but with slow body fluid seepage until I'm nothing more than a retching husk.

It's 3 p.m., and there's a glimmer of hope on the horizon. I haven't thrown up for almost an hour, so I feel cautiously optimistic. I'm hungry too, which is a good sign. It looks like I won't die today. The consommé is starting to sound pretty damn enticing. I may even try my hand at a dry piece of toast.

Chef is preparing his stocks and other fantastical potions for the weekend. The kitchen is a melting pot of fragrant spices and herbs as I wander in on iffy legs. I'm a bit dehydrated, so I prepare a quick sugar, salt, and water solution and throw it back before I attempt the soup.

It's been twenty minutes, and the soup has stayed down. Hoorah! I dueled with the bug and emerged victorious. I'm feeling pretty cocky, so I pop a slice of sourdough bread into the toaster. The smell of toasted bread has to be one of the best smells ever. It's not exactly a gourmet dish, but it is iconic.

And wouldn't you know it? The toast, too, stayed down. Success! I think I'd better lie down for a while, just in case, to give my stomach a fighting chance, so I make my way to my room. I pass George on the way up.

"You're looking a little better, Ella," he smiles.

"I'm feeling much better. Thank you for keeping an eye on Jagger, George."

"Only a pleasure, my dear."

"I'll be in my room if anyone needs me."

"Alright. Feel better."

"Thanks."

I hear my phone ringing when I'm in the hall, so I move a little faster.

"Hello," I answer, out of breath.

“Hi. Is everything okay? I called earlier, but you didn’t answer.”

“Hi, Carter. Yes, sorry, I was in the kitchen. You’ll never guess what I’ve got.”

“I feel like I should know this one,” he teases.

“Jagger has become quite the little ninja when it comes to passing on his illnesses to those closest to him,” I groan.

“Oh, no. The stomach bug?”

“Yup. The very same.”

“Well, that’s not cool. I’ll have to have a chat with him about that,” he coos. “Are you okay?”

“I was close to flatlining earlier, with my head permanently hovering over the bog, but I think I may survive.”

“Poor baby. I wish I was there to take care of you.”

“Sure. Of course. You being such an expert at dealing with vomit and all,” I chuckle.

“Yeah. You’re right. It’s probably a good thing I’m here, or you’d see what a pathetic nurse I am and dump my sorry ass,” he laughs.

“Ugh...don’t make me laugh. My stomach hurts from all the dry heaving.”

“I’ll be back tomorrow night and kiss it better. How does that sound?”

“I’ll do my best to stay alive until then.”

“You do that.”

* * *

It’s morning again, and although I’m not hugging the porcelain, I’m still feeling squirrely. Carter is coming home today, and I’d like to prepare something for him for dinner so we can spend some alone time together, but at this rate, I may just leave it up to Chef.

Hopefully, I can keep my ass off the bathroom floor for long enough to show my lover how much I've missed him. But this morning, I have lots to do.

"Jagger," I say softly, and I touch his tiny sleeping body. "It's time to get up, sweetheart. You have a game this morning."

Jagger opens one sleepy eye and smiles at me. His angelic face is marked with sleeping lines from his pillow. He is so damn cute.

"Is it today already?" he asks with a sleepy voice.

"It is. Come on, star player, let's get you dressed."

The forty minutes that follow are a blur. Jagger rushes around getting his things ready, Dash does what he does best, which is getting under our feet, and I prepare snacks and juice for the morning.

Soon we're in the car and on our way to Jagger's tennis tournament. The level of excitement is too high for my iffy stomach to cope, and I have to take in frequent gulps of fresh air. I'm grateful that the fall air is cool enough so I don't overheat.

"How are you feeling, munchkin?" I ask a very excitable Jagger. "Is your tummy okay?"

"I'm fine."

Bully for you. Thanks for passing it on, you little carrier pigeon, you.

"That's great. Are you excited to play?"

"Coach says I play like a star," he says proudly.

"I know. I've watched you. You're very good."

"I wish Daddy was here to see."

"I'll take a video clip and send it to him, okay?"

"Cool. Is Mommy coming to watch?"

"Yes, sweetheart."

I wish she wasn't, but I guess she has every right to be there. I'll stay back so she doesn't give me her signature death stare.

Now that I'm sleeping with her ex, I suppose she has even more reason to hate me. Not that she knows. Or, at least, I hope she doesn't. One can never know who's been saying what in a home as large as Carter's.

He and I aren't flaunting our relationship, but there are many eyes and twice as many mouths that love to carry news. From what I gather, though, the former Mrs. Moore wasn't particularly popular with the staff. She's not exactly warm and fuzzy, and she's used to treating people like they're beneath her. That's the mark that coming from wealth seems to leave on people like Amanda.

I'm not feeling great, so I'm in no mood today to take a tongue-lashing from the likes of her.

"Here we are, Poppet." Let's do this."

CARTER

Look at her. Ella is ridiculously gorgeous. I can't believe I missed her this much. I'm burning to present her with the negligee I bought her. Or am I burning to rip it off her with my teeth? Either way, I think I'll save that until later.

"Hello, Jones," I say after I give her a thorough snog hello. I'm already undressing her with my eyes.

"Why, hello to you too."

Tonight we're in the guesthouse. It's a good place for us to hang out, away from prying eyes.

"How are you feeling?"

"Not quite back to fighting fit just yet, but better. How was your trip?"

"Productive, thanks. How was your week? Apart from battling the green bug."

"Good. Jagger played like a little star today," she smiles, proud as punch.

"Thanks for sending the clip. He's growing up so fast. I wish I could freeze time and keep him at this age. He's so cute."

"I hear you. His coach tells me he's never seen a child Jagger's age progress so quickly at tennis."

"I'm sure he says that to all the parents and minders," I grin. "I certainly pay enough in fees to keep the coach sweet."

Ella laughs at my dig.

“Nah, he’s okay. He’s very good with Jagger. You’re getting your money’s worth, I promise.”

“Good to know.”

“It’s rather quiet around here tonight. Where is everyone?”

“I gave the staff the night off. Sent them into town to let down their hair, so to speak.”

“I see,” Ella smirks.

“Now we can make as much noise as we like,” I grin.

“Very clever.”

“I thought so.”

“I planned on making you my favorite dish for dinner, but the bug had other ideas.”

“That’s okay. Chef did a bang-up job with this pasta, so I’ll let you off the hook.”

“You’re too kind. Sooo, what’s in the bag?”

“Oh, you spotted that, did you?”

“I’m a woman. I see everything,” she smiles.

“I bought you a little something.”

“Ooh, a present. I like presents.”

“To be perfectly honest, I may have bought it more for me than for you,” I grin.

“Did you, now? Okay, hand it over. Let me see.”

I hand her the little bag. Her eyes are sparkling as she pulls out the gift paper. Ella looks inside the gift bag and then at me.

“Is this what I think it is?” she chuckles.

“I hope you don’t mind. I saw it and thought of you.”

“I’m glad it isn’t a set of power tools,” she laughs.

“I’ll save that for our anniversary.”

“Don’t you dare,” she laughs, pulling the negligee out of the bag.

“Oh, wow. It’s gorgeous. Another win for Victoria.”

“I guess the secret’s out of the bag now.”

“Clever. Shall I put it on for you?”

“Oh, yes, please.”

“I’m not going to ask how you know my size. I’m sure it’s some sort of a conversion chart thing.”

“Correct. I held it up to my body and imagined you snuggling up against me. I have to say that it was challenging. No one wants to walk out of a ladies garment store sporting a chubby.”

“You, Carter Moore, are a treasure. I’ll be back in a bit. No peeking.”

“I’m not promising anything.”

The sex is wild and heart-stopping. I’m so glad no one can hear us. It’s that good. Afterward, we lie together in afterglow bliss.

“I’m falling in love with you, Jones,” I blurt out without thinking. It feels natural, so I’m not sorry I said it.

“I feel the same.”

Thank God.

“Who would have thought?” I chuckle.

“What? That an American would charm an English Au Pair out of her delicates?”

“No. Okay, yes, that too. What I meant was, who would have thought that I’d find someone as incredible as you?”

“Ah, that’s sweet.”

“If you think that’s sickly, wait until you see what I’m about to do to you next,” I purr and bend down so I can nibble on her nipple.

It’s been another amazing week spent sharing stolen moments with Carter. Jagger is due back tonight, so I’m in his room prepping his outfits for the week of school and outdoor activities and making sure everything is just so. Jagger has a habit of leaving his clothes on the playing field at school, so it

takes a bit of forward planning to ensure that he actually has enough clothes left in his closet. I suppose all six-year-olds are the same in that way.

Carter is in his office, making calls. There's an air of peace in this house that I've never felt before. It is as if Carter, Jagger, and I are a full-fledged family, and I'm suddenly overwhelmed by a feeling of utter joy and purpose.

It's been happening to me a lot lately. I catch myself being introspective and overly emotional more and more often, which is unlike me. It must be because I'm finally on the tail-end of my nightmare with Sebastian. Having spent time with Carter, I've realized what it's like to be appreciated and treasured. Carter is so gentle and loving. I find myself more relaxed when I'm around him—completely free from tension, except for the exhilarating sexual tension, of course. Carter is so hot, that I can barely keep my hands off him.

It's difficult to put a finger on it, but I felt almost dirty after making love with Seb all those times. He had a habit of making me feel like a sexual object toward the end of our relationship. The way he looked at me was disturbing. I realize now, being away from the situation and in hindsight, that I was his possession, arm candy, and a status symbol more than a lover and soulmate. Carter is completely the opposite. Thank God.

Where the heck is Jagger's other shoe? I bend down to look under the bed. I must have kicked in under there when Dash threw himself in front of my feet. As soon as I bend down to retrieve it, I feel a wave of nausea tugging at my gut.

I cannot believe how long it's taken me to shake the tummy bug Jagger passed onto me. It's been over a week now, and I'm still not myself. Being a foreigner in a new area does make me prone to catching bugs my immune system isn't used to. It's normal, I suppose, but even so, it's a gigantic pain in the ass, and I need to sort it out.

A little voice in the back of my head pushes its way to the fore again. It's the same small voice that's been at me for a few weeks now. The one I've been ignoring and pushing aside.

When last did you have your period, Doc? Surely, as a medical professional, you should stay on top of such things.

No. It can't be. I'm on the pill, and I'm a very light bleeder. That's all there is to it. I'm in a new environment, and the initial stress of the move is slowly working its way out of my system. That's all there is to it, small voice. So zip it!

Are you certain? Shouldn't you do a test? Just to be sure.

Damn it. I'd better heed the bloody nag in my head. Crazy things have happened. It's nonsense, of course. I've felt the dull pain of imminent menstruation gnawing at my insides for a week. I'm probably just late.

But, to put myself at ease and to shut up the infernal voice, I'll take a test anyway. Ugh! Being a woman isn't easy. I make a mental note to pop into the drugstore this afternoon before Amanda drops Jagger off for the week.

"That's a nice pose," I hear Carter say behind me.

I still have my head under the bed.

"Don't get any ideas, mister," I giggle as I wiggle out.

"I don't know how you find anything in here."

"Jagger is a challenge when it comes to organizational skills," I laugh.

"So eloquently put. Are you feeling okay?"

"Yes. Why?"

"You look a little paler than usual."

"Hey, I just spent time under your son's bed. You'd be pale too."

"Are you over that tummy bug yet?"

"Just about. Your American bugs are kicking my butt."

"It's a good thing we're not in Texas then," he purrs, pulling me closer.

"Don't start anything, boss man. I have things to do."

"You're incorrigible."

“You’ve put a spell on me, Jones. I can’t help it.”

I wish he wouldn’t call me that. It highlights my deception, and I’m not particularly proud of my white lies. I know Carter is the kind of man who would understand, but I’m not ready to tell him yet. I will. Soon enough. But not yet.

Instead, I close my eyes while our tongues do the tango. Carter’s hard body against mine feels so good. I’m deliriously happy when I’m in his arms.

“I have to go out for a while,” he says when he finally lets me go.

“I have a few errands to run too.”

“Okay. I’ll see you later tonight.”

“Count on it, lover.”

I watch as he walks away, my eyes locked on his perfect gluteus maximus. No wonder Amanda is pissed. I couldn’t give up on an ass like that!

* * *

I unwrap the drugstore pregnancy test once I’m home. My bladder is uncomfortably full after the large green juice I finished on the drive home, so I make a beeline for the guest loo. I’m about as thirsty as a camel these days. No doubt all the fluids I lost during my war with the infernal stomach bug.

It’s later than I thought. Amanda will be here soon with Jagger, so I’d better shake a leg. I pee on the stick and set it down on the edge of the basin. I’m nervous, even though I know I can’t be pregnant. I check my phone for text messages while I wait for the allotted time to pass.

Okay. Five minutes are done. I’ll just get this over with, and then...

I swear I can feel the blood pooling in my feet. What the...

Positive! No! It can’t be! I check the date on the packet to make sure the test isn’t old. Nope. It’s fine. It’s probably a

false positive. I'm a doctor. I know these things happen. I'm not going to panic. I'll simply buy another tomorrow after I drop Jagger off at school. All I have to do in the meantime is stay calm. I can do this.

I wrap the test in a wad of toilet paper and chuck it in the wastepaper basket. I don't have time to think about this now. I can hear Jagger's voice in the hall.

* * *

The bitch is everywhere. It's hard not to claw out her eyes whenever I see her with my son. Ella Jones has become my nemesis.

"Bye, Mommy," my angel says and hugs me.

"I'll see you next week, my love. Have a good week at school."

Jagger runs off with the dog by his side. I'm happy he's happy, but I'm not happy that he's replaced me with Ella. It hurts.

"Hello," Ella smiles when she sees me. I want to slap her smug face, but I ignore her instead and walk past her to use the guest bathroom.

Besides, she's not important to me. Ella is a naught.

I know she's been in here before me because I can smell her perfume. I hope I don't catch some infectious English disease. I wipe down the toilet seat just in case. I'd use another toilet, but my bladder is too full to turn back now.

I wash my hands after I relieve myself and rub my itchy ear. These new earrings are very uncomfortable. They're expensive, but for some unknown reason, they make my ears itch. The butterfly on the back of the diamond stud pops off while I'm scratching and falls into the wastepaper basket.

Damn it! If the damn things weren't so expensive, I'd leave them there. I have no option but to start digging around. I'm grateful that the basket is empty except for a small wad of

paper. My fingers are wet, so the toilet paper sticks to my hand as I pull out the gold butterfly.

An object catches my eye as it falls to the floor. What the hell? Is that what I think it is? I bend down to pick it up, and it confirms my worst fears. It's a pregnancy test. A positive pregnancy test! Is this hussy pregnant? My legs go lame. My face is hot.

An array of expletives flood my mind, and a few spill out as I'm staring at the two lines in the little window, willing one to disappear.

I knew it! That social climbing bitch! I'm finding it hard to breathe now. I have to get out of here. She's not going to get away with this. Ella Jones is now officially on the sharp end of my boot, and soon she'll be sorry she ever wormed her way into this family.

I throw the test down and wash my hands again. Ella is nowhere to be found when I leave the bathroom. This is it. War!

CARTER

I'm all sweaty after my run when my cell phone rings. It's Amanda. I must have been a pretty despicable human being in my previous life to warrant such consistent torture.

"Hello," I answer, still out of breath.

"How could you do this to your son?"

"What?" I ask, trying to hear what she's yelling at me across the crackling call.

Amanda's voice breaks off a few times.

"Amanda? I can't hear you. Where are you?"

"Son of a bitch...scandalous...you're a selfish...." the war of words rains down intermittently.

"What? Amanda. I can't hear you."

I move around the trail so I can get a better signal. Perhaps the cell tower is too far away from where I like to run. Honestly, I'm too hot and sweaty right now for this.

"Carter! Can you hear me now?"

"Yeah, that's better. What's going on? And, for shit's sake, talk slower."

"I'm talking about your Au Pair whore!"

"Amanda, stop talking like that about Ella. What's the problem?"

"How could you, Carter?"

“How could I do what? What the hell are you talking about?”

I take it that somehow my ex-wife has found out about my relationship with Ella. That’s the only reason she’d be going off at me like this. I don’t know how she found out, but, honestly, I’m glad. It’s a good thing. Now I don’t have to sneak around anymore and feel like a bloody asshole. I hate how this has been so unfair and, frankly, disrespectful to Ella.

“I’m talking about how you could knock up our son’s nanny, you commoner!”

What? Did I hear that correctly? How would my ex come up with such an outlandish idea?

“What are you talking about?”

Amanda is silent for a while, as if she wasn’t expecting that reaction.

“Oh, I see,” she laughs hysterically, “you don’t know, do you? Ha! You idiot! I warned you, didn’t I? Didn’t I tell you to stay away from that English piece of ass? She’s pulled a fast one on you, hasn’t she? I knew this would happen. You’re a horny moron!”

“Pregnant? Ella? What?”

“You’d better fix this, Carter. I refuse to stand by and watch my son compete with a bastard for his father’s affections,” Amanda screeches and ends the call.

I’m speechless. Is Ella pregnant? But why wouldn’t she tell me? And, if so, how the hell does Amanda know about it? This isn’t how I imagined the end of my day. I had such high hopes. It goes to show that a shitstorm is always lurking around the next corner. Pregnant! What?

I’m not sure how I feel about this. It’s hard for me to picture any other child but Jagger in my life right now. Am I upset? Truth be told, I don’t know.

I dial Ella’s number while I drive back to the house. Her voice is shaky when she answers.

“Hi, Carter. I’m glad you called. We need to talk.”

“I have a feeling I know what it’s about. I’ll be home in a few minutes. Meet me in the office.”

“Okay.”

I surmise from Ella’s reaction to my call that Amanda was right. I try not to make a snap judgment. That sort of thing never ends well.

Ella is in the office when I get there. She is pacing.

“Oh, Carter,” she says softly when she sees me.

She looks so vulnerable, and I have a sudden urge to wrap my arms around her and tell her that whatever happens, I’m there for her.

“Amanda just called me, screaming and shouting at me like I’m a villain.”

“Yes, I figured she might.”

“What’s going on, Ella? Is it true? Are you pregnant? And, if so, how the hell does my ex-wife know before I do?”

“I need to sit down,” Ella says, seemingly defeated.

“It’s true. I am pregnant. But, I swear to you, Carter, I didn’t plan it. I don’t know how this happened.”

“How does Amanda know?”

“She must have found the pregnancy test in the guest bathroom. I meant to throw it away, but she and Jagger arrived before I had a chance to do so. Honestly, I don’t know what the hell she was doing rummaging through the wastepaper basket in the first place.”

“Who knows? That woman is more than a little relentless.”

“Are you mad?”

Ella’s eyes are staring up into mine. My heart melts instantly at her vulnerability. This woman has turned my life upside down. In the most amazing way.

“Of course not. Sure, I won’t lie. It’s unexpected. But I’m not mad. How can I be? I’m in love with you, Ella Jones. And I’ll love this baby too.”

“Oh, Carter,” she says as tears fill her big eyes. “I’m so relieved.”

I reach for her and pull her to her feet. I hold Ella tightly until I can feel her relaxing into me. She’s so special. I know others may suspect her of trying to snag herself a lifestyle, but anyone who’s ever had a real conversation with this woman would know that she is so not that person.

“Are you feeling okay?”

“I’m a little embarrassed, but, yes, I’m fine. I owe Jagger and the American Stomach Bug Association an apology letter, though. Here I was thinking that they were responsible for me feeling poorly.”

“Uh-huh. I’ll see if I can issue a formal apology on a company letterhead,” I chuckle.

“Honestly, Carter,” Ella looks up at me and sighs, “why aren’t you upset? This is a big deal.”

“It is. But how can a child conceived out of love be a bad thing, Jones? This is our baby. I’m excited.”

“Enjoy the feeling while you can. Amanda will rip you a new one as soon as you leave this office.”

“We’d better stay here then. We have everything we need. A world-class chef, and a staff complement of note. We could hide here forever without any issues,” I smile and kiss her forehead.

“I’ve never met anyone like you, Carter.”

“That goes double for me. You are a breath of fresh air, Jones.”

“Wait until I’m hanging over the toilet bowl. I’m not going to be so fresh then.”

“I can see you’re bouncing back. Don’t allow Amanda to rain on our parade, gorgeous. She’s going to try her best.”

“I should have known she was up to something when I heard the front door rattle on its hinges as she left. She’s a bit scary, isn’t she?” Ella chuckles.

“That woman is as serious as a heart attack.”

“What are we going to tell Jagger? I hope he isn’t going to be upset.”

“Are you kidding? The reason I bought Jagger a dog in the first place was that he was heartbroken when I explained to him that Amanda and I weren’t going to have another baby. He’s going to be thrilled.”

“Oh, good. I love the little trooper. I’ll never do anything to hurt him. I hope you know that.”

“I believe you, Ella.”

We kiss, and my heart soars.

* * *

“Are you insane?” Amanda shouts at me incredulously. “She’s a stranger! You know nothing about this hussy, Carter! How can you have a child with her? And what about Jagger? What are you going to tell him? How will you explain to our son that he’s going to have to share you with a stranger’s bastard?”

Her eyes are crazed, and she’s practically foaming at the mouth as she paces back and forth. I knew she’d be mad, but this is something else.

“Amanda! Calm down.”

“How can I be calm? This is beyond insanity.”

“You know nothing about Ella,” I start to say, but she interrupts me.

“Neither do you!”

“That’s not true. She’s a good person. I’d think that you’d be happy that Jagger is in such loving hands when he’s not with you.”

Okay, perhaps I chose my words poorly.

Instead of throwing a vase at me, which I was kind of expecting, Amanda glowers at me, her knuckles as white as a

sheet as she balls her fists.

“I’m going to ignore that stupid comment. So, that’s it, then. You’re going to go through with this, are you? You’re going to have a child with a stranger. Wonderful. Real smart, Carter.”

“I can’t have a meaningful conversation with you when you’re this far gone, Amanda. I’m going to ask you to behave yourself. Leave Ella alone. You and I are divorced. Get it into your head, please.”

I get up and head for the door. There’s no mending this fence, I’m afraid.

“You’re going to regret this, Carter. Mark my words,” she yells at me as I leave.

* * *

“Who’s up for pizza?” I say when I get home and find Ella and Jagger in the kitchen.

“Me!” Jagger yells and jumps off the chair where he’s been drawing.

“What’s the occasion?” Ella smiles.

“One never needs an excuse to have pizza,” I wink.

“Yeah, Ella. Duhhh.”

Both Ella and I crack up at my son’s expression.

“Alright then. Let’s get going.”

“Hi, babe,” Ella smiles and kisses me.

“Yuk! Kissing,” Jagger says, pulling a face.

“Sorry, buddy,” I laugh, and Ella blushes.

She and I hold hands on the way to the restaurant. We sat Jagger down the week before and explained our relationship to him. To our surprise, my son didn’t bat an eye. He said something along the lines of okay, and that was that. I’m always amazed at children’s reactions. The world would be such an uncomplicated place if kids never grew older.

Tonight Ella and I plan on telling Jagger that he's going to have a little sibling. I thought it would be nice if we made a fuss over him so that he knows he'll always be my firstborn and that my love for him would never change or diminish.

I'm sure it must be scary to know that your father is having another child. I don't want Jagger to be upset with Ella. They have such a lovely relationship. I'd hate for anything to spoil that.

Our usual table is reserved, and Jagger heads straight for the playroom while Ella and I sit down.

"How are you feeling today, my love?" I ask her.

"I feel much better, thanks. The nausea is almost entirely gone, thank God."

"You look beautiful."

"Wait until I get chubby."

"Nonsense. You're only going to become more beautiful. Besides, I've always wanted to fondle a plentiful woman," I purr.

"Oh, you're going to pay for that, Mr. Cooper."

"Hey, what's the worst that can happen? I can't get you any more pregnant than you already are," I laugh.

"I wouldn't put it past you. As it is, you beat the odds by impregnating a woman on the pill. Who knows what you could achieve if you put your mind to it?"

"Check, please!"

"Haha..."

"I thought we could tell Jagger tonight."

Ella looks nervous.

"Are you sure? Isn't it too soon?"

"He's going to know soon enough."

"I suppose. Actually, I'm shocked that his mother hasn't said anything to him yet."

“You and I both. But, for all her faults and batshit crazy ways, Amanda loves Jagger, and she won’t want to hurt him.”

“Come on. Be honest. She’s probably still trying to talk you into forcing me to get an abortion, Carter.”

“You’re too smart, Jones.”

“I’m a woman. I get how we folk think. Has she?”

“Yeah. But it’s not an issue. I’m excited, and I know Jagger will be too. And, that’s what’s important here. Not the ravings of a pissed-off ex.”

“If you say so.”

“Now. What’s it going to be? You must be starving now that you’re eating for two. A large pizza covered in pepperoni?”

“Ugh! I think I’ll have a steak. The idea of a greasy pizza is making me feel a little green.”

“Wow! Okay. Ella is passing on pizza. This is a new one.”

“Trust me. No one is as shocked as I am.”

“Hey, Daddy. Can I have pepperoni on my pizza?” Jagger says as he flops down on his chair.

“Sure, buddy.”

Ella and I share a brief glimpse of one another.

“We have some news, big guy,” I start.

“Yeah?”

“Yup. It’s a surprise, just for you.”

“What is it?”

“You’re going to be a big brother, champ.”

Jagger’s eyes grow large as he takes in the news.

“What?” he says with a huge grin on his face.

“Uh-huh. Ella is having a baby, and it’s going to be your new brother or sister.”

I look across at Ella. She looks a little nervous, so I take hold of her hand and squeeze it gently.

“Oh, neat! We can share my toys, and I’ll tell Dash to be nice to him.”

“It could be a girl, Jagger.”

“Nah, it’s going to be a boy. Can we call him Woody? Like in Toy Story. I like Woody.”

Jagger is talking at a hundred miles an hour. Neither Ella nor I can get a word in edgeways. What a jubilant reaction! I’m so pleased, and I know Ella is relieved.

“Let’s wait until the baby is born before we choose a name, buddy. Okay?”

“Okay.”

Jagger leaps off his chair and runs toward the playroom.

“Hey, guys!” he yells as he gets closer to the other kids who are inside. “I’m getting a baby brother! Isn’t that cool?”

“Oh, Lord, this better be a boy,” Ella sighs.

“Woody...I suppose it would be an accurate depiction. This baby was created thanks to a woody.”

“You’re terrible, Carter Moore,” Ella laughs.

“You have no idea,” I purr and kiss her neck.

So that went well.

AMANDA

He's had a full two weeks to do something about his bitch's pregnancy, and he's done nothing! This is insane. It seems that Carter is totally cunt struck. Typical male. I guess it's up to me to remedy this situation.

It's time to step it up and contact the PI I hired to get a bloody move on. I'm out of time, and I'll be damned if Ella Bloody Jones is going to steal my family out from under my nose.

"Hello, Amanda. How are you, my dear?"

"Howard, I don't have the time or patience for chit-chat. What do you have for me on Ella Jones?"

My temper is frayed, and I'm in no mood for niceties.

"Okay, straight to it, then."

"What have you discovered?"

"Ella is her name, but she isn't Jones. Her surname is Parker."

I've had a feeling from the start that this woman is up to something. This confirms my suspicions. Au Pair indeed! Ha!

"I knew it! What is she hiding?"

"Ella Parker is a medical doctor."

"A doctor?"

I have to admit. This I did not see coming. Why would a doctor work as an Au Pair? Was she a disgraced practitioner? What is she running from? And why change her name? Now I'm intrigued as well as outraged.

“Yes. Until recently, she worked at a hospital in London. Then, apparently, she upped and vanished.”

“Interesting. Go on. Family? Husband?”

“No, she’s single. But Ella was dating a psychiatrist, a Doctor Sebastian Drake, and from what I’ve gathered, he wasn’t too pleased when she disappeared.”

“Have you spoken to any of her colleagues?”

“I did talk to one doctor in particular, off the record, of course. He said that they were all mystified by Ella’s sudden departure. I’ve been doing this for a while now, and I get the feeling that the boyfriend may have something to do with it.”

“Why would you say that?”

“Call it a hunch.”

“Do you have a contact for this ex-boyfriend?”

“I do. I also have information on her aunt, who is her only family.”

I couldn’t give a crap about her aunt. I want to find out why she ran away and left her ex behind. He’s the key to this mystery. If I talk to him, then I’ll no doubt get all the dirt on Doctor Ella Parker.

I’m sure he’d love to know where his precious Ella is.

“Okay, Howard. Email me the details. Oh, and send me your account.”

“I will do that. Have a nice...”

I end the call before the PI can finish his sentence. Finally! Vindication for my hunch. I knew that girl was up to something. Her ‘aw shucks’ act didn’t fool me for a second. I think it’s time I had a little chat with Sebastian. If my hunch is correct, he’ll be very pleased to find out where his little sparrow has flown to.

Hang on. Something occurs to me suddenly. If Ella left without saying a word, then perhaps it would be an idea for me to contact Sebastian and pretend to be her. That would give me

a very good indication as to the reason for her cloak-and-dagger modus operandi.

Howard's mail is in my inbox as soon as I fire up my PC. There's a slew of information. The PI certainly knows his stuff. Apparently, Ella's parents died in an accident when she was a teenager, leaving her in the care of her aunt.

I go through Ella's CV. She's a bright girl. Something must have happened to cause her to give up what she no doubt worked hard to achieve. Not my problem.

I look at my watch. By my estimation, the boyfriend will still be up. It's about 10 p.m. in London. I wonder how he'll react when he hears from her, or rather, hears from me pretending to be her.

It's worth a try. Nothing ventured, nothing gained, as they.

Okay, Doctor Ella Parker. Let's see how you handle this new challenge. I'm going to enjoy this. All is fair in love and war, after all.

I block my number before I start typing.

Hi, Sebastian.

It's Ella.

That's it. Short and sweet. Let's see what he says.

* * *

It's warming a bit. Summer is close by. My soul, however, is as cold as the dead of winter. I have kicked my latest conquest into touch. She bored the living daylights out of me. Her clingy ways were getting on my last nerve, and I couldn't pretend for the life of me any longer.

I'm home alone tonight. It's been a long day. Listening to my mother groan about Ella and how wonderful she is, made for a very painful dinner spent with family. I wish she would shut

up about it. If she isn't careful, I'll stop going to see them altogether. No skin off my nose.

My phone buzzes while I'm tossing and turning in bed. If that's a patient, they'd better think twice before jumping off a roof, because the way I feel tonight, I may just let them. I'm sick to death of the losers and weaklings I have to deal with on a daily basis. Why can't these people take charge of their lives? Must every session be a pity party? If it weren't for the fact that I have a reputation to uphold, I'd play with one or two of them until they topped themselves. Perhaps that would relieve my boredom.

I don't recognize the number, and the caller ID isn't stored on my phone. It had better not be a fucking telemarketer. I'm in the mood to send someone to hell.

My heart skips a beat when I turn on the screen and see the name that pops up at the end of the message. Is someone messing with me? Ella? Can it be?

The message is short. What the hell? Incredulously short considering she left me without a word of explanation. My first instinct is to shit all over her. But if I do that, she will likely end the conversation. I have to tread carefully here. I can't afford to scare her off.

Ella. This is a surprise. How are you?

It's by far the furthest from what I'd really like to say. But, it's the safest option. For now.

I'm okay. How have you been?

As if she gives a shit! What's with the sudden concern?

I'm confused, Ella. Your letter didn't clear anything up. How could you just leave like that? I've been worried sick about

you. I thought what we had was special. We love each other. Don't we?

I have no idea what she's up to. Why is she reaching out? Does she miss me? Is she finally ready to admit that she made a mistake? How long should I torture her before I take her back?

Yes, I was hasty. I miss you, Sebastian.

I knew it! Ella loves me. It's always been crystal clear to me that we belong together. We're meant to be. Finally, Ella sees it too.

Where are you?

You'd better tell me where you are, Ella. You know I won't let you go. I'll search for you until I find you. You're mine!

I'm afraid.

You should be!

Afraid of what? I don't understand. Talk to me, Ella.

I'm drawing on all my powers of persuasion and compassion now. If I'm going to get her back, I have to convince Ella that she's safe with me. I have to let her know how much I want her. I can't drop the ball now.

Things can't be the same when I come back. We can't be the same.

I have no idea what she means. I've never treated anyone as well as I treated Ella. I love this woman with all my heart. What more does she want? I'm not going to grovel! I'd rather hunt her down like a dog and drag her back by the hair before I humiliate myself like that. This woman is pushing her luck.

I love you, Ella. I've loved you from the moment I saw you, and I'll always love you. Please, tell me where you are. I'll come and meet you wherever you are. You'll see. We belong together. There will never be anyone like me in your life. There will never be a better us. Come home to me, my love. I forgive you for hurting me by running away. We'll put it all behind us and start over. I promise.

Come on, bitch. I'm not going to sweet-talk you any more than this. You'd better tell me where you are.

Let me sleep on it. I'll let you know tomorrow.

Ella must have done a number on this guy. He sounds so pathetic, I almost feel sorry for him. I dare not give in too quickly, though. I'll string him along for a day or two and then tell him where to find his precious Ella.

What I wouldn't do to see the look on her face when she opens the door and finds the man she ran away from standing there. Oh, the delicious payback.

You thought you'd simply swoop in and steal my man out from under my nose, did you? You've underestimated me, Ella Parker. You'll get what's coming to you. A reckoning is coming, bitch, and I can't wait to give you what you deserve.

Let's see what Carter thinks of you when he finds out you've been lying to him. But don't worry. I'll be there to pick up the pieces of his broken heart. I made him love me once, and I can

do it again. You and your baby can go back to England, where you belong.

I'll take care of my Carter. He'll see that there's no one who loves him more than I do. We'll be a family again, and this time I won't ruin it by allowing my childhood fears to conquer me.

It's all your fault, Mother. You made me weak. You made me give up on the one person who has always loved me. Ella's affections may temporarily blind Carter, but he'll see that I'm the one who deserves his love. Look at what I've done for him. If that's not love, then what is?

ELLA

I'm on top of the world! My morning sickness has subsided and my energy levels have returned, so it's back to chasing after Jagger at home and being chased around the bedroom by Carter. What can I say? Life is good.

Carter and I have told family and friends about our relationship and the pregnancy. The cat was pretty much out of the bag, as it were, once Amanda found out, so there is no point in hiding it any longer. I'll start showing soon, in any event.

My conversation with Aunt Sue went like this.

"Hi, Ella. How are you, my darling?"

"Hi, there. Very well, thanks. How have you been? I'm sure you must be relieved that summer is on its way."

"And how. The old bones creak a little more with each passing year, and my bum knee pops and crackles when it's cold. How's California? I bet they know nothing of the cold."

"It's all sunshine and palm trees over here," I chuckled.

"How's work?"

"Good."

"Still living the dream?"

"And then some. I'm calling with some news."

"Oh?"

"Yup. Guess who has a steady boyfriend now?"

“Oh, so you’ve made it official, have you?”

“And how,” I’d said, wondering how Sue would react.

“Okay. What’s on your mind, Ella?”

“I’m pregnant.”

Silence.

“Please say something, Aunt Sue.”

“I will. As soon as I can find a way to unswallow my tongue, dear.”

“It was pretty shocking to me too. It isn’t as if I planned this.”

“I would hope not. What does Carter have to say about this?”

“He’s happy.”

“Are you happy, sweetie? This is a big step.”

“I’m well aware. Yes, I’m happy. I was in shock for a while, but Carter has been so wonderful about the pregnancy that I feel good about us and our future.”

“Well, Ella, you’re a grownup, and a clever one at that, so I trust your judgment. I’m happy for you, sweet girl.”

“Thank you, Aunt Sue. I’m so excited.”

“I would feel much better if I got to meet Carter, to be honest. So far I’ve only heard good things, but I’d feel better once I get to look him in the eye.”

“I can’t say I blame you after the disastrous episode with Sebastian. Let me talk to Carter. Perhaps we can arrange for you to visit us.”

“That would be lovely, Ella.”

“How far along are you?”

“About four months now.”

“Goodness.”

We’d spoken for a while longer before I had to leave to fetch Jagger from school. I felt better after I shared my news with

someone I loved. Next was my call to Anna. It was a bit more spirited than the one with Aunt Sue.

“You’re what? Are you serious?”

“Uh-huh. Four months along.”

“I have to hand it to you, Parker. There aren’t any flies on you. Snagging a billionaire.”

“All in a day’s work, Anna...all in a day’s work,” I laughed.

“Seriously, though, this was a bit of a shock, my friend. I feel like a bit of an idiot, if I’m honest. It’s not as if I needed this right now.”

“Rubbish! This is all for you, my friend. You deserve it. How does Carter feel about the pregnancy?”

“He’s thrilled. His ex, not so much.”

“Sod her! She let him go. That’s her loss. Oh, I’m so thrilled! I wish I was there with you.”

“Aunt Sue wants to come out and meet Carter. If you can arrange some time off, then you girls can come together.”

“That’s an excellent idea. Let me see who I have to blow to get some time off.”

“Oh, Anna. I miss you, you bloody nut job.”

* * *

“My aunt is dying to meet you,” I say to Carter while we’re on our way to lunch.

“I’d love to meet her too. Why doesn’t she pop over for a visit?”

“Would that be okay? I know you’re very busy at the moment. I didn’t want to presume.”

“Of course. I’ll make time. I’d love it. That way, I can grill her for all your little secrets. Assuming you have any,” he smirks.

If only you knew.

“She’s sworn to secrecy,” I smile.

“Please, invite your aunt. I know how special she is to you.”

“Anna wants to come along too. Talk about a British invasion.”

“They’re welcome. I’ll send the jet to pick them up.”

“Are you sure, Carter? That’s terribly generous of you.”

“Of course. Nothing is too much for you, Jones.”

There it is again. Jones. How the hell am I going to explain myself to this amazing man? I’ve been putting it off for so long now that I worry it’s too late to tell him. I have sleepless nights anticipating the backlash my secret will bring with it when it gets out.

“Thank you, Carter. You’re too good to me.”

“That’s impossible.”

I call Sue and Anna to tell them the good news. They’re blown away by Carter’s generosity. A private jet, no less. How very stuck up, quote, unquote.

I wonder how excited they would have been if I were pregnant by Sebastian. I, for one, would doubtlessly be positively suicidal. I can’t imagine sharing my life with that monster, never mind sharing a child with him. It’s a good thing this happened with Carter and not the man I managed to force out of my life.

Anna is right. I’ve sacrificed enough for that bastard. It’s my time to enjoy a season in the sun.

* * *

Amanda is in the house. I feel her presence like one would a malignant tumor or a wild creature lurking in the darkness. Oh, well. I guess now is as good a time as any to face her wrath.

I’ve been lucky up until now. I’ve managed to successfully dodge her face-to-face. But today is a new day, and I’m ready

for her sharp tongue. I have nothing to cower over. Carter loves me, and I love him.

So why the hell are my palms clammy?

“Oh, hi, Ella.”

What? Is she talking to me? Am I having a small stroke, or is Amanda smiling? It has to be a stroke.

“Uh, hi, Amanda. I’ll just fetch Jagger for you.”

“Hang on. I’d like to talk to you if you have a moment.”

Is this one of those candid camera shows? Is a director about to jump out from behind the curtain and yell cut?

“Sure.”

What else can I say? I’m gobsmacked.

“I’d like to apologize, Ella.”

WTF?

“I’ve been a little short with you. I feel bad about that.”

Uh-huh...Am I awake? Is this some sort of nightmare? I know pregnancy can bring with it pretty vivid dreams, but this one takes the cake.

“I’d like it very much if we could start over. Perhaps we could have lunch? My treat.”

Answer her, Ella. Use your words.

“I appreciate that. Thank you, Amanda. I would like that very much,” I say, careful to close my mouth after I speak in case I step on my lower jaw.

“Excellent. I’ll call you, and we can arrange it.”

“I’ll go get Jagger, shall I?”

“Thanks.”

I’m sure her eyes are burning a hole in the back of my skull as I walk away. This isn’t normal. Amanda must be up to something. Either that or she’s had a near-death epiphany. Either way, I plan on proceeding with caution. Carter never told me she was this fickle. Good grief!

“Jagger, your mum’s here, sweetheart.”

He’s out back with Carter.

“Oh, goody,” Carter says in a low voice.

“You’ll never believe what just happened,” I whisper to him so Jagger can’t hear.

“What?”

“I’ll tell you as soon as Amanda leaves.”

Jagger bids us goodbye, and soon Carter and I are alone.

“Uhhh, thanks for telling me Amanda is a psycho,” I start.

“What did she do this time?” he sighs.

“She apologized to me and invited me to lunch.”

“Woah! Okay, that’s new.”

“Oh, good. I thought it was a pregnancy hallucination.”

“I wonder what crawled over her grave.”

“She isn’t going to lure me in with the promise of a green juice and antifreeze my ass is she?”

“Honestly, Jones. I have no idea. This is a side of her I haven’t seen before. Maybe she is genuinely interested in keeping the peace,” he says, shrugging his shoulders.

“Yeah, I don’t think so. Your ex-wife is up to something, Mr. Moore. Count on it.”

“Poor baby,” he says, wrapping his arms around me. “Don’t be afraid, Jones, I’ve got you. I won’t let anyone bully you.”

“Hey, I can take care of myself. I’m just warning you; if I suddenly go missing, you’ll know where to look.”

“Gotcha. Now, give me a snog fatty.”

“Oh, you’re going to pay for that.”

* * *

“Oh, my giddy aunt!” Sue gasps as we drive into the estate.
“This place is a bloody mansion.”

“Wait until you see the guest cottage,” Anna giggles. “It’s bigger than your house and my apartment combined.”

“Is the man behind the billions as impressive?”

“Even more so, Aunt Sue.”

“I’m looking forward to meeting the legend,” Anna adds.

“Let’s get you hens settled, and then I’ll give you the grand tour.”

“Look at you. Lady of the Manor,” Sue laughs.

“Not bad for a girl who lived on baked beans and toast for nearly two years,” I laugh.

“Damn! I should have applied for the Au Pair gig, Ella,” Anna sighs. Instead, I’m stuck in England, healing all sorts of horrible ailments. And what do I get for my trouble? Rain and multiple level housing.”

* * *

Aunt Sue, Anna, and I are relaxing in the guest cottage. Their bags are unpacked, and we’re having a drink. They are enjoying a glass of wine, and I’m drinking orange juice.

“Carter should be home soon,” I say.

“Have you told him yet, honey?” Sue asks.

“Yes, Does he know about Sebastian?” Anna interjects.

I’ve been anticipating the question. I was hoping it wouldn’t be so soon after they arrived, but I guess now is as good a time as any.

“No, I haven’t.”

“You can’t avoid it forever, Ella,” Aunt Sue says with a frown.

“I know. I don’t really know how to tell him. Our relationship is in such a good place now. Does he really have to know?”

“Yes, he bloody does, Ella,” Anna thunders. “What will you do if he finds out from someone else? I’m telling you. Better it is you than someone looking to undermine you.”

“I know. I know...”

“We’re not here to pressure you, El. You do it when you’re ready.”

“Thanks, Anna. You’re right. I’ll tell him after your visit. Let’s not complicate things now.”

I hear footsteps along the path outside the cottage. It must be Carter. My heart leaps in my chest. I hope he didn’t hear the conversation.

“Hello, ladies. May I crash your party?” he says when he pops his head around the door.

“Hi, there. Please, come in,” I smile.

Sue and Anna are all smiles when I introduce them to the love of my life. I can tell that they’re impressed by his gentle smile and fiendishly good looks. Sue is practically putty in his hands. She was never this way with Seb. I think she instinctively knew he wasn’t a keeper.

Anna waits until Carter’s back is turned to her before she gives me two thumbs up and points to his perfect ass. I have to try my best not to burst into hysterical laughter at her animated gestures.

“Thank you for having us, Carter,” Aunt Sue coos. “Your home is lovely.”

“It’s my pleasure, Sue. I’ve been so looking forward to meeting you. Ella says such wonderful things about you.”

“Well, she always had a propensity for porky pies,” she smirks and winks.

“Porky pies?” Carter says this and raises an eyebrow.

“It’s cockney slang. Porkie pies...telling lies.”

Carter laughs while I threaten to strangle Aunt Sue.

CARTER

Ella's aunt is a scream. I love the way she says exactly what's on her mind. I've always preferred people like that. I have no patience for small talk and ass-kissing. If you want to say something, then you should have the freedom and the balls to do so at will, no matter your audience.

It's one of those qualities I encounter rarely in my world. I suppose when one is wealthy, others tend to kowtow. Not Sue; God bless her. I was given the third degree on what I was planning on doing about the pregnancy and also asked how I really felt about Ella.

Sue explained to me that she'd promised her sister that she'd take excellent care of Ella and that she had no intention of dropping the ball—no offense intended, she assured me.

I've been thinking about it seriously since she asked me that question. What are my plans with Ella? She and I have known each other for a relatively short amount of time, it's true, but Ella and I are somehow connected, and it's not just because of the pregnancy. It's hard to explain it to others, hell, even I don't fully understand it, but I can see myself being with her for the rest of my life.

I've always thought that after the disappointment with Amanda, I would be afraid to commit again. But I honestly don't feel that way with Ella. She's warm, sincere, bright, fun, and loving in every way, especially toward Jagger, and every time I look at her, I'm bewitched anew by her beauty.

I think it's time I made a decision about us. I'm going to ask Ella Jones to marry me. I don't want our child to feel like I don't love his or her mother enough to make a commitment. And that's what marriage is about. Commitment. Sure, one can argue that it's only a piece of paper, but it means something to those who matter.

I'll call my jeweler and ask him to prepare a selection of engagement rings for my perusal. The ring must reflect Ella's personality, and I have a specific idea in mind. I can afford to buy her a rock, but Ella isn't that kind of woman. Plus, she has such slender hands that it makes no sense to present her with a knuckle duster that weighs a ton. I'll make sure it's a brilliant cut, obviously, but not flashy 'keeping up with the Joneses nonsense.

I call Sophie to ask for her input.

"This is such wonderful news, little brother."

"Thanks, Sophie. I was thinking of asking her this weekend."

"I'd love to meet her before you do that."

"Why don't you fly in tonight and meet her? Can you make it at such short notice?"

"Of course. This is important. I'd love that."

"Great. I'll send the jet to pick you up."

After our conversation, I call my pilot to arrange the pick-up.

* * *

I'm at the airport to meet my sister when she lands.

"Hey, Carter," Sophie says and hugs me.

"Hi, Sis. Thanks for coming. You're looking well. How's the rest of the gang?"

"The kids are away at camp for a week, so your timing is excellent. I've been knocking about the old place without a clue what to do with myself. It's crazy how involved you become with your children's schedules."

“I know. I don’t know how you do it all.”

“One learns to manage. The old multitasking gene kicks in.”

“You’re a lot like Mom in that regard.”

“Yup, I learned from the best. Speaking of mothers, how’s Amanda taking the news about the pregnancy? I imagine she’s not too thrilled?”

“She was like a mad woman when she found out, but she’s since cooled down just a bit.”

“Really? That doesn’t compute.”

“No one is as surprised as I am. But Ella told me that Amanda apologized to her for being rude and then invited her to lunch.”

“You’re joking!”

“I know, right? That woman never ceases to throw me for a loop.”

“I’d be careful if I were Ella. Tell her not to drink the tea,” Sophie scoffs.

“Are you kidding? Done that already,” I smirk.

“How does Jagger feel about the baby?”

“He can’t stop talking about it and touching Ella’s stomach. It’s so sweet. He whispers goodnight to Ella’s tiny bump every night. I swear that child is an angel. He’s the best thing Amanda and I could ever have done.”

“I agree. Let’s hope the new baby follows in his footsteps.”

“From your lips to God’s ears. Okay, let’s get you home so you can meet Ella.”

Jagger, Dash, and Ella are down at the beach playing frisbee when we get home. Dash spots Sophie and me first and rushes across the sand to meet us.

“Hey, guys. We’re back!” I call out to Ella and Jagger.

“Aunty Sophie!” Jagger shouts.

“Hi, little guy. Wow! You’ve grown taller.”

“Hello, Sophie,” Ella smiles warmly. “It’s such a pleasure to meet you.”

“Hi, Ella. Same here.”

“It’s getting chilly. Shall we go in and have a drink?” I suggest. “Come along, Jagger. How about a mug of hot chocolate?”

“I could do with one of those,” Ella grins and puts her arms around me.

“Ah, chocolate,” Sophie agrees. “Forget about diamonds; chocolate is a woman’s best friend.”

“Hear, hear!” Ella laughs. “If chocolate is your speed, I have a brownie and fudge cake squirreled away in the pantry, if you’re interested.”

“Carter, Ella, and I are going to have a little girly sesh. Don’t call us; we’ll call you.”

“Oh, dear. It looks like you and I are on our own, Jagger.”

“Who needs girls, hey, Daddy?”

* * *

Sophie and Ella resurface about an hour later, and I can see that my sister is impressed. It’s such a relief. Not that I was worried, but it’s important to be with someone who gets along with family. This is a life lesson I’ve learned the hard way.

“She’s lovely, Carter,” Sophie whispers when Ella and Jagger are engaged in a conversation at the dinner table.

I wink in appreciation at my sister.

“So, Jagger,” she says after a while, “Daddy tells me you think the baby is a boy.”

“Yup. And his name is going to be Woody,” my son beams.

“Woody, hey? That’s an interesting name.

Ella and I share a secret glance. She looks down at her plate and blushes.

“Yeah! Woody is a brave name,” he continues.

“Oh? How so?”

“Haven’t you watched Toy Story, Aunty Sophie? Woody saves his friends from the bad guy.”

“Oh, yes. That’s right. A fine choice, Jagger. And what if it’s a girl?”

Jagger stares at Sophie as if the thought hadn’t occurred to him.

“Nah! It’s a boy.”

“Woody Moore. It does have a certain ring to it,” my sister grins at me.

“It could have been worse,” I whisper when Jagger is distracted. “It could have been Hacksaw. Jagger’s a huge Avatar fan.”

“Goodness. Okay, Woody, it is,” she laughs.

“Right, little man. It’s bedtime for you,” Ella announces after we’ve finished dessert. “Excuse us, please, guys.”

“Aah, can’t I stay up a little later tonight?”

“You have a very busy day tomorrow, sweetheart,” she says, kissing him on the cheek.

“Ugh! Fine. Goodnight Daddy. Goodnight, Aunty Sophie.”

“Sleep well, pumpkin,” Sophie smiles.

“I’ll come and tuck you in after your bath, big guy.”

Jagger and Ella leave the table.

“She’s very good with Jagger.”

“I know, she has him eating out of her hand,” I agree.

“I’m happy for you, Carter. I think Ella is going to make you very happy.”

“That means a lot to me, Sophe.”

“Well, you have my blessing. Not that you need it.”

“Thanks. I know I don’t need it, but it’s wonderful all the same.”

“It’s been so good spending time with you, Sophie.”

“The feeling is mutual, Ella. You let me know if you need anything, you hear?”

“I will, thank you.”

I’ve enjoyed the few days spent with Carter’s sister. She is a loving woman, and she’s gone out of her way to make me feel like a part of the Moore clan. I’ve always longed for a sister. I hope that my relationship with her will blossom into something special. It certainly has gotten off to a good start.

I stay behind at the house while Sophie and Carter leave for the airport. I’m filled with trepidation tonight. My secret has been weighing heavily on me. Meeting Sophie has only made it worse. I feel terrible for having lied to everyone. I’m in so deep now that it’s time to do something about it, or I won’t have the strength to do it later.

It’s around 9 p.m. when Carter returns to the house. He snuggles up next to me on the couch in the bedroom, where I’ve been chatting with Anna on my laptop.

“Hey, there. You look nice and snug,” he smiles.

“Yeah, I’m feeling the chill tonight.”

“Are you alright, Jones?”

“Not really. There’s something I need to talk to you about.”

“Sounds serious.”

“It is.”

Carter develops a frown line between his eyes.

This is it, Ella. It’s now or never.

“Okay. I’m listening. What’s on your mind, babe?”

This is so hard.

“I haven’t been completely honest about why I moved to California,” I start.

“Okay,” Carter says lovingly, encouraging me to go on.

“Please don’t say anything until I’m finished, or I’ll lose my nerve.”

“Alright.”

“Thank you. Here goes. I came here to get away from someone. A boyfriend. He was abusive, and I’d had enough. I needed a change, so I decided to move away from London.”

Carter doesn’t say anything, but so far he looks like he isn’t too bothered by my admission. Encouraged, I carry on.

“My name isn’t Ella Jones. It’s Ella Parker. I’m so sorry I lied to you, Carter, but I had no idea that we’d fall in love. There was no reason to tell you before now. But it’s been weighing on me.”

“May I say something?” Carter asks.

“Sure.”

“I don’t care what your name is, Ella. Jones or Parker, it means nothing to me. It doesn’t change how I feel about you.”

“Oh, Carter. Thank you. But there’s one more thing.”

“You’re not going to tell me that you used to be a man, are you,” he grins.

“The pregnancy should answer that question,” I say pensively.

“Good. Because I gotta tell you. That’s a bit of a game changer.”

“No, it’s nothing too dramatic. I’m a doctor.”

“A medical doctor?”

“Yes. Ella Parker, MD.”

“Okay, so far, I’m not too stressed. In fact, it makes perfect sense now.”

“What does?”

“Not to be disrespectful to Au Pairs, but I’ve always felt you could be more. I’m not at all surprised that you’re a doctor, Jo...I mean, Parker. You’re a smart cookie.”

“So, you’re not mad?”

“Hell, no. Wait, scratch that. Yes, I am. But not at you. I’m mad at the man who made your life hell. If I ever had the displeasure of meeting him in the street, I’d be compelled to kick the snot out of him. Who is he? If you don’t mind me asking, of course.”

A lone tear rolls down my cheek. I’ve been so terribly worried that my secret would destroy my relationship with Carter that the relief of it all pours out of me.

“Oh, my love. Don’t cry. It’s going to be alright. I won’t let anyone hurt you again. I promise,” Carter whispers, holding me in his strong arms. “We don’t have to talk about him if you don’t want to.”

“Thank you, Carter. I love you. I’m sorry I lied to you.”

“I understand, Ella. You did what you had to to be safe. We’ll talk about him another day. Tonight we’ll celebrate our love,” he says tenderly before he kisses me.

“I love you, Ella,” Carter whispers in my ear while he unbuttons my shirt.

“I love you, too, Carter. So much.”

“We’re starting our own family soon. Our love will heal all your heartache. Just like your love for me has healed mine.”

I’m so blessed to have met this man. I can’t believe it’s taken me so long to tell him the truth. I melt into his arms as we make love. I’m finally in the place I’ve always dreamed of being. A man who loves me, a baby on the way, and more importantly than anything else, true love and kindness.

AMANDA

I've been talking to Sebastian for a few weeks now. He was practically begging me for my address the last time we texted, or more to the point, for Ella's address. I finally *relented* and gave it to him.

My plan is progressing even better than expected. Ella's ex is flying into LA tomorrow and booking into a hotel. All I have to do now is to call Ella and arrange a luncheon at my beach house. Tomorrow morning 'Ella' will text Sebastian and tell him to meet her at my beach house.

All that's left for me to do is to call and invite Ella to lunch. It's a perfect trap.

I call her around 12 p.m. when I'm sure she won't be busy with Jagger.

"Hello, Ella speaking."

"Hi, Ella. It's Amanda."

I hate being so sweet to her. But, there's a method to my madness so I keep my tone upbeat.

"I'd love it if you would join me for lunch tomorrow. Are you free?"

"Uhm..."

"Please. I'd love to get to know you better."

"Sure."

"Excellent. I'll send you a pin location. Shall we say around 12:15?"

“Okay. I’ll see you then.”

“Good. I’m looking forward to it. Bye.”

The last part is true. I am looking forward to it. I look forward to Sebastian talking some sense into Ella. He clearly loves her very much from what I have gathered from the texts. She’d be a fool to give up such love and dedication.

Your place is in England with Sebastian, Ella. Carter will soon forget about you. He still loves me. I know he does. Once you’re out of the way and he’s out from under your bewitchment he’ll see that he and I belong together.

Tomorrow can’t come soon enough.

* * *

LA is something else. It’s a damn sight brighter out here than in London at the moment, and I don’t just mean the weather. I’ve forgotten how free it feels. The streets are filled with scantily clad women walking their quaffed dogs, rollerbladers cross-crossing the boulevards, and expensive toys, driven by spoiled rich kids. La La Land indeed.

Ella is waiting for me somewhere in this melee of carefree people. The hotel I’m staying at is easy enough to find. The woman at reception is stuck up. Clearly, she’s used to dealing with the elite. I don’t pay her any mind as I book in and grab a bite to eat in the restaurant across the road.

The message from Ella comes through while I’m finishing my tea. She’s different from the way she used to be. I wonder what prompted her radical change in direction. Her letter was quite clear. She left and she wasn’t planning on seeing me again. Perhaps, she finally appreciates me for who I was to her. They say the grass isn’t always greener on the other side and I think this is the perfect metaphor for Ella’s current situation.

Leaving one’s country, friends, and family behind without looking back isn’t as easy as it would seem. I guess, America, with its land of the free and home of the brave ideology turned

out to deliver less of the goods than expected. Not that I'm complaining. I have what I wanted. I'm happy. I will, however, make it clear to the ungrateful Ella that what she did to me will not go completely unpunished. Nothing too severe, but payment must be made. She's on the back foot, and that's precisely where I prefer my women to be.

Excellent. I now have an address. I'm tempted to go there this evening, but Ella tells me she won't be there, so I wait. What the hell? I've waited this long, I'll survive one more night.

What to do? Perhaps, I'll procure a spot of amusement for the evening. That way I'll work out much of the frustration Ella's caused me before I see her tomorrow. I'll troll the LA websites for a lady of the night that closely resembles my runaway Ella and have at it. It's a solid plan. I feel better already. I pay the lunch bill and leave.

* * *

It's early when I text Sebastian.

Sebastian, my love. Please, come see me this afternoon at 1 p.m. I'll send you the location. I can't wait to be in your arms again.

All my love.

Ella.

The stage is set.

Around 12:45, I send Ella a text.

Hi, Ella.

I'm so sorry, but I'm running a few minutes late. Please, let yourself into the house and relax in the living room. I won't be too long.

See you very soon.

Amanda

Last night was fantastic. I wish all women were as accommodating as prostitutes. They seem to get the job done without the bloody fuss. No apologies needed, and no useless bouquets required. Just straightforward fucking.

I'm on a high this morning. Today's the day that I'll be reunited with Ella. Fortunately for her, I worked out most of my anger last night, so today is all about pretending to be the loving and caring boyfriend who was gutted when the love of his life dumped him like a bag of rotten fruit.

I check the time. It's 12:10 and I've already mapped out the route to Ella's on my hire car's GPS. It should take me exactly half an hour to get there, traffic permitting. I hate tardiness. Being late, in any instance, is just bad ruddy manners.

* * *

It's 12:40 when I park on the curb in front of the beach house. I can't see the whole house, as it's sizable, but I am able to see the kitchen window. I stare intently at that spot when I see movement. It's Ella. I've almost forgotten how stunningly beautiful she is. She looks so relaxed—must be the California sunshine. It could also be the thought of being with me again. Either way, she's gorgeous.

I switch off the engine and sit and watch her while she pours water from the tap into a glass and then drinks from it. I can almost taste her sweet lips as I watch her wrap them around the rim of the glass. Such a mundane act, yet so sensual.

Oh, Ella. I've missed you. Why did you do this to me?

It's time. Time to meet with the woman who will be mine again. And, this time, I will not let her get away so easily. I'll be keeping Ella close to me. I can't have her getting any ideas again. Perhaps we'll leave London and move to the country where she can raise our children away from the distraction that city life brings with it. Ella will be much happier if she dedicates herself to me and our children and forgets all this

career nonsense. Mother insists that having a family should be every woman's highest priority, and I agree.

I grab the flowers I bought for Ella from the passenger seat. Tulips. They're quite beautiful. I know she's going to love them.

* * *

Ugh! Amanda's going to be late. I'm anxious enough as it is being here in her domain. I hope she isn't going to leave me sitting here for too long.

I have to give her credit for her style. The beach house is exquisitely furnished. I recognize the deft hand of Kelly Westler as I roam about taking in the decor elements. Very impressive.

I'm thirsty. Our baby is busy today. Who knows what the little one is up to but I can feel the telltale flutters as my angel leaps about whilst exploring the womb. I wonder what it is. Boy? Girl? Who knows? It could be one of each. There are twins on my father's side of the family. Personally, I'd prefer one challenge at a time. The thought of juggling two newborns is far too daunting.

I'm sure Carter and I will have a slew of minders and nannies to help, but I want to be with my baby. Too many kids are brought up by strangers. My baby will be mine and Carter's. No one else's.

I move to the living room after I down a glass of ice-cold water.

Where is Amanda? It's nearly 1 p.m.! If she isn't here in fifteen minutes, I'm leaving.

I hear the door open. Finally! It must be her.

* * *

My pulse quickens as I walk toward the gate. Ella gave me the security code so I punch in the numbers and then make my way to the front door. My senses are heightened. The thought of having her in my arms again has me all discombobulated. No other woman has ever held such power over my body. It's both exhilarating and frustrating at the same time.

It's quiet inside the house except for the sound of the waves crashing against the shore. I have to wonder how Ella manages to afford such a grand home. I suppose she's living here as an arrangement of sorts. Perhaps she is house-sitting for a client.

I don't see anyone so I walk through the entrance hall toward what looks to be the living room. That's where I find my Ella, sitting on a couch, looking every bit the goddess I know her to be.

"Hello, Ella, my love."

* * *

I'm instantly nauseated by the sound of the familiar voice. I was expecting Amanda. Not this! Not him! How is this even possible?

"Sebastian?" I whisper.

It's more of a question than a statement—my deepest fear verbalized.

I turn slowly to find the man I ran from standing behind me in the doorway. He has a bouquet of tulips in one hand. His other hand he holds over his heart in a cheesy gesture of affection.

"Yes, my love. I'm here."

I feel sick. I'm afraid I may faint from the shock but I hold onto the modicum of sanity I know is inside me somewhere.

"Sebastian? What are you doing here?"

He looks at me as if I've gone mad.

"What do you mean?"

“How...how did you find me?” I stutter, determined not to show fear, but failing dismally, I’m sure.

“Ella, are you alright?”

Sebastian looks confused. Perplexed.

“No,” I stammer and leap to my feet.

“What are you playing at, Ella? You asked me to come. You contacted me, remember?”

What? I don’t know what’s going on, but I know I have to get away from this man. Then, like a bolt of lightning, the puzzle pieces come together to form a very disturbing picture, indeed. Amanda! But, how? How did she know about Sebastian?

This is a disaster in the making. I immediately start working on an escape plan in my head while Sebastian tosses down the tulips on the table nearest to me.

“What the fuck is going on, Ella?” he insists, and I recognize the familiar look of a cobra about to strike. “Did you ask me here to humiliate me?”

“No. Of course not, Sebastian. I...”

My enemy is blocking my most likely escape route. He remains firmly between me and the front door. Hell, even if he weren’t, I’d still struggle to get past him before he caught up with me. Sebastian is strong and nimble. I have no chance against him.

My only option is to try and talk my way out of this predicament. Perhaps, calm him down and then find a way to escape the fate that undoubtedly awaits me now.

Oh, Carter! Where are you now? I need you! How could I have fallen so foolishly for Amanda’s trickery? That bitch!

“I don’t understand. If it wasn’t you who texted me, then who was it?” he barks at me, slowly coming to the same conclusion as me.

“I don’t know,” I lie in desperation because it’s too complicated to explain it to him now.

And, I'm afraid that if I do share my suspicions with him, I'll have to tell my already fuming ex about Carter, and that is a spectacularly bad idea.

Oh, Carter!

I have to make a run for it. I have no other choice. The sliding door to the beach is open. If I run outside and along the sand, I can call out for help. There must be someone nearby who can help me. There has to be.

Oh, God. Please, help me!

I make a break for the door but Sebastian is right there. My foot catches on the edge of a scatter carpet and I go down before I can stop myself from falling. I feel a sharp pain against my head before my world turns to darkness.

CARTER

I have an uneasy feeling in my gut. There's no particular reason—or none that I can think of, anyway—but, even so,

I arrive home from my business trip with a definite sense that something is very wrong.

The house is quiet when I drop my keys on the table.

“Hello! Honey, I'm home,” I call out in a mocking tone.

Silence.

“Ella! Your hero is home from his daily toil! Hello?”

Dash comes rushing at me from the direction of the kitchen. He loves hanging around Chef so he can maximize his snacking opportunities.

“Hey, boy,” I say, and I bend down to give him a good scratch behind the ear.

“Good evening, Sir.”

“Oh, hello, George. Have you seen Ella?”

“No, Sir. She left this morning before noon. I haven't seen her since.”

I check the time. It's 7 p.m. Where could she have gone off to?

“Okay, thank you, George.”

“Do you need anything else, Sir?”

“Uhm, no thanks. You may go.”

“Thank you. Have a good evening, Mr. Moore.”

I check my cell phone for messages. None from Ella. This is very odd. I try calling Ella on her cell phone after I drop my briefcase off in the office. It goes straight to voicemail.

“Hi, babe. It’s me. Where are you? Call me when you get this, please. Love you.”

There’s no need to worry, I’m sure. Ella’s phone battery must have died. I’ll have a drink and answer a few emails while I wait. I pour myself a whiskey and open my emails.

* * *

It’s been an hour since I arrived home. This doesn’t feel right. I’ve answered the most urgent emails, but now I can’t focus anymore. I’m worried about Ella. She’s pregnant, after all. I worry that something may have happened and she’s at a hospital somewhere. Surely, she’d ask someone to call me if that were the case.

I try her number again. This time, I don’t bother leaving a message. I remember suddenly having trackers fitted to all my vehicles. I open the app and search for her car’s location. It’s not that I’m spying on Ella. I’m worried about her.

This is very odd. Her car is at a shopping mall near the beach. Why would she go there when we have a very good mall just around the corner from us?

Come on, Carter. Don’t get all bent out of shape. You know women. Maybe there’s a baby shop or a salon there.

I decide to take a drive out to the mall and look for her so that I can put my fears to rest. Rather safe than sorry.

I find her car parked in a lot on the farthest side of the main entrance. The mall is busy this time of day, with restaurants and convenience stores crowded with people. I spend at least an hour looking around, popping into just about every store to see if Ella is there. No luck. It’s like she’s fallen off the face of the planet.

Now I’m terrified. This doesn’t feel right. I’m not sure where to go next.

Where are you, Ella?

* * *

I spend the next few hours pacing the house. It's 11 p.m. when I call the police.

"LAPD, how may we be of assistance?"

"Hello. My name is Carter Moore. I'm worried about my girlfriend. She's missing."

"Hello, Mr. Moore. When was the last time you saw her?"

"I've just returned from a few days away, and she's not home. She left the house this morning before noon."

"I see. I'm sorry, Mr. Moore, but we can't do anything until she's been missing for forty-eight hours."

"But, she's pregnant. I know she wouldn't just up and disappear like this. I'm telling you something is wrong."

"I'm sorry. Our hands are tied."

"This is crazy. I'm telling you, something is wrong."

"I'm sorry."

I end the call abruptly. This is ridiculous. Clearly, I'm not going to get anywhere with this police officer. I have no option but to wait this out.

It's morning, and I haven't slept a wink, so I grab a quick cup of coffee before I drive back to the mall parking lot. Ella's car is still here in the same spot as it was last night. No! This time I'm going to drive to the police station instead of calling, and they'd better not give me the runaround.

I march straight to the front desk of the precinct and demand to speak to a detective. I explain to him that this is urgent and that I'm not leaving until they do something about finding Ella.

"She's been missing since yesterday morning. I found her car abandoned in the mall parking lot. I'm telling you, something

has happened to her.”

“Please, Mr. Moore, come this way,” the detective says, taking me to his office.

I spend the next hour explaining the situation to him in detail. I tell him about Ella’s ex and her reasons for moving to LA. I can kick myself for not getting the ex’s full details from Ella. What if he’s managed to find her? Is she in danger?

The detective makes notes and tells me to return home in case Ella contacts me there. I do so begrudgingly. I feel so useless. I should be out combing the city for her, but where the hell do I start looking?

As a last-ditch effort, I decide to call Amanda. I know it’s a long shot, but perhaps she knows where Ella is.

“Hello, Amanda. I know this is going to sound odd, but have you heard from Ella?”

“Hi, Carter. No, I haven’t. What’s wrong?”

“I got back from a trip yesterday, and she’s nowhere to be found. I’m worried.”

“I’m just around the corner. I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

“No..it’s okay...” I say, but she’s already hung up.

Damn it! I don’t need Amanda gloating right now.

She arrives a few minutes later.

“Hi. Have you heard anything?”

“No.”

“It’s odd. She and I were supposed to have lunch yesterday at my beach house, but when I got there, she wasn’t there.”

“And you’re only telling me this now? What the hell, Amanda!”

“I’m sorry, Carter. I thought that she’d changed her mind.”

“You could have called me.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

I can't believe this. How typical of Amanda to neglect to tell me something so important.

"How much do you really know about her, Carter? Perhaps she's gone back to where she came from."

"I know plenty. Ella would never just leave like this. Something is wrong."

"I've had a bad feeling about that woman from the start, Carter. I told you not to get involved with her."

"Amanda, please. You're not helping."

"Why? Because I care enough about you and Jagger to know when someone is totally wrong for you?"

"I think it would be better for both of us if you leave now, Amanda. Before I say something I may regret."

Her eyes are ablaze with rage.

"I love you, Carter! You and I belong together. This Ella woman is no good for you."

"Leave, Amanda!"

My ex moves in closer and grabs me in a passionate embrace. I practically have to peel her off me.

"Stop it. I told you, Amanda. It's over. I don't feel that way about you anymore. I love Ella. We're having a child together," I yell at her while holding her firmly by her upper arms.

"You stupid son of a bitch!" she spits her words at me. "Fine! Run after your little whore. But I'm telling you, she's done a runner. I'll be shocked if you ever see her again."

"What have you done, Amanda?"

"I haven't done anything but love you," she says, leaving in a huff.

AMANDA

I'm gutted. I was sure that Carter would understand that I did this for him...for us. On top of the pain and anguish of my soulmate's betrayal, I'm now worried too. Something awful must have happened at my beach house because I found blood on the living room floor when I went there yesterday. Ella was nowhere to be found, but her car was still parked in my driveway.

I couldn't leave it there. Carter would surely find it and know that I had something to do with his precious Ella's disappearance. Shit! It's all gone so wrong. This is not how it was supposed to go. What the hell is Sebastian playing at?

I drove Ella's car to the mall, left it in the parking lot, and took an Uber home. It's all I could think to do on such short notice.

I don't know what Sebastian did to Ella, but the blood on the floor has me worried. I didn't mean for anything bad to happen to the woman. I simply meant for Sebastian to talk some sense into her so she would leave Carter alone.

Worst of all, I've been trying to reach Sebastian on the number we've been using, but the phone has been off since yesterday morning. I'm no detective, but I'm thinking this isn't good. I wouldn't even know where to start looking for him. Not that I want to. If the blood on the floor is any indication of the man's temper, I think it's best I stay away.

Perhaps that's why Ella left him. Fuck! What a mess. I can imagine how pissed Sebastian must have been when he

realized that Ella wasn't the one who has been texting him. I've dug a pretty deep hole for myself here.

I don't know what to do now. I can't tell Carter. Not that he deserves my help after the way he shunned me. My attempts to call Ella on her phone come to nothing, as it goes straight to voicemail.

"What's wrong, Mommy?" Jagger asks when I pick him up from school.

"Nothing, my love. Why?"

"You look sick. Are you feeling okay?"

"I'm fine, darling. How was school?"

Jagger goes into a diatribe about his day, but I hardly hear a word he's saying as I white knuckle the steering wheel while my mind races to come up with a solution that will get me out of the shitstorm I'm in.

"Mommy, can I have a guinea pig? Sammy has one. He says it's the cutest thing he's ever seen. His mommy bought it for him for his birthday. Kylie says she had one, but her cat killed it. We don't have a cat."

"Uhm...sure, honey. I suppose that will be okay."

"Oh, wow! For real?"

I'm willing to give Jagger a bloody elephant right now if only he'd shut up and let me think in peace.

"Can we go to the pet shop now, Mommy? Pleeeeease!"

"Sure, baby."

I hope no one finds out about my texts to Sebastian. I could be charged as an accessory to murder if anything happens to Ella.

Fucking men! Why do they have to spoil everything? All Sebastian had to do was drag Ella's ass back to England. That's all. Now I'm in a world of trouble, all because he couldn't pull his shit together.

* * *

Carter Moore is coming apart at the seams. He clearly believes that Ms. Parker is in danger. He's practically foaming at the mouth while he tells me about his girlfriend's ex-boyfriend. I have to agree that it sounds to me like there's been foul play here.

"Mr. Cooper, I need you to calm down and allow me to go through the process of this investigation."

"You'd better hurry, Detective. Ella's been missing now for more than a day, and I can assure you that I won't be happy if something happens to her while you are asking me all these ridiculous questions," he barks.

The sad truth is that when it comes to disappearances, we always start with the missing person's partner. Passion and love are powerful forces, and people do crazy things when they're betrayed or feel as if they're about to lose the one they love.

Mr. Cooper isn't a typical suspect, though. I contemplate the usual motivations a man has to get rid of his girlfriend. Money? Unlikely, as Moore has plenty of his own. Revenge? She's pregnant with his kid. Why would he want her gone? No. Ella Parker's disappearance is unlikely that of Carter Moore's doing.

No, I'm going to have to look elsewhere.

"Mr. Cooper, you say you're divorced."

"Yeah. So?"

"How does your ex feel about your relationship with Ella?"

"Amanda? Uhm, she was upset at first, but she's come around since. Why do you ask?"

"Jealousy is a strong motivator."

"No. She wouldn't do this."

“Okay. I’ll call you as soon as we find anything, Mr. Moore. You should go home and wait there. Ella may try to contact you.”

I’m not going to tell him that he should be on alert in case someone has kidnapped Ella for ransom. Moore is a billionaire. That status comes with all sorts of problems. One of which is chancers looking to score an easy buck.

“Alright. But, please, Detective, keep me posted.”

“Of course.”

Moore leaves my office.

“Detective,” one of my officers says as he pops into my office after the billionaire is gone.

“Yeah, Scott. What is it?”

“We’ve got the video footage from the mall parking lot.”

“Did you find anything?”

“Yes, Sir. We’ve got footage of someone parking Miss Parker’s car.”

Bingo.

“Can you see who it is?”

“Kind of. The footage is pretty grainy, but it’s a woman.”

And, there it is. My instincts are on the money.

“Do me a favor, Scott. Email me a copy of the footage, please.”

“Will do, Detective.”

I have a feeling I know what happened here. It’s time to take a closer look.

* * *

I can’t believe I’ve been taken for a fool! What the fuck is going on here? Why does Ella look like a deer caught in the headlights? Why isn’t she throwing her arms around me like

she said she wanted to do throughout the texts we've been exchanging?

I'm so angry, I'm trembling. Now she's lying on the floor in the living room with blood seeping out of the spot on her head where she connected with the coffee table, and I don't know whether I should leave her there to die or take her with me and kill her myself.

Think, Seb. Think.

I scoop her up and take her to my car. This isn't over. This bitch owes me an explanation, damn her.

There's something different about Ella, I think, while I'm carrying her out to my car. What is it? Then, slowly, it dawns on me. What the...? Is Ella Parker pregnant? No! It can't be. She wouldn't dare...

To be fair, Ella's physical transformation isn't that obvious, but I can tell that she has a baby bump. I know this woman's body intimately, after all. Of course, I'm going to notice. Her breasts are bigger than usual. That should have been my first clue. They say women are radiant when they're expecting. That would explain the glow I noticed while staring at her through the window.

A baby! Who the hell is the father? What has Ella been up to? Is it mine? Is it possible? I do the calculations in my head. Ella is a petite girl. It's possible that she could be quite far along without necessarily showing too much.

No. It can't be. Ella's been gone for too long for this baby to be my child.

Fuck! The whore is pregnant with someone else's kid. I knew it. I knew she couldn't be trusted. All those times I accused her of cheating, and she flat-out denied it! Yet, here is the fucking proof.

The question now is, What am I going to do with her?

The hotel where I'm staying here in LA has a back entrance. I noticed it when I left this morning. I figure I can smuggle Ella into my room through the back without being noticed and wait

until she wakes up so I can find out what the hell she's been up to.

No one makes a fool out of Sebastian Drake! No one! And definitely not Ella Fucking Parker.

It takes some doing, but I have Ella inside my room in record time. I lie her down on the bed before I pour myself a stiff drink from the minibar. I sit down on the edge of the bed and watch her. The bitch is so beautiful. I wish to hell she wasn't. It would be so easy to strangle the life out of her while she's out cold like this, but that would be too easy. I want to know why she's done this. I want Ella to suffer as much as I have since she ran away like a coward and hid from me.

Ella stirs, and I suppress the urge to slap her awake. But I'll never get my answers if she's out cold again, so I control myself.

She whimpers.

"Wake up!" I say in a stern voice, not willing to wait another second.

Ella opens her eyes, and I can tell that she's trying to focus. She looks around the room and then at me.

"Sebastian," she says groggily, "where...where am I?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Oww, my head," she groans.

Ella touches the side of her head where she connected with the table. The blood is dry and caked now.

"Forget about your head. You'll live. You'd better start talking, Ella. What's going on here?"

"Can I have a glass of water?"

"Who have I been texting with?"

"Please, Sebastian. I need some water."

I get up, pour a glass of water, and hand it to her. I'm nothing if not a reasonable guy. Ella takes a few sips.

“You’d better tell me why you’re trying to make a fool out of me, Ella.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Sebastian.”

“Bullshit! Why would you ask me to come here and then act like a lunatic when you see me?”

“I didn’t ask you to come here,” she says very softly.

I feel like I’m going around in circles here. I’m growing angrier with each minute that passes.

“Then who did?”

“I don’t know.”

“Gah, come on! You must have some idea. You’re not a fool, Ella. And neither am I.”

She closes her eyes and touches her head again.

“I don’t suppose it has anything to do with that baby you’re carrying?”

Ella’s eyes shoot open. She’s staring at me in panic.

“What? You didn’t think I would miss something so glaringly obvious, did you? I’m not an idiot, Ella, no matter how much you’d like to believe it.”

“I’ve never thought that.”

“Whatever. Who’s the father?”

“I don’t want to talk to you about this, Sebastian. We’re no longer together. This doesn’t concern you.”

“The hell it doesn’t! You owe me an explanation. And I’m not just talking about the baby. How dare you leave like that after all I’ve done for you? After I invested so much in our relationship! And, to add insult to injury, you leave me a pathetic little note by way of explanation. As if that’s supposed to fix everything.”

I’m beyond angry now. I can feel it bubbling up inside of me like hot, sticky lava. This woman better be careful, or today will be her last before she shuffles off this mortal coil.

“I’m going to give you one more chance to explain yourself. I’m warning you, Ella. I’m in no mood for bullshit, so you’d better think carefully before you lie to me.”

ELLA

Sebastian's eyes are scaring the life out of me. I have to be very careful what I say and do now. I can't afford to antagonize him, or he'll kill me for sure.

My head is pounding! It's hard to think straight when you're on the verge of throwing up from the pain. We can't have gotten very far, so if I can get someone's attention, I'm sure I'll be back with Carter and Jagger in no time. If I'm smart, that is.

"I think I know who you've been talking to," I start.

Sebastian is glowering at me, but he doesn't say anything, so I carry on talking.

"I think it's my boss's ex-wife. She seems to think that he and I have something going on. We keep telling her that our relationship is purely professional, but she doesn't believe us."

"Who's the father?" he insists.

"It was a one-night stand. Someone I met in a bar shortly after I got here."

"That's rather slutty of you, wouldn't you say, Ella?"

"I was vulnerable, Seb. Leaving you was so hard. I was lonely, and I thought I'd made a terrible mistake."

"You did make a terrible mistake. You left me without giving me an opportunity to defend myself," he snarls, but I can see the rage subsiding.

“I should have spoken to you first. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“And now here you are. Pregnant and soon to be unemployed. What are your plans now, Ella, you fucking idiot?”

“Please, I’m sorry, Seb. I may not have sent you those messages, but, truthfully, I’m glad you’re here. I need you, but I was too embarrassed to call.”

I don’t know if my plan is working. Sebastian is a cunning man, and for all I know, he sees through my flimsy attempts at placating him.

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying, I’m sorry. I thought I could live without you, but I was wrong.”

The words are sticking in my craw. Their vile stench has me on the brink of retching, but my life depends on my performance, so I hold steady on my new course.

“Can you ever forgive me, Seb?”

The man I fear greatly, the one who currently holds the power of life and death over me, moves closer to where I’m sitting up on the bed. He comes so close to my face that I feel his breath on my skin as he says, “You’re a lying bitch, Ella Parker. I don’t believe a word you’re spewing at me.”

“No, please, I swear. You must believe me. Ask Aunt Sue if you think I’m full of shit. I told her how foolish I felt. I even shared with her that I wanted to come back, but I knew you wouldn’t believe me. Call her.”

The room is silent except for the ticking sound of the wall clock. My heart is racing while I watch for signs that Sebastian believes me.

“I’ll prove it to you,” I say softly. “We’ll make love, and you’ll know. My body won’t lie, Seb.”

He rushes me and grabs me by my hair.

“Stop it! You’re hurting me,” I cry out, but Seb isn’t listening to me anymore.

Is he going to kill me now? This is it. I'm going to be dead soon, and Carter will never know what happened to me. He's going to think that I ran away like I did before.

"No!" I scream when I see Seb's arm coming down.

But the man with the hate in his eyes and the rage in his fists is all over me.

Oh, God! Please help me. I don't want to die!

* * *

"Mr. Moore, it's Detective Anderson."

"Have you found her?"

"No, but there's something I'd like you to take a look at. Are you at home?"

"Yes."

"Stay there. I'm on my way over."

I have a feeling I know who the woman is on the footage we pulled off the parking mall camera. But I need Carter Moore to confirm it for me before I can make my next move, so I make my way out to his estate.

Impressive. It's a pity money can't buy loyalty.

Carter's butler shows me to his office.

"Please. Come in, Detective. Have a seat. What do you want to show me?"

What? No coffee or expensive brandy? Straight to business, hey. Alrighty.

"Have a look at this footage, please. It's Ella's car arriving at the mall parking lot. Do you recognize the driver? Is it Ella?"

Moore looks at the image frozen on my screen. I can tell from the look on his face that he knows who the woman is.

He looks up at me and then back at the screen before he speaks.

“Amanda?”

“Is this your ex-wife?”

“Yes, but...”

The man is speechless. I’ve seen this look many times in my career. People think they know the people in their lives intimately. Until they don’t.

“I don’t understand,” he says in a near whisper. “Amanda is fine with Ella and I. She’s...”

“I think we’d better call your ex-wife and ask her to come into the station, Mr. Moore. I’m sure you’d agree.”

He nods.

“I’ll call you when I’ve spoken to Amanda,” I say, getting up to leave.

“No! I’m coming with you. I want to be there when she comes in. If she knows where Ella is, I need to be there.”

I can tell from his tone that Carter Moore isn’t asking for permission. He’s a powerful man, and I don’t intend on losing my job over this.

“Of course,” I relent. “But, please, allow me to do my job, Mr. Moore. She may clam up if she knows you’re there, so it’s best if you stay out of sight.”

“Fine. Let’s go.”

I call Scott from my car.

“Hello, Detective.”

“Scott, I have a little favor to ask.”

“Sure.”

“Get Mr. Moore’s ex to the station, please. I think it’s time we had a little chat with her.”

“Will do.”

I call him back a few minutes later.

“And?”

“She’s a better actress than I expected, Detective. She kept her cool when I asked her to meet me.”

“Yeah. I think you’d better send a car just in case she decides to do a runner. She’s the kind of suspect whose passport is most certainly up to date.”

“I’m already on my way, Sir.”

“Good man.”

* * *

“I’m in trouble,” I yell into my phone at my therapist.

“What’s wrong, Amanda?”

“I did something crazy.”

“Are you in danger? Where are you?”

“I’m at home.”

“Come to the office, Amanda. Let’s talk.”

“I can’t come in now; that’s why I’m calling you. You need to help me, Doc. I’m in trouble!”

Does this woman ever hear me?

“Okay, Amanda. Take a deep breath and try to calm down.”

I take a few deep breaths before I carry on.

“Okay. That’s better,” she says. “Now, tell me exactly what happened. What did you do?”

“All I wanted was for Ella to leave Carter alone. That’s all. Now everything is a mess, and I don’t know what to do.”

“I don’t understand. Did you do something to Ella?”

“No! I didn’t, but I know who did. Actually, I’m not sure what he did to Ella, but I think it’s bad.”

“I’m going to need more information if I’m going to help you, Amanda. Why don’t you start at the beginning.”

I explain to my therapist exactly what has happened and my involvement in the sordid mess. I feel better once it's all out, if only marginally.

"Now the police are waiting for me at the station. They want to talk to me. They say it's routine, but I don't know if that's a trick or not."

"Amanda, you have to tell them the truth. What will you do if something awful happens to Ella? How will you live with yourself? How will Carter feel about your relationship?"

I know she's right, but I'm afraid.

"I can't go to prison. I just can't. I'd rather die than spend my life behind bars!"

"You're not going to do anything to harm yourself, are you? Please, don't do anything foolish."

The thought of being a lowly criminal makes my stomach churn. But offing myself isn't my style. I don't know why my therapist would say something like that to me. The woman doesn't get me. She never has. No one does. Not my mother or my brother! And it seems not even Carter understands me. Am I cursed to be an island forever? Doomed to be alone and unloved for the rest of my life?

My conversation with my therapist is interrupted by a buzz from the gatehouse. Who the hell is it?

I look at the monitor. Fuck! It's a police car. Now what? What do they know? The officer who called earlier told me they have to ask everyone who knows Ella a few routine questions. If it's routine, then why is he here?

"I have to go," I say into the phone and end the call.

Calm yourself, Amanda! Being hysterical isn't going to get you anywhere good.

I answer the buzzer.

"Hello."

"Hello, this is Officer Scott. We spoke earlier."

"Yes, what is it?"

“I thought I’d escort you to the station, Ma’am. For your safety.”

“My safety?”

“Yes, Ma’am. In case the people who took Ella are kidnappers. We don’t want you to be in danger.”

“Oh, I see.”

It never occurred to me that Sebastian might be dangerous. What if he finds out I was the one who tricked him into coming to LA? It’s a real concern. Then again, the officer could be full of shit and this is his way of tricking me into coming in for questioning.

Either way, I have no choice, it seems.

“Alright. I’ll buzz you in.”

“Thank you, Ma’am.”

AMANDA

The police car is clean and neat. I'm grateful that the cop allows me to sit in the front seat, at least. I would have put up a real stink had he even suggested I sit in the back.

We don't speak much on the way to the station. A few pleasantries are all. I'm shaking inside, but I manage to keep myself in check. I can't afford to give anything away. This is bullshit, anyway. I haven't done anything wrong. I can't be held responsible for a slighted ex's actions.

Once at the station, I'm led to an interview room, where Scott tells me I'm to wait for a detective. The room is small and bleak. It's my first time in an interview room, and I vow it will be my last. Awful place.

"Good day, Mrs. Moore. I'm Detective Anderson. Thank you so much for coming in."

The officer is carrying a laptop and a file.

"It's Amanda, please. I'm in the process of changing my name back to Hammond."

"Alright."

"How can I help you, Detective?"

"As I'm sure Officer Scott has told you, we're talking to everyone who's acquainted with Ella Parker."

"Parker? I thought her name was Jones," I add, cementing my ignorance.

“No. It’s Parker. Doctor Parker, actually.”

“Doctor? I thought she was an Au Pair.”

That’s it, Amanda. Lay it on thick. You’ve got this.

“It appears that Dr. Parker came to LA to escape an abusive relationship.”

“I see. This is unbelievable. Does Carter know about this?”

“Yes. Doctor Parker told Mr. Moore all about it.”

Fuck! So Carter knew, and he said nothing to me. The bastard’s known all along.

“I’m at a loss as to why I’m here, Detective. If you know all this about Ella, then why do you need to question me? I fail to see how I can be of assistance to you in your investigation. If you suspect Ella’s ex, then why aren’t you looking for him?”

I don’t like the way this cop is looking at me. I get the feeling that there’s something he’s not telling me, but I can’t imagine what it could be.

“We are busy with that. But there’s something I thought you could help me with, Amanda,” he says, opening his laptop.

What the hell is this cop up to?

“Tell me, Amanda, do you ever frequent the Palms Lifestyle Mall?”

Anderson may as well have slapped me across the face. It would have elicited the same reaction. A coldness spreads through my limbs. I’m convinced that, if I had to, I wouldn’t be able to stand right now. My legs are like jelly, and my heart is beating so hard that I’m sure I’m about to have an attack of sorts. But I have no other choice but to keep my composure.

“From time to time. Why?”

“Have you been there in the last few days?”

“Uhm…”

Shit! I don’t know if I should say yes or no.

“I don’t recall. It’s been a bit of a crazy week for me.”

“I see. There’s something I’d like to show you if you’ll indulge me,” Anderson says, turning the laptop around so I can see what’s on the screen.

My day just went from bad to worse. I watch the scene unfold before my eyes. I imagine that there isn’t a jury in the world that wouldn’t find me guilty when presented with this footage. It’s me in the video. I know that. But does the cop?

“Do you recognize the woman in this footage, Miss Hammond? I must say, it does look remarkably like you. What I can’t fathom is why you would be seen getting out of Doctor Parker’s car on the day that she goes missing. Were the two of you together? Was she in the Mall?”

I stare at the screen. Perhaps if I look long enough, the picture will change.

“At this stage, Amanda, all we know for sure is that you drove Ella’s car and parked it at the Mall. There’s nothing criminal about that. I do think, however, that if we put the whole picture together, we may find something that will put you in a very bad light. I think it would behoove you to fill in the blanks for me.”

“Do I need an attorney?”

“I don’t know, Amanda. Did you do something to Ella Parker?”

“No. I didn’t.”

“Do you know who did?”

“I might,” I relent.

It occurs to me that if I cooperate, I may still be able to get out of this colossal hole I’ve dug for myself.

“Please, Amanda. Tell me the truth, and I’ll see what we can do for you.”

“I never meant for any of this to happen, Detective. You must believe me.”

“Alright. Tell me what’s happened.”

“All I wanted was for Carter to see that the woman he was involved with wasn’t who she said she was.”

“So, you knew who she was before she disappeared.”

“Yes. I hired an investigator to do a background check on her. I only did it to protect my family.”

“I can understand that. Then what happened?”

“Well, I found out that she’d left the UK rather suddenly, which made me suspicious. I mean, this woman spends a serious amount of time with my son. She could be a serial killer for all I know. Carter was blinded by her good looks, so it was up to me to find out more about her.”

“Understandable. Go on.”

“Anyway, I found out about her ex, Doctor Sebastian Drake. I wanted to know why she suddenly left, so I contacted him.”

“And, what did he tell you?”

“I knew he wouldn’t necessarily tell a stranger the truth, so I pretended to be Ella.”

“What did you discuss with Dr. Drake?”

“I may have given him the impression that Ella wanted him back in her life. But, I swear, had I known he’d be violent, I would never have done it. You must believe me, Detective.”

“How did he know where to find Ella?”

“I invited Ella to lunch at my beach house, pretended to be Ella, and invited Sebastian to see her there. When I went over to the house, I expected to find them there, you know, working it out. He seems to adore her. That’s what I got from the texts.”

“What happened when you got to the house?”

“Ella’s car was there, but she wasn’t. Neither was Sebastian.”

Do I tell Anderson about the blood on the floor? This is where things can go really wrong for me. But, I know I have to be honest. I’ve come this far. There’s no point in holding back now. The cops have me on camera, for shit’s sake!

“Was there any indication of a struggle?”

“Nothing was disturbed...but there was blood on the floor in the living room.”

“How much blood?”

“I don’t know...about a palm-sized blob, I guess.”

“And it didn’t occur to you to call the police?”

“I was afraid to. I told you. I didn’t intend for anything bad to happen to Ella. I just wanted...”

“Amanda, do you have Dr. Drake’s contact number?”

“Yes, but it won’t do you any good. The phone’s been off. I tried to call him to find out if Ella was alright. Obviously, I was worried when I saw the blood. I’m not a monster, Detective.”

“Of course not. Can you give me the number, please?”

“Sure.”

I take out my cell phone and scroll through the contacts until I come to Sebastian’s number.

“Here.”

“Thank you. Excuse me for a moment, please,” he says, getting up from his chair.

I’m left alone in the small room to contemplate my fate. I feel sick.

* * *

I can’t believe what I’m seeing and hearing while I’m behind the one-way glass. Amanda is not the person I thought she was. How she could do such a despicable thing to Ella, I’ll never understand.

My blood is boiling, and I have to restrain myself from opening the door and rushing into the interview room. I think I’ll grab her by the neck and wring her neck if given half the chance.

I have a child with this woman! How can she be so callous? Who is she? Did she truly imagine that getting rid of Ella would somehow magically repair the broken relationship between her and me? Incredible!

Detective Anderson enters the room where I'm seething and pacing.

"I can't believe this!" I growl.

"Please, Mr. Moore. You have to stay calm. We don't have time for this now. We have to find Ella."

I know the cop is right, but it's incredibly difficult to let this go. Ella could be dead, and it's all thanks to Amanda.

"Blood! How can I remain calm when I hear that Ella's blood is all over my ex-wife's beach house? Would you be calm if the woman carrying your child was missing and injured?"

"I understand your fears and frustration, Carter. I really do. But this is my job, and I'm good at it. Please calm down, and we'll figure this out."

I take a deep breath and run my hands through my hair.

"Okay. What's the next move?" I ask, as calmly as I can manage.

"I have Ella's ex's number. We'll run a trace on it. I need you to stay here, Mr. Moore."

"Cut out the Mr. Moore crap, please, Anderson. Just call me Carter."

"Okay. Carter, I need you to stay here at the station. I can't have you running around LA half-cocked. My officers and I will take care of this. We'll find Ella."

"Forget about it, Anderson. That's not going to happen. You'll have to arrest me and throw me into a cell if you want to keep me here. And, believe me, you don't want to do that. I'm coming with you."

Anderson doesn't look happy, but I don't give a damn. Ella is out there, and she needs me. There's no way I'm not going to be there when the cops find her.

“I’m serious, Detective. I can make your life very difficult.”

“I’m going to forget you said that, Carter, because I know you’re under a great deal of stress.”

“Okay, I apologize. Please, I have to be there when you find Ella. Please, Detective. I’ll stay in the car until it’s safe. I swear.”

I can tell that the cop is contemplating my request. I know he is well aware that I’m wealthy enough to make his life hell if I wanted to. Not that I’m that asshole, but the threat was worth a shot. I’m desperate enough to do whatever it takes.

“Fine. Scott, get Mr. Moore a vest.”

Officer Scott takes me to a room down the hall and gives me a bulletproof vest.

“Please put this on, Mr. Moore. Just in case.”

I wait in the office while Anderson tracks Sebastian Drake’s cell phone. I’m a ball of nerves and rage. I’m glad that Anderson kept me from speaking with Amanda. I don’t know what I would have done to her had I been given a chance.

I have to remember that she is Jagger’s mother, and I wouldn’t dream of doing anything to hurt my son.

Time seems to be standing still. How long does it take to trace a bloody cell phone? I keep checking my watch and wondering how long it will be before I have Ella safely in my arms again. I worry about our baby. If Ella is injured, it means that the baby could be in distress. I don’t want to lose either one of them. My lovers or my child!

“Let’s go,” Anderson says as he opens the door to the office.
“We’ve got him.”

“Where is he?” I say as I leap to my feet.

“We’ve located Drake at a hardware store near the boulevard. We’re going to have to move it if we’re going to catch him.”

A hardware store? Is he buying cleaning materials? Is he trying to cover up a crime scene?

No! Stop it, Carter!

I move toward the door in haste. There's no time to waste.

* * *

The arrest has to be swift and quiet. No sirens, no attention.

I'm in the car with Detective Anderson and two other armed officers. We don't know if Drake is armed, and Anderson has sworn to me that he'll cuff me to the steering wheel if he has to. I have to stay in the car until they've secured Drake. I know that he's serious, so I assure him that I'll behave.

I watch as the cops pour out of the two additional vehicles and rush the store. It isn't long before they emerge from the store, escorting a man in cuffs. Drake. I want to leap out of the car and beat him with my fists until his face looks like hamburger meat, but I know I can't do that.

Anderson puts his head into the car I'm in.

"Where's Ella?"

"Drake won't talk, but we searched his pockets and found a key for a hotel nearby," he tells me. "Scott, take Mr. Moore to the Sunset Hotel. Drake's in room twenty-eight. I'm going to accompany Drake to the station and make sure we book his ass."

"Yes, Sir," Scott says.

"Carter," Anderson says before we leave, "well done."

"Drake better pray that Ella is okay. I don't want to incriminate myself by telling you what I plan on doing to him if she isn't."

"You'd better get going, Scott," he says, tapping the roof of the police car.

This time the cop turns on the sirens, so we have a clear path to the hotel.

Please be okay, Ella. I'm coming.

Scott, an armed officer, and I enter the hotel lobby.

“Stay behind me, please, Mr. Moore.”

Scott talks to the receptionist, who is bewildered for a moment. She points us in the direction of the room after she confirms that the man in the photo Scott shows her is indeed booked into room twenty-eight, but she says she hasn't seen anyone with him.

I'm worried. What will I do if Ella isn't in the room? Where the hell will we even start looking for her? My mind moves briefly in the direction I've been keeping it from for days now. What if Drake killed her?

No! Don't go there, Carter. You can't afford to think that!

We bypass the elevator. It's only two flights of stairs. We can get there quicker if we take the stairs. Scott is leading the assault, and I'm right behind him. We stop outside room Twenty-Eight, and Scott motions for me to stand to the side while he pulls the spare keys from his pocket and quietly unlocks the door.

The armed officer enters the room first, followed by Officer Scott.

My heart is thumping in my throat. I want to rush in, but I know I can't.

“Clear!” the officer calls, after which Scott comes out to fetch me.

“She's here,” is all I hear before I rush past him.

Is Ella alive? Oh, please, Ella. Be okay!

I see her lying on the bed. She's bruised, and her head is caked in dry blood. But Ella is alive!

“Ella!” I call out. “Oh Lord, what has he done to you?”

“Carter?” she whispers.

“Yes, my love. It's me. You're okay. I'm here now.”

“Oh, Carter. I thought he was going to kill me.”

“It's going to be alright, my love. The cops have Drake in custody.”

Officer Scott calls an ambulance, and I ride in the ambulance with Ella when it arrives.

“Our baby,” Ella whispers.

“Don’t worry about that now, my darling. I’m sure our baby will be fine. If our child is half as strong and stubborn as you are, I know all will be well,” I smile and kiss her gently on the lips.

“Ouch,” Ella winces, and she touches the place where the bastard busted her lip.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

“Kiss me again, Carter. I want to make sure I’m not dreaming.”

ELLA

I thought for sure Sebastian was going to kill me, yet here I am in a hospital bed, holding a 3D image of Carter and my healthy baby.

“You’re a very lucky woman, Ella,” the doctor says. “You have survived quite an ordeal and come out the other side relatively unscathed. How are you feeling?”

“Like I’ve been in a cage fight,” I groan.

“That would be the cracked rib.”

“Yet another memento from my time with my ex,” I grimace as I try to sit up without screaming in pain.

“Here,” Carter says, “let me help you, my love.”

“Thanks, babe.”

He pulls me up gently and slides a pillow behind my back for support.

“Ever think of entering the nursing profession?” I grin.

“If all my patients are as gorgeous as you, then I don’t see why not,” he chuckles.

“Yeah. Wait until those bedpans need changing,” I tease, sounding like an old smoker when I cough. “Ouch, damn it!”

“I can see I’m no longer needed here,” the doctor smiles. “Let me know if there’s anything you need, Ella.”

“Thanks, Doc. I’m okay.”

“When can I take my beautiful patient home?” Carter asks.

“I’d like to keep an eye on Ella for one more night. Tomorrow should be fine.”

“I’ll be okay, Carter,” I smirk once the doctor is gone. “I’m used to getting my ass kicked. I’ll be back on form in no time.”

“That was the last ass whooping you’ll ever have. I promise you that, Ella.”

“Thank God. It’s overrated. What’s the news on Sebastian and Amanda?”

“I think your ex had better get comfy where he is. The cops are planning on throwing the book at him.”

“I’m sure if they do a little digging, they’ll find other ex-girlfriends he’s used as punching bags too.”

“I’m so sorry, Ella.”

“Why are you sorry?”

“I should have taken you more seriously when you told me about Sebastian’s abusive nature. I can kick myself for letting you go out there without protection. And, Amanda! Well, I have no excuse for her.”

“She sure blindsided us, didn’t she? I should have trusted my instincts. What’s her story?”

“I haven’t spoken to her since she confessed to luring your ex here to LA. She kept telling the cops that she didn’t mean for you to get hurt. Honestly, I don’t know what to believe anymore.”

“Sebastian is very charming and manipulative. Not even Amanda stood a chance.”

“She’s facing all sorts of charges now. She’s in deep shit.”

“Carter, I don’t want to press charges against her,” I say, to his obvious surprise.

“What? Amanda almost got you killed. She deserves to be punished.”

“No, Carter. Think about what this will do to Jagger. He doesn’t understand adult thinking and motives yet. All he’ll see is that his Daddy didn’t care enough to keep him united with his mother.”

“You’re even more amazing than I could ever have imagined, my love. Alright. If you don’t want to press charges, then we won’t. But stay away from her from now on.”

“I think Amanda’s learned her lesson, babe. I don’t see her interfering in our relationship again. Not after she came so close to losing her freedom.”

“I love you, Ella Parker, MD,” Carter says, kissing me very gently on my split lips.

“I love you too.”

* * *

Yesterday was, hands down, the worst day of my life. I was sure that the cops would lock me up and throw me away. I kept waiting for the detective to come back and read me my rights before cuffing me and taking me to a holding cell.

But it didn’t happen. The backlash of fury I expected never came. Instead, the cops let me go and told me not to leave town. Anderson said he’d be in touch.

So, here I am now, sitting on the couch in the living room, waiting to hear what fate has in store for me.

Mother called. She said she heard from a friend that Carter was on the news. She wanted to know if I knew what was happening.

To my shock, she was lucid and perfectly sober. A first for me. I was so taken aback that I found it difficult to hold a conversation.

In all the years I needed my mother, she never once made me feel like I could count on her for anything. Now that my life is falling apart, she wants to swoop in and make it all better. I’m

furious with her. I don't know if I even want a relationship with her after the crappy mother she's been all these years.

And what do you think Jagger will say when he finds out what HIS mother has done? Be careful not to judge too quickly, Amanda!

Why does the voice of reason have to be so cruel?

The phone rings and I jump. My palms are instantly clammy.

"Hello."

"Amanda, it's Carter."

I don't know what to say to this man. I take it that he knows about my betrayal by now.

"I take it this is the call you've been wanting to make for a while now, Carter," I say before he can attack. "Your Ella is going to go for the jugular, isn't she?" I say, feeling defeated.

"Can you come over to the house, please?"

"What? Now?"

"In an hour."

"Uh...okay."

I guess bad news is better delivered when the punisher can see the fear on the punished party's face. Serves me right, I guess. I have made a terrible mess of things. I have no one to blame but myself.

Thank God the baby is okay, or I'd be up for manslaughter charges. I want this day to be over.

* * *

I can tell that Amanda is afraid. She is pale and wringing her hands as she sits in the living room.

"I'm so sorry, Ella," she says demurely. "I never intended for you to get hurt. I know you have no reason to believe me, but I swear it's true."

“You did a foolish and wicked thing, Amanda,” Ella starts. “But I’m not looking for vengeance. I know you don’t believe it, but I care very much for Carter and Jagger, and I don’t want to be the reason you’re taken away from Carter’s son.”

Amanda doesn’t utter a word. Her face is one of shock. I must say, I’m pretty incredulous about Ella’s attitude too. It takes a special kind of person to forgive others’ vicious ways.

“You’re a lucky woman, Amanda,” I add. “I was ready to throw the book at you but for Ella’s insistence that we not lay charges against you. You’d better hope that the prosecutor is as forgiving as the woman you tried to harm.”

“I’m truly sorry, Ella,” Amanda says without looking up. “Thank you.”

“It’s fine, Amanda. Perhaps we could still get along down the road.”

“I hope so,” my ex agrees.

* * *

“Hey, babe. How are you feeling today?” Carter asks me when I wake up, no doubt looking like death warmed up.

“Much better. My ribcage doesn’t feel like it’s on fire anymore.”

“Well, you’re your gorgeous self to me,” he smiles.

“Thanks, hon.”

“I have something for you,” Carter smirks.

“Please, not sexy undies. I’m bruised all over.”

“I think you’re going to like this gift,” he smiles and kisses me on the forehead.

“Where is it?”

“Close your eyes, and I’ll get it.”

I’m intrigued. Carter looks pretty pleased with himself. I close my eyes. I can hear him rustling around for something.

“Okay,” he says, “open your eyes.”

In front of me is a little box. Is this what I think it is? I haven’t wanted to put any pressure on Carter to make a commitment, but it does bother me that we’ll have a baby soon. I want to be Mrs. Moore more than anything, but I also want my child to have a father who is married to me.

I bring my hand to my mouth and let out a soft squeal of excitement.

“What did you do?” I gasp.

“Open it,” Carter egged me on.

“Oh, Carter,” I say as I flip open the box, “it’s…”

I look up and see Carter’s smirk. He looks like a naughty schoolboy.

“It’s a car key,” I say, trying my best not to sound disappointed.

“Uh-huh. Come with me.”

I follow Carter outside to the driveway. He points proudly to the most beautiful car I’ve ever seen.

“Oh, my goodness. What is it?”

“It’s a Ferrari SF90 Spider. I thought you’d like zipping around in something a little more your speed than an SUV,” he grins.

“Oh, wow! It’s gorgeous! It’s too much, Carter.”

“Nothing’s too much when it comes to you, Ella. Want to take it for a spin?”

“Do I?” I grin and get into the driver’s seat.

“Oh, do me a favor, Ella. Pass me the manual in the glove box, please.”

“Sure.”

I open the glovebox, and out falls a box.

“Oops. Here, this…”

It’s a ring box.

“You’re messing with me, aren’t you?” I say.

“I can’t help it. You should see your face. Go ahead. Open it.”

“It isn’t the key to a Boeing, is it?” I grin.

“No,” he smirks.

I open the box, and inside is a ridiculously beautiful blue diamond set in platinum. It’s the biggest stone I’ve ever seen. The engagement ring is spectacular!

“Ella Jones-Parker, will you marry me?” Carter chuckles.

“Yes, you precious man. I’ll marry you.”

“I think I’m going to keep calling you Jones,” he says, kissing me passionately.

“You can call me whatever you like. As long as you call me, Carter Moore.”

* * *

“You look beautiful, Ella,” Aunt Sue coos.

“I look like an earthworm that swallowed a pebble. No, better make that a boulder,” I sigh and pull on the waistline of my dress.

“Oh, stop complaining,” Anna bosses me around. “You’re about to marry the world’s sexiest and arguably sweetest man. Who cares what you look like?”

“Good point,” I grin. “Thanks for pulling me back into reality, Sergeant,” I tease.

“Yeah, you’re still in the dog box, Ella, so I’m not going to be too nice to you,” Anna says drolly.

“I’m sorry, Carter only has one brother, and he’s taken.”

“I think it’s mighty selfish of you not to arrange a bit of California beefcake for your bestie.”

“I’m working on it, I swear,” I say, pinching her cheeks.

“Your parents would be so proud of you, Ella,” Aunt Sue says and dabs at her eyes.

“Oh, hell, no! Come now, Aunt Sue,” Anna says, and she marches over to my aunt. “No tears now. The makeup artists will have a fit if Ella’s mascara runs. Besides, if you set me off, then all is lost.”

I can’t believe it’s my wedding day. Carter and I decided to get hitched before the birth of our baby. It’s been one hell of a rush to get everything arranged so soon, but we’ve managed to pull it off with the constant helicoptering of LA’s best wedding planner.

But, the stress was worth it. Carter’s and mine is a fairytale wedding!

* * *

“What do you think, Jones? Do you like it?”

Carter and I are on his new plane. It’s crazy fantastic.

“It’s like a palace with wings, Carter,” I chuckle.

“Wait until you see the main bedroom.”

“Something tells me I’m about it.”

“It is our honeymoon, Jones. I thought I’d pull out all the stops.”

“Job done, handsome. Now, will you tell me where we’re going? I hope it isn’t anywhere hot. I look like a beached whale. There’s no way I’m getting into a swimsuit. I’ll scare the other bathers.”

“Is this more English humor? You’re gorgeous, Ella.”

“You have to say that. You’re about to get lucky,” I laugh.

“I got lucky the day you walked into my life, Jones.”

“Ooh, you old smooth talker.”

“Come here,” he says, leading me to the room.

There are red rose petals all over the place, and a silver bucket with two glasses.

“Could I interest you in a drink, sexy?” Carter smiles and pulls a bottle of OJ out of the bucket.

“Good thinking,” I smirk. “Better not get our baby tipsy.”

“Nope. Woody is quite safe.”

“Are we really going to name our son Woody?” I laugh.

“I don’t have the heart to say no to Jagger. But you’re most welcome to give birth to a girl. It would save us a lot of drama.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“You have made me so happy, Ella. Thank you for saying yes.”

“You saved me in more ways than one, Carter. I love you.”

He smiles at me and pulls me closer.

“I’m going to show you exactly how much you mean to me, Jones,” he breathes into my ear.

My pulse is racing in a delicious way because my body knows what’s about to happen. Carter runs his fingers over my hard nipples, which sends shivers down my spine. He licks the skin where little goosebumps have popped up.

“You drive me crazy. Do you know that?” he asks in a thick voice.

I smile at his show of vulnerability. It’s the most attractive thing about Carter. He isn’t afraid to show me how much he loves me, and that is gold.

I run my hand down his torso and stop when it gets to the bulge. My stomach is tight with anticipation, and my head is swimming in endorphin-rich bliss.

“I hope Junior won’t mind a bit of home maintenance,” he purrs.

“I’ll tell the little tyke to close his eyes tightly for a bit, shall I?”

“Brilliant.”

“I’m going to miss your belly, Jones,” Carter says, breathing heavily.

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope. It’s wonderful to have so much more of you to love and fondle,” he says, kissing my neck.

“Speaking of more of me,” I giggle, “you’d better enjoy my breasts too because soon they’ll belong to our baby.”

“Right, then,” Carter says, picking me up, “let’s get to it. No plump boob of mine will go unloved on my watch.”

“Oi, they’re still mine, you know,” I laugh.

“Oh, yeah? If they dust for prints, whose do you think they’ll find all over these puppies?” he asks and nuzzles one of my breasts through my shirt.

My abdomen is heavy—and it’s not just the weight of pregnancy that has me feeling warm and engorged. I desperately want to feel my lover moving inside me. I yearn for him to fill me—to massage my wetness with his shaft until I succumb to the explosion of pleasure our lovemaking culminates in.

“I love you, Carter,” I whisper as he undresses me.

I’m suddenly overwhelmed with a love so great and deep for this man. He is everything I could have dreamed of and so much more. Is he perfect? No man can ever be. But he’s damn close to being there.

My lover disrobes and moves in behind me. Once again, we’re the perfect fit. I gasp as Carter kisses my shoulder and slides his hardness into me. He reaches around my arm and plays with my erect nipple. I hold onto his strong, smooth gluteus maximus while he rides me like a skilled jockey would do to get his mare to the finish line.

In the air, on the ground, in the ocean...no matter where we make love, it always ends the same way. Perfectly!

CARTER

“Are you ever going to wipe that grin off your face, Caboose?” Andrew chirps.

“Probably not, Brother.”

“Is Ella at home?”

“Yeah. She’s fed up, the poor thing. The baby is stubbornly hanging in there.”

“The baby must be a girl.”

“Funny.”

“So, you don’t know the sex?”

“No. We decided to keep it a surprise.”

“Jagger must be excited.”

“He is. I think he and this baby are going to be thick as thieves. Jagger has been talking to his sidekick in utero since he found out Ella was pregnant. He reads to the bump every night before bed. He says he thinks Woody likes Toy Story the best.”

“He’s going to be pretty steamed if it’s a girl.”

“Uh-huh. I can’t say I’m sold on the name Woody, so let’s see who wins this one,” I grin.

“Woody Moore. It does have a certain je ne sais quoi, doesn’t it,” Andrew smirks.

“Yup. It’s unique, alright.”

My brother is in town for the week, and of course I'm happy to see him. I am a bit distracted, though. Ella is due any second, and I'm on tenterhooks. I jump every time the phone rings, hoping it's the call.

So far, we've had one practice run and one false start. It turns out that indigestion is a real heartstopper when you're about to pop out a baby. Poor Ella is so over this. I suggested we have more sex, as I reckoned that would be a double bonus for both of us. I'm not sure I'm the favorite man in her life anymore. At least, that's the feeling I got when she rolled her eyes.

After lunch, I decide to go home so I can give moral support. Ella is in the kitchen when I get there.

"Hey!" She smiles happily when she sees me.

"Hey, yourself," I say, amazed at how fresh and happy she looks. "You look ready for a marathon."

"I feel great. I think my body has finally decided to just go with the flow, and embraced the adorable parasite as its own, as they say," she laughs and flits between the stove and the pantry.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm making my famous roast and Yorkshire puddings. I have a craving for beef."

"I see."

"Don't look so worried. I'm fine. Why don't you find Jagger and wash up? The food will be ready soon, and Yorkshire puds are best eaten straight out of the oven."

"Uh, okay."

I daren't tell Ella that I'm so not hungry. Clearly, she's been at this meal for a while, and she's looking so happy. I will not be that jerk who bursts her bubble.

"Pudding for lunch?" Jagger asks, intrigued.

"It's not really pudding," Ella explains. "It's called pudding, but it's savory. It's delicious. You're going to love it."

"Cool," he grins, and looks at me. I wink.

“Okay, boys. Here we go. Roast beef and Yorkshire puddings coming”

Ella stops dead in her tracks and stares at me.

“What? What’s wrong?”

She looks down. That’s when I notice the liquid trickling down her inner thighs.

“Great,” she sighs. “And it’s such a great batch of puds too.”

“What’s that?” Jagger asks with bulging eyes. “Ugh!”

“That, my boy, is a message from Woody. I think we’d better get Ella to the hospital. It’s go time, Son.”

“Oh, yay! I’ll get Woody’s bag,” he yells, leaps off the chair, and runs to get Ella’s hospital bag.

“Here we go, Daddy,” Ella says before she suddenly bends over and holds onto her belly as the first of many labor pains hits.

* * *

“You’re doing great, Jones,” I say while my wife is sweating up a storm and breathing shallowly. “Come on, you’ve got this.”

I’m holding her hand, and every so often I have to switch hands for fear that she may cut off all circulation to my fingers.

“Ouch!” she yells between pushing. “Come on, Junior! Mum needs a break!”

“You’re doing brilliantly, Ella,” the midwife encourages. “The baby is crowning. One more push, and we’re there.”

“We!” she grunts before she throws back her head and gives it one more loud push.

“There you go!” the nurse says excitedly. “One fresh baby.”

Ella sinks back onto the pillow. She’s beaming with pride, and I’m sure she’s elated that the birth is finally over.

I kiss her lips and gaze lovingly into her tired eyes.

“Thank you, my love,” I mouthe.

Ella grins and mouths back, “I love you.”

“Okay,” the nurse says out loud. “Who had money on what sex?”

“Our son is hoping for a brother,” I say, and I can tell that Ella is happy that I refer to Jagger as her son too.

“Well, I think your son is going to be pretty pleased with himself,” she laughs.

Ella and I look at each other.

“Oh, dear,” she says. “Who’s going to try and change his mind on the name?”

“Hey, I ain’t sticking my head into that beehive, thank you very much. The kid can change his name when he’s old enough to care.”

The nurse brings our new baby son, all wrapped up, and places him on Ella’s chest.

“Here you go, Mommy,” she smiles. “Meet your son.”

I take in the sight before me. Ella is beaming!

“He’s so handsome, Carter,” she coos. “He looks just like you.”

“He has your beautiful eyes,” I say, taking our son from his mother when she offers him to me. “Hey, little man. Welcome to the tribe. Your big brother is going to inhale you.”

* * *

“Ella! Where’s the dinosaur I bought for Woody?” Jagger calls from the baby’s room.

“Probably in Dash’s bed,” I laugh. “You know how he loves those soft toys. Either there or under the bed in your room,” I call back.

“Okay, thanks.”

Seth Woody Moore is one year old today, and he couldn't be more adorable if he tried. Jagger eventually, albeit begrudgingly, agreed to the name Seth, when we explained to him that Woody was his own special name for his brother and something only he should have total dibs over.

We're having a little birthday celebration at the house today with very special friends and family ready to celebrate our joy with us. Andrew and his wife, Sophie and her hubby, and two boys, Anna and Aunt Sue, are due to arrive any moment. I'm changing my shirt for the second time today, as the one covered in mud and chocolate isn't really party appropriate.

"Is that frosting in your hair?" Carter chuckles.

"Probably. Seth went nuts when he saw the cake and dragged his finger through the frosting. I managed to cover up the line so no harm done."

"Hhmm. Beautiful and sweet," he says, tasting the frosting.

It's been a busy year since little Seth joined the fun. I've never been busier or happier.

"I'd better get out there and welcome the guests," Carter says, kissing me passionately. "Or...we could knock out a quickie."

"Carter Moore, get your mind out of my underwear and go meet the guests," I command him and slap him on the butt.

I wouldn't mind a quickie, but I think I'll have a meltdown if I have to change one more time.

"Fine," he pouts. "But you're all mine after the kids crash."

"You bet."

* * *

"Where's my godson?" Anna calls out when she arrives.

"He's outside on the jumping castle, working on his circus moves."

"Hey, Ella," she says, and she hugs me tightly.

“How’s the new apartment?”

“A dream. I can’t believe I finally found one so close to the clinic. It’s perfect. I can walk there on a good day.”

“Great!”

“Thank you for the housewarming gift, by the way. You shouldn’t have.”

“It’s an air fryer, Anna, not a nuclear weapon. You can’t live off toast and beans for the rest of your life.”

“Want a bet?”

“Hi, Anna,” Carter says when he enters the kitchen.

“Hey, handsome. I thought you were on jumping castle patrol.”

“I am. I just thought I’d sneak away for a quick beer. It’s thirsty work out there.”

“Anna was just thanking me for the air fryer,” I grin.

“Yeah, Jones had a good giggle when she bought it,” Carter smirks.

“Well, don’t expect a gourmet meal anytime soon,” Anna says.

“I won’t,” Carter winks, grabs a beer, and leaves Anna and me to chat.

“I’m so glad you convinced me to move to LA, Ella. I just love it here.”

“Are you kidding? I could never manage the clinic without you.”

“What a wonderful idea that was. It’s hard to believe that there are so many women who need help. It’s wonderfully rewarding to be able to help them.”

“It’s crazy how many abused women there are out there. And all they need is someone who will listen and help them get to the other side of their liberty. I know. I was once one of those women.”

“It’s inspired, Ella.”

“I couldn’t have done it without Carter. Without his investment in the idea, it would have taken years to get the clinic and the housing facilities built and ready.”

“Like I said before. You’ve got yourself a keeper there, Babe.”

“The daycare center is my favorite place to sneak off to when I’m feeling overwhelmed and need to remind myself why we’re doing this. Those little faces are the perfect sight for sore eyes.”

“Agreed. I’m sorry to bring it up, but I read about the verdict in the paper. How are you feeling about that?”

“Sebastian is where he belongs.”

“Twenty years isn’t close to long enough, if you ask me.”

“I’m sure he’ll have plenty of time to think about his life choices during that time.”

“I can’t believe you let Amanda off the hook. I don’t think I would have been that forgiving. You’re a saint, Ella.”

“How could I even think of looking Jagger in the face if I was the reason his mother was in prison, Anna? I know she did a terrible thing, but ultimately I blame Seb for the abuse. Amanda was just trying to get Carter back. I can’t blame her for that.”

“Still. I couldn’t do it.”

“She’s changed. I think the threat of prison time snapped Amanda right out of her wicked ways.”

“She’d better be good to you, or she’ll have to contend with me.”

“I’m sure no one wants that,” I laugh.

“Yippers. We eat chicks like her for breakfast down in the Shire.”

“Damn straight. Here’s to the English.”

“God save the King!”

“If the two of you are done pledging allegiance to the King, could we get this party started, please?” Carter creeps up

behind me and says.

“Sure, handsome. Anything for my boys.”

* * *

“What time is it?”

“It’s 11 a.m.” Carter purrs and kisses the back of my neck.

“What?”

“You were sleeping so peacefully, I didn’t have the heart to wake you.”

“But, it’s our romantic weekend away. No clinic, no kids, no work. And you let me waste it by sleeping until midday,” I groan and stretch out.

“Are you kidding? We’re on a break together, and I have you all to myself, in bed, naked. What’s to complain about?”

“I hope the boys are behaving.”

“I’m sure Aunt Sue and a brigade of Au Pairs and staff are more than capable of keeping an eye on a two-year-old and his very busy brother,” Carter smiles and pulls the duvet aside.

“You’re not staring at my nakedness, are you, Mr. Moore?”

“I’m afraid I am, Doc. What can I say? I’m addicted to your tight little tush.”

“May I remind you that the last time we were here and you enjoyed my tush, we went home with a baby in utero.”

“Oh, yeah. What a fun weekend that was,” Carter chuckles.

“Yes, I have fond memories of the deck out back.”

Carter and I are at the house in Vegas. He bought it and presented it to me as a gift. Of all our holiday homes, this one’s my favorite.

“Well, it’s a stinker. Would you like to join me for a dip in the nice, cool pool?”

“I think that’s an outstanding idea.”

I notice a covered tray next to the pool.

“What’s under there?” I ask as I slip into the water.

“Some breakfast. Strawberries, whipped cream, and almond butter.”

“Could you be any more perfect?”

“I thought I’d butter you up before I ravage your bones.”

“You’re a cunning negotiator, Carter Moore.”

The pool water is perfectly chilled and much needed to quench the sweltering heat of the Nevada sun.

Carter swims toward me. He’s naked, and the feel of his body when he presses up against me gets me excited.

“Is that a pool net in your pocket, or are you just happy to see me?” I tease.

“When last did we play a little water polo?” he asks in a husky voice.

“It’s been far too long,” I answer while I’m hanging onto the edge of the deep end so he can untie my bikini bottom strings.

I wrap my arms around Carter’s neck and my legs around his waist.

“Okay, my sexy mermaid,” he whispers as he pushes his shaft into my waiting core, “it’s time for some Vegas lovin.”

I scream out his name when I climax. No one can hear us, and even if they could, I wouldn’t give a damn!

EXCERPT: DANGEROUS REFUGE



The handsome, mysterious man will protect me and my son under one condition... I have to marry him first.

Something draws me to Allie Clarke, and it's not just her sweet, innocent beauty. It's also her fierce desire to protect her son and her belief that people are good deep down...

As wrong as she is, Allie holds out hope for me. She doesn't know what I've done, and what I *will* do to keep her safe.

But Allie has a secret - an ex, the father of her son, who is on the hunt. He won't stop until he finds her, and she won't stop running until she's safe.

Rules we set ourselves are broken. I shouldn't touch Allie, but I can't resist anymore.

Once her ex reappears, two things are put to the test.

My loyalty to the bratva... and my love for Allie.

My decision might end us or give us the new beginning we've been craving... But no matter how I decide, when I do, it's going to change *everything*.

DANGEROUS REFUGE is the second book of The Corrupt Bloodlines series of interconnected standalones.

This is a dark spicy romance novel that can be enjoyed alone or binged with the rest of the series!

Allie

Nothing this entire night has gone my way. Standing next to the fryer in the kitchen, I dab my red apron with a towel, trying to get the grease splatters off it. I hate waiting tables, but it's the only job I could get at the time, and now the only thing I'm experienced in. Moving nine times in the past five years has meant nine different jobs, nine different apartments, nine times explaining to my son that things have to change again. I really want this to work out, but I really don't want to keep dealing with rude customers like the one who just wiped his fried chicken down the front of my apron just to prove how greasy the food was.

"Jerk off again?" Dana asks, slinging her tray into the large sink to be washed. She better than anyone knows how rude these people can be.

"Yeah, this time they smeared their food down my apron. I've about had it." I shake my head and toss the towel to the side. I'm going to wear this stain until I get home because I don't have a way to wash it out here.

"Looks like the cute guys at table six aren't giving you a hard time at all." She wags her eyebrows as she gets a clean tray and adds plates of food from the line onto it. When it's full, she leans her hip against the stainless-steel table and crosses her arms over her chest. "You need to get you a good-looking,

rich man to be your sugar daddy. Then you don't have to keep doing this job."

"Yeah, well you have a boyfriend. Why do you stick around here?" My sarcastic comment bounces off of her without an answer as I pick up the tray of drinks I need to deliver to said table of gentlemen, who—if I do say so myself—are extremely good-looking. Only one of them is wearing a ring too, despite a few of them being more mature than me.

I carry the tray into the dining room, avoiding the very rude customers as they pack up their things to leave. I won't get a tip from that table but hopefully these handsome fellows will make up for that.

"I have that fresh round of drinks for you guys," I say, balancing the tray on one hand as I set each man's drink in front of him. The one with Dark smoldering eyes who has had his gaze fixed on me all night is at it again. He stares, drinking me in as his tongue traces along his bottom lip. I like the attention, but I know I'm no good for him. Paul will catch up with me at some point—probably soon—and I'll have to leave again. It's just the way things work.

"You're a tall drink," the man says. His voice is scratchy, like he's a sixty-year-old smoker, or maybe he screams a lot and he's just hoarse. But when he speaks it sends a warm rush of arousal through me. He's the best-looking one at this table in my opinion, permanent five o'clock shadow, dark wavy hair he has slicked back, and blue eyes that promise I'd be in for a pleasurable time if I flirted back.

"Thank you, but I'm not really looking for anything right now."

It's true; I'm not. I can't. Not with Rico needing me to keep him away from his father. Paul will come after me; I will be forced to move. If I start something up with a guy, I'll just want to stay, and then what will happen? Rico's father will win, and I can't let that happen. Not after what happened to us.

"You know, the best things happen when you're not looking for them. Just ask Dom over there." His eyes dart at the man

with salt-and-pepper sideburns. He looks stern, grumpy even, not at all like this man who is speaking to me now.

“I appreciate that advice,” I say as I set his glass in front of him and his eyes trail over my curves. It makes me tense, my pussy tingling a little because of the attention. I haven’t had sex with a man in five years—dildos don’t count and they don’t cut it either. I just can’t break down and have a one-night stand either. I’m too principled, too picky.

“Has anyone ever told you that you have an amazing figure?” He leans back and studies me. “You see women out there trying to do all these crazy things to make themselves more attractive to men, but you have this natural beauty.” He gestures the length of my body and all I can think is how on earth does he think this ugly pinstriped waitress uniform is attractive.

I’m covered in grease. My hair is falling out of my bun. I have a run in my hose. My makeup is probably smudged from sweating too much, and I know there are bags under my eyes from lack of sleep and worry. He’s either the smoothest talker who just wants a quick bang and run, or he’s blind.

“Thanks, but no thanks.” I am not rude at all. I don’t want to be mean to anyone. I just can’t let myself feel that. I can’t be flattered by him—I am, but I can’t allow myself to respond to it. “Can I get you fellas anything else?” I ask, stepping back.

“How about your number?” another one of them says. “Sven is lonely and he’s really a good guy if you give him a chance.”

I sigh and shake my head. “I’ll be back with the check in a bit.”

I walk away feeling lighter. It’s nice to be admired and wanted, but it will only lead to more heartbreak for me. I have a feeling that I’m just going to be a lonely cat woman when Rico grows up and moves out. I’ll have my ten orange tabby cats and a dozen litter boxes spread around my tiny apartment where I hide out from life in general. It’s literally fate or something.

I brush my hair out of my face and force a smile as I leave behind the idea that I could escape my dreaded future by

snatching up one of those handsome men. The table I'm heading to has been nothing but trouble all night, but I still have to check on them. I weave between the other patrons in the dining room with my tray tucked under my arm and force a smile.

"That potato soup is almost ready for you. I apologize again that it had bacon in it when you requested no bacon. Is there anything I can get you while you wait?"

The woman seated at the table across from whom I can only assume is her very miserable husband scowls at me. "He's already finished eating and I haven't even gotten my food. The soda tasted like syrup, no carbonation, and you didn't even bring me silverware when you seated me. I think you've done enough." Her hair is in such a tight bun it draws her eyes back at the corner, which is comical, but I don't laugh at her.

"I'm sorry again, ma'am. I'll go check if the soup is finished now." I turn, heading for the kitchen, though I would rather she just complain and leave. I'm not getting a tip from her, and she's already told my manager I did a poor job tonight so far. It isn't my fault the cook prepared the wrong potato soup, but try to convince an unhappy customer of that. I hate waiting tables when I get blamed for mistakes someone else makes.

"Sheesh," Dana says as I walk into the kitchen. "You can hear that lady all the way in here." She rolls her eyes and hands me a tray with the bowl of soup sitting in the center, complete with a new bunch of silverware and napkin.

"I know right?" I hand her my empty tray and take the one with soup.

"Look, just go give her the soup and then we'll go have a smoke or something. You need a break." Dana is sometimes a lifesaver but today, she really is.

"Did I ever tell you I love you?" I croon, offering the first real smile of the day. "Now, let me go feed the dragon."

With my back to the door and tray in hand, I back into the dining room, passing by the handsome men who let out a few catcalls. I use the boost of confidence as I approach the

woman with her food. I don't know what causes it, but my foot snags on something and I lose my balance. It feels like my knees will buckle, and in order to keep my footing, I reach out and brace myself on the back of a nearby empty chair. Unfortunately, I also tip the tray holding the soup, which inevitably slides back toward me and spills down the front of my apron, drenching me in broth and chunks of potato.

I gasp, straightening as the bowl and tray fall to the ground. My apron, skirt and shoes are covered in the soup and there is nothing left to put on the table in front of her. The soup is hot, but not scalding. I quickly untie the apron and peel it off before the moisture soaks through into my shirt, but the hem of my skirt is soggy.

“Dammit,” I grumble under my breath. This is exactly what I needed tonight, to make things worse with an already unhappy customer. She sees me from across the room and her scowl becomes an angry glare. Dana is there in a heartbeat with towels and I use them to dab at the sticky fabric of my skirt's hem.

“Go... I got this,” she tells me, gesturing toward the woman.

My shoulders sag as I walk her way, feeling the soup soak through my ballet flats and warm my toes. It's a walk of shame. Everyone in this place saw me soil myself, and now I have to explain why this woman will not be eating her second bowl of soup.

“Was that mine! Oh my god, you're so careless. How can you be so clumsy?” The woman's tone is biting and harsh. I have to remember she is a customer not someone I know personally.

“I'm really sorry, ma'am. I—”

She stands, slamming her napkin onto the table. Her husband flushes with embarrassment but says nothing. “You should be ashamed of yourself. You know I've never had such horrible service here in my life.”

“Please, forgive me. I can have the kitchen prepare you a new soup, and I would like to pay for your meal myself.” I squeeze

the towel in my hands. I hardly have money to pay rent, but it's the right gesture. This screw up was my fault.

"No. I want to speak to your manager." She crosses her arms over her chest indignantly and I want to smack her. I restrain myself though, knowing that will just lead to assault charges. I step backward, thinking how Karen-like this woman is being, and I run into something very firm and lose my balance again, only this time, strong hands on my hips hold me upright.

I gasp and step away, seeing the very tall, very broad-chested man from the table across the room. His dreamy eyes are focused on me for a split second then he looks at the woman. "I'm sorry, Miss. I couldn't help but witness what happened and overhear you're upset. I would like to pay for your entire meal. And I would like to leave you with a gift." He pulls out his wallet, placing two-hundred-dollar bills on the table. That's enough to pay for this meal and a few more like it.

"Well..." the woman huffs, "you are not personally responsible for this woman's failure. Are you the manager?"

"I am not. I'm just a concerned customer who wants to help." He folds his hands in front of his waist holding his wallet in them. "If that's not enough, I can offer more."

I back away as Dana walks up, shooing me. I know she's watching out for me so the manager won't get on my case, and I'm amazed how this stranger has come to my rescue. He has no reason to be so kind and bail me out of this situation with the angry woman, and I will have to thank him sometime, but right now I just want to hide.

I head for the kitchen, tossing the dirty towel into the hamper where it goes and burst out the back door with my purse in hand, snagged from the hook near the breakroom. I plop myself on the bench where I usually sit to have a smoke and pull my cigarettes and lighter out. The ground is covered in butts, probably left there by the cook. It's a gross habit, and sometimes I pick them up and put them in the trash for him, but not today. I light up and puff on the cigarette, feeling the nicotine already calming the craving I had.

I've barely gotten my cigarette lit when I see someone approaching. It's a man wearing a dark hoodie, hunched over. I stand a bit nervous, and the man folds the hood back. His dark hair and dark eyes give him away immediately.

"Oh god, what are you doing here?" My worst nightmare approaches me. Paul has found me already. I thought I had a few months left before this happened again.

"You know why I'm here, Allie. I want my son. He deserves to know his father." He jams his hands in his hoodie pockets and I drop my lit cigarette to the ground and use the toe of my shoe to snuff it out.

"I don't have time for this," I tell him, heading for the door, but he grabs my elbow and hurts me, yanking me backward.

"You better make time," he growls. "Because I am going to get my son."

"Yeah, well sue me for custody then. I'll have them drug test you and you'll go to jail. You'll never see Rico again." I wrestle to get away from him but his grip tightens.

"I'm going to get him back."

I could spit in his face right now. I'm so angry. I was just starting to settle into this new place and now he'll be following me home. "I'll never let you have him. You beat me so bad in front of him he started wetting the bed again. You're not getting him back." This is the last thing I needed today. I want to go home now and pack my things and leave.

"Hey!"

Another male voice hits my ears and I see the large man from inside charging down the alley. Paul snarls and pushes me away and I cower near the door, ready to run inside. But the large man whose name I can't remember, is at my side, standing between me and Paul in a split second.

"Keep your hands off the lady, pal."

"What's it to you, prick? This is personal business." Paul squares his shoulders. He's a near match in height and weight,

but I fear the large man may go down hard if Paul hits him. I have first-hand experience with how hard he hits.

“It’s my business when I see a man get physical with a woman. Now leave before I call the cops.” When his chest puffs out I see the ridges of defined muscles beneath his shirt and I look away. I don’t want to stand here and watch a fist fight.

“I’ll be back, Allie. Rico is mine. You’ll see...”

Paul walks away and the large man turns to me. “You okay?” he asks, opening the door. I nod and back into the restaurant, ready for my break to be over.

“Yeah, I’m okay,” I manage to mumble. I never do get his name, though I make a mental note to try to get it if he comes in again.

He lets the door swing shut and I start a mental plan for how I’m going to tell Rico we have to move again. He’ll be crushed.

[Read the complete story HERE!](#)

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