

Callie

I'm not getting out of bed today.

This is an amazing mattress. Just the right amount of firm-to-soft ratio. This comforter rocks too. It's puffy but not suffocating. These sheets are a high thread count. Breathable. I did good when I picked these out. I could stay here all day. Don't need to go grocery shopping. Who needs to eat when you have a mattress like this? Laundry? Pffft. I won't need clothes if I stay in bed. This is the perfect solution to all of life's problems.

But what is that awful smell?

A long, wet tongue slides across my cheek, and I groan. "Go back to sleep, Maverick."

With my eyelids still closed, I reach out and smooth my fingers through my retriever's fluffy fur. His tongue makes another pass over my cheek, and again, I'm hit with a blast of that stench.

My nose scrunches as my head jerks up off the pillow. "Maverick, did you eat your poop again?"

His head dips down, and he rests it on top of his front paws.

"Don't give me those eyes! They're not going to work on me this time."

He leaps off the bed and bounds into the hallway, tail swatting from left to right as he waits for me at the top of the stairs.

Guess I'm getting out of bed.

I flip the comforter off my body, swing my legs to the side of the mattress, and jam my feet into my plush white slippers.

Once I'm vertical, my head throbs like someone dropped an anvil on it. I grip onto the cool iron bannister and take my time down the spiral staircase. Maverick waits at the bottom, his body thrashing like a shark from the momentum of his tail.

"You are way too awake for me right now, bud."

He *woofs* in response and prances into the kitchen ahead of me.

When I stagger into the kitchen, sunlight streams through the windows, reflecting off the marble countertop and searing my retinas. I yank the cord on the blinds and bury my face in the crook of my elbow, hissing like Dracula.

Maverick plops down at my feet, nuzzling my ankle with his wet nose. We both jump when we hear the creak of the front door, and then he takes off into the foyer.

Paul strides into the kitchen, saturated in sweat from his morning run, and I hold my breath until his lips curve up into a smile.

"Good morning, gorgeous."

Relief washes over me. "Morning. How was your run?"

Paul snatches a water bottle from the refrigerator and twists off the cap. "Four miles today."

His royal-blue Under Armour T-shirt clings to his broad chest, the muscles in his biceps flexing with his movements. His blond strands are damp and disheveled, and his skin glows with a golden sheen.

I lift an eyebrow. “How is it that you look this sexy after a four-mile run?”

He grins. “How is it that you look this sexy when you just woke up?”

I huff out a sardonic laugh, knowing damn well I resemble the Crypt Keeper at the moment.

Paul leans in with puckered lips, but I make an X with my forearms in front of my face.

“The poop-eating bandit got me. You might want to stay back.”

He looks down at Maverick, and as if he knows we’re talking about him, Maverick ducks around the corner of the island.

“You’re nasty, dog.”

“I’ll call the vet today. Maybe they’ll know how to deter him from eating his own feces.”

Paul leans his hip against the counter. “I think all dogs eat their own crap.”

“We have to watch him better when he’s out back. Stop it before he can get to it.” I walk around the island so I can start on breakfast. “I read something once that said dogs eat their poop when they’re lacking vitamins in their diet. Was it an article? Maybe Josie told me. I don’t know; I can’t remember. Either way—”

I stop moving and snap my fingers in front of Paul’s face. “Are you even listening to me?”

Paul shakes his head, his eyes roving over my body. “I haven’t heard one word since you stood up in those silky shorts.”

I smile and set a frying pan on top of the stove. “Please. This isn’t anything you haven’t seen before.”

“Yet it never gets old.” He closes the distance between us and stands behind me, trailing his hands up my arms.

I hum at his light touch, welcoming it. “Let’s hope you always think that.”

“I know I will.” He tilts my head to the side and presses his lips to my neck. One of his hands slips under my camisole, cupping my breast, while he tugs my shorts down with the other.

My head falls back against his shoulder, and a long exhale leaves my parted lips. “Don’t you have a meeting?”

“Just means we’ll have to be quick.” His fingers slide between my thighs and press inside me while his thumb rubs circles on my clit at the same time.

My legs quiver, and I reach forward to grip the edge of the counter. Paul gives my back a gentle push until my chest is pressed against the cool marble, and then he slides his length inside me.

“I love you,” he whispers at my ear, gripping my hips, pumping in and out of me in long, controlled strokes.

I arch my back to meet each of his thrusts, and his fingers return to my clit as he drives into me faster, harder, deeper. I moan, writhing against his hand, and his pace quickens.

I can feel the pleasure mounting in my core, the steady build like a rising wave. Soon, it crashes over me. I cry out as the spasms rack through my body. Paul goes under too, grunting as his hot liquid fills me.

He holds me there, pressing soft kisses to my shoulder, my neck, my temple. “This is what I’ve missed. I’m so glad we can finally get back to how things used to be.”

“Me too.”

And that’s my halfhearted truth.

I should relish in this feeling, the closeness, his gentle love, but my mind crawls toward the analytical place it always goes to, calculating the date, the time, the exact location in my cycle. My fingers itch to reach for my phone and click on the fertility app out of habit, but for the first time in three years, I don’t.

And after last night, I never will again.

With a pat on my backside, Paul pulls away and tucks himself back into his running shorts. “I’m hitting the shower.”

My eyes linger on his wide back and confident swagger as he leaves the room with his head held high, free from the anxious thoughts that plague me.

Guilt squeezes my chest when I think about everything that I’ve put him through over the past few years. The stress, the doctor’s appointments, all my tears.

No more.

Paul’s right. We need to get back to the way we used to be. Back before I became obsessed with starting a family. Before I plunged into depression and dragged him down with me. Before the people we were when we got married turned into strangers.

It’s time to put it to rest.

And it’s up to me to do it.

I can be better.

I can find happiness again.

I straighten my camisole, pull up my shorts, and start gathering the ingredients I need for breakfast.

The kitchen is my favorite room in this entire house. Beautiful marble countertops; tall, white cabinets; stainless steel appliances. Paul had the contractor create it based off of my exact vision. He says it’s because he loves me so much. I say it’s because he needs me to cook for him because Paul could burn water.

Sometimes it feels like I’m living someone else’s life, like this is all a dream. Living in a mansion in Orange County, California, married to the Adonis that is my husband, not having to get up and work 9-5 every day. I’m very fortunate to have everything I could ever need at my fingertips.

I didn’t grow up with all this. I came from an average, middle-class family. But when I met Paul in college, everything changed. We’ve been together for nine years now, and I’m still not used to this lifestyle. I don’t think I ever will be.

As I scoop the egg-white-and-spinach omelet with hash browns into the glass container, Paul struts back into the kitchen, dressed to perfection in his navy suit. I hand him his lunch bag, his breakfast, and his coffee mug.

He presses his lips to the top of my head. “Thanks, gorgeous. I’ll see you tonight.”

“Have a good day.”

“Be good, poop breath,” he calls over his shoulder.

Maverick barely lifts his head from where he’s sprawled out by the back door, bathing in the sunspot.

The dog-life of Riley.

When I hear the click of the front door, a long exhale whooshes out of me. I want to walk upstairs and climb right back into bed, but if I'm going to make things better, I have to start by looking the part. So instead, I drag myself up the stairs and into the bathroom.

It's been a while since I've cared about my appearance. Been a while since I've cared about anything other than becoming a mother.

Fake it 'til you make it, they say.

Flipping on the lights, I shimmy out of my pajama shorts and tear the camisole over my head. I suck in a sharp breath when my eyes land on my reflection in the mirror for the first time this morning. My stomach clenches at the sight of the dark-purple splotches along my left bicep, memories of last night flooding my vision.

Damn you, Maverick. I wanted to stay in bed today.

I blink away the hot tears before they get the chance to brim over, quick to replace the weak emotion with logic.

Paul drank too much last night, and everything we've been holding in for the last three years came to a head.

It was my fault.

I shouldn't have let things get to that point.

I shouldn't have spoken up.

I'll do better.

It won't happen again.

Needing a plan rather than wallowing in self-pity, I examine the span of the bruising and mentally scour through my wardrobe for the right sweater. Hopefully, today will be brisk enough to wear one without drawing attention to myself. Even if the weather's hot, I could get away with wearing one of my cardigans with three-quarter-length sleeves. Shouldn't be too conspicuous.

Deep breath in through the nose, and out through the mouth.

Maverick.

California king bed.

Walk-in closet.

Dream kitchen.

Yard with a pool.

Mercedes.

"I'm fine," I tell my reflection. "Everything's fine."

I twist the lever in the shower and step under the waterfall, letting the warm water cascade over my skin. By the time I lather and rinse, the urge to cry is gone and I can breathe easy again.

Wrapping the towel around myself, I swing open the bathroom door and head to my closet. My pale-yellow sweater covers the mess on my arm, and I leave it unbuttoned over my white-and-yellow floral maxi dress. I spend thirty minutes lining my eyelids, curling my lashes, and passing the flatiron over my blond waves, taming it the way I know Paul prefers it.

With my armor in place, I square my shoulders in the mirror and heave a sigh. "Good as new."

At the sound of my sandals clunking down the stairs, my overeager dog gallops toward the front door.

"Ready for your walk, Mav?"

He *woofs* and spins in a circle.

I'm clipping his leash onto his collar when a loud *boom* echoes outside. My shoulders jolt, and Maverick jumps to scratch at the door, barking like a madman.

"Are we starting with the fireworks already?"

The Fourth of July isn't for another week. Plus, it's nine o'clock in the morning.

I push the sheer cream curtain aside and peer out the window. A white pickup truck rolls to a stop in front of Josie's house across the street. Well, there are visible areas of white paint—the truck was white at *one* time—surrounded by burnt-orange rust spots eating away at the metal. The bed of the truck is covered by a blue tarp, securing the contents underneath with a yellow bungee cord. Thick, black smoke billows from the exhaust pipe, trailing all the way down the block.

The truck pops again as it idles, sending Maverick into another barking fit.

"All right, bud. Enough." I reach down to pat his head, keeping my nose glued to the windowpane.

The driver's door swings open, and a man steps out. A navy-blue baseball cap sits on his head, pulled down low over his eyes. His plain white T-shirt, which looks more like an undershirt, is wrinkled and smudged with brown stains. His jeans are ripped—not the kind of rips people pay for—and equally as filthy as his shirt. He strides around the front bumper and up the walkway that leads to Josie's backyard.

"He must be the new landscaper."

Maverick cocks his head to the side as if he's listening to me.

Josie's Lexus isn't in her driveway, so I find it strange that she'd give a stranger the passcode to get in through her back gate. Maybe she left it unlocked for him before she left. Seems odd, but we've been desperate to find a new landscaping company after one of the workers from our old company got caught having an affair with Mrs. Nelson down the street. If Josie found someone dependable, I'm going to need his card. Paul will be thrilled. Our shrubs need trimming, and weeds are beginning to poke up through the pavers in our driveway.

"Come on, bud." I snatch my sunglasses off the entryway table and lead Maverick out the front door.

Once we cross the wide street, Maverick pulls ahead of me, his nose to the ground, sniffing his way up the path of pavers. The iron gate is ajar, and Maverick continues pulling me through the opening into the backyard.

The layout is like mine. Same-sized rectangular inground pool, similar patio furniture. But Josie's yard is full of life, whereas mine has barely been touched. Squirt guns, skateboard ramps, and balls from every sport litter her grass. It's obvious that a family lives here.

Josie often complains of the mess, but I'd give anything to step on a Lego block belonging to *my* child.

The landscaper is standing in front of the pool house with his back to me, one hand on his hip while the other tips the neck of a brown glass bottle into his mouth.

So much for finding a reliable landscaper.

I stop a few feet behind him, wrapping Maverick's leash around my hand a few times to keep him from pulling me any further.

"Don't think you should be drinking on the job, sir."

The man spins around and blasts me with a scowl that sends a shiver down my spine. Under the brim of his hat, I spot a deep, disgruntled crease that lies between his dark brows. His prominent, unshaven jaw pops, clenching, as if he's gritting through physical pain while he glares at me with piercing steel-blue eyes.

The hairs on my arms lift in a whoosh of awareness, and fear slices into me.

I shouldn't have come back here alone.

Maverick's tail thumps against my leg as he leans forward to get to the stranger, clearly unfazed by the potential danger I've put us in.

"I ... I'm sorry." I pull Maverick back. "I didn't mean to startle you. I live across the street."

Great idea. Tell the nice murderer where you live.

He doesn't respond. Doesn't introduce himself. He just keeps hitting me with that unwavering glacial stare. It's too much, too powerful to withstand, so I lower my gaze and take in the rest of him.

Strong shoulders span wide, adding to his towering height. His shirt is taut around his upper-body. The muscles in his arms are well-defined striations, more than just swollen biceps and triceps. He's carved from stone, detailed and unforgiving. A work of art that people travel from all over to stand in front of in admiration.

This man is beautiful.

Then again, that's probably what every woman said about Ted Bundy right before he killed them.

I should leave. Flee back to the safety of my home.

But I'm frozen, sucked in by the enigmatic energy surging around him like a tornado of rage and agony.

And I'm standing right in his path.

I swallow, my throat thick with apprehension. "I, uh, we're in need of a new landscaper. I saw you come back here and figured I'd come ask for your card." I swallow again, my gaze flicking to the beer bottle glinting in the sunlight. "It's a little early to be drinking, don't you think? I mean, you shouldn't be impaired while operating heavy machinery. Don't want to lose a foot in the lawn mower."

I choke out a laugh, desperate to make light of the situation, but it comes out strangled and strained.

The man doesn't laugh with me. He doesn't crack a smile. Not sure his facial muscles would know how if he tried to. One massive hand is curled at his side, as if he's gripping the leash on his composure, his self-control ready to snap.

"You've got some nerve coming back here like this." The man's voice is gruff with a sharp edge, like he gargles with a throatful of razors every morning.

My eyebrows lift in a flash of irritation. "Me? I'm a potential customer. One who wants to pay you for your landscaping services. Or I did, before I caught you getting drunk on the job."

Why am I arguing with the scary man?

He folds his arms over his chest, accentuating the corded muscles in his forearms. "And you assume I'm a landscaper because why?"

"Your truck, for one." I wave my arm in front of him. "You're too dirty to be pool maintenance. If you were a roofer, you'd have a ladder." I shrug like it's simple addition. "And

this isn't your backyard, so unless you're here to rob the place ..." My fingers touch my lips. "Oh, God. You're not here to rob them, are you?"

He edges closer, the look of disgust twisting his features—the look he's directing at *me*.

I lift my chin and try not to flinch.

I've learned that flinching only makes it worse.

Maverick strains against his leash, his eager nose in the air, wide eyes begging the stranger to pet him. I have to use both hands to tug him back.

Some guard dog you are, Mav! This man is about to kill me, and you're trying to sniff his crotch and make friends.

The man points his index finger at me, revulsion rolling off his tongue with each syllable. "You self-righteous, pretentious little princess."

My mouth falls open, and my stomach bottoms out.

"You stand there in your designer clothes, your shoes that cost more than a month's rent, scrutinizing everyone behind your ridiculous fucking sunglasses, and you're gonna judge *me*?" He shakes his head. "My clothes are dirty because I work my ass off. My truck's a piece of shit because I have more important things to pay for. And I'm a grown-ass man, so I'll drink whenever the fuck I feel like drinking. All you rich motherfuckers act like you're better than people like me, but I know the sickening truth. I can lay my head down at night with a clear conscience because I'm not living a lie. I'd rather look ugly on the outside than be ugly on the inside like you."

His words pack a physical punch, hitting way too close to home. A tremor rips through me, and before I can stop it, a tear escapes from under my sunglasses.

It's time to go.

"I'm sorry." I whip around and bolt out of the backyard, dragging Maverick behind me.

My legs carry me across the grass as fast as my wedges will allow. I bunch my dress in my fist, hiking it up over my knees so my strides are longer.

When I reach my house, I slam the door closed behind me and press my back against it. My chest heaves as I gasp for air, my heart racing. A sob gurgles in my throat, but I swallow it down.

Maverick.

California king bed.

Walk-in closet.

Dream kitchen.

Yard with a pool.

Mercedes.

Maverick whimpers, nudging me with his cold nose. I sink down to the floor and fling my arms around him, burying my face in the comfort of his soft fur.

"It's okay, Mav. I'm okay."

Everything's okay.

I shouldn't have confronted him like that.

It's my fault for making him so angry.

My speeding pulse returns to normal after a few minutes of deep breathing, and I push off the floor. Maverick follows me into the kitchen as I swipe my purse and my car keys off the counter.

“Sorry, bud. You gotta stay here. I’m running to the store. Making a special dinner for your dad tonight.”

I kiss the top of his head, and then I’m back out the door, head down, without so much as a glance at the pickup truck out front.

* * *

“Mmm. So good, babe.”

My lips spread into a smile. “Figured I’d surprise you with your favorite dish tonight.”

Paul’s hand slides across the cherry wood table, and he entwines our fingers. “I love it. Thank you.”

“How was your day?”

He tugs on his tie, loosening it, before popping his collar and slipping the loop over his head. “Good. Meeting went well. I think Haarburger’s going to sign with us.”

“That’s great.”

He dabs the corner of his mouth with his napkin. “How was therapy?”

“It went well.”

His Adam’s apple bobs up and down. “Did you, uh, tell her what we talked about last night?”

“I told her about our decision to stop trying to have kids. She thinks it’s good that we’re on the same page, that we’re able to move on together.”

“Not what I was referring to, Cal.”

“Oh.”

He’s asking if I told her about the bruises he left on my arm.

I look down at my spaghetti. “No, I didn’t mention it.”

“Good.” He sets his fork down beside his plate. “Because I meant what I said last night. It won’t happen again.”

I nod, unsure of what he wants me to say to that. It wasn’t the first time he put his hands on me, nor was it the first time he promised that it won’t happen again. I want to call him out on that. I want to ask him why he feels the need to hurt me in order to get his point across. I want to ask him why he can’t control his temper. I want to ask him what happened to the sweet man I met in college. I want to ask him to get some help.

But sometimes, silence is easier than navigating around all the egg shells lying at my feet.

He picks his fork back up. “Did you call the vet?”

“I did. They said to watch him when he’s in the backyard so he doesn’t get the opportunity to eat his poop.” I lift my goblet to my lips and take a long sip.

“Did you ask why he’s doing this?”

My stomach coils. “The, uh, the doctor said it could be due to anxiety.”

“Anxiety. Like you.”

“Yeah. He asked if we’ve been stressed, because dogs can pick up on our feelings.”

Recognition flashes across Paul’s face, his light-brown eyes hardening. “So what did you tell him?”

“I told him everything’s fine, of course. He said we could put Maverick on a low dose of anxiety medication, but I said that won’t be necessary. We’ll just watch him better when he’s outside. Won’t happen again if we keep an eye on him.” I force a smile and clasp my hands together. “Ready for dessert?”

He shakes his head and pushes his chair back as he stands. “I’m going to change. Got some e-mails to send out.”

“Of course. I’ll get this all cleaned up.”

He’s gone before the sentence leaves my lips.

Could’ve gone worse, I suppose.

I release a sigh and begin stacking our plates.

While I rinse off the dishes in the sink, I gaze out the window into the darkened yard. The pool house at the far end elicits the memory of the bizarre encounter in Josie’s backyard this morning.

I’ve tried not to think about the rude stranger all day, but my mind keeps drifting back to him. Back to what he’d said.

He was right. I’d judged him by his appearance and made an assumption based on it. Shouldn’t have been that big of a deal, though. He could’ve laughed it off like a silly misunderstanding. He didn’t need to go off on me like he did. People judge books by their covers all the time.

Hell, he did the same thing with me, didn’t he? He lumped me in with the wealthy people in this neighborhood, pointing out my expensive clothes and accessories, calling me a fake without knowing anything about me. I could call him a jerk and chalk it up to him being mean.

But his words carry weight.

I am a fake.

I am living a lie.

Who was that man, and how did he read me so easily?

More importantly, does Josie know that someone was in her yard today?

I dry my hands on a dishtowel and dig through my purse to find my phone. Before I can tap out a text, I spot one already waiting in my inbox. When I click on it and read the words that pop up on the screen, my hand clamps over my mouth.

Josie: So I heard you met my brother this morning.