

ONE

Aiden Connolly is making me an offer I can't refuse, even when I know I should.

For the past two years, I've run a small antiques showroom in Boston. Business is not exactly booming. I make the rent, but otherwise, there's a whole lotta ramen in my life. I recently downgraded to a micro-apartment tiny enough that my cat is ready to serve me an eviction notice. So when Connolly walks into my showroom and offers me something a little different, it's hard to say no, even if my gut warns this job is a million miles out of my league.

Also, in the last five minutes, I've formed a very definite opinion of Mr. Connolly. He's kind of an asshole. He strode past my "Appointment Only" signs as if they didn't apply to him, marched up to me as I polished a French armoire and said, "I'm Aiden Connolly," as if I should recognize the name. I do not.

He stands there, looking down at me. Way down. He's not overly tall—maybe five eight or nine—but Connolly is one of those guys who could manage to look down his nose at someone standing on eye level. The smell of old Boston money wafts from him like fine cologne, and from his expression, my perfume is clearly eau de working class.

It doesn't help that Connolly is a ginger. I know that's usually an insult, but I have a thing for red-heads, especially ones like this, with eyes the color of new grass and red-gold hair and just the barest suggestion of freckles across the nose.

Combine "rich asshole" plus "hot young guy" plus "job that's beyond my skill set," and I should send him packing. I really should. And yet, well, I'm reaching the point where I drool every time I pass the fresh fruit stand down the road and have to count my pennies to see whether I can buy my apple a day.

"My office needs redecorating," he announces.

I look around my dimly lit showroom, crammed with antiques. “That . . . isn’t really—”

“You are not an interior designer,” he says. “But I believe you could be, of a sort. I’m envisioning a different process, one that begins with set pieces and builds around them.”

It takes a moment to understand his meaning. “Start with antiques and design an office to suit?”

“Yes. Someone else would do that design, of course. What I want is an expert to select the base pieces. Roger Thornton tells me you have a unique collection and an eye for quality pieces.”

I brighten at that, my confidence surging as Connolly’s odd offer begins to make sense. Roger Thornton is one of my best customers.

“My collection is indeed unique,” I say. “Every piece is one-of-a-kind. Not a factory-produced item in my shop.”

“I will take your word for that. I’ve collected a few antiques over the years, but I can barely even guess their period of origin.”

This admission could come with chagrin or self-deprecation. It could also come with pride, someone wanting to be clear they have no time for such mundanities. From Connolly, it’s a simple statement of fact, and I grant him a mental point for that.

“Now what I’d like—” he begins.

My front door opens, bell tinkling. I wait for the intruder to notice the second “By Appointment Only” sign, having obviously missed the first. Instead, a florid-faced man in his fifties strides in, clutching a box.

“I’m sorry,” I call. “We’re open by appointment only.”

He keeps heading straight for me.

“I’m sorry,” I say again, a little firmer now. “If you have a piece to sell, you’ll need to make

an appointment. I'm busy with—"

The man thrusts the wooden box at me. "Fix this."

I glance down at a hanging hinge. "I'm afraid I don't offer repair . . ."

I trail off. The box is a tea caddy. Regency period. Rosewood. Perched on four cat paws, with a mother-of-pearl inlaid top, showing a kitten playing with yarn. That yarn seems to slide right off the box and snake toward me, whispering a soft siren's call of devilry. Joker's jinx.

I clear my throat. "I do purchase damaged items, but if you want me to take a look at this, you'll need an appointment—"

He thrusts the box into my stomach. "I mean the curse. Fix *that*. Take it off."

I force a light laugh and try not to cast a nervous look at Connolly. "I'm afraid that's a whole other level of repair. I'm not sure why you think this is 'cursed'"—I air-quote the word with my tone—"but that is definitely not my department. Maybe you have the wrong address? There's a psychic two doors down, upper apartment."

"Are you Kennedy Bennett?"

"Er, yes, but—"

"From the Bennett family of Unstable, Massachusetts?"

"It's pronounced Unst-a-bull," I murmur reflexively.

"Owners of 'Unhex Me Here,' also in Unstable?"

"Er, yes." I tug at my button-down shirtfront, straightening it. "But I . . . I'm not part of the family business."

"I spoke to your sisters. They sent me. They say this curse is a joker's jinx, and that's your area of expertise. Now unhex my damn box or I'll leave a one-star review."

"Go," Connolly says.

The man turns and blinks as if Connolly teleported in from an alternate dimension.

“I said, go,” Connolly says. “Ms. Bennett clearly has no idea what you are talking about. Just as clearly, she has another client. Now take *that*”—his lip curls—“piece of kitschy trash and leave.”

The man’s red face purples. “Who the hell are you?”

“The person Ms. Bennett is currently dealing with. The client with an appointment.”

“Y-yes,” I say. “Mr. Connolly absolutely had an appointment, and I must insist that you make one yourself if you’re interested in selling that box. As for anything else you think I can do with it, my sisters have a very weird sense of humor. I’ll totally understand if you one-star *their* business.”

The man’s jaw works. Then he plunks the box on a sideboard. “Fine. You know what? You just bought yourself a curse, young lady. *That’s* my one-star review.”

He stalks out, leaving the box behind. As the door bells jangle, Connolly murmurs, “That was interesting.”

I force a laugh. “Right?” I ease the cursed tea caddy off the sideboard and tuck it safely out of reach. “So tell me more about this job, Mr. Connolly.”

We agree that I’ll stop by Connolly’s office after lunch, so I can see the space. When he leaves, I exhale and slump over the sideboard. Then I lock the door, place the tea caddy on my desk and peer at it.

While Connolly called it kitsch, it’s actually a valuable antique, like everything in here. As I told him, all my goods are one-of-a-kind. That’s because they’re cursed. Formerly cursed, I should say. The former part is very important.

I come from a family of curse weavers—a gift passed down through our female line and said to stretch back to the Greek *arae*. While we can weave curses, we can also unweave them, and that's our true calling. Most times we're asked to uncurse an item, though, we fake it. Not that we leave the curse on. That would be wrong. The problem is that those who show up on our doorstep rarely suffer from an actual cursed object. Instead, they suffer from an anxious mind that needs settling, and for generations, the Bennett women have provided that service, pretending to uncurse some heirloom or other.

People who have a real cursed object usually don't realize it. They only know sometimes that the jewelry box they inherited from Aunt Edna gives them the creeps. Worse, no one wants to buy it because it gives *them* the creeps, too. That's where I come in. I will take that box off your hands, for a price. Then I'll uncurse it and resell it.

One might think that the ethical thing to do is offer to uncurse the object. I tried that a few times. The owner stared at me like I'd sprouted a turban and hoop earrings. Lift a *curse*? What kind of wacko was I? They just wanted to sell their weird jewelry box.

A couple of times, when I felt really bad about buying an heirloom, I tried quietly uncursing the object and giving it back. Didn't help. They wanted it gone. That explains the tea caddy suddenly in my possession. While the owner obviously believed in the curse, he decided dumping it on me was safer than keeping it. Or he just got pissy and wanted to storm off with a grand gesture . . . which ultimately benefited one of us more than the other.

I'll uncurse the caddy tonight, and if the former owner returns, I'll buy it from him. Fair and square. Right now though, I have a far more important task: texting my sisters to tell them I'm going to kill them, in some fresh new way that is totally different from the other two times this week I threatened to do it.

Kennedy: Suffocation. Inside an antique tea caddy.

It only takes a moment for my younger sister to reply.

Hope: I don't think we'd fit.

Kennedy: Oh, you will when I get through with you.

Our older sister, Turani, joins in.

Ani: Pfft. I'm not worried. To kill us, you'd need to come to Unstable. Which apparently has fallen off your GPS.

Kennedy: I missed one weekend. ONE. Also, the highway runs both ways. You could come here.

Ani: To that den of iniquity?

Kennedy: We call it 'Boston'

Hope: Can we go pub-hopping?

Ani: Yes. When you're twenty-one.

Ani: Now what's this about a tea caddy?

Kennedy: Joker's jinx Regency tea caddy. Guy barged in during a client showing.

Ani: I didn't send him. H?

Hope: Hell, no. I learned my lesson. I hate you, by the way, K. I had a date last week. Made the mistake of offering to drive, forgetting that every time I sit in the driver's seat, it makes a fart noise. 🐈

Kennedy: Unhex it. Oh, wait, you can't. Jinxed.

Hope: Hate. You.

Kennedy: Well, whoever sent the guy, please just don't do it again.

Ani: We didn't, K.

Kennedy: Confer. Get your story straight. Gotta run. 🤔🔪🔪🍌

They don't text back to protest. They know better. One of them sent that guy, and I don't care which one did—I just want it to stop.

My sisters aren't trying to ruin my business. They just don't understand why I need to have it in Boston, rather than Unstable where I'd pay a fraction of the rent and could cater to the steady stream of tourists. Except I don't want bargain-hunting tourists. I also don't want to live at home. Not right now.

Mom died of cancer a month before I fled to Boston. Three years earlier, a car accident claimed our father. That time I fled in the opposite direction—quitting college to come home and be with my family. After Mom died, I needed out. I needed to breathe, to be somewhere that didn't have my parents—our family, our memories—imprinted on every damn blade of grass.

Besides, I'm twenty-five, and if there is an age when I should be spreading my wings—and sowing my wild oats—this is it. Yes, there are times when I miss Unstable and my sisters so badly I could cry. Times when I must admit that “sowing my wild oats” means “going to a bar, telling myself I'm going to hook up with a hot guy, and then spending all night chatting with the bartender instead.” But I just . . . I want to give this a shot. I want to prove that I can fly on my own, even if I don't need to prove it to anyone but myself.

TWO

This is . . . not what I expected.

Those words keep cycling through my head that afternoon as I sit in the reception area of Connolly's office. I did my research on the guy. As I guessed, he comes from old money, a family who arrived in America even before mine. Connolly himself runs one of those vaguely named companies whose actual line of business remained unclear no matter how hard I searched. Something about securities. Stocks maybe?

From that, I thought I knew exactly what to expect from his place of business. It'd be old-school Boston. Dimly lit hallways, tiny nooks for offices, no amount of cleaning chemicals masking the odor of age. That fit with someone looking to redecorate with antiques and recreate the kind of office his great-grandfather would have had. Massive carved-oak pedestal desk. Swivel desk chair with buttoned red leather. Bookcases full of first editions that will languish, unopened, for the rest of their lives. An antique globe for the corner. Maybe a few mismatched Tiffany lamps. Aiden Connolly will sit in that leather chair, loafers perched on a desk worth more than I make in a good year, as he sips single-malt from a cut-glass tumbler.

That is what I expect. Instead, his offices are in a modern skyscraper, the rooms all steel and marble and glass. I have no idea where I could even put an antique without it seeming as out of place as a wet dog in a formal parlor.

I'm in the reception area, perched on a sleek glass chair that, with each fidget, threatens to send me sliding to the floor like a penguin on a ski slope. Speaking of penguins, I wish I'd worn the black pencil skirt and white Oxford shirt I'd contemplated. So far, I've seen three people, all of them dressed in shades of black and white. The Nordic blond behind the desk wears a pearl-gray dress that I keep expecting to tinkle like crackling ice when she moves.

Forget antiques. What this place needs is a splash of *color*. Technically, my red dress provides it, but I feel like an open wound ready to ooze onto the white marble tiles.

“Ms. Bennett?”

I jump and see Connolly waiting at an open door. His fingers tap the doorframe, impatient at this two-second delay. I leap up . . . and my heels promptly slide across the marble. Connolly’s PA shakes her head. Her boss, fortunately, has already retreated into his office. I find my footing and follow him with as much dignity as I can muster.

When I step into Connolly’s office, he’s at his desk, leaning over it to rustle through papers. Earlier, I’d squashed Connolly into the narrative I created for this job—and into the wood-paneled office I imagined—but seeing him here, I realize I’d been deluding myself. I cannot actually imagine him lounging with his shoes on a big antique desk. His surroundings here suit him perfectly. Chilly, austere, stylish and haughty. His personal office is no different. I’m sure it’s gorgeous, in a Scandinavian way. It just makes me long for a warm, woolly sweater and a crackling fire.

There’s been a mistake.

“Mr. Connolly?” I say as he bends over his desk to rustle through papers

Green eyes lift to mine as one sandy brow arches. He does not say “Call me Aiden, please.” He could be talking to someone ten years his senior, and he’d still insist on the formality. Old money, old ways.

“I . . . think there might be a misunderstanding,” I say. “This doesn’t seem like the . . . environment for antiques.”

“No, it’s not, is it?” he says. “Which is precisely the problem.”

I stiffen, ready to defend myself if he dares blame me for the mix-up. Instead, he opens a

side door and strides through. The door half shuts behind him, before he grabs it and gives me a sharp wave, lips tightening in annoyance that I didn't just follow.

I walk in and—

“Oh,” I say, my breath catching.

We're on the fourteenth floor, and until now, I haven't glanced out a window. I can't avoid that here—one entire wall is glass, jutting out to form the curving nook of a solarium. Sunlight streams through, bedazzling a view that overlooks the Common.

“This is the room I want to redecorate,” he says. “The sunlight made it too warm most of the year, but thankfully, the air conditioning has been upgraded.”

Upgraded is definitely the right word. The room is about sixty-five degrees, AC pumping an arctic jet stream. I inch closer to the sunny windows.

“I wish to repurpose it as a staff area,” Connolly says.

“A lounge?”

That lip press again, as if the word is too informal, conjuring images of employees actually relaxing, possibly in real chairs.

“A staff *area*,” he repeats. “I understand that my choice of decor may invoke . . .”

“Antarctica without the penguins?”

The faintest narrowing of his eyes. “I was going to say it invokes a sense of asceticism that some find off-putting.”

“Asceticism is great,” I murmur. “If you're a monk.”

He continues as if he hasn't heard me. “Personally, I *like* clean lines and simplicity. Clutter in one's environment produces clutter in one's mind. However, I am aware that employee productivity may suffer in a setting that is not comfortable. So I wish to remodel this room in a

more traditional style.”

He walks to a built-in bookcase of glass shelves. That’s when I notice the antiques. Three pieces small enough to fit on those shelves: a snuff box, a cigarette case and a mahogany triptych mirror.

I’m drawn to the cigarette case first. It’s art-deco, the silver lid inlaid with jade showing a twenties-style flapper smoking oh-so-elegantly.

“This is beautiful,” I say, curling my fingers against the urge to touch it.

“Yes, I won it in a card game.”

I must glance over sharper than I intended, thinking he’s joking, though I’m not sure which is harder to picture—Connolly playing cards or Connolly telling a joke.

“I have an excellent poker face,” he says.

He points at the snuff box. “I won that on the same night. I have a bit of luck now and then.” His lips twitch, as if this is indeed a joke, albeit a personal one I am neither supposed to understand nor pursue.

“And this—” I stop short, fingers extended toward the mirror. I wasn’t going to touch it. I know better. I was just gesturing. Still, the moment I do, I yank back.

Curse.

I hesitate and then give myself a mental shake. Obviously, my brain is misfiring, because the irony there would just be too rich. This morning Connolly dismissed the guy with the cursed tea caddy . . . only to have a cursed object himself.

I glance at the mirror again and those tendrils of magic snake out, whispering . . .

Nope, definitely cursed.

Damn.

I inch closer and let the first notes of that hex wash over me. A lover's lament. Better known as an ex-hex. Hell hath no fury like a lover scorned. And from the vibes rising from this mirror, someone felt *very* scorned.

"Did you win this one?" I ask hopefully.

"No, that was a gift from a woman I was seeing. Quite surprising, actually. I'd long admired it. When we had a falling out, she gave it to me. A peace offering, to show there were no hard feelings."

He waves away his words. "Which is more than you care—or need—to know. But of the three, it is my personal favorite, and whatever you suggest for this room, that one piece must stay."

Of course it must. Because this couldn't be easy. He couldn't say, *Oh, I don't really care for that particular piece, perhaps you'd like to buy it from me?*

Connolly clearly doesn't realize it's cursed—it takes an psychically attuned person to pick up even just "bad vibes." I can see why he likes it. Of the three, it's the simplest piece. Edwardian. Gleaming red mahogany. The original mirrors, only faintly warped. The center mirror is oval with brass fittings that allow it to tilt.

I will admit I have a predilection for more ornate items—gaudy, Ani would say—and the cigarette box is more my style, but I must appreciate the sheer craftsmanship and elegance of the mirror. A truly perfect piece . . . flawed by a nasty little curse.

Two hexed items in one day? Is that even possible?

The last time I stumbled over a cursed object "in the wild" was a year ago. And yet, technically, I've only stumbled over one today. The tea caddy was brought to me after my sisters sent the owner my way, which they do with irritating regularity.

Also, let's be blunt, I am not the least bit surprised that Aiden Connolly has earned himself an ex-hex. Something tells me, if you scroll through his romantic history, it'd be a Christmas light string blinking red with angry exes. He's young, attractive, successful and single. He'll have no problem finding companionship, and I suspect he'd have no problem moving on a month later, probably via breakup text. He's also exactly the sort of guy who'd see nothing suspicious about an ex offering a lovely parting gift. It would only prove that he'd done nothing untoward and the breakup was mutually acceptable.

"Ideally, I'd want a dual-purpose area," Connolly says, and I tear my gaze from the mirror to find him across the room. "A place for staff to decompress, but also a place to entertain some of our older clientele. A more traditional meeting room."

"Got it. Now, I must admit I wasn't able to find a lot about your company online. What, uh, exactly do you do?"

"Insurance."

My soul drops, just a little. I'll admit, I'd held out hope for something a little more interesting, a little sexier. But no, this fits. Sadly, this fits.

"What sort of insurance?" I ask, struggling to sound intrigued.

A wave of his hand. "This and that. Now, I only have a few more minutes before my next appointment. Do you have any questions, Ms. Bennett?"

Any chance you'll let me take that mirror home? Fix it up for you?

Remove that ex-hex before I'm forced to work in the same room as it?

That is a problem to consider later. For now, I ask if I may take photographs of the room. I'm hoping to get a little more face-time with the mirror, but Connolly stays right where he is, watching. I snap my shots and leave with a promise to call later this week.

THREE

I'm home, my mind still churning through my dilemma. I texted and called my sisters leaving Connolly's office and again walking home from my showroom. They aren't answering, which could mean they're annoyed at me, but it more likely indicates cell service is down in Unstable, again. That's the problem with living in a place where the average resident is still on dial-up internet. The psychics of Unstable have a direct line to God, Fate and the future. To Boston? Not so much.

When I push open the door to my apartment, a black cat sits on the kitchen counter while my favorite bone china mug rests precariously on the edge, where I absolutely did not leave it. One small kitty paw rests against the mug. Green eyes meet mine . . . and the mug creeps toward the edge.

"Don't you dare, Ellie."

Another nudge.

"Yes, I know we ran out of wet food, and you hate kibble." I reach into my shopping bag and hold up a can. "Better?"

She considers. Then another nudge sets the mug teetering.

I snatch out a can of tuna and wave it. "There. Happy? I felt bad, so I bought you a treat."

She sniffs and hops down to wait by her dish. As I push the mug back, her purr drowns me out, the sound as loud as a buzzsaw. I shake my head and open the can.

I've had Ellie nearly four years, ever since someone dropped her off at our house in Unstable, claiming she was cursed. According to her former owner, Ellie was the thirteenth cat in her litter. She's also completely black except for a white spot on her chest that bears an uncanny resemblance to the evil eye. She isn't cursed, though. She's just an asshole. In other words, as

Ani would say, she's a cat. True, but Ellie inherited the asshole gene more than most of her species. Hence her full name of Elohssa—asshole spelled backwards.

Once Ellie is fed, I start pacing the apartment, which takes about ten strides. With each revolution, I check my phone. Nothing from Ani or Hope. My texts are delivered but unread. Damn it.

I plunk onto my sofa. Ellie takes her spot on the arm. She isn't the world's cuddliest cat. Oh, she acts like it, rubbing up against your legs and purring her buzzsaw purr. It's a trap, one that has left scars on both my sisters. I've learned the pattern. Two pats are acceptable. A third will draw blood. Mostly, she just sits nearby. And she listens. Say what you will about Ellie, but she is an excellent listener.

"So I have a problem," I begin, and she stretches out, getting comfortable.

I tell her about the ex-hex.

"I want the job," I say. "Connolly's paying well, it would look good on my resume, and it might lead to more work. The guy is about as warm and cuddly as you, but I can work with that."

She rumbles in sage agreement.

"The thing is, a poorly woven curse can fray and infect those in the vicinity. My love life already sucks. What if I catch the curse, and I'm doomed to a lifetime of lonely celibacy?"

Her look tells me I'm overreacting. Or, possibly, that I'm already on that path, so don't go blaming it on a curse.

"Yes, I suppose the chances of me catching the hex are slight. The problem . . ." I thump my head back into the sofa. "Arghh! The problem is that I'm a nice person who wants to do the right thing."

Ellie gives a disdainful sniff.

“Hey,” I say. “If I wasn’t, you’d be living in a barn right now. Or a houseful of small children with grubby hands that love to pull kitty-cat tails. While I can complain about not wanting to catch Connolly’s curse, the truth is that I should fix it. The guy might be arrogant, but he isn’t a monster. He recognizes that his decorating tastes don’t suit everyone, and he’s paying me very well to give his staff a nice room. I want to undo the curse for him, and if that makes me a sucker, so be it.”

Ellie cleans one paw.

“Fine. Yes. That settles it. I need to uncurse Connolly’s mirror. The next problem is how. I’m not supposed to meet with him again until Monday. By then, he may have moved the mirror. Also, I need time alone with it. Time when no one’s going to walk in and ask what I’m doing.”

I pull my legs up under me and consider the matter. “Clearly, the answer is that I need to break in tonight. I’ll take my lock picks and disarm his security system . . .”

Ellie’s green eyes narrow.

“That was a joke,” I say. “I can barely open the bathroom door when the lock sticks. This is going to require finesse.”

I don’t fail to catch the cat’s look then, the one that says, if finesse is what’s required, this mission is doomed from the start. I stick out my tongue and push up from the sofa. Time to grab my kit. I have a curse to unweave.

It’s seven PM, and I’m inside Connolly’s offices, wearing the best disguise for the job: no disguise at all. While I’d only seen a few employees flitting about earlier, they were all under forty. That means at least a few will be ambitious enough to work later than the boss.

Most I saw were also male, and I caught a few admiring glances as I walked through. I’m

not the prettiest Bennett sister—that would be Hope. I’ve been told my skin is my best feature, which always feels like groping for something nice to say. I *am* blessed with clear light olive skin, though. Straight black hair swings past my shoulders, left loose tonight. Guys have called my eyes everything from mahogany to chestnut to rich oak. In other words, brown. And apparently wooden. I have an average figure, unblessed by Ani’s curves, but good enough to have the doorman’s eyes roaming below waist level as I head into Connolly’s building. If women compliment my skin, for guys it’s all about my legs.

My first stop was the building’s parking garage, where I found the numbered spots for Connolly’s business. I presume he gets the first, but one through five were empty, and the two cars remaining in his section were a pickup and an old smart car. Neither strikes me as his style.

Then it was past the doorman, too busy checking out my legs to question my right to be in the building. An elevator ride takes me to Connolly’s office suites. The main door isn’t locked, and I walk in to find a janitor mopping the floor. A female janitor. Not ideal but . . .

“Oh my God,” I say, breathlessly, as if I’ve run up thirteen flights of stairs. “Thank God someone’s still here. I need access to the solarium.”

“The what?” she says, leaning on her mop.

I wave my free hand. “The—the atrium. Or the solarium. The room with all the windows. I’m redecorating it, and I got home to find my cell phone pictures won’t work. I need this.” I gesture to the camera around my neck.

Her wrinkled face pinches. I raise my voice a little, letting it echo through the empty halls.

“Cell phones just aren’t good enough. They don’t have the right F-stop and lens aperture and exposure rate.” I throw out random camera terms and pray she isn’t an amateur photographer. “I need proper photos and— Oh!” I bounce on my toes and wave at an employee leaning from his

office. “Hello! Can you help me, please!”

Now this guy is exactly what I was hoping to find here. Late thirties. Average appearance. Slightly harried. Staying late at the office because no one is waiting at home. Hopefully not gay, but if so, I can work with that—appeal to any big-brother sense of responsibility toward a young career woman.

I wave frantically, and he comes out, hesitantly at first. Then his gaze sweeps over me, and he straightens and runs a hand through his hair before he strides out.

“May I help you?” he says, his voice lowering an octave with each word.

I explain the situation so far.

“Also measurements.” I hold up a tape measure. “I need the width of the doorway, to know what size of furniture I can get through. Also the distance between outlets and immovable obstacles and . . .”

I exhale, drooping. “I know I should have gotten all this earlier. Or made an appointment. But this . . . It’s not my usual gig. I’m an antiques dealer. A job like this is huge, and I got frazzled, and Mr. Connolly . . .” I lower my voice, as if the man himself might be watching through security cams. “He’s kind of intimidating.”

The employee chuckles. “*Kind of?* I’ve been here three years, and I’m still afraid to ask for a key to the washroom.”

“Well, then I don’t feel so bad. I just . . . I got nervous and I snapped a few cell phone shots and then at home, I realized that wasn’t nearly enough. I just need, like, thirty minutes in there. I’d take twenty if thirty is too much. I know the room attaches to his office, but I’m presuming that door is locked.”

“Definitely locked. I don’t think Steffie even has a key.”

“Good. Then there wouldn’t be any problem just letting me into the solarium.” I turn to the janitor. “Do you have the key for *that*?”

She shrugs. “No need. Just a few pieces of old junk on a shelf. Mr. Connolly’s office is the only room he wants locked. ” She turns to the employee. “Including the washroom.”

“Er, right. I . . . knew that.” He gives a strained chuckle. “Well, no more running downstairs to the coffee shop for me.” He sweeps an arm along the hall. “Come along, Ms . . .”

“Bennett,” I say. “But you can call me Kennedy.”

He beams. “Let’s get you situated in that room then, Kennedy.”