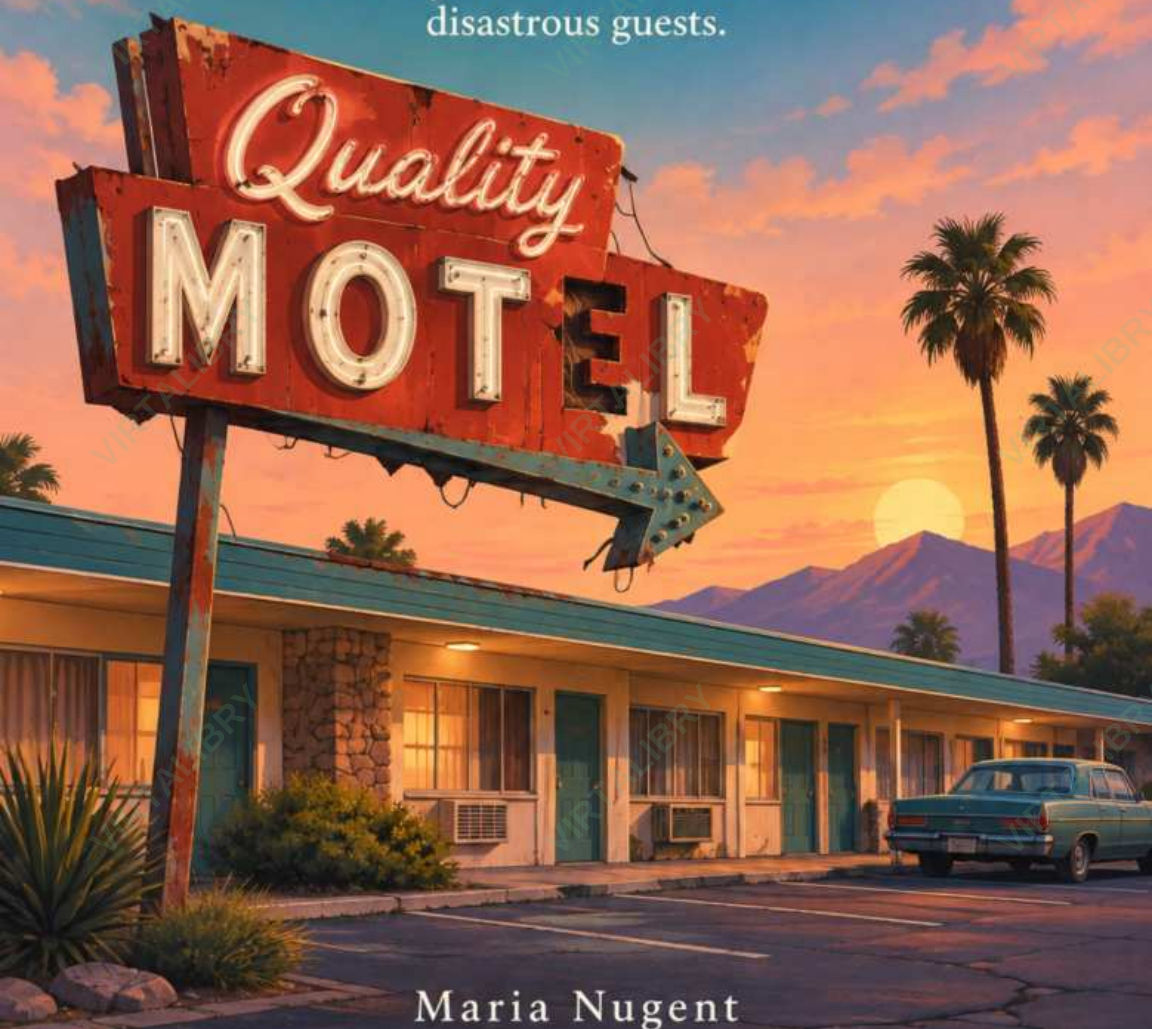


Motel — Of — Bad Decisions

A snarky romance amid chaotic,
disastrous guests.



Maria Nugent

Introduction

By the time I inherited the Motel of Bad Decisions, I'd already learned two universal truths: keys have opinions, and paperwork always shows up late with attitude. This story starts in a sun-faded office that smells like old coffee and newer consequences, where every "minor fix" somehow becomes an event, and every guest has a talent for making my life worse on purpose.

The real question isn't whether the motel will keep misbehaving - it's whether I'll survive long enough to figure out why. Between lies that smell like mold and rules that get treated like decorative suggestions, I'm chasing the kind of trouble you can't lock in a room; you have to solve it, preferably before love and an inspection both arrive with clipboards raised. Welcome to **Motel Of Bad Decisions** - where chaos is the check-in policy and romance is the fine print.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1 The Inheritance Key Fiasco

Chapter 2 The Smoke Alarm That Lied

Chapter 3 Who Keeps Replacing My Locks?

Chapter 4 The Pool Turns Into Soup

Chapter 5 My Staff Thinks Rules Are Suggestions

Chapter 6 The Vending Machine Eats Cash

Chapter 7 The Missing Soap Has an Alibi

Chapter 8 The Karaoke Night Starts a Fight

Chapter 9 The Dog That Talks Back

Chapter 10 The Room Key Opens Wrong Doors

Chapter 11 The Inspector's Clipboard Smells Like Trouble

Chapter 12 The Laundry Floods the Hallway

Chapter 13 I Lied About the Mold Test

Chapter 14 The Ice Bucket Becomes Evidence

Chapter 15 Tessa's Secret Note Leads Me

Chapter 16 The Contractor's Van Vanishes

Chapter 17 I Accidentally Hire a Clown

Chapter 18 The Party Popper Sets Off Sprinklers

Chapter 19 The Guest Who Won't Leave

Chapter 20 The Burner Phone Calls the Wrong Person

Chapter 21 Barkley's Lecture to the Guests

Chapter 22 The Fire Alarm Triggers a Food Fight

Chapter 23 I Break Down in the Office

Chapter 24 We Trace the Grant's Last Recipient

Chapter 25 The Guest With the Fake Permit

Chapter 26 The Scheme Blows Up the Sign

Chapter 27 Tessa Finally Says My Name

Chapter 28 The Motel's New Rule: No Traps

Chapter 29 Barkley Solves the Last Complaint

Chapter 30 Love, Inspections, and the New Sign

The Inheritance Key Fiasco

The key box weighed twelve pounds, which was impressive considering half the keys inside belonged to doors that no longer existed.

I carried it across the cracked parking lot of the I-16 Motor Lodge while the afternoon heat pressed down like a landlord collecting overdue rent. The sign above the office buzzed in pink and blue, blinking MOTEL, then M TEL, then what looked suspiciously like METH. A promising first impression, if the goal was to attract people making terrible choices.

A brindle dog sat beneath the office window, watching me approach with the weary expression of a retired bouncer.

"You're late," he said.

I stopped.

The dog scratched behind one ear. "And you brought the keys. Good. I was worried you'd inherited the place without the useful part."

I stared at him. He stared back.

"Do you always talk?" I asked.

"Only when people are being slow."

"Fantastic. I inherit a motel and a judgmental dog."

"Watch dog," he corrected. "There's a difference."

His name, according to the brass tag on his collar, was Baggage. He looked like he had survived three divorces and a minor war.

I set the key box on the office counter, which groaned beneath it. The counter smelled of dust, old coffee, and something that had once been alive but had chosen not to discuss it. Behind me, the office door sagged on one hinge. The front desk had a cracked bell, two dead flies, and a guest ledger whose last entry read: CASH, NO QUESTIONS.

I had inherited the motel that morning from my aunt Celia, along with a handwritten note that said, Maribel, don't sell it until you've checked the basement.

Naturally, I had not checked the basement.

I had checked the bank account. That was how I knew I needed to get the motel running long enough to collect rent before the property taxes ate what remained of my inheritance.

"Where's the staff?" I asked.

Baggage glanced toward the back office. "One is asleep in the linen closet. One is pretending to be asleep in the linen closet. The third has gone to buy a wrench and may return with a tattoo."

"Names?"

"Depends who is asking."

I opened the ledger. "I'm asking."

"That's your first mistake."

The office phone rang.

I answered it. "I-16 Motor Lodge."

A man's voice said, "Room seventeen is leaking."

"From where?"

"The ceiling."

I looked up. A brown water stain spread above the desk in the shape of Florida.

"Are you sure it's the ceiling?"

"No, I'm calling about the floor. Of course it's the ceiling."

"Please put a bucket under it."

"There's already a bucket."

"Then put another bucket under the first bucket."

He hung up.

Baggage sighed. "You'll fit right in."

I ignored him and began sorting the keys. My plan was simple: open the office, assign rooms, collect money, avoid lawsuits. It was not an ambitious plan. It had the dignity of a shopping list.

The keys were labeled with fading plastic tags. Room 4. Room 4 again. Laundry. Pool gate. Something marked DO NOT USE, which made it the most honest label in the entire building.

I picked up a brass key stamped 12.

"Room twelve," I said.

Baggage's ears lifted. "That one sticks."

"I can handle a sticky lock."

"It doesn't stick because of the lock."

Before I could ask what that meant, a red convertible screeched into the parking lot and stopped sideways across two spaces. A woman in silver boots climbed out, followed by a man wearing a bathrobe, sunglasses, and the expression of someone who had recently lost an argument with a casino.

The woman marched into the office.

"I need a room," she announced.

"That's what we provide."

"Tonight."

"I assumed."

"Private entrance?"

"All entrances are technically private if nobody else is using them."

She leaned over the counter. Her perfume smelled like hot fruit and poor decisions.

"We're not here for anything weird," she said.

The man in the bathrobe looked at her.

She looked at him.

"Fine," she said. "We're here for something moderately weird."

Baggage rose from beneath the desk. "Room twelve."

I frowned. "I haven't assigned - "

"Room twelve," he repeated. "It has the right atmosphere."

The man in the bathrobe pointed at him. "That dog talks."

"Only when he's bored," I said.

"I'm never bored," Baggage said. "I'm disappointed."

The woman slapped cash on the counter. "One night."

I counted it. It was enough to cover the room and possibly the emotional damage.

"Name?"

"Darla."

"And his?"

The man lifted two fingers. "Todd."

"Occupation?"

Darla snatched the registration card. "None of your business."

"Actually, it's the state's business."

She wrote something, folded the card in half, and pushed it back.

I did not look. I had inherited enough problems without learning Todd's legal name.

I handed her the brass key.

"Room twelve is at the end of the walkway. If the lock sticks, jiggle it."

Baggage made a low sound in his throat.

"What?" I said.

He looked at the key. "Not that way."

Darla and Todd left. The moment they reached the walkway, Todd tried the key. The lock clicked. The door opened.

Then every other door on the east wing clicked too.

One after another, locks snapped open down the building with the cheerful rhythm of a machine shop.

The doors swung outward.

Room 9 opened first. A naked man wearing only a cowboy hat stepped into the corridor holding a hair dryer.

Room 10 opened next. A woman in a wedding veil emerged carrying a live chicken.

Room 11 opened with a violent bang, releasing a cloud of cigarette smoke and a man who shouted, "I knew it!"

Room 12 remained closed.

Room 13 opened by itself.

A little boy's voice yelled, "Mom, the bathroom is full of shrimp!"

The parking lot went silent except for the sign buzzing overhead.

Then the naked cowboy looked toward the office. "New management?"

I closed my eyes for one second. That was all the time I could spare.

"Everyone back in their rooms," I called.

The woman with the chicken pointed at me. "He said the room was empty!"

The man from room eleven shouted, "It was supposed to be!"

Darla pounded on the door of room twelve. "The key doesn't work!"

"Try turning it the other way," I said.

"I did!"

"Try lifting the handle."

"I did!"

"Try not screaming."

She screamed.

Baggage trotted past me and sat in the middle of the walkway. "The door is locked from the inside."

Todd appeared behind Darla. "That's impossible. We're outside."

"Not for long," Baggage said.

The room twelve door shuddered. Something heavy thumped against it from within.

Everyone stopped moving.

The chicken clucked.

A faucet began running somewhere upstairs.

"What is in that room?" I asked.

Baggage glanced at me. "Depends when you last checked."

"I've never checked."

"Then it could be anything."

The door burst open.

A wave of warm, greasy water rolled across the walkway, carrying three oranges, a plastic sandal, and what appeared to be a decorative goldfish bowl. The water hit Todd's bare feet. He yelped and leapt backward, landing on the hood of Darla's convertible.

The convertible's alarm began shrieking.

The naked cowboy raised his hair dryer like a weapon.

The bride released the chicken.

The chicken flew directly into my face.

For several seconds, I stood blind beneath a furious bird while the motel performed its opening-night number around me. The alarm screamed. Water slapped against the concrete. Someone in room nine shouted that the chicken was theirs. Someone in room thirteen yelled that the shrimp were escaping. Baggage barked once, sharply.

"Maribel," he said, "the office is flooding."

I pulled the chicken off my head.

"Why?"

"Because you gave them room twelve."

"I didn't know the lock opened every door!"

"That's why the old manager labeled the key."

"The key says twelve!"

"It used to say twelve."

The water reached the office threshold.

I grabbed the mop from behind the desk. The mop head fell off before it touched the floor.

"Of course," I said.

Darla climbed down from the convertible hood, leaving two muddy footprints on the windshield. "You said this place was respectable."

"I said no such thing."

"You implied it by having a sign."

"That sign currently spells meth."

Todd pointed at the water. "There's a fish in my shoe."

"It's not a fish," Baggage said. "It's a shrimp."

The shrimp wriggled free and vanished beneath the vending machine.

I found the shutoff valve behind the desk, turned it, and received a blast of rusty water directly in the chest. My blouse darkened. My hair began dripping onto the registration forms.

The leak stopped.

The alarm did not.

Neither did the chicken.

The bride chased it through the lobby, veil trailing behind her like a surrender flag. The naked cowboy followed, still holding the hair dryer. The man from room eleven tried to help by throwing a towel. It landed on the chandelier, which immediately dropped three feet and shed a rain of dead moths.

Baggage watched the proceedings with professional interest.

"Do something," I said.

"I am."

"You're sitting."

"I'm supervising."

The front door slammed open. A tall man in a pale blue inspection shirt stepped inside, carrying a clipboard and wearing the clean, tired expression of someone who had seen the inside of too many refrigerators.

He looked at me. He looked at the water. He looked at the chicken circling the lobby.

Then he looked at Baggage.

"Is that dog licensed?"

"He is," I said.

"I'm not," Baggage said.

The man's gaze returned to me. "Maribel Hart?"

I straightened, which made water pour from my sleeves onto the floor.

"Yes."

"Evan Pike. County health inspection."

The chicken landed on the front desk.

Evan slowly lowered his clipboard.

"I've been here eleven minutes," I said. "This is not representative."

A ceiling tile fell behind him.

It struck the floor with a wet slap.

Evan wrote something down.

"Do not write that."

"I'm writing it."

The alarm finally stopped. The silence afterward was so complete I could hear the shrimp tapping against the vending machine's plastic base.

Evan stepped around a puddle and crouched near the lobby drain. He lifted a clogged grate with the end of his pen. A gray wad of hair, candy wrappers, and one small plastic dinosaur emerged.

He looked at me.

"Was the drain recently cleaned?"

"Define recently."

"Within this calendar year."

"Then no."

He wrote again.

Baggage wandered over and sniffed the inspection clipboard. "He's going to shut you down."

"I can hear him," I muttered.

Evan glanced at the dog. "Did he just speak?"

"He does that."

"Does he have a rabies certificate?"

Baggage sat. "Does he have a personality certificate?"

Evan's mouth twitched.

It was almost a smile. A very small one, quickly strangled, but I saw it.

That was inconvenient.

He walked through the office, examining the walls, the sink, the coffee machine, and the bucket collecting water from the Florida-shaped stain. Each time he wrote, my bank account made a tiny dying noise.

"I'm issuing a temporary closure notice for the east wing," he said.

"The whole wing?"

"Unless you'd like to keep renting rooms with doors that open themselves."

"Not particularly."

"And the office until the standing water is removed, the drain cleared, and the electrical panel is inspected."

"The office too?"

"You're standing in wastewater."

I looked down.

A shrimp brushed my ankle.

"I had noticed."

Evan handed me a card. His fingers were dry, cool, and annoyingly competent.

"Call when the immediate hazards are corrected."

"You'll come back?"

"It's my job."

"Right. Of course."

Baggage nudged my knee. "He likes you."

Evan looked at him. "I heard that."

"Good," Baggage said.

By dusk, the guests had retreated to the west wing, the chicken had been returned to its owner, and Todd had accepted that his shoe was not salvageable. Darla demanded a refund, a different room, and an apology from the shrimp.

I gave her the refund.

She took the different room.

The apology remained pending.

With Evan's notice taped to the front door, I dragged the key box into the back office and locked the door behind me. The lock held. I tried it twice, then leaned my forehead against the peeling wood.

The motel was technically secure.

It was also closed, wet, under inspection, and already costing me money I did not have.

Baggage settled beneath the desk.

"Good first day," he said.

I looked at the ruined lobby, the chicken feather stuck to my blouse, and the health-code notice fluttering in the warm night air.

"Tomorrow," I said, "we fix the locks."

From somewhere in the east wing came the unmistakable sound of another door clicking open.

Baggage lifted his head.

"Tomorrow," he corrected, "we find out who changed them."

The Smoke Alarm That Lied

The door clicked open again before I had finished pretending tomorrow would be manageable.

I stood in the locked back office with one hand on the doorknob and the other wrapped around a mop handle that had already betrayed me once. Outside, the east wing gave a long metallic creak, followed by the soft thump of something falling over.

Baggage lifted his head from beneath the desk.

"Could be a pillow," I said.

"It wasn't."

"A towel?"

"It had bones."

I tightened my grip on the mop.

"Whose bones?"

"Probably the motel's."

That was not comforting, but comfort had not been included with the inheritance. Neither had a functioning lock system, a dry floor, or a staff member capable of hearing the phrase temporary closure without treating it as a suggestion.

The office smelled of damp plaster and burnt coffee. Evan Pike's closure notice fluttered against the front door whenever the air conditioner coughed, which was often and with the wet confidence of a smoker. I had spent the last hour sweeping shrimp, hair, and one plastic dinosaur away from the drain while Baggage supervised from a position of moral superiority.

Now the alarm began.

Not the fire alarm. That would have been too straightforward. This was a shrill electronic chirp from somewhere in the hallway, followed by a recorded voice saying, "Please remain calm."

The recorded voice sounded deeply unconvinced.

Baggage crawled out from under the desk. "That's the evacuation alarm."

"I know what it is."

"You asked me yesterday what the pool gate key opened."

"It opened the pool gate."

"It opened the laundry room."

"That was not my fault."

"It was your hand holding the key."

The alarm chirped again.

Then the voice said, "Please remain calm," in a tone suggesting it had recently seen the shrimp.

I unlocked the office door.

The hallway was already filling with guests. Darla stood in a silk robe and one silver boot, holding a hairbrush like a weapon. Todd wore the same bathrobe as yesterday, though it had acquired a dark stain down the front and an expression of defeat.

The bride from room nine had wrapped her veil around her waist. The woman with the chicken held the bird against her chest. The naked cowboy had put on jeans but no shirt, which was technically an improvement and spiritually not one.

Behind them, the man from room eleven dragged a suitcase with a wheel missing.

"Why is the alarm going off?" Darla demanded.

"Because the building is trying to kill us," Todd said.

"It's not trying to kill anyone," I said.

The alarm chirped.

A ceiling light flickered.

"Fine," I said. "It's trying to inconvenience us."

From the stairwell came a clatter, a curse, and the unmistakable sound of a metal bucket rolling down three steps.

My staff finally appeared.

Lenny came out of the laundry room carrying a screwdriver, a flashlight, and what looked like half a sandwich. He had been gone for most of the afternoon, presumably buying a wrench and possibly acquiring the tattoo Baggage had predicted.

Mavis followed him in a bathrobe patterned with tiny flamingos. She had worked at the motel longer than the wallpaper had remained attached and treated every emergency as a personal insult.

"It's fine," Mavis announced.

The alarm chirped directly above her.

"See?" she said. "It's just the hallway."

"That is where the guests are," I said.

"Then they're in the right place."

Lenny bit into his sandwich. "We can shut it off."

"Wonderful. Do that."

He looked at Mavis.

Mavis looked at him.

Neither moved.

"What?" I asked.

"We need the panel," Lenny said.

"Where is the panel?"

"Somewhere near the stairs."

"Near the stairs is not a location. It's a rumor."

Mavis pointed down the corridor. "Behind the linen cabinet."

I stared at the linen cabinet. It leaned against the wall beneath a sign that said EMERGENCY EQUIPMENT. The cabinet was full of towels, a broken vacuum, and what appeared to be a ceramic swan wearing sunglasses.

"Why is a swan blocking the emergency panel?"

"Decoration," Mavis said.

"It has a crack through its neck."

"Vintage decoration."

Another chirp sounded. The recorded voice repeated itself.

"Please remain calm."

The woman with the chicken began edging toward the exit.

"Everybody stay where you are," I said.

The naked cowboy raised a hand. "Is this because of the fire?"

"There is no fire."

"Then why does it smell like smoke?"

We all sniffed.

He was right.

A thin gray ribbon drifted from the stairwell and curled along the ceiling. It smelled like scorched dust, hot wiring, and the motel's general personality.

The guests began moving toward the front doors.

Mavis planted herself in the hallway. "Nobody evacuates until we know what's happening."

"That is the opposite of what alarms are for."

"It could be a false alarm."

"It could also be a real alarm."

Lenny nodded thoughtfully. "Either way, it's alarming."

I pointed at him. "Panel. Now."

He set down his sandwich and shoved the linen cabinet. It moved three inches, then stopped against the wall with a deep wooden groan.

"Something's behind it," he said.

"Probably the emergency equipment."

"No, this is heavier."

Mavis joined him. Together they pushed. The cabinet scraped across the floor, dragging a trail of dust and one dead moth. Behind it was a narrow metal door with a keyhole.

I looked at the key box in my mind, heavy and ugly, sitting in the office like a brick full of bad decisions.

"Who has the panel key?" I asked.

Lenny patted his pockets.

Mavis patted hers.

Baggage sniffed the door.

"Try the key marked DO NOT USE," he said.

"That key is in the office."

"It's always in the office when you need it."

I ran back, grabbed the key box, and hauled it into the hallway. The box weighed approximately as much as a guilty conscience. I dumped the keys onto the floor.

They scattered beneath the guests' feet.

The bride stepped on one and yelped. Todd picked up a key labeled POOL and held it toward me.

"Is this the one?"

"No."

"What does it open?"

"The pool."

"There's no pool."

"Then it opens something worse."

Baggage nosed through the pile and pulled out the key marked DO NOT USE.

Mavis snatched it from his mouth. "I told Celia this should be labeled."

"It is labeled," I said.

"Not clearly."

The key fit the panel.

That was the first encouraging thing that had happened all day, which should have warned me.

Lenny opened the metal door. Inside, wires ran in every direction, bundled together with yellowing tape and what appeared to be a shoelace. A red light blinked above a row of switches.

The smoke thickened.

"Which one shuts it off?" I asked.

Lenny pointed to a switch marked HALLWAY.

Mavis slapped his hand away. "That kills the lights."

"The lights are already dying."

"It kills the important ones."

"What are the unimportant lights?"

"The ones guests can see."

The alarm shrieked louder.

The recorded voice said, "Please remain calm."

Darla pressed both hands to her temples. "If that voice says calm one more time, I'm going to make it a medical emergency."

Lenny reached for the switch marked ALARM.

I grabbed his wrist. "Wait."

He looked at me.

"Why is there a strip of duct tape over it?"

"Safety," Mavis said.

"Why is the tape labeled MARIBEL?"

Every head in the hallway turned toward me.

I looked at the tape. My name had been written in black marker across it in large, aggressive letters.

"I did not put that there."

Lenny folded his arms. "You're the one who rewired the office."

"I changed one lightbulb."

"You complained about the wiring."

"I complained because the lightbulb sparked."

"That's basically rewiring."

Baggage sat beside the panel. "Their logic is leaking."

A sharp pop came from inside the wall.

The hallway lights went out.

For one second, the motel became a dark tunnel full of breathing, fabric rustling, and one chicken making a noise like a rusty hinge.

Then the emergency lights came on.

They were red.

The guests' faces glowed beneath them, giving the bride a demonic veil and making Todd look like a man who had been caught stealing organs.

The smoke alarm screamed.

"Everybody outside," I said.

Mavis grabbed my sleeve. "We can't evacuate. The front door is locked."

I turned toward the lobby.

The front door was, in fact, locked.

Not closed. Locked.

The evacuation alarm had somehow triggered the security system, which had responded by sealing the building like a vending machine full of people.

"Who designed this?" I asked.

"Your aunt," Mavis said.

"Of course she did."

Lenny hurried toward the lobby. "I can open it."

"Can you?"

"Yes."

"Will it open?"

"That's less certain."

The guests surged after him. The chicken flapped. The bride's veil caught on a wall sconce and yanked her backward. Todd tried to help and pulled the sconce off the wall. It struck the floor, sparked, and made the alarm change pitch.

The recorded voice said, "Please remain calm."

Darla reached up and ripped the speaker from the ceiling.

The voice stopped.

The silence lasted half a second.

Then the sprinkler above us burst.

Water hammered down over the hallway.

Everyone froze beneath it.

The naked cowboy looked at the ceiling. "That seems bad."

"It's not fire," Mavis said.

"It's water," I said. "That's a different kind of bad."

The sprinkler soaked the guests, the carpet, the key box, and the emergency panel. Lenny threw himself over the wiring with a towel. Mavis began shouting instructions nobody followed.

The woman with the chicken held the bird above her head.

The bride's veil collapsed over her face.

Todd stood under the spray with both arms out, accepting his fate with the quiet dignity of a man who had lost a shoe to seafood.

Baggage climbed onto the linen cabinet.

"Maribel," he said, "the stairwell is filling."

I looked toward the stairs.

Water poured down from the upper landing, carrying dust, leaves, and three small plastic shampoo bottles. The smoke drifted through it in gray ropes. Somewhere below, a door banged repeatedly.

The building had achieved a new level of incompetence: it was now both smoking and flooding.

"Lenny!" I shouted. "Open the front door!"

"I'm trying!"

"Try harder!"

"I'm using the key!"

"Use the correct one!"

"I don't know which one that is!"

I seized the key box, dumped the wet keys across the floor, and crawled through the spray. Baggage barked once.

"Left of the red tag."

I found a brass key beneath Todd's foot.

"This one?"

"Other left."

"There are two lefts!"

"The one that looks guilty."

All of them looked guilty.

I jammed the key into the lock beside the front door. It turned halfway, stuck, and refused to move.

Behind me, the sprinkler continued its enthusiastic attempt to drown the motel. Mavis yelled that the panel was smoking. Lenny yelled that smoke was normal. The chicken escaped and ran directly between my legs.

I fell against the door.

The impact turned the key.

The lock released with a heavy clunk.

The front doors flew open.

Warm night air rushed in, carrying the smell of asphalt, gasoline, and freedom.

The guests stumbled into the parking lot, dripping and furious. The bride dragged her veil behind her. Todd carried one wet slipper that did not belong to him. The naked cowboy held the chicken under one arm.

Baggage trotted out last.

I followed, soaked to the skin, clutching the key box against my chest while water streamed from my hair.

Across the lot, the motel's red emergency lights flashed against the sign. The I-16 traffic roared beyond the trees, indifferent to our suffering and probably wise to stay that way.

For a moment, nobody spoke.

Then Darla looked at me.

"Is this covered by the room rate?"

"No."

"Then I want a refund."

"You already got one."

"I want another."

"Take it up with the chicken."

The chicken pecked at Todd's robe.

Todd sighed. "I'm beginning to think this place has a personal issue with me."

Baggage shook himself beside my leg, spraying water onto my calves.

"It has a personal issue with everyone," he said.

The alarm finally died inside the building. The sprinkler sputtered to a stop. A thin plume of smoke continued to rise from the stairwell window, as if the motel had one last opinion to express.

Lenny emerged carrying the ruined panel cover.

"Good news," he said.

I stared at him.

"The alarm is off."

"What's the bad news?"

He held up a melted wire.

"The system is now permanently off."

Mavis came out behind him, dragging the soaked linen cabinet. "That's not bad news. It means it can't go off again."

I looked at the smoking stairwell, the flooded hallway, and the guests assembled in various states of damp outrage.

"Everyone out of the building," I said. "Nobody goes back inside until the smoke clears."

"We're already outside," Darla said.

"Then stay outside with purpose."

Baggage sat at my feet. "That's the first sensible thing anyone has said."

I called the county emergency line from the motel office phone, which worked only if I held the receiver at an angle and threatened it. The operator took down the address, the incident, and my name.

When I mentioned the health-code notice, she went quiet.

"Inspector Pike has already flagged the property," she said. "He'll be notified."

"Could I notify him myself?"

"You could."

"Would that make him come faster?"

"Yes."

I hung up.

A minute later, my cell phone rang.

Evan's name appeared on the screen.

I answered. "If you're calling to say this is my fault, I'm already aware of the general theme."

"I'm calling because the county sent me an alert."

"You're very efficient."

"I try to be."

Behind him, I could hear traffic and the faint clatter of paper. His voice was calm, irritatingly calm, while I stood barefoot in a puddle wearing a blouse that smelled like smoke and old shrimp.

"What happened?" he asked.

"The alarm lied."

"Smoke alarm?"

"Evacuation system."

"Was there smoke?"

"Yes."

"Fire?"

"No."

"Electrical damage?"

"Possibly."

"Water damage?"

"Definitely."

He exhaled slowly. "Maribel."

I disliked how my name sounded in his voice. It made me feel as if I had been caught doing something reckless and he was trying not to enjoy it.

"We cleared the building," I said. "Everyone is safe. The guests are outside. The alarm is disabled."

"That last part is not reassuring."

"It wasn't meant to be."

"I'm scheduling an immediate shutdown visit."

"When?"

"Seven in the morning."

I glanced at the motel. Water dripped from the roofline. The red lights blinked over the sign. Baggage was chewing something that had probably been part of the alarm system.

"Seven is aggressive."

"Seven is generous."

"Could we make it eight?"

"No."

"Seven-thirty?"

"No."

"You're very firm for a man calling from a parking lot."

"I'm very firm everywhere."

The words landed between us, damp and inconvenient.

Baggage looked up at me. "He likes you."

Evan heard him. "I'll see you at seven, Baggage."

"Bring paperwork," Baggage said.

"I always do."

The call ended.

I lowered the phone.

Darla crossed her arms. "Who was that?"

"The inspector."

"The attractive one?"

I looked toward the darkened motel and the official notice taped to the door.

"He's not attractive."

Baggage leaned against my ankle.

"He's clean," he said. "That's attractive here."

I ignored him, though my face had become annoyingly warm despite the night air.

At seven in the morning, Evan Pike would return with his clipboard, his dry hands, and a legal reason to shut me down. The motel had survived the smoke, the flood, the evacuation, and one chicken with a grudge.

Now it had a schedule.

I looked at the broken alarm panel.

"Tomorrow," I said, "we fix the wiring."

Baggage glanced at the motel.

"Tomorrow," he said, "we try not to fix it worse."

From inside the building came one final click.

Every guest in the parking lot turned toward the sound.

Then the sign over the office went dark.

Who Keeps Replacing My Locks?

The motel sign went dark at 12:03 a.m., which was considerate. It allowed the rest of the property to reveal its problems without competition.

I stood in the laundry room with a flashlight between my teeth, one hand gripping the key box and the other trying to keep a dryer door from falling off. The machine had been making a grinding noise since dinner, but now it had upgraded to a metallic shriek, as if a small demon were trapped inside with a fork.

"Hold still," I told it.

The dryer dropped its door.

I stepped backward, caught my heel on a laundry basket, and landed against the folding table. The key box slid from my hand, hit the floor, and burst open.

Keys scattered across the concrete.

Baggage watched from atop a pile of towels. "That went well."

"It's midnight."

"That explains the lack of improvement."

Evan Pike was coming at seven to shut us down. The motel had flooded, smoked, evacuated, lost its emergency system, and apparently decided the final touch should be a blackout. I had six hours to identify who kept tampering with the locks before Evan arrived with his clipboard and that calm expression that made me want to confess to crimes I hadn't committed.

The laundry room smelled like hot dust, bleach, and wet carpet. Somewhere beyond the wall, a pipe knocked twice.

I looked at the keys.

"Who keeps replacing my locks?"

Baggage yawned. "Someone with access."

"Helpful."

"I save my best observations for emergencies."

"This is an emergency."

"No. This is Tuesday."

I crouched and began sorting the keys. The box contained room keys, facility keys, several blanks, and one brass key labeled POOL, despite the motel continuing to possess no pool. There was also the key marked DO NOT USE, which had somehow acquired a fresh scratch along its teeth.

I held it up to the flashlight.

"Someone used this."

"Someone always uses that."

"Who?"

Baggage scratched his ear. "The people who don't want to be seen using the other keys."

That was the closest thing to a clue I had received from him that didn't involve an insult, so I followed it.

The laundry room had two doors. One led to the hallway. The other led to a storage closet that had been locked since I inherited the motel, allegedly because the hinges were bad.

In a functioning business, a locked storage closet meant cleaning supplies.

At the I-16 Motor Lodge, it meant either a body or paperwork proving the body belonged to somebody else.

I tried the DO NOT USE key.

The closet opened.

Baggage sat up. "That's new."

"You said the key was always in the office."

"I said it was always in the office when you needed it. You've moved it."

"I have not."

"You moved the box."

"That is not the same thing."

"It is to the key."

The closet door scraped across the floor and stopped against a mop bucket. Cold air rolled out, carrying the sour smell of cardboard, mildew, and old cigarette smoke. Shelves leaned under stacks of towels, cracked soap dispensers, and a plastic bin labeled TAXES, which contained three plungers and a single velvet glove.

I swept the flashlight over the walls.

The locks had been changed recently. The screws were bright, the metal clean around the plates. Someone had replaced the closet hardware while leaving the rest of the building held together by paint and optimism.

I touched the newest screw.

"Lenny," I said.

Baggage shook his head. "Too neat."

"Mavis?"

"Too honest."

"That is a deeply insulting thing to say about Mavis."

"It's also true."

I moved a box of broken irons. Behind it, the wall had been scratched around a second latch. The wood dust was fresh.

My pulse gave one interested little kick. Not dramatic. More like a raccoon noticing an unattended sandwich.

I found a screwdriver on the shelf and removed the latch plate. Behind it was a narrow cavity packed with loose hardware: screws, lock cylinders, strike plates, and two brass room tags.

Room 9.

Room 12.

I stared at them.

Room 9 had housed the naked cowboy and the hair dryer. Room 12 had produced the flood, the shrimp, and the first outbreak of doors opening themselves. Both

rooms had been involved in the original key disaster.

Baggage sniffed the cavity. "There's grease."

"From what?"

"Hands."

"Whose?"

"Not mine."

I pulled out the lock cylinders and laid them on a towel. One belonged to room nine. The other belonged to room twelve. Both had been altered. Tiny metal shavings glittered inside the grooves.

Someone had not simply replaced the locks.

Someone had made them fit more than one key.

A noise came from the laundry hallway.

I shoved the hardware into my pocket and turned off the flashlight.

The darkness smelled of detergent and overheated wiring. Baggage climbed silently down from the towels, which was impressive for a dog who usually announced every movement like a landlord.

The door opened.

Mavis stepped inside carrying a mop, a bucket, and the expression of a woman who had been summoned by the sound of wrongdoing.

She flicked on the overhead light.

Nothing happened.

"Power's out," I said.

"I noticed."

"What are you doing here?"

"Cleaning."

"At midnight?"

"It's when the stains are least judgmental."

She saw the open closet.

Her eyes moved to the broken latch, then to me.

"Maribel."

"Who changed these locks?"

Mavis put down the bucket. "Which locks?"

"The closet. Room nine. Room twelve."

"I don't know."

"You're the head of housekeeping."

"I'm the only person who knows which towels are supposed to be white."

"Did you order hardware?"

"No."

"Did Lenny?"

"No."

"Did anyone?"

Mavis glanced toward the hallway. "Not officially."

That was not an answer. It was an answer wearing a fake mustache.

"Who has access to the storage closet?"

"The staff."

"Which staff?"

"The staff who have keys."

"Who has keys?"

"People with access."

Baggage sighed. "This is why I prefer barking."

Mavis folded her arms. "You want names? Lenny has a master key. I have a master key. Celia had a master key. The guests have room keys. Sometimes the guests have master keys."

"Sometimes?"

Mavis looked at the open cavity. "This place has always had arrangements."

"What arrangements?"

"People come here because they need privacy."

"That's the motel's reputation, not a maintenance policy."

"It's both."

The dryer door slid off the floor and bumped my ankle.

Mavis looked down. "That needs fixing."

"I'm tracking a criminal."

"You can track him after the dryer."

"The dryer is not changing locks."

"Not yet."

She picked up the door and leaned it against the machine. From her apron pocket, she produced a ring of keys and began sorting through them.

I watched her hands.

"Why do you have three keys labeled room twelve?"

Mavis stopped.

Baggage's ears lifted.

"I don't," she said.

I pointed.

There were three faded brass tags. Each said 12. One was stamped with a star. One had a red thread tied through its ring. The third had no tag at all.

Mavis closed her fist around them.

"Those are old."

"Old enough to explain the shrimp?"

"Nothing explains the shrimp."

"Who gave them to you?"

"No one."

"Keys don't grow in aprons."

"These might."

"Mavis."

She looked toward the dark hallway. "I found them."

"Where?"

"Laundry room."

"Tonight?"

"Last week."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"You were busy being inspected."

That was fair, which made it irritating.

Baggage nudged the bucket. "She's hiding something."

Mavis glared at him. "You're hiding something."

"I'm hiding my disappointment. It's under my tongue."

Before I could ask what she meant, footsteps thudded in the hall.

Lenny appeared carrying a toolbox and wearing one boot.

"Why is everyone in here?" he asked.

"Who changed the locks?" I said.

Lenny looked at Mavis.

Mavis looked at Lenny.

Baggage looked at both of them.

"Not me," they said together.

That would have been more convincing if Lenny had not been holding a lock cylinder.

I pointed at it.

He tucked it behind his back.

"Why are you hiding that?"

"I'm not."

"It's behind your back."

"I'm checking my posture."

"Lenny."

He sighed and brought it forward. "I found it in the linen closet."

"Which lock is it from?"

"Room seventeen."

"Room seventeen leaks."

"It leaks less now."

"Did you replace the lock?"

"No."

"Did you remove it?"

"No."

"Then why do you have it?"

"Because it was in my way."

"Where?"

"In the linen closet."

Baggage stared at him. "Your testimony has the structural integrity of wet toast."

Lenny set the cylinder on the shelf. "Look, I didn't change anything. I only repair what breaks."

"Who supplies the parts?"

"Depends."

"On what?"

"Who's asking."

I grabbed the flashlight and shone it at his face. "I'm asking."

He blinked. "Then the answer is Mavis."

Mavis turned on him. "You said the answer was the hardware store."

"It is sometimes."

"You charged the motel for parts from a hardware store that closed three years ago."

"It had good prices."

"It had no roof."

"Lower overhead."

I rubbed my forehead. The blackout pressed around us, punctuated by the distant drip of water and the dryer's cooling metal ticking like an impatient clock.

"Both of you are lying."

"Not technically," Mavis said.

"That is the slogan of this entire property."

I went back into the closet and shoved aside a stack of stained pillows. Behind them sat a cardboard box sealed with motel tape. The tape had been cut and re-sealed twice.

Inside were lock plates, room tags, duplicate keys, and handwritten notes.

Room 9. Tuesday, 11:40.

Room 12. Thursday, after alarm.

Room 17. Leak before inspection.

Below that, in a different hand:

Move them before Pike returns.

I held the note up.

Nobody spoke.

Even Baggage stopped looking amused.

"Who is Pike?" Lenny asked.

"Evan Pike," I said. "The health inspector."

Mavis reached for the paper. I pulled it away.

"You know exactly who he is."

"Everybody knows Pike."

"Why would someone move locks before he returns?"

"Maybe they're trying to help."

"By making the doors open?"

"Maybe they're trying to keep the place from being shut down."

I stared at her. "That is the worst help I've ever heard of."

"Have you met the staff?"

"Yes. I'm beginning to regret it."

Lenny picked up the note and examined the handwriting. "That's not mine."

Mavis snatched it. "Not mine either."

"Whose is it?"

She turned the paper over.

On the back was a list of room numbers. Nine. Twelve. Seventeen. Four. Sixteen. Twenty-one.

Beside each number was a single initial.

D. T. C. B. R. H.

I knew the first two.

Darla. Todd.

The third could have been anyone. C for chicken, perhaps, though the chicken had never demonstrated an ability to write. The fourth might have been Baggage, which he would have hated. The fifth and sixth were complete mysteries.

"Those are guests," Mavis said quietly.

"Regular guests," Lenny added.

"Regular enough to have initials?"

"Regular enough to have opinions about which rooms they prefer," Mavis said.

Baggage sniffed the paper. "They're not just guests."

"What are they, then?"

"People who know where the bad doors are."

The storage closet seemed to shrink around us.

I turned to Mavis. "Who is the network?"

She looked offended. "It's not a network."

"Then why do they have assigned rooms, duplicate keys, and a schedule for moving locks?"

"Because they help each other."

"Do they also help the motel flood?"

"No."

"Set off the alarm?"

"No."

"Make the sign go dark?"

Lenny raised a finger. "That was probably electrical."

"Probably?"

He lowered the finger.

A car door slammed outside.

All three of us froze.

Through the narrow laundry window, headlights swept across the back wall. A vehicle rolled slowly past the service entrance, then stopped beside the dumpsters.

Baggage's hackles rose.

"Who is that?" I whispered.

He looked through the glass. "One of the regulars."

"Which one?"

"The one who never signs in."

A figure stepped out of the car and opened the trunk. The person wore a dark jacket and carried a canvas bag.

I moved toward the back door.

Mavis grabbed my arm. "Don't."

"Why?"

"Because if they see you, they'll move everything."

"Everything is already moving."

Lenny peered through the window. "That's the blue sedan."

"Whose?"

"Depends who's asking."

"I am going to throw your toolbox into the dryer."

The figure lifted something from the trunk. Metal flashed under the parking lot light.

A lock cylinder.

I shoved the door open.

Cold air slapped my face. The figure looked up, dropped the cylinder, and ran between the laundry building and the east wing.

Baggage shot after them.

"Baggage!"

"I'm supervising!"

He vanished into the dark.

I ran after him, slipping on wet concrete. Behind me, Mavis shouted something about my shoes. Lenny shouted something about his toolbox. Neither was useful.

The figure reached the east-wing walkway and cut toward room twelve.

I saw the door open.

Then the figure disappeared inside.

By the time I reached it, the room was empty.

The air smelled of damp plaster and oranges.

The bed had been stripped. The bathroom door swung gently on its hinges. A plastic sandal lay beside the bathtub, identical to the one carried away in the first flood.

Baggage stood in the middle of the room, staring at the wall.

"What happened?" I asked.

"They left through the other door."

"There's no other door."

He tapped the wall with one paw.

The panel shifted.

Behind it was a narrow passage leading into the storage cavity, packed with old pipes and fresh footprints.

I crawled through far enough to shine the flashlight along the passage. Someone had installed a second latch on the room side. The hardware was new. The screws were bright.

At the far end, a ring of keys hung from a nail.

I reached for it.

Baggage growled.

The key ring held six brass tags, each marked with a room number and a single initial.

D. T. C. B. R. H.

The same list.

My fingers closed around the ring.

A folded receipt was tied beneath it with red thread. I opened it.

The date was tomorrow.

The order read:

Six replacement cylinders.

Two master keys.

One inspection delay.

Underneath, someone had written:

Pike must not see the old route.

I heard footsteps behind me.

Not running.

Walking.

Slowly.

I crawled backward out of the passage and stood in room twelve with the key ring clenched in my hand. Mavis and Lenny crowded the doorway. Baggage positioned himself between us and the hall, teeth showing.

At the end of the walkway, a silhouette moved past the broken emergency light.

Then Evan Pike stepped into view, clipboard tucked beneath one arm, his pale blue inspection shirt crisp despite the hour.

He looked at the open room, the hidden panel, and the keys in my hand.

His expression hardened.

"Maribel," he said, "where did you get those?"

I held up the ring.

"Apparently," I said, "from your regulars."

Evan's gaze dropped to the note.

For the first time since I had met him, he looked genuinely alarmed.

Baggage glanced between us.

"Well," he said, "that's worse than the shrimp."

Evan stepped inside and shut the door behind him.

The lock clicked.

From the passage wall, another lock clicked back.

The Pool Turns Into Soup

The lock in the wall clicked again.

I stared at Evan. Evan stared at the hidden passage. Baggage stared at both of us with the exhausted expression of a dog who had been right too many times before breakfast.

Then the pool pump coughed outside.

A thick mechanical groan rolled across the property, followed by a wet slap and the unmistakable sound of something being sucked through a pipe that should have been minding its own business.

Evan's head turned toward the pool deck.

"What was that?" he asked.

"The pool," I said.

"Why does the pool sound like it's swallowing a shoe?"

"Because this motel has a theme."

Baggage trotted toward the door. "The water is wrong."

"Water can be wrong?" Evan asked.

"At this motel, water has ambitions."

We left the room together, which would have felt romantic if the walkway hadn't smelled like wet plaster and somebody hadn't left a dead moth in my shoe. Evan carried his clipboard. I carried the key ring. Baggage carried nothing because he had staff privileges.

The pool sat behind the east wing beneath a sun-faded sign promising crystal-clear relaxation. The sign had lost the letters C, L, and R, so it now promised ystal-ea relaxation, which was less a promise than a threat.

Morning sunlight struck the water.

The surface shone green.

Not a pleasant garden green. Not the dignified green of a cucumber. This was the green of something that had been left in a jar beneath a porch and had begun developing opinions.

A film trembled across the top. Small bubbles rose near the deep end. The air smelled of chlorine, warm pennies, and sweet rot.

Darla stood at the edge in a leopard-print swimsuit, holding a plastic cup.

Todd sat in a pool chair wearing goggles and the same expression he had worn when the shrimp entered his shoe.

The naked cowboy leaned against the diving board, still naked except for the hat, because apparently consequences had never reached him.

Mavis was crouched beside the pump housing with a wrench.

Lenny stood beside her holding a pool skimmer upside down.

I stopped at the gate.

"What are you doing?"

Mavis did not look up. "Maintenance."

"That water is the color of a lawsuit."

"It's seasoning."

Darla lifted her cup. "The pool is seasoning."

I looked at her.

She took a sip.

Evan made a sharp sound behind me.

Darla swallowed and nodded thoughtfully. "Needs more salt."

Todd lowered his goggles. "She said it gets better after the second cup."

"Second cup of what?" I asked.

"Pool," Darla said.

Baggage sniffed the gate. "It smells like a sock lost in a swamp."

"Thank you," I said. "Finally, a professional assessment."

Mavis tightened something on the pump. The motor shrieked and spat a fan of greenish water across her shirt.

"It's fine," she said.

"You're wearing the pool."

"It's a splash zone."

"Why is the water green?"

"Sunlight."

"It's cloudy."

"Overcast sunlight."

"That isn't how anything works."

Lenny lifted the skimmer. A thick ribbon of algae stretched from the net to the concrete, wobbling in the breeze like a very lazy piece of pasta.

"Filtration's running," he said.

The pump coughed again.

The skimmer jerked out of his hand and shot across the deck. It struck the diving board, bounced off the life-ring cabinet, and landed in the shallow end.

The naked cowboy watched it sink.

"Still running," Lenny said.

Evan moved past me and examined the pump housing. He crouched, ran one clean finger along the edge, and held it up. Black grit coated the fingertip.

"Who serviced this system?"

Mavis stood. "We did."

"Who is we?"

"Staff."

"Which staff?"

Lenny raised his hand.

Mavis lowered it.

Evan opened the housing. A wad of cloth had been jammed around the intake valve. He pulled it free. The cloth was covered in grease, hair, and two glittering rhinestones.

I recognized the fabric.

It matched the silver boots Darla had worn on my first day.

Darla looked down at her swimsuit. "Those aren't mine."

"You're wearing glitter," I said.

"That's not evidence. That's a lifestyle."

Evan held up the cloth. "This was deliberately placed in the intake."

Mavis crossed her arms. "Or it got there naturally."

"Cloth does not naturally enter a locked pump housing."

"At this motel, it might."

Baggage sat beside the filter tank. "The pump has been gagged."

"Thank you," Evan said.

Baggage glanced at him. "You're welcome."

I turned to Mavis. "Did you know the filtration system was blocked?"

"No."

"You were just tightening a bolt."

"I was checking it."

"You were checking it while guests drank the water."

Darla raised her cup. "I'm not drinking it. I'm tasting the seasoning."

"Stop tasting it."

She looked offended. "You're very controlling for someone who owns a motel."

"I am controlling the part where guests don't ingest the swimming pool."

Todd peered into the water. "There's something moving."

Every head turned.

A pale shape drifted beneath the surface, bumped the pool wall, and sank.

The naked cowboy pointed. "That's my wallet."

"You lost your wallet in there?" I asked.

"Last night."

"Why did you go swimming last night?"

"It was dark."

"That is not an answer."

"It was romantic."

The bride from room nine appeared at the gate wearing a veil, rubber boots, and a life jacket. She held a plastic baby doll under one arm.

"I heard there was a pool emergency," she said.

"There is no pool emergency," Mavis said.

The pump emitted a grinding shriek.

A green bubble rose from the deep end and burst with a wet pop.

The bride nodded. "That sounds like an emergency."

Evan looked at me. "The pool needs to be closed."

"I know."

Mavis stepped between us and the gate. "We can clear it."

"Clear what?" I asked.

"The water."

"With what?"

"Chemicals."

"Which chemicals?"

She glanced at Lenny.

Lenny glanced at the pump.

"The usual ones," he said.

"Name one."

"Blue."

"That is a color."

"It's also what we have."

He hurried toward the maintenance shed before I could stop him. Baggage followed, because apparently the dog had more faith in his own judgment than mine.

"Do not add anything to that pool," I shouted.

Lenny kept walking.

Mavis grabbed the shed key from her apron. "We need to balance it."

"The only thing that needs balancing is my blood pressure."

She unlocked the shed. The door swung open, releasing the smell of damp cardboard, rubber, and a chemical sharp enough to make my eyes water.

Inside, shelves sagged beneath bottles with faded labels. A cracked bucket sat beneath a leak. Something small rustled behind the chlorine drums.

Baggage looked in. "Mouse."

"Fine," I said. "At least one creature here has standards."

Lenny reached for a white container.

Evan caught his wrist.

"What is that?"

"Treatment."

"It has no label."

"It used to."

"What was it?"

Lenny considered. "A powder."

Evan took the container from him. "Nobody adds anything until I test the water."

Mavis frowned. "You're shutting down the pool over a little algae?"

"I'm shutting down the pool because the filtration system was sabotaged, the water is contaminated, and your employee is about to pour an unidentified powder into it."

Lenny looked hurt. "It might have helped."

"It might have dissolved the guests."

Darla leaned over the gate. "Would that be covered by the room rate?"

"No," I said.

Evan pulled a testing kit from his inspection bag.

I watched him unpack glass vials, strips, and a little plastic case. He had brought equipment for the pool. He had expected trouble.

That should not have made me feel anything except professionally insulted.

Instead, I noticed his sleeves were rolled to the elbows.

Baggage sat on my foot.

"He likes you," he said.

"He likes shutting me down."

"Both can happen."

Evan filled a vial from the pool tap. The water came out cloudy and warm. It smelled like wet pennies and the inside of an abandoned cooler.

He added a reagent.

The liquid turned pink.

Then red.

Then a shade of purple usually associated with bruised fruit and bad medical news.

Evan frowned.

"That's not the correct color," I said.

"I'm aware."

"Could it be the lighting?"

"No."

"Overcast lighting?"

He looked at me.

"Worth trying," I said.

He tested the chlorine. The strip turned black.

He tested the pH. The strip dissolved.

Evan stared at the little paper remnants floating in the vial.

"The test strip dissolved," I said.

"I can see that."

"Is that common?"

"No."

"Good. I'd hate for us to be normal."

Behind us, a car horn sounded from the front drive. Then another. A white van rolled into the parking lot with a magnetic sign on the side reading LOCAL 8 NEWS - WE ASK THE QUESTIONS.

A woman in a bright yellow jacket climbed out carrying a camera. A teenage boy followed with a microphone and the eager expression of someone who had just discovered public humiliation could be content.

My stomach dropped.

Mavis whispered, "Who called the news?"

Nobody answered.

Baggage looked at Darla.

Darla pointed at Todd.

Todd pointed at the naked cowboy.

The naked cowboy pointed at the pool.

"I was in the water," he said. "I had no phone."

The reporter hurried toward us. "Are you the owner?"

"I am."

"Maribel Hart?"

"Yes."

"We've received a video showing unsafe conditions at the I-16 Motor Lodge."

"Of course you have."

The teenage boy raised his phone. On the screen, Darla stood beside the pool holding her cup.

Her voice came through the tiny speaker.

"Welcome to the motel pool, where the water is seasoning."

She dipped her finger into the green surface, tasted it, and gave the camera a solemn thumbs-up.

The video ended with Todd shouting, "Don't put your mouth in that!"

The reporter looked from the phone to me. "Is the pool open to guests?"

"It was not supposed to be."

"But guests are using it."

"They are also using rooms that open into hidden passages. We're having a difficult week."

"Is the water safe?"

"No."

That answer came out before I could improve it.

The reporter's eyebrows lifted. The camera swung toward the pool.

Evan stepped beside me. "The pool is being closed pending remediation."

The reporter turned to him. "Are you with the county?"

"Yes."

"Has the motel been cited?"

Evan looked at me.

I looked at the pool.

The pool burped.

"Yes," he said.

The reporter smiled in a way that suggested my financial ruin had excellent lighting. "Can we get a statement from the owner?"

"You just got one."

"About the contamination."

"I said it wasn't safe."

"Why wasn't it safe?"

"Because someone stuffed a rhinestone-covered piece of clothing into the filtration intake."

The reporter paused.

The teenage boy lowered his microphone. "Was it, like, sabotage?"

"It was definitely not good housekeeping," I said.

Mavis made a small offended noise.

The reporter moved closer. "Are you saying someone intentionally contaminated the pool?"

"I'm saying the pump was blocked, the tests are unusable, and the staff refuses to admit anything happened."

Mavis turned toward me. "We admit the water is a little seasoned."

Evan closed his eyes.

The reporter's camera zoomed in on the pool.

Darla raised her cup to the lens.

"Try the shallow end," she called.

"Do not try any end," I shouted.

The naked cowboy climbed onto the diving board.

"Don't," I said.

He looked offended. "I haven't even done anything."

"That is exactly when you're most dangerous."

He bounced once.

The board groaned.

Evan grabbed my arm and pulled me backward as the board snapped upward. The naked cowboy launched into the air, hat flying off, and landed in the pool with a splash that sent green water over the deck, the reporter, the camera, and my face.

For one suspended second, nobody moved.

The reporter stood dripping beneath a curtain of algae. Her yellow jacket had turned the color of old mustard. The camera operator wiped slime from his lens. The teenage boy held his microphone at arm's length while a string of green liquid slid down his wrist.

The naked cowboy surfaced wearing his hat.

He blinked. "It's warm."

I wiped water from my eyes.

A strand of algae clung to Evan's cheek.

Without thinking, I reached up and removed it.

His gaze met mine.

The pool pump screamed.

The reporter's camera light blinked back on.

Baggage sniffed the algae on my hand. "Romance," he said.

"Not now."

"Especially now."

Evan took the strand from my fingers and dropped it onto the deck. "Everyone out. The pool is closed."

Darla climbed through the gate instead of out of it.

"Darla," I said.

"What? I'm leaving."

"You're going toward the pool."

"It's the shortest route."

"It is three feet away."

She stepped backward. Her heel landed on the fallen skimmer.

The skimmer shot forward.

Darla grabbed the life-ring cabinet.

The cabinet door opened.

The life ring swung out on its rope, struck Todd in the chest, and yanked him into the shallow end. He landed sitting down with a splash. The water rose around him like a green bathrobe.

Todd stood slowly.

Something pale clung to his shoulder.

He looked at it.

The reporter screamed.

Todd screamed louder.

The pale object was a plastic pool thermometer.

Mavis fainted onto the pump housing.

Lenny caught her, then slipped on the algae and dragged both of them into a stack of lounge chairs. The chairs collapsed in a metallic accordion. The reporter backed away, stepped into a puddle, and sat down hard. Her camera operator tried to help, tangled himself in the life-ring rope, and fell against the gate.

The gate swung shut.

The lock clicked.

Baggage sat outside it.

"Good," he said. "Now the pool can't escape."

I found the padlock in the maintenance shed, returned to the gate, and snapped it through the latch with hands that smelled like chlorine and swamp.

The reporter had recovered enough to point her microphone at me.

"Can you confirm the pool is now closed?"

"Yes."

"Until when?"

"Until it stops trying to become soup."

The teenage boy stared at his phone. "The video already has twelve thousand views."

"What?"

He turned the screen toward me.

Darla's clip had been reposted by a local traffic page. Comments raced beneath it.

IS THIS THE SHRIMP MOTEL?

POOL LOOKS LIKE GRAVY.

I-16 MOTOR LODGE STRIKES AGAIN.

One comment read: ASK ABOUT THE SECRET TUNNELS.

I looked at Evan.

He had gone very still.

"How does the internet know about the tunnels?" I asked.

His jaw tightened. "That's what I'd like to know."

From the locked pool gate came a soft metallic rattle.

Baggage turned his head.

"Someone's on the other side," he said.

The gate rattled again.

The reporter lifted her camera.

I grabbed the padlock.

The latch had been opened from inside.

The pool spread green and glistening behind us. The pump wheezed. The local news camera kept recording. Evan reached for my hand, and this time neither of us pretended it was accidental.

Then the pool drain made a deep sucking sound.

A brass key rose through the green water and tapped against the grate.

Baggage looked at it.

"Room twelve," he said.

The reporter whispered, "Is that the secret tunnel key?"

I closed the pool gate harder, though it was already locked.

"No," I said.

The key tapped the grate again.

Evan looked at me, his hand still around mine.

"Yes," Baggage said. "It is."

My Staff Thinks Rules Are Suggestions

The brass key tapped the pool drain again.

I stared at it through the green water while Evan's hand remained around mine and Baggage sat beside the locked gate like a furry security consultant who charged in insults.

"Fine," I said. "The key is room twelve. The pool is closed. Nobody touches the drain."

Cal Rourke, who had somehow appeared behind the maintenance shed with a wrench in one hand and a bag of powdered something in the other, raised his eyebrows.

"Does that include me?"

"It especially includes you."

Nina Dyer leaned against the office door, eating crackers from a box labeled EMERGENCY SUPPLIES. She flicked salt from her thumb.

"What if the drain touches him first?"

"Then we'll have a separate problem."

"We already have several."

"Thank you, Nina. Your contribution has been noted."

Evan released my hand, which was probably sensible. My fingers immediately missed the warmth, which was not sensible and therefore perfectly on brand for the motel.

He crouched beside the pool gate and examined the lock. "The pool stays closed. The room stays closed. The key goes into evidence."

"Evidence?" Cal said. "Of what?"

"Sabotage."

Cal looked genuinely impressed. "That sounds important."

"It is."

"Can I sabotage something less important?"

"No."

He nodded, as if I had given him a challenge rather than an answer.

By sunrise, the pool had been cordoned off with yellow tape, three towels, and a handwritten sign Nina made on the back of a takeout menu.

POOL CLOSED

DO NOT ENTER

SERIOUSLY

Someone had added:

UNLESS INVITED BY THE DRAIN

I tore the sign down.

The motel smelled of chlorine, wet carpet, and the faint sourness of viral fame. The local news van had left, but the reporter's camera light still seemed to hover in my peripheral vision, waiting for me to say something legally expensive. Guests wandered the parking lot in damp clothes, discussing the pool as if it had been a communal spiritual experience.

The woman with the chicken asked whether the bird could have a refund.

Todd wanted to know if his room key still worked.

The bride from room nine had put her veil in the laundry dryer, where it revolved slowly behind the glass like a ghost trying to escape a wedding.

I stood in the staff break room with a marker, a stack of paper, and the conviction that rules were simply boundaries wearing sensible shoes.

The break room had one table, four mismatched chairs, a refrigerator that hummed in E-flat, and a microwave with a fork permanently fused to the inside wall. The air smelled of burnt coffee and someone's tuna sandwich, though nobody admitted bringing one.

"Today," I said, "we establish basic operating rules."

Nina looked up from her crackers. "Are these the kind with consequences?"

"Yes."

"Actual consequences?"

"Yes."

Cal sat backward on a chair, his arms folded across the backrest. "Like what?"

"Like no one enters a closed pool."

"That's already a rule."

"It is now written down."

He glanced at the paper. "In capital letters?"

"Large ones."

"Good. Guests respect large letters."

"They don't respect anything."

Baggage lay beneath the table with his chin on his paws. "The staff respects even less."

I uncapped the marker. "No unauthorized repairs. No moving locks. No touching electrical panels unless I'm present. No chemicals in the pool. No hiding broken equipment. No adding notes to official notices."

Cal raised a hand.

I stared at him.

"Does that include funny notes?"

"It includes all notes."

"What about accurate notes?"

"Especially accurate notes if they're written on the back of a pizza box."

Nina reached into the refrigerator and pulled out a plastic container. "What if the note is on a clean pizza box?"

"Why would a motel employee be writing an official notice on a pizza box?"

"It was a very formal pizza."

I set the marker down before I snapped it in half. "The inspector is coming back."

Nina's face sharpened. "When?"

"Soon."

"How soon?"

"Soon enough that I'd like the building to remain standing."

Cal leaned farther over the chair. "Is Pike bringing the clipboard?"

"Yes."

"And the little shoe covers?"

"Yes."

"Can we put shoe covers on Baggage?"

Baggage opened one eye. "Try it and lose a hand."

I pointed at him. "No threatening staff."

"I was threatening Cal."

"Still staff."

"That rule is poorly designed."

I took a breath and wrote the first line across the paper.

"From now on, we follow a schedule. Cleaning, maintenance, inspections, supply checks. Everything gets logged."

Nina stared at the page as if I had announced mandatory tax audits.

"Logged where?"

"In the binder."

"What binder?"

I held up a blue binder.

Cal squinted at it. "That looks official."

"That is the idea."

"Can I sign it?"

"Only after completing the task."

"What if I sign it before?"

"Then it's falsifying records."

He considered this. "What if I complete it after?"

"That's how records work."

Nina took the binder from me and opened it. Several blank forms waited inside, each with boxes for dates, initials, and comments.

She picked up the marker.

I lunged across the table. "Do not."

"I was going to label it."

"You were going to draw something."

"Those are not mutually exclusive."

Baggage lifted his head. "She has a cartoon in her pocket."

Nina slowly removed a folded napkin from her uniform. On it was a drawing of a stick figure falling into a pool while holding a clipboard.

The stick figure wore a tiny tie.

I looked at Evan's empty place beside the gate, then back at the napkin.

"Why does the inspector have a tie?"

"Authority," Nina said.

"He wears a polo shirt."

"Then it's aspirational authority."

Cal pointed to the drawing. "The pool has teeth."

"The pool has earned teeth."

I took the napkin and put it in my pocket. "We are not turning compliance into performance art."

Nina and Cal exchanged a glance.

That was the first moment I understood I had already lost.

The next two hours were spent trying to make the motel safer while preventing the staff from helping.

I assigned Nina to the front desk and told her to stop issuing keys to rooms with active maintenance problems. She responded by placing a red sticker on every key in the key box, including the office key, the laundry key, and one labeled DO NOT USE.

"What do the stickers mean?" I asked.

"Red means caution."

"Why is the office key caution?"

"Because the office is dangerous."

"That is not how key systems work."

"It is how this key system feels."

Cal was sent to inspect the electrical closet with me present. He wore rubber gloves, safety goggles, and a hard hat that said KISS THE MAINTENANCE MAN.

"Where did you get that?" I asked.

"Lost and found."

"The lost and found is for guests."

"It was lonely."

The electrical closet sat behind the laundry room, narrow and hot, with concrete walls sweating in the Georgia humidity. The air smelled of dust, ozone, and old metal. Wires disappeared into the ceiling like black vines. The breaker panel had a handwritten label taped across it.

IMPORTANT

PROBABLY

I peeled it off.

Cal looked offended. "That label was useful."

"It said probably."

"It encouraged caution."

"It encouraged lawsuits."

Baggage sat in the doorway. "The closet is making a buzzing sound."

"That's the electricity," Cal said.

"No," Baggage replied. "The electricity is making a buzzing sound."

I turned to Cal. "No repairs. No adjustments. We are only identifying hazards."

"Can I identify them with my screwdriver?"

"With your eyes."

"My eyes are not certified."

"Neither is your screwdriver."

He crouched beside the panel and reached toward a loose bundle of wires.

I slapped his hand away.

"Eyes."

He sighed. "Fine."

We found three unlabeled breakers, one switch held in place with duct tape, and a handwritten note that read:

DO NOT FLIP UNLESS YOU LIKE SURPRISES.

"Who wrote this?" I asked.

Cal looked at the note.

"Nina," he said.

From the laundry room, Nina shouted, "It was a team effort!"

I pinched the bridge of my nose.

"New rule," I said. "Every breaker gets a proper label."

Cal stood. "I can do that."

"With the power off."

"I know."

"With the main switch."

"I know."

"With me watching."

"I know."

"With no improvising."

He looked wounded. "You've taken all the joy out of electricity."

"Electricity is not supposed to have joy."

"It does here."

By lunch, the rules were taped to the break-room wall. Nina had added small illustrations beside each one: a crossed-out key, a crossed-out wrench, a crossed-out bottle, and a crossed-out Cal.

Cal stared at his portrait.

"I feel targeted."

"You are targeted."

"Can I add one of you?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm the owner."

Baggage sniffed the paper. "Also because she has veto power."

The first schedule reset went better than expected. Nina stopped issuing room twelve keys. Cal recorded the damaged pump parts instead of throwing them into the bushes. Mavis, after a stern conversation, labeled the cleaning supplies and only hid one mop.

I began to believe authority might work.

That was my mistake.

At three, I called everyone back into the break room for a compliance drill.

"Why are we drilling?" Nina asked.

"Because if the inspector asks who knows the emergency procedures, I want an answer that isn't 'the dog.'"

Baggage wagged his tail once. "I'm the most qualified."

"The drill is simple. We identify the shutoffs, confirm the breaker labels, and practice reporting a hazard."

Cal raised his hand.

"No."

"You haven't heard the question."

"I know the question."

"Can I be the hazard?"

"You already are."

Mavis entered carrying a tray of coffee. "What's happening?"

"Training."

She set the tray down. "Are we allowed to fail?"

"Not intentionally."

"Then Cal should sit out."

Cal placed a hand over his chest. "I am hurt."

"You're also holding a screwdriver," Mavis said.

He looked down.

I pointed toward the electrical closet. "We start with the breaker panel. Nobody touches anything unless I say so."

We filed down the hallway. The motel's lights flickered overhead. Somewhere, a toilet flushed with the determination of a dying accordion.

The electrical closet was even hotter than before. Sweat gathered at the back of my neck. The panel door hung open, revealing rows of switches and a nest of wires that looked as if a spider had been given a toolbox.

I held up the schedule sheet. "First, Cal identifies the main breaker."

Cal pointed.

"Good. Nina reads the label."

Nina leaned in. "Main."

"Excellent. Mavis confirms the emergency number."

"Which one?"

"The county line."

She pulled a receipt from her apron. "I have the number for a pizza place."

"Why?"

"They answer faster."

Baggage sniffed the lower panel. "There is burning plastic."

I turned to Cal. "Did you smell that?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"I thought it was part of the drill."

I stared at him.

He shrugged. "You said identify hazards."

The smell grew stronger.

A thin curl of smoke rose from behind the panel.

"Everybody out," I said.

Cal reached past me.

"Do not touch anything."

"I'm shutting off the breaker."

"I said do not - "

He flipped a switch.

The entire motel went dark.

For a second, the only sound was the refrigerator winding down and Nina whispering, "That was probably important."

Then the emergency lights came on.

Red.

Of course red.

The electrical closet filled with a sharp pop. A breaker snapped loose and clattered onto the concrete floor. Sparks spat from the panel, bright and furious, while smoke rolled toward the ceiling.

Mavis dropped the coffee tray.

The cups shattered.

Baggage backed into my legs. "Training successful."

Cal stared at the broken breaker in his gloved hand.

"I may have identified it," he said.

"You broke it."

"Identification can be rough."

The fire alarm began to chirp.

I closed my eyes.

"No," I said.

The recorded voice crackled overhead.

"Please remain calm."

Nina looked at me. "Should I call Pike?"

"No."

"Should I call the county?"

"Yes."

"Should I call the pizza place?"

"Also yes."

The alarm chirped again.

I grabbed the schedule, the key box, and Cal by the back of his shirt.

"Out of the closet. Nobody touches anything else. Nina, lock the maintenance room. Mavis, get the guests away from the east wing. Baggage - "

"Supervise."

"Yes."

We spilled into the hallway as the lights flickered back on, then off, then on again. Somewhere upstairs, a guest shouted that the television had died during a romantic movie. Another voice shouted that the movie had improved.

I turned toward the office.

Evan would be coming back.

The rules were posted. The schedule existed. The staff had technically participated in training.

And the electrical system was now smoking behind us.

Baggage trotted at my side. "You wanted authority."

"I wanted basic competence."

"You got babysitting."

Behind us, Cal called, "Maribel?"

I stopped.

He held up the broken breaker.

"Do we log this?"

I looked at the smoking electrical closet, the shattered coffee cups, and the red emergency lights painting everybody's faces the color of bad decisions.

"Yes," I said. "Log it."

Cal nodded and reached for the binder.

Then the breaker sparked in his hand.

I snatched it away.

"Put the screwdriver down."

He looked at the tool as if surprised to find it there.

"Right," he said. "New rule."

"No," I said, dragging him toward the office. "Same rule. You just finally heard it."

The Vending Machine Eats Cash

The breaker sparked in Cal's hand, and I decided the lobby was the safest place to hide him.

That lasted approximately forty seconds.

The motel had gone dark again, the emergency lights painting the front desk red while the fire alarm chirped overhead like a bird with a personal grudge. The air smelled of burnt plastic, scorched coffee, and the damp carpet that had survived three floods and was now developing opinions.

I shoved Cal toward the office.

"Stay there," I said.

"Can I log the breaker?"

"You can sit on your hands."

"That seems unsanitary."

"Then hold the binder."

He took the binder. Baggage followed us into the lobby, his nails clicking across the tile.

"You're creating a containment zone," he said.

"I'm creating a staff-free zone."

"Same thing with less barking."

The lobby's vending machine gave a cheerful electronic chime.

We all turned.

It stood against the wall beside the ice machine, glowing faintly through the emergency lighting. The machine had been inherited with the motel, along with the sagging roof, the secret tunnels, and a coffee maker that produced something legally

classified as a threat. Its front panel displayed rows of chips, candy, crackers, and one lonely granola bar that had expired during a previous administration.

A guest stood in front of it, jabbing the selection buttons.

The machine chimed again.

Then it printed a receipt.

The receipt slid from the slot and curled onto the floor.

The guest picked it up. "It charged me for a mystery item."

I approached cautiously. "What did you buy?"

"Peanut butter crackers."

"Those aren't mysterious."

"It says MYSTERY ITEM."

He held out the receipt.

The words were printed beneath the crackers.

MYSTERY ITEM - \$6.75

I looked at the machine.

The machine hummed.

Baggage sniffed the receipt. "It knows what it did."

The guest was a narrow man in a wrinkled fishing shirt, with a sunburned neck and the wounded expression of someone who had been personally betrayed by a snack. He held two quarters in one hand and a five-dollar bill in the other.

"I put in a dollar," he said. "It gave me crackers and charged me for something else."

"Did anything else come out?"

"No."

"Then it didn't charge you."

He pointed at the receipt. "That is not how receipts work."

I glanced toward the office. Cal had already opened the binder.

"Lenny!" I shouted.

From somewhere near the laundry hall came a crash, followed by Lenny yelling, "I'm not touching anything!"

"That's new," Baggage said.

The vending machine chimed again.

Another receipt slid out.

Then another.

The guest stepped backward. "It's doing it again."

The machine began printing with steady, horrifying enthusiasm. Receipts spilled onto the tile, one after another, their little white bodies curling at the edges.

MYSTERY ITEM - \$6.75.

MYSTERY ITEM - \$6.75.

MYSTERY ITEM - \$6.75.

The guest pointed at me. "Make it stop."

"I'm trying to determine what it thinks it sold you."

"It sold me crackers."

"It may disagree."

The machine's motor whirled. A packet of cheese crackers dropped into the collection tray. Then a second packet. Then a third.

The guest crouched to retrieve them.

"Don't touch those," I said.

He froze. "Why?"

"Because the machine may be charging you for them."

"It already charged me."

"It may charge you again."

He slowly withdrew his hand.

The machine printed another receipt.

Baggage leaned toward me. "It's charging him for hesitation."

"That would be the first profitable feature in this building."

The lobby doors opened, letting in a gust of hot Georgia air and the smell of gasoline from I-16. Todd walked in carrying a damp towel around his shoulders. He had apparently showered during the power outage, which was brave considering the electrical closet had recently tried to become a crematorium.

"What's happening?" he asked.

"The vending machine is malfunctioning."

Todd studied the growing carpet of receipts. "Is it giving away food?"

"No."

"Then I don't see the problem."

The machine dropped another packet.

Todd reached for it.

I slapped his hand away.

"Why does everyone here respond to machinery by feeding it?"

"It looks hungry," Todd said.

"It looks possessed."

The vending machine chimed.

The guest's face tightened. "That was my money."

"I know."

"No, I mean I just put in another dollar."

"Why?"

"To see if it would work."

"That is not troubleshooting. That is gambling with a machine that has already confessed to fraud."

He pointed toward the coin slot. "It took it."

The machine printed three receipts.

The guest made a sound usually heard from people discovering a raccoon in their attic.

Mavis hurried in from the east wing, carrying a mop and one of the red emergency flashlights. "What broke?"

"The vending machine."

"Again?"

"It has done this before?"

"Not with receipts."

"That distinction is not comforting."

Mavis crouched beside the machine and peered underneath. "Maybe the coin return is stuck."

"Maybe the machine is charging for an invisible product."

"Does it have a button for that?"

The guest pointed at the display. "It says mystery item."

Mavis considered this. "Could be seasonal."

The machine printed five more receipts.

"Seasonal?" I said.

"It's a flexible machine."

The guest bent over and began gathering the receipts. They stuck to his damp fingers and each other, forming a papery chain that dragged across the floor.

"I want a refund," he said.

"Of course."

"Cash."

"Fine."

"How much?"

I looked at the receipt pile. "How many mystery items did it charge you for?"

He held up the latest receipt.

MYSTERY ITEM - \$6.75.

MYSTERY ITEM - \$6.75.

MYSTERY ITEM - \$6.75.

MYSTERY ITEM - \$6.75.

MYSTERY ITEM - \$6.75.

MYSTERY ITEM - \$6.75.

"Six," he said.

"You only put in two dollars."

"That's what I'm saying."

Baggage sat beneath the front desk. "He's being robbed by accounting."

I opened the cash drawer. The register was still functioning, which felt suspiciously like a trap. Inside were three singles, a handful of quarters, and a coupon for a free breakfast from 2019.

The machine began to print faster.

The receipts poured out in a continuous white stream, spilling over the tray and spreading across the floor. They slid beneath the lobby chairs. They curled around the umbrella stand. One landed on the guest's shoe and adhered there.

Todd picked up a receipt. "This one says it charged for a canoe."

I took it from him.

MYSTERY ITEM - CANOE - \$48.00.

"That isn't even the same mystery item."

The machine shuddered.

A candy bar dropped.

Then a plastic comb.

Then a tiny bottle of hand sanitizer.

The guest stared at the products. "I didn't buy those."

"I'm aware."

"Then who did?"

The machine printed another receipt.

MYSTERY ITEM - CUSTOMER.

Baggage lifted his head. "That seems accurate."

The guest backed away. "I'm leaving."

The lobby doors opened behind him.

The vending machine gave a loud electronic beep.

The doors slammed shut.

Nobody moved.

The guest looked at me. "Did it lock me in?"

"No."

I hurried to the door and pressed the release bar.

Nothing happened.

I pressed it again.

The emergency lights flickered. Somewhere behind the wall, a relay clicked.

The door opened three inches, then stopped.

Hot air pushed through the gap.

Todd leaned toward it. "Maybe the machine controls the doors."

"It does not control the doors."

The machine printed a receipt.

MYSTERY ITEM - EXIT - \$12.00.

The guest looked ready to climb through the ceiling.

"Lenny!" I shouted.

This time he appeared from the laundry hallway holding a screwdriver, a roll of duct tape, and a length of wire.

I pointed at the wire. "Put it down."

"It's for the vending machine."

"Why do you have it?"

"I found it."

"Where?"

"In the electrical closet."

"After Cal broke the breaker?"

"It was already loose."

Baggage sniffed the wire. "It smells like fire."

"It's insulated," Lenny said.

"It smells like fire."

"That's probably the insulation."

"Put it down," I repeated.

Lenny tucked the wire behind his back.

I stared at him.

He brought it forward again.

Mavis tried the door release while I moved behind the vending machine. Dust coated the floor, mixed with old candy wrappers and one dried-out French fry. The machine's power cord vanished into a wall outlet beside the ice machine.

A strip of masking tape labeled the outlet.

VENDING / POSSIBLY ICE.

"Who wired this?" I asked.

Lenny raised his hand halfway.

"Lower it."

He lowered it.

The machine continued printing.

The guest had begun stacking receipts on the counter. The pile reached his elbow. Every few seconds, one slid free and floated to the floor like a tiny surrender flag.

"I want the owner," he said.

"I am the owner."

"I want the responsible owner."

"Then you're going to be waiting a while."

The lobby doors finally released with a clunk. The guest grabbed the handle.

The vending machine chimed.

He stopped.

A packet of peanut butter crackers dropped into the tray.

The guest turned around slowly. "Those are mine."

"They might be."

He crossed the lobby, snatched the packet, and tore it open.

"Don't eat that," I said.

He stuffed a cracker into his mouth.

"Why do people hear warnings as invitations?" I asked.

He chewed.

The machine printed another receipt.

MYSTERY ITEM - PEANUT BUTTER CRACKERS - \$6.75.

The guest swallowed. "It charged me again."

The machine dropped another packet.

He stared at it.

I saw the exact moment his dignity lost a fight with hunger.

"No," I said.

He reached.

"No."

He reached faster.

I caught his wrist.

The machine printed six receipts at once.

Todd whispered, "It's encouraging him."

Mavis grabbed a broom and swept at the receipts. The bristles caught the paper, which wrapped around them in long, damp ribbons. She pulled harder. The broom head detached and shot beneath the front desk.

"Excellent," Baggage said.

The guest yanked his arm free. "I paid for the crackers."

"You paid for one dollar's worth of crackers."

"I've been charged for six crackers, a canoe, a comb, hand sanitizer, and an exit."

"None of those came from the machine."

"The receipts say they did."

"The receipts also say you bought yourself."

He glanced down at the latest slip.

MYSTERY ITEM - CUSTOMER - \$99.99.

His face changed.

"I'm calling the police."

"Fine."

He pulled out his phone.

The machine beeped.

His phone screen lit up.

A payment notification appeared.

VENDING PURCHASE: CUSTOMER - \$99.99.

The guest looked at me.

I looked at the machine.

The machine hummed with the smug, low confidence of a creature that had recently discovered online banking.

"Lenny," I said, "find the shutoff."

"I need the right part."

"You need a switch."

"We don't have the right switch."

"Then find the wrong one."

He hurried behind the front desk and began opening drawers. Mavis joined him, pulling out extension cords, batteries, a stapler, and a small framed photograph of a horse.

"Why is there a horse in the supplies?" I asked.

"That's not a horse," Mavis said.

The framed photograph showed a horse.

"It's Lenny's emergency animal."

"What emergency requires a framed horse?"

"Morale."

The machine began dispensing everything in its inventory.

Candy bars landed in the tray. Chips thumped against the glass. A packet of powdered cheese burst inside the machine, coating the lower shelves in orange dust. The lone granola bar dropped sideways and became lodged between the spiral coils.

Receipts streamed down the front like a paper waterfall.

The guest backed into the key box, which had been left on the counter after the morning's inspection-prep panic. The heavy box wobbled. Keys rattled inside.

Baggage sprang up. "Don't knock over the keys."

The guest turned too quickly.

His elbow hit the key box.

It tipped.

I lunged and caught one handle. The box swung against the counter, dragging a row of room keys with it. Brass tags scattered across the floor.

Room 9.

Room 12.

Room 17.

The vending machine printed a receipt.

MYSTERY ITEM - MASTER KEY - \$45.00.

The guest stared at the keys. "This place is insane."

"That is our current marketing strategy."

The key box slipped again.

Baggage clamped his teeth around the other handle.

"Good dog," I said.

"Finally," he said through the handle. "Recognition."

Together, we lowered the box to the floor.

The machine gave a triumphant chime.

A bottle of water dropped.

It struck the tray, bounced, and rolled beneath the machine.

Something cracked.

A thin stream of water appeared under the vending machine, spreading across the tile.

I stared at it.

"That's not from the bottle," Mavis said.

"Thank you."

The leak widened, slipping beneath the carpet runner and toward the wall.

The guest raised both hands. "I didn't do that."

"I know."

The machine printed another receipt.

MYSTERY ITEM - WATER DAMAGE - \$125.00.

Baggage sniffed the spreading puddle. "The lobby is becoming a pool."

"Don't say that."

"Small pool."

"Still no."

The water reached the baseboard. A dark line climbed the paint beneath the vending machine. Somewhere inside the wall, a slow drip began.

One drop.

Then another.

Then a steady, maddening tap.

The front doors opened. Evan stepped inside carrying his inspection bag, his expression already tired enough to qualify as a medical condition.

His gaze moved over the lobby: the red emergency lights, the receipts, the scattered keys, the guest clutching crackers, Lenny kneeling behind the desk with a wire in his hand, and water creeping across the floor.

He looked at me.

"Should I ask?"

"No."

The vending machine printed a receipt.

Evan picked it up.

MYSTERY ITEM - HEALTH INSPECTOR - \$75.00.

His mouth twitched.

Not a smile. Evan Pike did not smile when the building was actively billing him. But something near one passed across his face and disappeared.

"Apparently," I said, "you're on the menu."

"I've been called worse."

The machine dropped a packet of cookies.

Evan crouched beside the outlet. "Where's the shutoff?"

"Lenny says we don't have the right part."

"I didn't ask for a part."

Lenny lifted the wire. "I can bridge it."

"No," Evan and I said together.

Baggage wagged once. "Romance through shared refusal."

Evan reached behind the machine and found the power cord. He pulled.

The machine stayed on.

The receipts kept coming.

He frowned. "It's on a backup."

"Why does a vending machine have a backup?"

"Because someone wired it into the emergency circuit."

Every face turned toward Lenny.

Lenny looked offended. "The snacks were important."

Evan stood. "Where's the breaker for this circuit?"

I pointed toward the electrical closet.

He looked at the smoking hallway.

"No."

"Agreed."

He opened his inspection bag and pulled out insulated cutters.

Lenny leaned forward. "Those are expensive."

"So is water damage."

Evan cut the secondary cable.

The vending machine went silent.

For one glorious second, the lobby contained no beeps, no printing, no mechanical humming.

Then the machine released one final receipt.

It drifted out of the slot and landed at Evan's shoes.

He picked it up.

MYSTERY ITEM - SHUTDOWN - \$0.00.

The guest stared at the dead machine. "So I still don't get a refund?"

I opened the cash drawer and handed him two dollars.

He examined the bills. "What about the canoe?"

"You didn't receive a canoe."

"What about the exit?"

"The exit is free."

"What about the customer charge?"

I glanced at the receipt pile. "Consider that a compliment."

He looked at the dead vending machine, the leaking wall, and the dog sitting beside the key box.

"I'm leaving."

"Good."

He pushed through the front doors and disappeared into the heat.

Mavis began gathering the receipts. Todd used a dustpan to scoop up loose candy. Lenny stood beside the dead machine, holding the cut cable like a severed limb.

Evan crouched near the spreading water.

"This leak is behind the wall," he said.

"I can see that."

"It may be connected to the old supply line."

"The one near the hidden route?"

His eyes lifted to mine.

"Yes."

Baggage stared at the wall. "The old route is wet."

"That is not a sentence I wanted today."

Evan pressed his fingers against the baseboard. Water darkened the paint around them.

"Your inspection prep just became a plumbing emergency."

"I was hoping for one boring afternoon."

He looked at the receipt pile. "You should aim lower."

The lobby cleanup continued around us, the staff moving with the wounded dignity of people who had just been defeated by a snack dispenser. I grabbed a mop and pushed the water away from the key box.

The mop caught on something beneath the carpet runner.

I pulled.

A corner of metal lifted through the wet fibers.

Baggage's ears rose.

Evan reached down and peeled back the runner.

Beneath it sat a small brass access plate, freshly unscrewed, with water bubbling around its edges.

A room tag rested on top.

Room 12.

The leak tapped beneath the floor.

The dead vending machine gave one final, tiny click.

Baggage looked at me.

"Damage control," he said.

I stared at the access plate, the spreading water, and Evan kneeling beside me with his sleeves rolled up.

"Fine," I said. "But if a canoe comes out of that floor, I'm selling the motel."

The Missing Soap Has an Alibi

The canoe did not come out of the floor, which was the only reason I didn't sell the motel before breakfast.

The leak under the access plate had been contained with a bucket, three towels, and Lenny standing on the towels to keep them from "wandering." The lobby still smelled like wet plaster, dead vending-machine dust, and the faint orange cheese powder that had somehow reached the ceiling. Evan had left after shutting off the old supply line, promising to return with a proper inspection report and the expression of a man who had just discovered a second job hiding inside his first one.

By eight-thirty, I had a different emergency.

"Where's the soap?" I asked.

Mavis looked up from the front desk. "Which soap?"

"The soap we use to prevent guests from becoming walking lawsuits."

She glanced toward the supply closet. "We have some."

"We had some."

Baggage lay beneath the counter, his paws crossed over one another. "The soap has gone to ground."

"That is not how soap works."

"It has an alibi."

I opened the supply closet.

Three shelves of towels leaned toward collapse. A box of toilet paper had been opened and resealed with duct tape. One mop bucket contained a single spoon. The sanitation shelf held four empty spray bottles, a roll of trash bags, and a handwritten note that read:

SOAP IS A STATE OF MIND.

I stared at it.

Mavis winced. "That may be from Darla."

"Darla is not allowed to write philosophy on inventory."

"She says inventory is oppressive."

"Inventory is how we know whether we have soap."

Baggage sniffed the empty shelf. "Someone took six pump bottles, two bars, and the emergency lemon soap."

"The emergency lemon soap?"

"It was for morale."

I turned to Mavis. "When did you last see it?"

"Yesterday."

"Where?"

"Near the rooms."

"That narrows it down to the motel."

She folded a towel with the care of someone trying to conceal a weapon inside it. "I saw Todd carrying something."

"What something?"

"White."

"Soap is white."

"So was the thing he carried."

"Was it soap?"

"It could have been."

"Could it have been a small loaf of bread?"

Mavis considered. "Todd does carry bread strangely."

Baggage lifted his head. "Todd has been seen near the guest parking area."

"Doing what?"

"Being suspicious."

"That is not evidence."

"It is at this motel."

I grabbed the inventory clipboard and headed outside.

The guest parking area shimmered beneath the Georgia sun. Heat rose off the asphalt in wavering sheets, carrying the smells of gasoline, hot rubber, and somebody's breakfast burrito. Cars sat at uneven angles beneath the faded motel sign, most of them dusty, dented, or held together by the kind of optimism that usually preceded a police report.

The woman with the chicken stood beside a red sedan, arguing with the bird.

"You cannot keep eating the registration card," she said.

The chicken pecked the corner of the card.

"See?" the woman said. "It's personal."

I approached with my clipboard. "Have you seen anyone taking soap?"

The chicken clucked.

The woman narrowed her eyes at me. "That's a private matter."

"It's motel soap."

"Nothing is private once it's in a motel."

Baggage trotted up behind me. "Ask about the trunk."

The woman moved in front of the sedan. "There is no reason to inspect my trunk."

"I didn't ask to inspect it."

"You were thinking about it."

"I was thinking about soap."

"Same thing here."

The chicken scratched at the tire.

I wrote down the woman's name, which she gave as "Mrs. Cluck's legal representative," and moved on.

Todd stood beside a blue pickup truck, wearing yesterday's shirt and holding a paper cup of coffee that smelled like burned pennies. He watched me approach with the nervous stillness of a man who had already hidden something and was now trying to remember where.

"Did you take soap?" I asked.

"No."

"You're answering very quickly."

"I've practiced."

"Why?"

"People ask me questions."

"About soap?"

"Not usually."

Baggage sniffed Todd's shoes. "He smells like lemon."

Todd looked down. "That's my cologne."

"You wear lemon cologne?"

"It's called Citrus Confidence."

"It smells like a kitchen floor."

Todd took a step back. "I have allergies."

"To cleaning products?"

"To accusations."

I looked at the truck. The passenger door was unlocked. A white plastic bag sat on the seat, folded over at the top.

Todd followed my gaze.

"That's not soap," he said.

"I didn't say it was."

"You were about to."

"I was about to ask what it was."

"It's personal."

"That answer is getting popular."

He reached for the bag.

Baggage darted forward and caught the handle in his teeth.

Todd yelped. "The dog stole my property."

Baggage backed away, dragging the bag beneath the truck.

"Baggage," I said.

"It has a smell."

"Everything has a smell."

"Not everything has six missing pump bottles."

Todd dropped to his knees.

I grabbed the back of his shirt while he reached beneath the truck. His fingers brushed the bag, but Baggage jerked it farther into the shade.

"Stop wrestling the dog," I said.

"I'm not wrestling him."

"You're losing to him."

The woman with the chicken wandered over. The chicken followed, apparently because it had no respect for boundaries or poultry law.

"What's in the bag?" she asked.

"Nothing," Todd said.

"Nothing smells like lemon," Baggage replied.

Todd looked at me. "He talks too much."

"He's the only witness giving consistent testimony."

The bag tore.

Two soap pump bottles rolled across the asphalt, shining in the sunlight like tiny white trophies. A third landed beneath the pickup. The fourth struck the woman's boot and stopped.

The chicken pecked it.

I closed my eyes for one second.

"Those are mine," Todd said.

"They belong to the motel."

"I was going to return them."

"When?"

"Eventually."

"After using them?"

"That depends on the definition of using."

Baggage nosed the torn bag. "There are more."

Todd grabbed for it.

I grabbed Todd.

The woman with the chicken grabbed the woman with the chicken's chicken, which was the only person in the group with a clear plan.

"Everyone stop moving," I said.

Nobody stopped moving.

Todd pulled backward. I held the front of his shirt. The chicken flapped. Baggage tugged the bag. A soap bottle rolled downhill toward the storm drain, gathering speed with the smug purpose of a tiny fugitive.

I lunged.

My shoe landed on a fallen motel key.

The key shot out.

I windmilled my arms, caught the side mirror of the pickup, and swung around it. The mirror snapped downward. Todd lost his grip on me. Baggage released the bag. The chicken squawked. Soap slid everywhere.

One bottle struck the tire and bounced into the wheel well.

Another rolled beneath the red sedan.

The third vanished under a parked van.

The fourth came to rest against my ankle.

Baggage sat down.

"Evidence," he said.

"Excellent," I said, breathing hard. "We've recovered one quarter of a sanitation system."

Todd straightened his shirt. "This is harassment."

"This is inventory."

"You dragged me."

"You were trying to crawl under a truck."

"I was retrieving my belongings."

"Why were motel supplies in your belongings?"

He looked toward the highway.

That was not an answer. It was the facial expression of a man considering whether the interstate offered better legal protection.

I picked up the bottle. The label had been scratched off, but the motel's blue inventory stripe remained along the bottom.

"Where did you get these?"

Todd rubbed his neck. "They were given to me."

"By whom?"

He glanced toward room eleven.

The man from room eleven stood beside his beige sedan, watching us through the open driver's door. He wore a bathrobe, sunglasses, and one sock. His trunk was open.

Inside were two plastic crates.

Baggage growled.

The man from room eleven shut the trunk.

Too late.

I crossed the parking lot. "Open it."

He placed both hands on the lid. "No."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm busy."

"You're standing still."

"It's a complicated kind of busy."

The woman with the chicken arrived behind me. "He has a cooler."

The man from room eleven looked betrayed. "Why would you say that?"

"Because I saw it."

"Seeing is not the same as understanding."

Baggage sniffed the trunk. "Soap."

The man from room eleven sighed. "That dog has no discretion."

"He has more than the staff," I said.

I lifted the trunk lid.

Inside sat a cooler, a folded motel towel, three room keys, and a cardboard sign that read:

TONIGHT'S ROUTINE - 11:40 PM.

Beneath it, written in black marker:

SOAP REQUIRED.

The air seemed to shift, though that may have been the heat rising off the pavement and my temper trying to escape through my ears.

"What is this?" I asked.

The man from room eleven reached for the sign.

I held it away. "Don't."

"It's private."

"It's in a motel parking lot."

"That has never stopped anything here."

Baggage peered into the trunk. "There are crackers."

"Stay focused," I told him.

"I contain multitudes."

The man from room eleven adjusted his sunglasses. "The soap is part of the routine."

"What routine?"

He glanced at the other cars.

The woman with the chicken suddenly found the chicken fascinating.

Todd looked at his shoes.

Mavis appeared at the edge of the parking area carrying a mop, though nobody had asked her to come outside.

I looked from face to face.

"You all know about this."

Mavis stopped walking.

"That depends," she said, "on what you mean by know."

"I mean six pump bottles and two bars of soap have vanished from my supply closet."

"Maybe they're on vacation," she offered.

"Soap does not go on vacation."

Baggage sat beside my leg. "It goes to the guest parking area."

The man from room eleven closed the trunk again. "You inherited the motel. You didn't inherit the routines."

"I inherited the plumbing, the viral pool, and a vending machine that tried to sell a customer to himself. I'm beginning to suspect the routines came with the building."

Nobody answered.

A truck rumbled along I-16, shaking the motel sign. The sign's loose metal bracket clanged overhead. Somewhere near the office, a toilet flushed with the deep, mournful sound of an animal reconsidering its life.

I pointed at the cardboard sign. "What happens at 11:40?"

The man from room eleven looked at the others.

Todd said, "Nothing."

Mavis said, "A little something."

The woman with the chicken said, "It depends who's staying."

Baggage said, "Bad choices."

"Be specific."

The man from room eleven leaned against the sedan. "People come here when they've decided to do something they'll regret."

"I know the reputation."

"No," he said. "You know the slogan. There's a difference."

That shut me up for half a second, which was impressive.

He tapped the cardboard sign. "The regulars have routines. Room swaps. Duplicate keys. The old route. Certain nights, certain guests. Soap is part of the setup."

"What setup?"

He looked toward the line of rooms. "A stage."

The word landed oddly in the heat.

I glanced at the motel: peeling doors, crooked balconies, curtains that had survived three decades and at least one emotional breakdown. A stage was generous. This place was more like a theater after the audience had left and the props had begun making decisions.

"What kind of stage requires soap?" I asked.

"The clean kind."

"That is not reassuring."

"It's not supposed to be."

A car horn blared. Darla drove past in a golf cart she had no permission to use, wearing silver boots and a red plastic visor.

"Inventory inspection!" she shouted.

"Stop!"

She accelerated.

The golf cart swerved around the blue pickup, clipped a traffic cone, and sent it spinning beneath the beige sedan. The man from room eleven jumped aside. His trunk popped open again.

The cooler tipped.

A dozen soap bottles spilled onto the asphalt.

For a moment, the parking area went very quiet.

Even the chicken stopped pecking.

The bottles rolled in every direction, white plastic glinting beneath the sun. One slid under the blue pickup. Two bumped against the storm drain. Another spun in a slow circle beside my shoe before settling with its label facing upward.

MOTEL PROPERTY.

Darla braked crookedly against the curb.

"Found them," she said.

I looked at her. "You knew?"

"I suspected."

"You were driving away with a golf cart."

"I was conducting a mobile investigation."

"You almost hit a cone."

"The cone was evasive."

Baggage trotted among the bottles, sniffing each one. "This is where the soap has been hiding."

The man from room eleven rubbed his forehead. "They weren't supposed to spill."

"Nothing here is supposed to spill," I said. "It's our defining feature."

I gathered the bottles into a crate while Mavis collected the ones near the drain. Todd stood uselessly beside the truck, watching his secret routine collapse into public sanitation.

"What does 'for protection' mean?" I asked him.

He looked at the soap in my hand.

"Protection from what?"

Todd swallowed. "From the choices."

"That is not a thing soap protects against."

"It is here."

The man from room eleven lowered his voice. "The routine keeps people from crossing certain lines."

I stared at him. "By stealing soap?"

"By making everyone participate."

"Participate in what?"

Nobody answered quickly enough.

The answer was somewhere in the open trunks, the duplicate keys, the cardboard schedule, and the motel's long history of guests arriving with terrible plans and leaving with worse ones. I had thought I was tracking missing supplies. Instead, I had found a ritual with inventory numbers.

Evan's truck turned into the parking area.

Of course it did.

He parked beside the office, stepped out with his inspection bag, and immediately noticed the soap crate, the open trunks, Darla's golf cart, and the man from room eleven wearing one sock.

His gaze settled on me.

"Should I ask?" he said.

"No."

"I've heard that before."

Baggage sat beside the crate. "She found the soap."

Evan looked at the bottles. "Where?"

"In guest vehicles."

His expression tightened. He walked toward us, sleeves already rolled up despite the heat.

The man from room eleven moved between Evan and the trunk.

Evan stopped. "Open it."

The man shook his head.

Evan looked at me. "Maribel."

"I know."

I turned to the man from room eleven. "Open the trunk."

He held my gaze for a long moment, then lifted the lid.

The cardboard sign lay beside the cooler. Underneath it sat a ring of duplicate keys, a folded map of the old route, and a stack of handwritten names.

Evan reached for the map.

I caught his wrist.

"Not yet."

His eyes met mine. "Why?"

Because the man from room eleven was watching me like I had one chance to choose what kind of owner I wanted to be. Because the soap wasn't just stolen property anymore. Because this strange little routine might be the only thing keeping the motel's worst guests from turning their bad decisions into crimes.

I hated moral dilemmas. They were inventory problems with feelings.

I took the map from the trunk and folded it shut.

"We're going inside," I said. "All of us."

The man from room eleven exhaled.

Todd grabbed one of the soap bottles. "Can I keep this?"

"No."

"It's for protection."

"Against what?"

He looked toward the dark line beneath the motel balconies.

"Tonight," he said, "you'll see."

Baggage picked up the cardboard sign and carried it toward the office.

"Good," he said. "A scheduled disaster."

Evan fell into step beside me, close enough that his shoulder brushed mine.

"And the soap?" he asked.

I glanced back at the crate.

"It has an alibi," I said. "Unfortunately, the guests don't."

The Karaoke Night Starts a Fight

The courtyard patio had been decorated for karaoke with three folding chairs, a dying fern, and a string of lights that flickered whenever anyone lied.

Which meant they flickered constantly.

I stood beside the portable speaker with the soap crate at my feet, the cardboard schedule tucked under one arm, and the firm intention of keeping the evening calm. No fights. No stolen property. No guests crawling under vehicles in search of protective toiletries. Most importantly, no damage before Evan Pike returned to inspect the motel and discovered that my idea of preparation involved an electrical closet that had recently smoked, a vending machine that had billed a man for his own existence, and a courtyard full of people treating soap like a religious artifact.

Baggage sat beside me, watching the guests drag patio chairs into a rough circle.

"This is not calm," he said.

"It's pre-calm."

"It has a microphone."

"That's for karaoke."

"It has Todd."

I looked over.

Todd was holding the microphone with both hands, testing it against his chin.

"Check. Check. Is this thing supposed to smell like pennies?"

"It's been in the lost and found," I said.

"Everything in the lost and found smells like pennies," Mavis said from behind the drink table.

She had placed a bowl of ice beside the lemonade and labeled it ICE, probably because the last time she'd served guests a cooler full of soap, nobody had asked

enough questions. Lenny was crouched beside the speaker, threading wires through a power strip.

I pointed at him. "No improvising."

"I'm not improvising."

"What are you doing?"

"Using a different cable."

"Why?"

"The right cable is warm."

Baggage sniffed the speaker. "That one is warm too."

Lenny frowned. "The electricity here has an attitude."

The patio sat between the motel pool and the row of rooms, a square of cracked concrete bordered by oleander bushes and a railing that had been repaired with zip ties. Beyond the fence, traffic hissed along I-16. The air smelled of hot asphalt, citronella, and something fried in old oil. Overhead, the string lights blinked like a nervous witness.

Evan arrived just as Todd began singing.

He stepped onto the patio carrying his inspection bag, sleeves rolled to his elbows, and stopped beneath the crooked sign that read KARAOKE NIGHT - GUESTS ONLY.

His eyes moved from the speaker to the soap crate, then to the guests gathered around the microphone.

"This is new," he said.

"It's controlled," I replied.

A burst of feedback screamed from the speaker.

Evan flinched.

"It's becoming controlled," I added.

Baggage glanced at him. "She said that about the vending machine."

Evan looked at me.

"The machine was a special situation."

"It charged a man for being alive."

"Technically, it charged him for being a customer."

"That distinction won't help with the county."

"I'm aware."

Todd finished his song by shouting the final word directly into the microphone. The speaker produced a deep electronic groan. The woman with the chicken covered one ear. The chicken covered neither, because chickens have no sense of self-preservation.

Todd handed the microphone to the man from room eleven.

"Your turn."

The man from room eleven took it, glanced at the screen, and selected a song with a title that suggested poor judgment and a key change.

I stepped forward. "Let's keep the volume reasonable."

Todd pointed at the speaker. "It has numbers."

"The numbers are not a challenge."

"They go to thirty."

"Then we stop at twelve."

Lenny looked up from the wires. "What happens at thirteen?"

"The patio catches fire."

"Good to know."

The man from room eleven began singing. He was not terrible, which made the situation more dangerous. Terrible singers could be stopped by public mercy. Competent singers developed confidence, and confidence was how people ended up opening motel doors they had been specifically told not to open.

The guests swayed. Mavis served lemonade. Darla danced beside the fern in silver boots, knocking leaves loose with every dramatic turn. Even the bride from room nine had come outside, still wearing the veil she'd nearly burned in the dryer.

For three full minutes, nothing went wrong.

I should have recognized that as a warning.

The microphone vanished during the chorus.

One second, the man from room eleven held it. The next, his hand closed around empty air.

The speaker continued playing his backing track while he stood there, mouth open, singing silently into the space where the microphone had been.

The song carried on without him.

A single fern leaf dropped onto his shoulder.

He looked at Todd.

"Where is it?"

Todd held up both hands. "Why are you looking at me?"

"You were standing beside me."

"I was dancing."

"You don't dance. You hover."

"I was rhythmically positioned."

The woman with the chicken pointed toward the hedge. "I saw Darla take it."

Darla stopped mid-twirl. "I did not."

"You had your hand behind your back."

"I was balancing."

"With a microphone?"

Darla's expression tightened. "I know what a microphone looks like."

Baggage sniffed the patio. "It smells like lemonade and betrayal."

I raised both hands. "Nobody accuse anyone until we find it."

The man from room eleven turned to me. "That was my song."

"It's still playing."

"It's playing without me."

"Then hum along."

"I am not humming in front of these people."

Todd stepped closer. "You stole the microphone."

The man from room eleven stared at him. "You're the one who stole six soap pumps."

"That was different."

"How?"

"The soap was for protection."

"The microphone is for singing."

"Exactly. Less useful."

Darla folded her arms. "Search him."

Todd pointed at the man from room eleven. "Search her."

The woman with the chicken grabbed the chicken under one wing. "Search the bird."

The chicken squawked and kicked her in the shin.

"Not helping," I said.

The backing track ended. The speaker announced, "Thank you for singing," in a cheerful voice that sounded like it had never met any of us.

The man from room eleven's face went red.

"I want my microphone."

"You'll get it," I said.

"Now."

"Fine. Everyone stay where you are."

Nobody stayed where they were.

Darla climbed onto a patio chair to look over the hedge. Todd ducked beneath the drink table. The woman with the chicken began checking flowerpots. Mavis un-

plugged the lemonade dispenser and carried it three feet away, because apparently beverages were now considered evidence.

Baggage trotted toward the pool gate.

"Found something," he said.

I followed him.

The microphone lay on the other side of the gate, balanced on the pool's closed sign. Someone had placed it there with care. The cord dangled through the bars, trailing across the concrete.

I picked it up.

The microphone was wet.

"Who touched the pool gate?" I asked.

Nobody answered.

The speaker crackled behind us.

Then, through the microphone in my hand, a voice said, "Testing."

I dropped it.

The word echoed across the courtyard.

The guests stared at me.

The microphone rolled toward the pool.

Baggage caught it between his paws.

"I have it," he said.

"Don't speak into it."

He looked offended. "I wasn't planning to sing."

"You were absolutely planning to sing."

"I have range."

The man from room eleven snatched the microphone from him. "That's mine."

"It was found in a restricted area," I said.

"It was stolen."

"It was relocated."

"By whom?"

A voice came from the hedge.

"Maybe it walked."

Todd emerged from beneath the drink table holding a plastic cup and a handful of napkins. "Nobody saw me take it."

Every head turned.

Todd froze.

"I mean," he said, "nobody saw anyone take it."

The man from room eleven lunged.

I caught him around the waist before he reached Todd. Unfortunately, Todd chose that moment to step backward, and we all went down against the patio chairs in a clatter of metal and wounded dignity.

The microphone hit the concrete.

The speaker amplified the impact into a gunshot.

The chicken shrieked.

Darla screamed, "The fight has started!"

"It has not started," I said from beneath the man from room eleven.

Todd stood over us. "He attacked me."

"I did not."

"You moved aggressively."

"I tripped."

"You tripped with intent."

The man from room eleven shoved himself upright. "He stole the microphone."

"I found the microphone," Todd said.

"You hid it."

"I relocated it for dramatic effect."

"Why?"

Todd pointed at the speaker. "Because he was singing the same verse for four minutes."

The man from room eleven grabbed Todd's shirt.

I got between them.

"No one is fighting over a microphone."

Todd reached around me. "He started it."

"He stole it."

"He cannot prove that."

"The dog saw you."

Everyone looked at Baggage.

Baggage sat beside the soap crate. "I saw Todd put the microphone in the hedge."

Todd's mouth fell open. "You can't testify. You're biased."

"I'm biased toward facts."

The man from room eleven shoved Todd.

Todd shoved back.

The patio chair behind him folded under his legs. He dropped into it, the chair collapsed, and the microphone flew from his hand.

It struck the speaker.

The speaker emitted a shriek so loud that three doors opened along the motel walkway.

The naked cowboy stepped out of room seven wearing boots, a hat, and the kind of confidence that required no further clothing.

"Is this the karaoke fight?" he called.

"No," I shouted.

"Then why is everyone fighting?"

The woman with the chicken threw a paper cup at him.

It missed and hit Lenny.

Lenny, startled, grabbed the nearest cable.

The string lights went out.

The speaker surged to full volume.

A new song began, loud enough to rattle the patio railing.

The man from room eleven and Todd were still grappling beside the drink table. Darla climbed onto the collapsed chair and began singing into an ice scoop. Mavis picked up a broom and used it to separate the men, but the broom caught Todd's belt loop and yanked his trousers sideways.

The woman with the chicken released the bird.

The chicken flew directly onto the karaoke table.

The lyric screen tipped.

The bride from room nine tried to catch it and pulled the entire tablecloth down instead.

Plastic cups hit the ground. Lemonade spread across the concrete. The chicken slid through it, flapped once, and landed on the soap crate.

Baggage barked.

The speaker translated his bark into a microphone howl.

Every guest in the courtyard shouted at once.

I moved through the chaos with the calm authority of a woman whose motel had already survived a viral pool incident, a breaker fire, a possessed vending machine, and a soap ritual. Unfortunately, authority did not improve my balance. My shoe hit a puddle of lemonade, and I skidded into the patio railing.

The railing gave a metallic squeal.

A zip tie snapped.

Evan caught my arm before I went over the side.

His hand closed around my elbow. His face was close, his expression sharp and annoyed in the way that made him look unfairly attractive.

"Are you hurt?"

"Only professionally."

"Maribel."

"I'm fine."

Behind us, Todd shouted, "He stole my song!"

The man from room eleven shouted back, "You stole my microphone!"

"That is not how theft works!"

"It is exactly how theft works!"

Evan released my arm and stepped toward them. "Stop."

They did not stop.

The speaker blasted the chorus.

Darla sang along with the wrong words.

The naked cowboy climbed onto the drink table.

Mavis swung the broom and knocked his hat into the lemonade.

The chicken pecked the karaoke tablet.

The tablet changed the song.

A heavy bass line began thumping through the courtyard.

The motel windows vibrated.

Somewhere in room twelve, a toilet flushed.

Then the exterior lights came on all at once, including the damaged floodlight above the patio. It flashed white, went dark, flashed again, and illuminated the entire courtyard in violent bursts.

The man from room eleven grabbed Todd's wrist.

Todd grabbed the microphone.

The cord wrapped around both of them.

They pulled in opposite directions.

The speaker tipped forward.

Evan lunged for it.

I lunged too.

We reached the speaker at the same time, our hands colliding over the plastic casing. The speaker slid across the wet concrete, struck the patio railing, and knocked loose the final zip tie.

The railing sagged outward.

Everyone froze.

For one stretched-out second, the courtyard contained only the bass beat, the dripping lemonade, and the chicken standing on the soap crate like a tiny, furious mayor.

Then the railing collapsed.

It did not fall away from the patio.

It folded inward.

The metal frame dropped across the karaoke table, crushing the lyric screen, knocking the microphone into the ice bucket, and sending the bowl of ice across the concrete. Cubes scattered under everyone's shoes.

The naked cowboy stepped backward onto one.

His boot shot forward.

He landed in the lemonade with both feet, arms windmilling, hat flying off, and dignity leaving the premises ahead of him.

The man from room eleven tripped over the microphone cord.

Todd fell onto the collapsed chair.

Darla landed on the fern.

The chicken flapped onto Baggage's back.

Baggage stood perfectly still.

"I am carrying poultry," he said.

The speaker, still somehow functioning, announced, "Great performance!"

That was when the police cruiser pulled into the courtyard.

Its headlights swept across the patio, catching the wreckage in stages: the broken railing, the overturned table, the naked cowboy sitting in lemonade, Todd tangled in a microphone cord, the man from room eleven clutching his wrist, Darla buried in fern leaves, and Baggage carrying the chicken like a furry parade float.

The music stopped.

The officers stepped out.

One of them looked at me. "Who's in charge here?"

I raised my hand.

Baggage shifted beneath the chicken. "A questionable choice."

"I own the motel," I said.

The officer glanced at the patio. "That explains the confidence."

"It was karaoke."

"I can see that."

"It was supposed to be calm."

The officer looked at the broken railing. "It stopped being calm."

Evan came to stand beside me. "I'm Evan Pike, county health inspection."

The officer's gaze moved to him. "You called?"

"No," Evan said.

Baggage looked at me. "He should have."

The officer took out a notebook. "We received a complaint about a disturbance and possible property damage."

Todd raised his hand from the collapsed chair. "The microphone was stolen."

The man from room eleven pointed at him. "He stole it."

"I found it."

"You hid it."

"I relocated it."

The officer wrote something down.

I looked at the broken railing, the wet patio, and the health inspector standing beside me with his inspection bag and a crease between his eyebrows.

"Can we handle this internally?" I asked.

The officer looked at the chicken.

The chicken pecked Baggage's ear.

"No," he said.

The officers separated everyone and took statements. The woman with the chicken explained the fight while holding the bird under one arm. Mavis insisted the broom had been acting independently. Lenny attempted to explain the electrical setup and was told, twice, to put down the cable.

Darla gave her statement from inside the fern.

The naked cowboy wrapped himself in a motel towel and described his fall as "a tactical retreat."

Todd and the man from room eleven each claimed the other had weaponized the microphone.

The officer examined the broken railing, the ruined karaoke table, and the speaker lying on its side in the lemonade.

"Who's responsible for the damage?" he asked.

Every guest pointed at someone else.

Baggage pointed at the patio.

The officer sighed and wrote for several minutes.

I stood beside Evan while the scene was documented. His shoulder brushed mine again, but this time neither of us moved away.

"This will complicate your inspection," he said.

"I know."

"The county will want the incident report."

"I know."

"And the railing needs to be secured before anyone uses this area again."

"I know."

He looked at me. "You don't have to say it every time."

"I'm trying to establish a new management style."

"Is it working?"

A police camera flashed as the officer photographed the collapsed railing.

"No," I said.

Baggage padded over, the chicken now back beneath the woman's arm. He looked up at me.

"Karaoke is over?"

"Yes."

"Can I announce it?"

I took the microphone from the ice bucket. It was dripping lemonade and smelled like pennies.

"Fine."

Baggage faced the guests.

"Karaoke is canceled due to theft, fighting, poultry involvement, and structural failure."

The officer stopped writing.

"Did that dog just talk?"

I looked at Baggage.

Baggage looked at me.

"No," I said.

"Yes," said Baggage.

The officer slowly added another line to his notebook.

The patio was no longer a host's evening event. It was a crime scene with lemonade on the floor, a chicken witness, and a health inspector standing close enough to share my humiliation.

I picked up the broken schedule from beneath the table.

The officer handed me a form. "You'll need to come by the station tomorrow to sign the incident report."

"Tomorrow?"

"And someone from the county may contact you about the inspection."

Evan's expression tightened.

I looked at him. "How soon?"

He glanced toward the damaged patio, the ruined speaker, and the soap crate with one cracked corner.

"Soon," he said.

Of course it was.

I had ended karaoke early, failed to prevent property damage, and attracted law enforcement attention before Evan's next visit.

Baggage nudged the incident form with his nose.

"Host mode is finished," he said.

I took the pen.

"Apparently," I said, signing beneath the officer's notes, "I'm an incident now."

The Dog That Talks Back

The police had barely finished photographing the collapsed patio railing when Baggage climbed onto the overturned karaoke table and began conducting traffic with his tail.

"Room nine, stop dripping lemonade."

The bride from room nine looked down at her shoes. "I'm not dripping."

"You're wearing the puddle."

She lifted one foot. Lemonade slid out of the heel.

I signed the last incident form and handed the pen back to the officer. "Host mode is finished," Baggage had said.

"Apparently," I'd replied, signing beneath the officer's notes, "I'm an incident now."

That had been ten minutes ago. I was still holding the emotional paperwork for it.

The courtyard smelled like spilled lemonade, wet plywood, and the faint burnt-plastic tang of the karaoke speaker. The broken railing sagged across the patio like it had given up on architecture. A police camera flashed again, catching Darla in the background as she tried to hide the naked cowboy's hat beneath a fern.

"Darla," I called.

She froze.

"Put the hat down."

"I'm preserving evidence."

"You're wearing it."

She touched the brim. "Evidence can be stylish."

Baggage hopped off the table and trotted toward me. He was a broad, scarred mutt with one torn ear, a white stripe down his nose, and the calm confidence of a

creature who had never once been asked to pay a motel bill. His collar jingled as he stopped beside my knee.

"You need a system," he said.

"I need everyone to stop touching things."

"That's not a system. That's a wish with shoes."

Evan Pike stood near the guest entrance, examining the concrete where the karaoke table had gouged the surface. His sleeves were still rolled to his elbows. His inspection bag rested by his boots, looking far too professional for a courtyard containing a chicken, a naked cowboy wrapped in a towel, and Todd trapped in a microphone cord.

He glanced toward me.

"Is the dog part of your management team?"

"No."

Baggage looked at him. "I'm senior operations."

"You are not," I said.

"I outrank Lenny."

"Most furniture outranks Lenny."

From behind the damaged speaker, Lenny raised a hand. "I heard that."

"Good. It means your ears work."

Evan's mouth twitched. He had been appearing at the motel with increasing frequency, which was inconvenient because every time he did, something broke, leaked, smoked, or became legally interesting. It was also inconvenient because he looked unfairly good standing beside disaster, like a man who had been specifically designed to inspect my worst decisions.

I needed order. Not a miracle. Not a functioning railing. Just ten consecutive minutes in which nobody stole a microphone, weaponized poultry, or climbed onto anything that had been nailed down before 1998.

Baggage watched me watching Evan.

"You want him to think you're in charge," he said.

"I am in charge."

"Then why are you hiding the officer's form under your shirt?"

I looked down. The incident report was, in fact, tucked against my stomach beneath the waistband of my skirt.

"I'm not hiding it."

"You're sweating on it."

"That's called weather."

"That's called evidence."

Evan's eyebrows lifted.

I yanked the form free and waved it once, which only made it look more incriminating. "Everything is under control."

The chicken squawked from beneath the woman's arm.

Baggage nodded toward it. "The poultry disagrees."

The woman with the chicken adjusted her grip. "She's had a difficult evening."

"She attacked the karaoke tablet," I said.

"She was provoked."

"The tablet played a song."

"She hates that song."

Nobody asked which song. We had all learned not to invite details.

I clapped my hands. "All right. Everyone away from the courtyard. Guests go to their rooms. Staff clean the lemonade. Lenny, secure the railing. Darla, return the hat. Todd, untangle yourself without involving another appliance."

Baggage barked once.

The sound bounced off the motel walls.

"Did you hear her?" he said. "She wants order."

"I want you quiet."

"That wasn't the same request."

Todd tugged at the microphone cord. "I can't get loose."

"You tied yourself to the speaker."

"I was defending property."

"You were wrestling a cable."

"It was aggressive."

Baggage walked over, caught the loose cord in his teeth, and pulled. Todd spun halfway around and landed against the guest entrance with a soft, humiliating thump.

"There," Baggage said. "Untangled."

Todd rubbed his shoulder. "He assaulted me."

"You were standing in a loop," I said.

"That doesn't make it legal."

The naked cowboy, now wearing only the towel and one boot, raised a hand. "Can I have my hat?"

Darla clutched it to her chest. "I'm still examining it."

"You put it on."

"For structural analysis."

"It has a feather."

"Structural feather."

I took the hat from her and handed it to the cowboy. "Go to your room."

He put the hat on. "Which one?"

"Seven."

"I'm in seven."

"Then this is going beautifully."

Evan stepped closer, his gaze moving from the broken railing to the wet concrete and then to the drain beside the guest entrance. A wad of paper had collected there, swollen with lemonade.

"Who's cleaning that?" he asked.

"I am."

Baggage sniffed the drain. "No, you're not."

I turned on him. "I am absolutely cleaning it."

"You said that about the vending machine receipts."

"That was different."

"You used a dustpan."

"It was a perfectly good dustpan."

"It dissolved."

I pointed toward the courtyard. "Go supervise the guests."

Baggage sat down. "I'm supervising you."

Evan folded his arms. "He seems effective."

"He is a dog."

"He identified the soap theft."

"He tattled."

"He identified the leak."

"He tattled with accuracy."

"He also found Todd's microphone."

"He has no respect for privacy."

Baggage looked pleased. "Privacy is where people hide stolen motel supplies."

The man from room eleven, who had been lingering near the beige sedan, began edging backward.

Baggage's head turned.

"Don't," the dog said.

The man stopped. "I'm not doing anything."

"You're considering leaving."

"I'm standing."

"You're standing toward the parking lot."

I moved between him and the sedan. "Nobody leaves until the officer finishes the report."

"The officer already left."

"Then nobody leaves until I finish being angry."

"That could take hours."

"Now you're understanding management."

The man from room eleven looked at Evan. "Is she allowed to detain us?"

Evan glanced at me. "Maribel."

"I'm not detaining anyone. I'm asking them to remain available."

"That sounds like detaining with better branding," Baggage said.

I pointed at him. "You are not helping."

"I'm improving compliance."

The man from room eleven crossed his arms. "The dog is making this worse."

"He's making it louder," I said.

"Same thing."

Baggage trotted toward the guest entrance, where the bride from room nine had begun wiping lemonade off the door with the sleeve of her dress.

"Stop," he said.

She stopped.

"Use the towels."

"The towels are in the laundry room."

"Correct."

"I'm not going all the way there."

"Then remain sticky."

The bride looked at me. "Does he always talk like this?"

"Only when awake."

"I heard that," Baggage said.

"You were supposed to."

I grabbed a mop from Mavis, who had appeared with three buckets and no explanation. The handle was warm from the courtyard air, and the mop head smelled faintly of old lemons and regret.

"I'll clean the drain," I said.

Baggage moved in front of me.

"No."

I stared down at him. "Move."

"No."

"Baggage."

"The drain is blocked."

"I can see that."

"No, you can see the paper. You cannot see the grease beneath it."

Evan came over. "He's right."

I looked at him. "You're siding with the dog?"

"I'm siding with the drain."

"Of course you are."

He crouched beside the entrance and used the end of a metal ruler to nudge the paper aside. Gray water bubbled beneath it, carrying bits of ice, lemon pulp, and something that looked suspiciously like a soap wrapper.

Baggage leaned over the opening. "Sanitation issue."

"I know," I said.

"You should report it."

"I'm the owner. I'm standing here."

"To the inspector."

Evan looked up. "I'm already here."

Baggage's ears perked. "Excellent."

I tightened my grip on the mop. "Nobody report anything."

The dog turned toward Evan. "The drain is blocked with food debris and possibly soap residue. The guest entrance smells like sour lemonade. Also, the mop bucket has a cracked wheel and may tip if moved quickly."

Evan picked up his inspection bag.

"Baggage," I said.

He continued. "The railing is unstable, the karaoke speaker is wet, and Lenny has stored an extension cord under the drink table."

Lenny glanced at the cord. "It's dry."

"It is under a table that was covered in lemonade."

"It's mostly dry."

Evan stood. "Maribel."

I closed my eyes. "Don't."

"I need to see the drain."

"You're seeing it."

"I need to inspect it."

"Why?"

"Because your dog just reported a sanitation issue."

Baggage sat beside the drain, chest lifted, tail thumping once against the concrete.

"I am a responsible citizen," he said.

"You are a traitor with fur."

The bride from room nine whispered to Todd, "Is the dog really the manager?"

Todd, still holding the microphone cord, whispered back, "He has better instincts."

"I can hear you," I said.

"That's because he's right," Baggage said.

Evan crouched again. He removed a pair of gloves from his bag, and I watched his hands move with irritating competence as he lifted the drain cover. The smell rose immediately: sour citrus, damp metal, and the unmistakable stink of something that had been hiding under a grate since the previous administration.

Guests gathered around despite my earlier order. The woman with the chicken came closer. The chicken stretched its neck toward the opening.

"No," I said.

The woman tightened her hold. "She's curious."

"She tried to eat a karaoke tablet."

"She has varied interests."

Evan pulled out a wad of soggy paper. A motel key tag clung to it.

Room 12.

My stomach gave a small, annoyed twist.

The old route. The leak. The duplicate keys. The ritual. Room 12 had been turning up in every problem like the motel itself was trying to leave me a note and lacked the courtesy to use words.

Evan held up the tag.

"Where did this come from?"

Baggage sniffed it. "The drain."

"I gathered that," Evan said.

"No, you didn't. You asked."

I took the tag from Evan. It was slick and cold between my fingers.

The man from room eleven shifted behind me.

Baggage noticed.

"His pocket," he said.

The man stiffened. "What about it?"

"It smells like the drain."

"That's impossible."

Baggage sniffed again. "And lemonade."

"I was near the lemonade."

"And soap."

The courtyard went quiet.

The man from room eleven reached into his pocket.

I caught his wrist. "Take your hand out slowly."

"I have nothing."

"You're making that claim while reaching into your pocket."

"It's a handkerchief."

"Then let it enjoy daylight."

He pulled out a small plastic bag. Inside was a wet brass key and a folded slip of paper.

The woman with the chicken made a soft, scandalized noise.

Darla leaned over the broken railing. "Is that another schedule?"

The man from room eleven looked at me. "It's not what you think."

"People keep saying that right before producing exactly what I think."

Baggage sat down. "It's the old route."

Evan took the bag. His fingers brushed mine as he did, and the contact was brief enough to be accidental but irritatingly memorable.

He unfolded the paper.

The writing was smudged, but the room numbers were clear.

Nine.

Twelve.

Seventeen.

Then, beneath them, a time.

11:40 PM.

The same schedule as before. The same little network of bad decisions, apparently operating with the punctuality of a train system and none of the public funding.

"What were you doing with this?" I asked.

The man from room eleven looked toward the dark windows above the courtyard. "Trying to stop tonight's exchange."

"By putting the key in the drain?"

"I dropped it."

"You dropped it into a drain full of lemonade?"

"It was an accident."

Baggage tilted his head. "You also dropped the paper."

"Dogs don't understand accidents."

"Dogs understand pockets."

Evan looked at me. "You need to close the guest entrance until this is cleaned."

I glanced at the crowd, the broken railing, the wet speaker, the chicken, and Baggage sitting beside the drain like a furry compliance officer.

"I can handle it."

"You can't handle everything."

"That's a bold opinion from a man who keeps showing up whenever my motel is on fire."

"It wasn't on fire tonight."

"Lenny had a cable."

"That's not the same thing."

"It's adjacent."

His gaze held mine. Beneath the professional irritation, something warmer flickered. Concern, maybe. Or exhaustion. With Evan, the two wore the same shirt.

He lowered his voice. "Let me help."

That was the problem. I wanted him to help. I wanted to stop being the woman sprinting after leaks with a mop while guests turned structural failures into entertainment. I wanted to look like an owner instead of a person who had inherited a motel and immediately become its emergency contact.

I also wanted Baggage to stop narrating my inadequacies to the only man whose opinion I cared about.

"I have it," I said.

Baggage looked at Evan. "She does not have it."

"Baggage."

"She wants to appear capable."

"I am capable."

"She also wants him to stay."

The courtyard made a collective sound that was not quite a gasp and not quite a laugh. It was the noise of twenty people discovering a secret at the same time and being too polite to admit they'd enjoyed it.

Evan's expression changed.

I pointed at the dog. "Inside. Now."

Baggage did not move.

"Baggage."

"I'm protecting the motel."

"You're ruining my life."

"Those are not mutually exclusive."

Darla covered her mouth. Todd made a strangled sound. The naked cowboy looked between Evan and me with the solemn interest of a man who had once lost a hat and found romance instead.

Evan stood, still holding the plastic bag with the key and schedule.

"I'll inspect the drain," he said.

"No."

"Maribel."

"No. I can clean one drain without county supervision."

Baggage's head snapped toward him.

I saw it happen. The slight lift of his muzzle. The alertness in his eyes. The expression of a dog who had just discovered a fresh opportunity to make my evening worse.

"Don't," I warned.

Baggage walked to Evan.

"Don't you dare."

He sat at Evan's boots.

Evan looked down. "What?"

Baggage looked up at him.

"The drain is contaminated with food debris, soap residue, and standing water," he said clearly. "The guest entrance should be closed until sanitation is restored."

I lunged for his collar.

Too late.

Evan's face went still in that professional way that meant my motel had just been sentenced by a man with excellent cheekbones.

He opened his inspection bag.

The guests leaned closer.

The chicken pecked the woman's arm.

Baggage's tail thumped against Evan's boot.

I tightened my grip on the mop and stared at my watchdog.

"Barkley Monroe," I said, using his full name.

He looked pleased.

"I told you," he said. "I'm senior operations."

Evan pulled out his clipboard.

The guest entrance clicked shut behind us, locking the courtyard into the smell of sour lemonade, wet metal, and another expensive bad decision.

The Room Key Opens Wrong Doors

The guest entrance clicked shut behind us, and Evan pulled out his clipboard with the calm expression of a man preparing to ruin my morning in several official categories.

Baggage sat beneath the sour lemonade smell, looking proud of himself.

"Second floor," Evan said. "We'll start with the guest corridor."

"Of course we will."

"It's where the lock assignments are."

I stopped. "They're what?"

Baggage's ears lifted. "She has discovered the next problem."

"I have not discovered anything."

From above us came a metallic clunk, followed by a muffled shout.

"That's room twelve," I said.

"No," said Baggage. "That's room nine."

I looked at him. "You can tell the difference?"

"Room twelve swears more."

Another clunk sounded overhead.

Then someone yelled, "Why is there a chicken in here?"

The woman with the chicken gasped. "She was with me."

Evan closed his eyes for one brief second. It was the closest he ever came to prayer.

I ran for the stairs.

The second-floor corridor smelled like hot dust, old carpet, and the industrial lemon cleaner Mavis used whenever she wanted a stain to feel judged. The carpet

buckled beneath my shoes. One ceiling tile sagged over room fourteen, holding a brown water mark shaped like a state that had given up.

At the far end, Darla was trying keycards against every door.

"Stop testing them on guests," I shouted.

"I'm testing the system."

"You're testing the people inside the system."

A man in a towel opened room twelve. "She tested mine three times."

Darla held up a card. "It worked on room nine."

"It opened my door."

"That's not the same thing."

"It is when I'm naked."

"Then the lock is functioning."

I reached her and snatched the card from her hand. "Why are the assignments wrong?"

Darla looked offended. "They're not wrong. They're flexible."

"Locks are not yoga."

Baggage trotted past us. "This one opens room fourteen, the laundry closet, and possibly a vending machine."

"That is not possible," I said.

He nudged a keycard with his nose. "The motel disagrees."

Evan arrived at the top of the stairs, clipboard tucked against his chest. His gaze moved along the corridor, taking in the open doors, half-dressed guests, and Darla's growing collection of cards.

"Maribel," he said.

"I know."

"You said that last night."

"I'm trying to establish consistency."

A door slammed near the elevator alcove.

Mavis emerged from room sixteen carrying a laundry basket and a small brass key.

"I found the problem," she announced.

"Why were you in room sixteen?"

"I thought it was the laundry room."

"It has a bed."

"It was a convincing bed."

A guest behind her pointed at the brass key. "She opened my room and took my towels."

"I was rescuing them."

"They were on my body."

Mavis looked at me. "He was using them incorrectly."

Evan wrote something down.

I lunged for the clipboard. He lifted it out of reach.

"Don't," he said.

"I'm not going to read it."

"You're going to pretend you aren't reading it while reading it."

"I can multitask."

Baggage sniffed the key box Darla had dragged upstairs. It was the heavy metal box containing keys to motel rooms and facilities, its lid dented from years of being treated like a blunt instrument. The lock hung open.

"Who opened that?" I asked.

Darla raised her hand.

"Why?"

"To fix the assignments."

"By opening the box?"

"Keys are inside."

"That is not a repair strategy."

"It was a promising beginning."

Inside the box, the labeled hooks were empty, doubled, or occupied by keys with no labels. Room nine's key hung beneath fourteen. Room twelve had three copies. Room eleven had none. One tag read ICE MACHINE and was attached to a key marked 17.

I stared into the box.

The box stared back in the way only motel equipment can, with the silent confidence of an object that knows it has ruined your day before breakfast.

"Who moved these?" I asked.

The corridor went quiet.

Todd stepped out of room thirteen wearing one shoe and holding a bowl of cereal.

"I may have reorganized."

I turned slowly. "Why?"

"The old arrangement was confusing."

"It had labels."

"Labels can be misleading."

"You put room nine under fourteen."

"Those numbers are close."

"They are not the same room."

"They're both on the second floor."

Baggage sniffed Todd's cereal. "It contains regret."

Todd looked down. "It's bran."

"Same texture."

Evan stepped toward the box. "How many cards have been issued?"

Todd swallowed. "Depends."

"On what?"

"Whether you count the ones that no longer open doors."

I held up a hand. "Nobody move."

That would have worked better if the naked cowboy hadn't stepped out of room seven at that exact moment.

He wore his boots, his hat, and a bathrobe tied with the confidence of a man who had never met a belt.

"I'm locked out," he said.

"Which room?"

"Seven."

I tried the card in his hand against room seven.

The light flashed red.

He looked at me. "That seems personal."

I tried room twelve.

The lock flashed green.

The naked cowboy stared at the door. "That's not my room."

"I'm aware."

The door opened behind us.

The woman with the chicken stepped out, holding her bird under one arm and a motel towel under the other.

"Why is everyone in my room?" she asked.

"Your room is room seven?" I said.

"No. Room nine."

I looked at the box.

Baggage looked at the box.

Evan wrote faster.

The corridor erupted.

Guests began emerging from every door, each carrying the wrong belongings or wearing the wrong level of clothing. The bride from room nine appeared in a robe decorated with tiny pink flamingos.

"That's not mine," she said, looking down.

"The robe?" I asked.

"The room."

The man from room eleven came out of fourteen holding a hair dryer.

"I was looking for my schedule."

"You were in the wrong room."

"I know that now."

"Why didn't you know it when you opened the door?"

"Because the door opened."

That was, unfortunately, the strongest argument anyone had offered.

Darla began swiping cards again.

I grabbed her wrist. "Stop."

"I'm narrowing the pattern."

"You're widening the lawsuit."

A door clicked behind us.

Everyone turned.

A woman I had never seen before stood in the doorway of room twelve. She wore a green inspection vest and held a tablet.

Evan's assistant.

I had met her once in the lobby, briefly, before the karaoke incident and the police report had turned my schedule into a decorative fiction. Her name was Nora. She had

sensible shoes, a tidy braid, and the exhausted expression of someone who had been assigned to supervise Evan and had regretted accepting the position by lunchtime.

She looked at the corridor.

Then at her tablet.

Then at me.

"I was told to meet Evan by the guest entrance," she said.

"The guest entrance is closed."

"I noticed."

"How did you get upstairs?"

She lifted the card. "This opened room twelve."

"That is not an answer."

"It's the only answer I have."

Baggage approached her.

Nora looked down. "Is he the dog who talks?"

"Yes," I said.

"No," Baggage said. "I'm the dog who reports."

Nora glanced at Evan. "He's worse than the last one."

"The last one was a parrot," Evan said.

"It knew when to stop."

Baggage sat beside Nora's shoes. "She has a keycard in her left pocket."

Nora stiffened. "I do."

"Why?"

"It was issued to me."

"For which room?" I asked.

"Room twelve."

I looked at the open door.

"Then why are you holding it?"

"Because I'm in room twelve."

"No, you're standing in room twelve."

"That is generally how rooms work."

"Not here."

The lock on room twelve clicked.

Nora turned toward it.

The door swung shut.

She stepped back. "Was that supposed to happen?"

"No," I said.

The handle rattled from inside.

Nora looked at me through the narrowing gap. "I'm still in the corridor."

"No, you're not."

The door shut completely.

A lock engaged with a thick mechanical clunk.

Nora pounded once. "I'm in the room."

Evan moved toward her. "Nora?"

"I'm fine."

A second sound came from inside the room.

A spring-loaded pop.

Then a burst of glitter shot beneath the door.

Everyone stared at the sparkling carpet.

Nora shouted, "Why is there glitter?"

I looked at Todd.

Todd looked at the ceiling.

Baggage sniffed the glitter. "Cheap craft adhesive. Also tuna."

"Why is there tuna?" Evan asked.

"That's a separate concern," I said.

Nora rattled the handle. "The door won't open."

I tried her card from the outside.

Red light.

I tried room twelve's spare.

Red.

I tried room nine's card.

Green.

The lock clicked.

The door opened two inches, then stopped against something.

Nora shoved from inside. "What's blocking it?"

I crouched and looked through the gap.

A fishing line stretched from the handle to the bedpost. Beyond it, a row of plastic cups sat balanced along the floor. A paper sign hung from the ceiling fan.

CONGRATULATIONS, INSPECTOR'S ASSISTANT.

Baggage peered beside me.

"Guest prank," he said.

"I can see that."

"Poorly executed."

"It trapped a county employee."

"It trapped her emotionally too."

Nora's voice came through the gap. "I can hear the dog."

"He's not helping," I said.

"I disagree."

The corridor had gone silent again, but this time nobody was pretending not to enjoy it. The naked cowboy leaned against the wall. Todd held his cereal bowl beneath his chin. The bride in the flamingo robe had her phone out.

"Put that away," I told her.

"I'm documenting the inspection."

"You're documenting a felony with glitter."

"It's not a felony."

"Give it time."

Evan crouched beside me. His knee brushed mine. The corridor was hot, and his shoulder was close enough that I could smell soap and the faint metal scent of his inspection bag.

"Can you cut the line?" he asked.

"I need a knife."

Mavis produced one from her laundry basket.

I stared at it.

"It's for loose threads," she said.

"It has a serrated blade."

"Some threads are ambitious."

I took it and slid the blade through the gap. The fishing line snapped. Inside the room, the plastic cups toppled one by one, making a tiny, ridiculous drumroll.

Nora shoved the door.

It opened another inch.

Then the ceiling fan turned on.

A second burst of glitter dropped from above.

Nora screamed.

The sound echoed down the corridor and startled the chicken, which flapped out of the woman's arm and landed on Todd's head.

Todd dropped his cereal.

The bowl shattered.

Milk ran across the carpet toward the open door.

Baggage barked. "Containment failure."

"I am aware!"

I grabbed towels from Mavis. Evan grabbed the door. Together we pulled it open while Nora tried to avoid the glitter, the fishing line, and a plastic bucket that tipped from the closet shelf.

The bucket landed on her head.

She disappeared beneath it.

"I'm fine," she said.

"No one is fine," Evan replied.

I pulled the bucket free. Nora's braid was decorated with glitter. A tuna sandwich hung from the back of her inspection vest by a clothespin.

She touched it.

"Why?"

Baggage looked at Todd.

Todd pointed at the man from room eleven.

The man from room eleven pointed at the naked cowboy.

The naked cowboy pointed at the chicken.

The chicken pecked the carpet.

"This is a coordinated response," I said.

"It's a prank," said the man from room eleven.

"On an inspector's assistant."

"She came in the wrong room."

"She came in the room the lock assigned her."

"That's different."

"It's literally the same problem."

Evan helped Nora out of the room. She stepped onto the milk-soaked carpet, slipped, and caught his arm.

He steadied her.

"I'm sorry," I said.

Nora looked at the corridor, the scattered cereal, the glitter, and the guests wearing borrowed clothing.

"Are you?"

"No."

That seemed to comfort her more than an apology would have.

I turned to the key box.

"All right. New rule. Nobody touches a keycard, a key, a lock, or a guest."

Darla raised her hand. "What about the guest if the guest is touching the lock?"

"Then call me."

"What if you're unavailable?"

"Call Evan."

Evan looked at me.

"What?" I said. "He's already here."

Baggage wagged his tail. "She wants him involved."

"I want the motel operational."

"Those can be the same thing."

I ignored him and began pulling cards from the box. Todd handed me a stack. Mavis found another batch in the laundry basket. Darla produced six from her pockets, three from the ice machine, and one from inside her boot.

"Why was it in your boot?" I asked.

"It was hiding."

"It was a keycard."

"It had a nervous energy."

I sorted the cards by room, using the floor plan taped inside the box. The paper was stained with old coffee and had been repaired with duct tape. Room nine belonged to the bride. Room eleven to the man with the schedule. Room twelve was empty on paper but occupied by Nora. Room fourteen belonged to the naked cowboy, who had apparently been sleeping in seven because seven's lock liked him better.

The assignments had been scrambled by a combination of Todd's reorganization, Darla's testing, and the motel's ancient lock system deciding that room numbers were more of a suggestion.

Evan watched me work.

"You're going to need to replace the entire access system," he said.

"I'm going to need a miracle and a credit line."

"Start with the cards."

"I'm starting with survival."

I reset each assignment at the control panel mounted behind the key box. The panel buzzed beneath my fingers. The screen flickered, displayed ERROR, then displayed WELCOME, which was insulting in several directions.

Baggage sat beside the panel.

"Room fourteen still opens room seven."

"I'm fixing it."

"Room seven opens the ice machine."

"I'm aware."

"Room twelve opens nothing."

"That's progress."

The panel flashed.

Every lock on the second floor clicked at once.

Doors opened.

Guests shouted.

The bride's borrowed robe vanished as she pulled it shut.

The naked cowboy's door opened behind him, revealing a room full of balloons.

He stared inside. "Those aren't mine."

The man from room eleven's door opened, and a bucket of water tipped from the top frame.

He jumped aside.

The water hit the carpet.

Baggage sighed. "The prank has spread."

Nora looked at Evan. "Is this normal?"

"No," he said.

Baggage glanced at me. "It's normal for her."

I slammed my palm against the control panel.

The doors clicked shut again.

This time, room twelve locked from the outside.

Nora looked at the door.

I looked at the door.

Evan looked at me.

"No," I said.

Baggage sniffed the lock. "Yes."

I tried Nora's card.

Red.

The master card.

Red.

The room twelve spare.

Red.

The key marked ICE MACHINE.

Red.

"Why did you try that?" Evan asked.

"I'm working through options."

"You tried the ice machine key."

"It's been surprisingly versatile."

Nora leaned against the wall. Glitter shook loose from her braid.

"I'm not going back in there."

"You don't have to."

The door behind her clicked.

It opened.

A hand reached through the gap and grabbed the back of her inspection vest.

Nora yelped as the fishing line tightened again.

I grabbed her arm. Evan grabbed her other arm. Baggage caught the vest in his teeth.

For one long, ridiculous second, we pulled in three directions while the room attempted to reclaim Nora.

The tuna sandwich swung between us.

"Let go," Nora shouted.

"I'm trying," I said.

"Not you," Baggage said. "The room."

Evan braced his shoes against the carpet and pulled harder. The fishing line snapped. Nora lurched free, stumbled backward, and landed against the wall.

The door slammed.

A final glitter cloud puffed beneath it.

The corridor fell silent except for the drip of water and Todd's cereal milk spreading toward the stairs.

I looked at the key box.

Then at Evan's clipboard.

Then at Nora, who was still wearing a tuna sandwich.

"I fixed the assignments," I said.

Baggage sniffed the door. "Mostly."

"What does mostly mean?"

"Room twelve is now assigned correctly."

I exhaled.

"And locked from the outside," he added.

Nora stared at the door. "With the prank setup inside."

"Yes," I said.

Evan rubbed a hand over his face. "We need to contain this floor."

"We are containing it."

"By trapping my assistant?"

"She's not injured."

Nora lifted the tuna sandwich from her vest. "I have been attacked by lunch."

"That's not an injury."

"It's a statement."

I took the master key box and locked it. The metal lid clanged shut. Around us, the guests stood in various states of borrowed clothing, damp socks, glitter contamination, and wounded dignity.

Darla raised a card. "Should I test the corrected system?"

"No."

"What if it's wrong?"

"Then it can be wrong quietly."

Baggage sat beside the sealed box.

"Containment," he said.

I looked at the closed doors, the wet carpet, the glitter beneath room twelve, and Evan standing beside me with his inspection notes ruined by a smear of tuna.

"Containment," I agreed.

From behind room twelve's door came a soft mechanical click.

Then the ceiling fan started again.

Nora closed her eyes.

Evan looked at me.

I put the master key box under my arm.

"Don't worry," I said. "The room is locked."

Baggage tilted his head.

"Wrong side," he said.

The Inspector's Clipboard Smells Like Trouble

Baggage tilted his head.

"Wrong side," he said.

I looked at room twelve's door, then at the hallway behind us, where the key box sat under my arm like a metal child I had failed to raise properly.

"That is not helpful."

"It is accurate."

"It can be both."

The ceiling fan inside room twelve clicked again. Nora stood three feet away, still glittering from braid to shoes and wearing the tuna sandwich's oily imprint on her inspection vest. Evan Pike had one hand on her shoulder and the other wrapped around his clipboard, which now carried a yellow smear shaped vaguely like a fish.

He looked at me.

"Today's inspection is going to be difficult."

"Today's inspection was difficult before lunch attacked your assistant."

"It's almost eleven."

"That's still morning in motel time."

Baggage sniffed the key box. "The box smells like panic."

"It smells like brass."

"Panic has a brass note."

Before I could answer, the lobby doors opened.

A woman stepped inside wearing a navy county jacket, sensible shoes, and a smile so polished it could have cut the motel's remaining glass. She carried a clip-

board against her chest. The clipboard was brown at the edges, thick with paper, and smelled faintly of vinegar, disinfectant, and the specific confidence of someone who had never had to unclog a drain with a butter knife.

Evan straightened.

"Tessa."

The woman's smile widened. "Evan."

I looked between them. "You know each other?"

"She's taking over the inspection," Evan said.

Tessa extended her hand. "Tessa Kincaid. County health."

Her handshake was firm enough to make my knuckles reconsider their career choices.

"Maribel Hart."

"I know."

Of course she did. The motel had a reputation off I-16, and not the charming kind. People came here when they were about to make a terrible choice, then left reviews complaining about the consequences.

Baggage approached Tessa and sniffed her clipboard.

She looked down. "Is he always this involved?"

"He's our watchdog," I said.

"I'm our senior operations officer," Baggage said.

Tessa glanced at Evan.

Evan glanced at me.

"He talks," I said.

"I gathered that."

"He also reports conditions."

Baggage sat beside her shoes. "Your clipboard smells like trouble."

Tessa's smile did not move. "It smells like vinegar."

"Trouble often does."

I stepped between the dog and the clipboard. "We're ready for the walkthrough."

Tessa looked past me at the glitter trail, the damp carpet, the tuna-stained vest, and the key box dented from where I had slammed it shut.

"No," she said pleasantly. "You're available for the walkthrough."

"That's basically the same thing."

"It isn't."

"It is if the county is flexible."

"The county is not flexible."

"Have you met the motel?"

"I've reviewed the reports."

"That's worse."

Tessa opened the clipboard. "We'll begin with the guest rooms, then the service areas, then the courtyard drain."

"The drain is closed."

"The guest entrance is closed."

"Correct."

"And room twelve?"

"Also closed."

"Why?"

"Prank."

Nora raised her hand. "With glitter."

"And tuna," Baggage added.

Tessa wrote something down.

I leaned toward Evan. "What did she write?"

"Probably 'tuna.'"

"Why would tuna matter?"

"It can matter."

"Everything matters to you people."

Tessa turned toward the first room. "Room nine."

The bride from room nine opened the door before I could knock. She was still wearing the flamingo robe, though she had added a pair of enormous sunglasses and held a hairbrush like a weapon.

"No one is sleeping in here," she announced.

Tessa stepped inside.

The room smelled of hairspray, damp carpet, and the lemon-scented cleaner Mavis used whenever she wanted a stain to look emotionally improved. A stack of towels leaned beside the bathroom door. One towel had a glittery handprint across it.

Tessa touched the counter.

Her fingertip came away gray.

I looked at Mavis.

Mavis looked at the ceiling.

"It's vintage dust," I said.

"It's residue," Tessa replied.

"Vintage residue."

Tessa opened the mini refrigerator. A plastic container of something green sat on the top shelf.

"What is this?"

The bride lowered her sunglasses. "My wedding dip."

"How long has it been here?"

"Since Tuesday."

"It's Thursday," I said.

"It has aged beautifully."

Tessa wrote.

"Please remove it."

The bride clutched the container. "It has a name."

"Then say goodbye to Gerald," I said.

The bride handed it over with the solemnity of a woman surrendering a family heirloom. Mavis took it toward the trash.

Baggage followed.

"Gerald is leaking," he said.

"I can see that," Mavis snapped.

"No, you can smell it."

The bride shut the door behind us. "Is she going to close the motel?"

I looked at Tessa's clipboard. "Not if everyone stops helping her."

The door to room eleven opened.

The man from room eleven stood there holding three keycards, a wet towel, and the expression of someone who had been waiting to be questioned.

Tessa looked at the cards.

He tucked them behind his back.

"No," I said.

"I'm not doing anything."

"You're hiding evidence with the subtlety of a raccoon in a pantry."

Tessa held out her hand.

He gave her the cards.

She examined each one. "These are assigned to rooms nine, twelve, and seventeen."

"System error," I said quickly.

"Is that why they were in his possession?"

"I found them."

"Where?"

He looked at me.

I looked at him.

Baggage sat down. "He found them in his pocket."

Tessa wrote again.

The man from room eleven glared at the dog. "You're a menace."

"I'm a witness."

"To what?"

"The old route."

The hallway seemed to tighten around that phrase.

Tessa stopped writing.

Evan's eyes moved to Baggage. "What old route?"

I felt the key box grow heavier under my arm.

"Nothing," I said.

Baggage looked at me. "That is not true."

"Baggage."

"The old route goes through rooms nine, twelve, and seventeen."

Tessa turned toward me. "What route?"

The man from room eleven tried to step backward.

Tessa caught it. "Stay where you are."

He stayed.

I gave Baggage a look that promised consequences, though the dog had never respected a promise he hadn't personally approved.

"It's an old guest pattern," I said. "People move through the motel using duplicate keys. We found a schedule."

"Where is it?"

"In evidence."

"Which means?"

"Wet."

"Where?"

"The drain."

Tessa's smile remained, but it had lost its shine. "Show me."

The inspection had begun as a negotiation. By room eleven, it had become an interrogation with towels.

We moved through room twelve next. Tessa stood outside while Evan opened the door with a tool from his bag. The fishing line had been cut, but several plastic cups remained scattered across the floor. Glitter clung to the carpet. A tuna sandwich had been flattened beneath the bed.

Nora stayed in the hallway.

"I'm not going back in," she said.

"No one is asking you to," Evan told her.

Baggage peered through the doorway. "The room is still hostile."

Tessa entered.

She crouched beside the bed and lifted the mattress corner. A brass key slid across the floor.

I stared at it.

"That wasn't there before," I said.

Tessa picked it up with a gloved hand. "Room seventeen."

The man from room eleven made a small noise.

Not a gasp. More like a hiccup that had seen a warrant.

Tessa looked at him. "You said the cards were all you had."

"They were."

"Then this key walked here?"

"It could have."

Baggage sniffed the key. "It smells like soap."

I looked toward the bathroom.

The sink cabinet hung open. Inside, the plumbing was exposed, and behind the pipes a narrow black gap disappeared into the wall.

Tessa shone her flashlight into it.

The beam caught a strip of old paper, a second brass key, and a trail of dust disturbed by recent movement.

Evan leaned beside her. "That's not standard construction."

"Neither is the motel," I said.

Tessa reached into the gap and pulled out the paper.

It was brittle, folded twice, and marked with room numbers. The ink had bled, but one word remained clear at the bottom.

INSPECTION.

My mouth went dry.

Tessa looked at me. "How long have you known about this?"

"About the passage? Recently."

"About the schedule?"

"Recently."

"About the inspection note?"

"I haven't seen that one."

The man from room eleven turned toward the stairwell.

Baggage blocked him.

"You're not leaving," the dog said.

"I need air."

"You're in a hallway."

"I need different air."

"Suspicious."

Tessa folded the paper into an evidence sleeve. "We'll discuss this later."

"Can we discuss the fact that the passage may be connected to the building's plumbing?" I asked.

"We can discuss it after I inspect the plumbing."

"That sounds expensive."

"It is."

"Could we discuss a discount?"

"No."

"I admire the speed of your answer."

Room seventeen was empty on the registry and occupied in reality by three folding chairs, a broken ice machine, and a sleeping little boy who had apparently been placed there by an adult with a loose relationship to supervision.

The boy opened one eye as we entered.

"Is this the inspection?" he asked.

"Yes," I said.

"Am I in trouble?"

"Not unless you own the ice machine."

He pointed at it. "It makes a screaming sound."

Tessa examined the machine. The metal casing was rusted near the base. Water had pooled beneath it, turning the carpet dark.

She pressed a button.

The machine screamed.

The boy sat up.

Baggage barked.

Nora swore in the hallway.

Tessa calmly wrote on her clipboard while the machine continued producing a noise like a haunted dentist's drill.

I unplugged it.

The screaming stopped.

The silence afterward was almost rude.

Tessa looked at the outlet. "That outlet is not grounded."

"Probably why the machine was screaming."

"Electrical faults aren't health violations."

"Excellent."

"Standing water is."

"Less excellent."

She touched the wall beside the machine. The panel shifted.

A cold draft slipped through the crack.

Tessa's eyes narrowed.

I knew that look. It was the same look Evan wore before closing something.

"No," I said.

Tessa moved the panel aside.

Behind it was the narrow passage we had found before, running toward the old supply line. A faint smell drifted out: damp stone, soap, and something sharp enough to sting my nose.

Baggage stepped forward.

"Someone has been through here."

Tessa aimed her flashlight into the darkness. Dust marked the floor in overlapping shoe prints.

Fresh ones.

The inspection had found a question and then, because this motel had no sense of proportion, found footprints answering it.

Evan crouched near the opening. "These are recent."

"How recent?" I asked.

"Within a day."

Tessa looked at the schedule in her evidence sleeve. "The anomalies began before the last inspection."

I turned toward her. "What anomalies?"

She hesitated.

That was the first thing she had done all morning that wasn't efficient.

"Repeated sanitation complaints," she said. "Drain contamination. Missing inventory. Lock access that doesn't match the registry. Inspection records altered after the fact."

"Altered by whom?"

"That's what I'm trying to determine."

The man from room eleven backed into the wall.

I looked at him. "You know something."

"I know this motel has always been strange."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the only one I have."

Baggage sniffed the floor. "He is lying."

"I'm not."

"You're sweating through your shirt."

"It's hot."

"You're sweating in one spot."

Tessa's gaze dropped to his right sleeve.

A dark smear marked the cuff.

"What is that?" she asked.

He tucked his arm behind him.

I caught his wrist before he could move.

The smear was gray-brown and smelled of soap, rust, and wet paper.

Tessa's expression hardened.

"Where did you get this?"

He looked at me, then at the dark passage.

"I was trying to find the person who keeps moving the locks."

The hallway went quiet.

Even Baggage stopped wagging.

"Who?" I asked.

"I don't know."

"You've been following the route."

"I've been trying to stop it."

"By carrying duplicate keys and schedules?"

"I thought they were using me."

"That is not reassuring."

Tessa held out her clipboard. "What does the person look like?"

He swallowed. "I never see them. I hear the passage door. Then the locks change."

"When?"

"Before inspections."

Tessa's pen paused.

"Every time?" she asked.

"Every time."

I looked at Evan.

He was already looking at me.

The motel had been unsafe before I inherited it. That was the comforting part. The deeply unhelpful part was that somebody had been maintaining the unsafe conditions with the punctuality of an appointment.

Tessa closed the clipboard.

"Maribel, I'm issuing a shutdown order."

The words landed with less drama than they deserved. No thunder. No collapsing ceiling. Just Tessa's calm voice and the soft hum of the broken ice machine cooling beside us.

"For the whole motel?" I asked.

"Guest rooms, service areas, and the courtyard entrance."

"That's everything."

"Yes."

"I can correct the drain."

"You can't correct the pattern."

"I can replace the locks."

"You can't replace them while someone is accessing the walls."

"I can close the passage."

"You can't seal a passage you haven't mapped."

I hated that she had answers ready. I hated more that they were good.

Evan stepped beside her. "Tessa, the shutdown may be excessive."

She turned to him. "You saw the drain."

"I did."

"You saw the lock failures."

"I did."

"You saw the room access."

"I did."

"And the contaminated passage."

He looked at me.

I looked at the clipboard.

Baggage sighed. "This is where humans pretend facts are negotiable."

Tessa handed me the order.

The paper was warm from her hand. My name sat at the top beneath the county seal, followed by enough violations to make the motel sound less like a business and more like a dare.

"Effective immediately," she said.

I looked at the crowded hallway, the glitter beneath room twelve, the little boy beside the unplugged ice machine, Nora's tuna-stained vest, and the man from room eleven clutching his duplicate keys like they might explain themselves.

"Where are the guests supposed to go?"

"Somewhere compliant."

"Do you know a place?"

"No."

"Then this feels less like public health and more like revenge."

Her smile returned, smaller this time. "I'm not trying to punish you."

"You're shutting me down."

"I'm trying to stop whoever is using your motel."

That changed the air.

Tessa reached into her folder and removed a photocopy. She passed it to me beneath the clipboard.

At the bottom of the page was a handwritten note.

11:40. OLD ROUTE. INSPECTOR DELAYED.

The handwriting matched the note we had found before.

My fingers tightened around the paper.

"This was attached to a previous inspection file," Tessa said quietly. "It disappeared before I could enter it into the record."

"Who took it?"

"I don't know."

"Why show me now?"

"Because the same phrase appears in three reports."

"Three?"

"And each time, the motel was closed within forty-eight hours."

I stared at the copied note.

The shutdown order sagged in my other hand.

"So the person sabotaging the motel wants it closed."

"Or wants someone to believe that."

Baggage pressed against my leg.

"More trouble," he said.

"Yes."

Tessa looked at him. "He's right."

Baggage's tail thumped once. "I like her."

"Don't encourage him," I said.

Tessa gathered her papers. "Do not reopen until the order is lifted."

"Will you come back?"

She met my eyes.

"Yes."

It was not a promise. It was worse. It was a professional certainty with the faintest edge of personal interest, the kind that made my pulse trip over itself and then blame the plumbing.

Evan watched us both.

I folded the photocopy and slipped it into my pocket.

The motel was shut down. The guests were furious. The passage was still breathing cold air through the wall.

But now I had a name for the pattern.

The old route.

Baggage looked toward the dark opening.

"Should we investigate?"

I glanced at the shutdown order, the duplicate keys, and Tessa's clipboard disappearing down the stairs.

"We're already investigating."

From inside the wall came the soft metallic click of a lock changing.

Baggage's ears rose.

"Then someone knows," he said.

The Laundry Floods the Hallway

Baggage's ears rose.

"Then someone knows," he said.

I was already moving.

The laundry room sat behind the office, past the vending machine we had shut down and the corridor where the carpet still glittered from Nora's attack by room twelve. Tessa's shutdown order was folded in my back pocket, warm from being clutched too often. The motel was officially closed to guests, restricted to essential repairs, and apparently still open to whatever demon lived inside the plumbing.

I wanted one clean victory.

Not a heroic victory. I wasn't asking for trumpets or a plaque. I wanted to stop one leak, obey one inspector, and avoid adding another violation to the growing list that made my motel sound like a county-funded experiment in poor judgment.

The laundry room door stood open.

Water whispered beneath it.

Baggage stopped beside me. "That is not a good whisper."

"It's a pipe."

"It's a pipe planning something."

Inside, the air smelled of hot metal, detergent, and wet pennies. Three industrial washers lined the back wall beneath a shelf of mismatched soap bottles. One washer shuddered hard enough to make its lid bounce.

Todd stood beside it holding a mop.

Mavis stood on the other side holding a bucket.

Darla stood on a chair holding a towel over her head.

Nobody appeared to have a plan.

"What happened?" I asked.

The washer answered by coughing up a sheet.

It shot through the open lid, slapped Todd in the face, and landed across the floor with a wet, defeated flop.

Todd lowered the mop. "The machine became emotional."

"It backed up," Mavis said.

"It backed up emotionally," Todd insisted.

Water spread from beneath the washer, carrying gray suds, two socks, a motel washcloth, and what looked disturbingly like a plastic chicken wing.

Baggage sniffed the flood.

"Food debris," he said. "Soap residue. One sock. Possibly a second sock."

"I don't care about the sock count," I said. "Shut the water off."

"We tried," Darla said from the chair.

"Who tried?"

"I did."

"Why are you on a chair?"

"The floor is wet."

"That is not a reason to climb furniture."

"It is when the floor has opinions."

The washer bucked again. Its metal body knocked against the wall with a deep clang.

I grabbed the shutoff valve behind it. The handle was slick and hot beneath my fingers. I turned it clockwise.

Nothing happened.

I turned harder.

The pipe groaned.

Baggage backed up. "That is the sound of a bad decision becoming plumbing."

"Everyone move."

Todd moved left.

Mavis moved right.

Darla remained on the chair.

The valve broke off in my hand.

Water burst from the pipe in a bright, furious stream.

It hit the ceiling first, then the fluorescent light, then me.

For one beautiful second, I stood beneath it with the broken valve in my fist, soaked from hairline to shoes while the laundry room sprayed around me like the motel had finally decided to celebrate my management style.

Baggage looked up.

"You stopped it," he said.

"I did not stop it."

"You stopped standing still."

"That is not the same thing."

The water struck the floor harder. Suds rolled under the washers and through the doorway into the hall.

Mavis flung her bucket beneath the pipe.

The bucket filled in two seconds and tipped over.

"Why was it empty?" I shouted.

"It was empty when I got here."

"Why didn't you bring another one?"

"I brought this one."

"You brought a bucket to a flood."

"It was optimistic."

Todd shoved the mop into the spray.

The mop head spun away, struck the wall, and knocked down the shelf of detergent.

Bottles hit the floor. Blue soap burst across the tiles. A lavender scent bloomed through the hot damp air, making the whole disaster smell like a spa operated by criminals.

"Get towels," I said.

"We have towels," Todd said.

"Dry towels."

He looked at the flooded floor. "That narrows it down."

"Laundry carts," I said. "Block the hall."

Darla climbed down from the chair, stepped into the water, and immediately slid three feet backward.

She caught the doorframe with both hands.

"I'm fine," she announced.

"You're holding the wall like it owes you money."

"I'm stabilizing."

"You're leaking."

"That's the floor."

The water swept into the hallway.

A door opened.

The bride from room nine stepped out wearing the flamingo robe and holding a cup of coffee. She looked down at the gray foam moving around her slippers.

"Is this part of the closure?" she asked.

"Yes," I said. "Go back inside."

She stepped forward instead.

Baggage barked. "Do not enter the flood."

She froze. "The dog said that."

"The dog is correct."

"I only need to get to the office."

"The office is the other direction."

She looked behind her. "My room is full of glitter."

"Then remain in the glitter."

Another door opened.

The man from room eleven leaned out, saw the water, and began closing it again.

"Don't," I said.

"I'm staying in my room."

"You're restricted to your room."

"I'm complying."

"You're holding three duplicate keys."

He looked at the keys in his hand as if they had betrayed him personally. "I forgot about those."

Baggage pointed his nose at the water. "He is attempting to escape through the laundry corridor."

"I am not."

"You looked at the exit."

"I looked at the floor."

"Your eyes moved toward the exit."

"I have directional eyes."

The washer gave another violent shudder.

A hose popped loose.

Water blasted sideways across the hall and struck the man from room eleven in the chest.

He stood dripping, clutching the duplicate keys.

Baggage nodded. "Now he is clean."

"This is not funny," the man said.

"No," I said. "It's sanitation."

The hallway became a slip-and-slide with a county violation attached. Water crept beneath the doors. Towels drifted past like tiny defeated rafts. One of the bride's pink flamingos detached from her robe and floated toward the stairs.

Todd chased it with a mop.

"Leave the bird," I yelled.

"It's not a bird. It's fabric."

"It has a face. That makes it a priority to you."

"I'm saving it."

"You're abandoning the flood."

"I'm multitasking."

He lunged for the flamingo, missed, and landed on his backside. The mop flew from his hands and slid beneath the door of room twelve.

From inside room twelve came a mechanical click.

Baggage stared at the door.

"No," I said.

The ceiling fan started.

Glitter puffed beneath the gap and mixed with the gray water.

Baggage sighed. "The room is participating."

I ran back into the laundry room. Water was now ankle-deep, cold around my shoes despite the heat from the machines. The broken valve sprayed steadily from the wall. Mavis had wedged a laundry basket beneath it, which filled, tipped, and floated away.

"Where's the main shutoff?" I asked.

Mavis pointed behind the dryers.

"Of course it's behind the dryers."

"They're heavy."

"Are they attached?"

"Not technically."

Todd appeared in the doorway, soaked to the waist and holding the flamingo robe's detached bird.

"I rescued him."

"Put him somewhere dry."

He looked around. "Where?"

I pointed at the top of a washer.

He placed the flamingo there. Its pink fabric body sagged over the lid with a look of exhausted judgment.

Darla crawled behind the dryers.

"Found the pipe."

"Can you reach the valve?"

"I can reach the dust."

"Can you reach the valve?"

"I can reach a dead mouse."

"Not useful."

"It may know."

Baggage entered the room, water rippling around his legs.

"Main shutoff is behind the second dryer," he said. "The first dryer is blocking it."

"I know."

"The second dryer is plugged into an outlet with a loose faceplate."

"I know."

"The third dryer is humming."

I stopped. "Why is the third dryer humming?"

"It is full of towels."

"Is it running?"

"No."

"Then why is it humming?"

Baggage looked at me. "It has concerns."

I grabbed the side of the first dryer and pulled. It moved half an inch, scraping the tile with a shriek.

Todd joined me.

Mavis joined Todd.

Darla crawled out from behind the machines. "I found the mouse."

"Later."

"It has a tag."

"What?"

The mouse wore a tiny plastic motel key tag around its neck.

Baggage sniffed it. "Room seventeen."

I stared at him.

"Do not make that relevant right now."

"It is relevant."

"I am standing in a flood."

"The mouse has a room assignment."

"Everything in this motel has a room assignment except the people."

Todd pulled harder. The dryer shifted another inch.

The water rose over my shoes.

A knock sounded from the hallway.

Everyone stopped.

Tessa's voice came through the open door.

"Maribel?"

I closed my eyes.

Baggage sat down in the flood. "She has returned."

"Why is she here?" Todd whispered.

"Because she keeps showing up whenever I'm about to look competent."

Tessa stepped into the hallway. She wore a dark raincoat, sensible boots, and the expression of a woman who had driven back to a condemned motel because she had apparently misplaced her self-preservation.

Her gaze traveled over the water, the drifting towels, the glitter, the bride's flamingo robe, and the man from room eleven dripping beside his door.

Then she looked at me.

"Why is there water in the restricted corridor?"

I held up the broken valve. "Plumbing."

"That is not an answer."

"It's the answer with the least paperwork."

Baggage rose. "The washer backed up."

Tessa looked at him. "Did it?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Poor maintenance, overloaded drain line, and possibly sabotage."

I pointed at the dog. "We're not using the word sabotage until we know."

Tessa's eyes moved to the water. "You know enough to stop."

"I'm stopping."

She glanced at the spray behind me. "You are standing in the middle of an active discharge."

"I'm working on it."

"Where is your emergency response plan?"

I looked at Todd.

Todd looked at Mavis.

Mavis looked at Darla.

Darla looked at the mouse.

The mouse looked dead.

"We're improvising," I said.

"That's clear."

The washer coughed again.

A sheet rose out of it like a ghost with a laundry budget and landed across Tessa's shoulders.

She stood beneath the wet fabric, perfectly still.

A blue sock clung to her cheek.

Baggage tilted his head. "You are wearing evidence."

Tessa removed the sheet.

"I see that."

I bit the inside of my cheek.

Tessa looked at me.

"Don't," she said.

"I didn't say anything."

"You were about to."

"I was about to ask if the sheet was clean."

Her eyes narrowed.

The man from room eleven snorted.

Tessa turned toward him. "You find this amusing?"

"No."

"You made a sound."

"I'm wet."

"That was not the question."

Baggage's tail thumped. "He is amused and afraid."

"I am neither."

"You are both."

"Everyone stop talking," I said.

Nobody stopped talking.

Darla announced that the mouse's key tag had a smear of blue detergent on it. Todd said the flamingo needed a towel. Mavis shouted that someone had taken the good mop. The bride asked whether coffee counted as an essential service under the shutdown order.

Tessa stepped around a floating towel.

"Maribel, get everyone out of this corridor."

"I'm trying."

"You're not trying. You're negotiating with them."

"Because they keep stepping into the water."

The bride lifted her coffee. "I was told to remain available."

"You can remain available in your room."

"My room is glitter-contaminated."

"Then remain available glitter-contaminated."

The bride looked at Tessa. "Is that permitted?"

Tessa glanced at me. "No one should be in the hallway."

"Thank you," I said.

The bride retreated.

The man from room eleven did not.

Tessa pointed at his door. "Inside."

He obeyed immediately.

I stared after him. "You could have done that five minutes ago."

"I didn't have authority."

"You had a dog."

Baggage nodded. "I am persuasive."

A deep metallic groan rolled through the laundry room.

The second dryer shifted.

Not because we pulled it.

Because the water had reached its base.

The machine leaned forward.

I grabbed the top.

Todd grabbed the side.

Mavis grabbed Todd.

Darla grabbed Mavis.

Baggage grabbed my pant leg.

The dryer tipped another inch.

"Let go," I said.

"No," Todd said.

"Let go of Mavis."

"I'm holding her."

"You're holding the dryer."

"I'm holding all of it."

The machine tipped farther.

A stack of folded towels slid from the shelf and buried Darla to the shoulders.

"I'm okay," she said from beneath the pile.

"No one asked," Mavis replied.

The dryer gave a final shudder and fell forward.

It landed with a crash that shook the walls.

The pipe behind it became visible.

So did the shutoff valve.

I crawled across the wet tile, reached behind the machine, and found the handle. It was stiff, rusted, and coated in something that smelled like old soap and even older regret.

I turned it.

The spray weakened.

I turned again.

The pipe coughed.

The water stopped.

For a second, the only sound was dripping.

Then the third dryer continued humming.

Tessa looked at it.

I looked at it.

Baggage sniffed the door.

"It is full of standing water," he said.

"Of course it is."

I opened the dryer.

Water poured out in a heavy sheet, carrying towels, a motel pillowcase, and a plastic bag containing six duplicate keycards.

Tessa crouched and picked up the bag.

Her expression went flat.

The hallway seemed to shrink around us.

"Where did these come from?" she asked.

I looked at the dark water beneath the machines.

"I don't know."

Baggage sniffed the bag. "Old route."

Tessa stood with the keycards in her gloved hand. "The laundry room is now part of the access problem."

"I can sanitize it."

"The floor is contaminated."

"It's detergent water."

"It contains food debris, standing water, and unknown materials."

"The unknown materials are mostly towels."

"Mostly is not a sanitation category."

I looked around the laundry room. The fallen dryer blocked the shutoff. The floor was gray with suds. Towels clung to the walls. The mouse had vanished. The pink flamingo watched from atop the washer, damp and judgmental.

"I stopped the flood," I said.

Tessa nodded once. "You did."

There was no praise in it. Just a fact, which somehow made me want to frame it.

"Then we're compliant," I said.

"No."

The word landed cleanly.

Tessa removed the shutdown order from my back pocket before I could stop her. She unfolded it, added a note to the bottom, and signed beneath it with the same calm handwriting that had condemned the rest of my business.

"Laundry facilities are now included in the closure," she said. "The adjacent hallway remains restricted. No staff or guests may use this area until the water is removed, the machines are inspected, and the keycards are accounted for."

I stared at the new line.

"That hallway leads to the office."

"Use the lobby entrance."

"The lobby entrance is blocked by the vending machine."

"Then move the vending machine."

"It's shut down."

"So is the laundry room."

Baggage sat beside the fallen dryer.

"The shutdown is expanding," he said.

"I noticed."

Tessa handed me the amended order. Her fingers brushed mine, warm despite the wet air and the cold water around our shoes.

"Maribel," she said, quieter now, "you can't keep fixing one emergency by creating three more."

"I'm not creating them."

She looked at the tipped dryer, the flooded hall, the glitter, the soaked guests, and the bag of duplicate keys.

"Your motel disagrees."

Behind us, the third dryer clicked.

Its drum began to turn.

A single motel towel slapped against the glass.

Baggage watched it rotate.

"Someone left it on," he said.

I closed my eyes.

Tessa reached for my arm before I stepped toward the machine.

"Don't."

"I have to shut it off."

"You have to leave the restricted area."

"But the dryer - "

"Is now evidence."

The towel slapped the glass again.

The pink flamingo slid from the washer and landed face-down in the foam.

I stood in the middle of the stopped flood, holding an expanded closure order while Tessa kept one hand around my wrist and Baggage inspected the soggy key-cards like a detective who had finally found a crime worth barking about.

The water had stopped.

The laundry room had not improved.

And somewhere behind the walls, another lock clicked open.

I Lied About the Mold Test

The lock clicked again behind the laundry-room wall, and I decided it was probably best not to punch the building.

Not because I lacked the desire. The third dryer was still turning with one lonely towel inside, the hallway was sealed, and Tessa Kincaid had expanded the shutdown order until the motel officially had fewer usable spaces than a broom closet. Punching the wall would only create another violation, and I was running out of categories in which to disappoint her.

By eight the next morning, the office smelled like damp carpet, burnt coffee, and the industrial lemon cleaner Todd had poured into the mop bucket without adding any water. The re-test scheduling desk sat beneath a sign that said HEALTH COMPLIANCE APPOINTMENTS, though the last three letters had peeled away and left HEALTH COMPLIANCE APPOINTM.

A promising brand.

Tessa stood on the other side of the desk with her clipboard tucked under one arm. She had changed out of the raincoat but not the expression that came with it. Evan Pike leaned against the filing cabinet, holding two paper cups of coffee and watching me pretend the motel had a future.

Baggage lay across my feet.

"You're planning to lie," he said.

"I'm planning to manage the narrative."

"That is lying with better posture."

"I need the motel open."

Tessa's pen paused over her clipboard. "The laundry remains closed."

"I know."

"The adjacent hallway remains restricted."

"I know."

"The guest entrance is still under the previous order."

"I know."

"Then what exactly are you trying to keep open?"

I gestured toward the lobby. "The lobby, the office, and any room that doesn't currently contain a flood, glitter trap, illegal dryer operation, or a hidden access route."

Baggage lifted his head. "Room fourteen has a cowboy."

"The naked cowboy is not a sanitation violation."

"He has been using the lobby microwave."

Tessa looked at me.

"He puts his boots in it," I said.

Evan handed me one of the coffees. "You need a test result before Tessa will schedule the reinspection."

"I have a test result."

Baggage's ears twitched. "You have a piece of paper."

"It says the mold count is within acceptable limits."

"It says that in Todd's handwriting."

Todd appeared from behind the filing cabinet carrying a plastic folder and wearing one of the motel's yellow rubber gloves on his left hand.

"I wrote exactly what the machine said," he said.

"What machine?"

He held up a handheld air-quality monitor with a cracked screen.

"That is a stud finder."

Todd looked at it. "It has numbers."

"It also has a picture of a wall."

"It found mold in the wall."

"It found a stud."

"Same family."

Tessa extended her hand. Todd gave her the folder.

She opened it.

Inside were three damp pages, two receipts, a photograph of a ceiling stain, and a handwritten chart that appeared to have been created during a power outage.

Tessa studied the first page. "This says the laundry room tested negative."

"The laundry room was closed," I said.

"It was flooded."

"Yes."

"It was under standing water."

"Yes."

"How did you test it?"

I looked at Todd.

Todd looked at the ceiling.

Baggage sighed. "He tested the mop bucket."

"That was not the laundry room," I said.

"It was in the laundry room," Todd said.

"That is not how rooms work."

"It was the only dry part."

"The mop bucket was full of gray water."

"Exactly. It had a representative sample."

Tessa lifted her eyes to me. "Representative of what?"

"The situation," I said.

Evan took a slow sip of coffee. "That answer won't help."

"It was not designed for comfort."

I had spent the night trying to turn a disaster into a technicality. The laundry had flooded, but the water was mostly detergent. The hallway was restricted, but the lobby remained open. The mold behind the office baseboard was old, but old mold still had the confidence of a current problem. If I could get one clean test, one acceptable number, one piece of official-looking paper, I could keep the motel breathing until the re-test.

The motel had survived years of bad plumbing, illegal key routes, prank glitter, and a chicken with no respect for fire codes. It could survive a little selective phrasing.

That was what I told myself.

Baggage nudged my ankle.

"You told yourself that before you tried to call the broken ice machine a decorative appliance."

"It was decorative."

"It screamed when touched."

"Many decorative objects have strong opinions."

Tessa turned another page. "This result is from room twelve."

"Room twelve is dry."

"It contains tuna, glitter, and a fishing line."

"The mold test was negative."

"Who performed it?"

"Todd."

"Todd used a stud finder."

Todd raised his gloved hand. "In my defense, the mold was not visible."

"That's because you were looking for walls," I said.

Tessa placed the folder on the desk. "I need a valid sample from the laundry room, the restricted hallway, and the office wall."

"The office wall?"

"There's visible growth near the baseboard."

"That's decorative mildew."

"It's green."

"Green is a classic motel color."

"It's fuzzy."

"Textured."

"It smells."

"Atmospheric."

Evan coughed into his coffee. His shoulders shook once.

I pointed at him. "Do not encourage her."

"I'm not."

"You're making a face."

"I'm making coffee."

Baggage sat up. "He likes when you say ridiculous things."

"I'm aware," I said.

Evan looked at me over the rim of the cup. "You could simply tell Tessa the test was invalid."

The office seemed to shrink. Behind me, the scheduling phone rang once, then stopped. Somewhere in the lobby, a vending machine made a grinding noise that had no business occurring because I had unplugged it three days earlier.

"I could," I said.

"You should," Baggage added.

Tessa waited.

That was the problem with Tessa. She never rushed the moment when I was about to make a poor decision. She left the entire burden of embarrassment in my hands, where I could admire it before dropping it.

I opened the folder again.

The first page said **NEGATIVE** in large block letters.

Underneath, Todd had drawn a smiley face.

The second page said NO VISIBLE GROWTH.

Underneath, Darla had written UNLESS YOU COUNT THE WALL.

The third page was blank except for a coffee ring and the words SAMPLE LOST IN FLOOD.

I closed the folder.

"I can get a proper test," I said.

Tessa's eyebrows lifted. "When?"

"Today."

"With what equipment?"

"I'll arrange it."

"Who will collect the samples?"

"I will."

"Are you certified?"

"No."

"Then the result won't be accepted."

I looked at Evan.

He set his coffee down. "I can schedule a certified technician."

"When?"

"Earliest appointment is Friday."

"Today is Tuesday."

"The motel will still exist on Friday."

"That is an optimistic assumption."

Baggage leaned against my shin. "The motel may be eaten by the wall."

"The wall is not eating anything."

A soft thump came from behind the office baseboard.

Everyone looked down.

Todd whispered, "It moved."

"It did not move."

Another thump.

Tessa wrote something on her clipboard.

I grabbed the folder. "Fine. Friday. We'll schedule the test for Friday."

Tessa nodded. "Assuming you retract the current results."

My hand tightened around the damp pages.

The current results were worthless. I knew that. Tessa knew that. Evan knew that. Even Baggage, who had once eaten a laminated fire-exit map, knew that.

But if I retracted them, the motel would be publicly admitting that the owner had handed the county a mold report produced by a stud finder and a mop bucket.

There were easier ways to announce incompetence. I could have rented the lobby to a man with a chicken.

"Oh," I said. "Do I have to retract them publicly?"

Tessa's mouth became a straight line. "You posted them publicly."

I glanced toward the lobby.

The results were taped to the front desk beneath a handwritten sign that said TEMPORARY CLEAN BILL OF HEALTH, PLEASE IGNORE THE FLOOD.

Todd had added a thumbs-up.

"I was under pressure," I said.

"You were under water," Baggage corrected.

"I was under both."

Tessa picked up the clipboard. "I'll schedule the re-test when the false results are removed and the correction is posted."

"Correction?"

"Public apology."

The phrase sat between us like an unpaid bill.

Evan moved closer to the desk. "Tessa, the motel is already restricted. Give her until the certified test."

"She has until the certified test to prove the conditions are safe."

"I'm trying," I said.

"You're trying to make unsafe conditions sound less unsafe."

That landed harder than it should have.

I looked at the papers. The ink had run along the edges, turning NEGATIVE into something that looked like a weather warning. The office wall smelled faintly sweet and rotten. Behind me, the baseboard gave another quiet knock.

I wanted to keep the motel open because it was mine. That was the clean version.

The dirtier version was that I wanted Tessa to look at me and see a woman capable of managing a crisis instead of a woman who had inherited a motel with a secret passage, a criminally enthusiastic key box, and a staff member who tested walls with construction equipment.

I wanted Evan to stop watching for the next disaster.

I wanted the motel to become a business before it became evidence.

"I'll retract it," I said.

Tessa studied me.

Baggage's tail tapped the floor. "That sounded painful."

"It was financially painful."

"Emotionally too."

"Don't get ambitious."

Tessa reached for the phone on the desk. "I'll schedule Friday at ten."

"Ten is during breakfast."

"You serve breakfast?"

"Technically."

"What does that mean?"

"Todd puts muffins near the coffee."

Todd nodded. "Sometimes they're still in the package."

Tessa dialed the number on the scheduling sheet.

I took the folder and walked into the lobby.

The public notice hung beneath the front desk lamp, glowing yellow against the water-stained wall. The motel guests had gathered around it with the focused interest of people who had been told not to touch something.

The bride from room nine stood in her flamingo robe, holding a paper cup of coffee. The man from room eleven leaned beside the ice machine, still carrying duplicate keys he claimed not to own. Darla sat on the counter. Todd hovered near the printer.

The woman with the chicken had brought the chicken.

Baggage followed me out.

"Are you going to apologize?" he asked.

"I'm going to issue a correction."

"That is an apology wearing a fake mustache."

I pulled the notice from the wall.

The bride leaned forward. "Does this mean the mold is back?"

"It was never properly tested."

The man from room eleven raised a hand. "Then why did the paper say negative?"

"Because Todd used the wrong equipment."

Todd lifted the stud finder. "It was very confident."

The chicken clucked.

Baggage looked at it. "She agrees."

"She does not get a vote," I said.

The printer behind me started feeding paper. Todd had apparently pressed something. A page slid out with the heading PUBLIC CORRECTION and the first line in

enormous type:

I LIED ABOUT THE MOLD TEST.

I stared at it.

Todd looked proud. "I made it clear."

"You made it legally terrifying."

"It's honest."

"That's the problem."

Baggage sniffed the page. "Good title."

I turned toward the guests. Tessa stood in the office doorway, listening. Evan was beside her, his expression unreadable except for the small crease near his mouth.

I held up the paper.

"The mold test results posted yesterday were invalid," I said. "The test was not conducted with certified equipment, the samples were not collected correctly, and one of the samples came from a mop bucket."

The bride lowered her coffee.

The man from room eleven looked toward the exit.

I continued before my courage could develop a union and demand better working conditions.

"The motel is not claiming a clean bill of health. We're scheduling a certified re-test for Friday. Until then, the laundry room and adjacent hallway remain closed, and any area Tessa has restricted stays restricted."

The woman with the chicken raised her hand.

I pointed at her. "What?"

"Can we still use the lobby microwave?"

"Does the chicken use it?"

The woman glanced down.

The chicken looked away.

"No," I said. "Nobody uses the microwave."

A murmur moved through the lobby. Not outrage, exactly. More the sound of people recalculating whether their terrible choices had become inconvenient.

The bride read the notice. "So the motel might be safe Friday?"

"If the test passes."

"And if it doesn't?"

"Then I will shut down the affected areas again."

Baggage sat beside the desk. "She means she will complain loudly while doing it."

"That is not part of the official statement."

Tessa stepped forward. "The correction is accurate."

I looked at her. "That's the nicest thing anyone has said to me all week."

"I'm not being nice."

"I know. It makes it better."

She took the notice from my hand and read it once more. Her fingers brushed mine as she accepted the paper. Neither of us moved immediately.

The lobby smelled like stale coffee, wet carpet, and the chicken's personal betrayal of common sense.

"You'll have a grace period," Tessa said.

I blinked. "What?"

"Until the re-test Friday morning. You may keep the lobby and unaffected rooms open, provided you follow the restrictions already issued."

"That sounds like a yes."

"It's a conditional yes."

"I'll take it."

"You'll also keep the correction posted."

"For how long?"

"Until the certified results are entered."

I looked at the paper in her hand. "That headline is aggressive."

"It's accurate."

Baggage wagged. "She likes it."

"I do not like it."

Tessa glanced at me. "You chose it."

"I chose honesty. Todd chose the font."

Todd raised his gloved hand. "The font is called Impact."

"It certainly made an impact."

Evan came to stand beside Tessa. His shoulder brushed hers, and for once he wasn't looking at the walls, the locks, or the ceiling. He was looking at me.

"You did the right thing," he said.

I glanced at the public correction. "I did the expensive thing."

"Those overlap more than you think."

"That is a terrible business model."

"It's a decent life model."

Baggage made a low sound in his throat.

I pointed at him. "Don't."

"I said nothing."

"You were about to."

Tessa pinned the notice beneath the front desk lamp. The paper curled slightly at the corners, but the headline remained bold and impossible to misunderstand.

I LIED ABOUT THE MOLD TEST.

The motel stayed open.

Barely. Conditionally. With the laundry room sealed, the hallway restricted, the office wall breathing through its baseboard, and a certified technician scheduled to arrive Friday with equipment that could apparently tell the difference between mold and architecture.

Tessa gathered her clipboard.

At the door, she paused. "Maribel."

I looked up.

"If you find anything else before Friday, tell me."

"That sounds like a threat."

"It's a request."

"Those are new."

Her mouth softened by half an inch. "I'm trying something different."

Baggage rose and stretched. "Trust."

Tessa looked down at him. "You're very observant."

"I'm a watchdog."

"You're a gossip with paws."

"That too."

Tessa opened the door. Warm air from the highway rolled into the lobby, carrying gasoline, dust, and the distant roar of I-16. She glanced back at the correction, then at me.

"Friday," she said.

"Friday."

She left with the clipboard tucked against her side.

I stood beneath the public confession while Todd adjusted the paper so the headline sat perfectly straight.

The wall thumped behind me.

Everyone turned.

Baggage sniffed the baseboard.

"Good news," he said. "The mold is not the only thing alive."

I stared at the wall.

The motel had earned a grace period.

It had also apparently acquired another tenant.

The Ice Bucket Becomes Evidence

The new tenant behind the office wall thumped twice before breakfast, then the ice machine began coughing.

I stood beneath my public confession - I LIED ABOUT THE MOLD TEST - holding a paper cup under the dispenser while gray flakes drifted into it like the motel had developed weather.

Baggage sniffed the cup.

"That is not ice."

"It's mostly ice."

"It has a smell."

"Everything here has a smell. The lobby smells like wet carpet and Todd's breakfast decisions."

Todd, behind the desk, lifted a muffin still inside its plastic wrapper. "These are fresh."

"They were fresh when the laundry flooded."

"That was yesterday."

"Exactly."

The machine coughed again. A cloudy cube dropped into my cup with a soft plunk.

Baggage backed away. "Evidence."

I stared at the cube. It was the color of old teeth and had something black suspended in its center.

"I need one clean morning," I said.

The motel, apparently offended by the request, rattled the ice machine harder.

Our grace period depended on Friday's certified retest. Until then, the laundry room and adjacent hallway were closed, the public correction was displayed under the front desk lamp, and Tessa Kincaid had made it very clear that one more compliance failure would turn my conditional reopening into a decorative memory.

So naturally the ice machine had started producing swamp jewelry.

I dumped the cup into the sink.

Todd looked up. "Was that for a guest?"

"No."

"Good. I already told the bride the ice was complimentary."

The bride from room nine appeared in the lobby wearing the flamingo robe, one slipper, and the expression of a woman prepared to sue a beverage. "I put one in my coffee."

"Did you drink it?"

"It melted."

"That's not an answer."

She held up the cup. A dark ring circled the coffee.

Baggage peered inside. "The coffee is now less trustworthy."

"It was motel coffee," I said. "The bar was already low."

The man from room eleven emerged from the stairwell holding three duplicate keycards and a plastic bag. He stopped when he saw the ice machine.

"I didn't touch it," he said.

"No one asked."

"You looked at me."

"I look at everyone when the ice develops an internal organ."

He tucked the keycards behind his back.

Baggage pointed. "He has suspicious pockets."

"They're normal pockets."

"Normal pockets do not contain three room cards and a bag of shame."

The man glanced at the machine. "It was fine last night."

"Were you monitoring the ice?"

"I was passing through."

"Through the lobby?"

"Eventually."

"That is not how passing through works."

The bride lifted her cup toward me. "I need to know whether this is safe."

"No," I said.

Her face fell.

"No one drinks anything from that machine until I know what's in it."

She looked at the coffee. "What about this?"

"Pour it out."

She did, directly into the lobby plant.

The plant had survived glitter, floodwater, and a chicken. It did not deserve coffee.

Baggage watched the dark liquid soak into the soil. "Now the plant is contaminated."

"It was already dying."

"It is attempting to leave."

The plant tipped sideways.

Todd caught it against his chest.

"I've got it," he said.

"You're wearing the dirt."

"It's organic."

"That is not a defense."

The ice machine made a grinding sound.

A clear cube dropped into the tray.

Then another.

Then a black fleck drifted through the third one like a tiny person trapped in amber.

I pulled the front panel open.

Cold air blasted my face, carrying the sour smell of wet metal and something faintly sweet. The interior was damp. A brown film clung to the bottom of the reservoir.

Baggage leaned closer.

"That is not ice."

"I'm aware."

"It is soup."

"Thank you."

Darla came in from the storage corridor carrying a mop bucket and wearing rubber gloves that reached to her elbows.

"Why is everyone staring at the machine?"

"It's contaminated," I said.

Darla looked inside. "Again?"

"Again?"

"It did this last month."

I turned slowly. "The ice machine did what?"

"Made gray ice."

"Last month?"

"Only for a day."

"And what did you do?"

"Ran it until the ice looked normal."

I closed my eyes.

Baggage sighed. "That is not maintenance."

"It was a solution," Darla said.

"It was a crime with a rinse cycle."

Todd set the plant on the desk. "I remember that. The cubes tasted like pennies."

"And you served them?"

"Only in the sodas."

The bride stared at him.

Todd added, "The sodas were discounted."

I pulled out my phone and called Evan.

He answered on the fourth ring.

"Maribel?"

"I have an ice problem."

There was a pause. "What kind?"

"The kind that has a film, a smell, and a history."

"Is the machine running?"

"Yes."

"Turn it off."

"I know how to turn off an ice machine."

"Do you?"

"I'm offended."

"Last time you tried to stop a dryer, you pulled the power cord out of the wall and took the outlet plate with it."

"That outlet was weak."

"Turn off the machine, don't touch the water, and keep guests away."

"I was going to do that."

"Good."

"Also, I need to know if this is a reportable contamination issue."

"It is."

"How reportable?"

"Enough that Tessa will want to see it."

I looked at the public correction beneath the desk lamp.

"Could we not tell her until I know what happened?"

"No."

"Evan."

"Maribel."

His voice had that calm, maddening weight it got when he was being reasonable in a way that made my plan look like a raccoon holding a lighter.

"I'm trying to fix this before Friday," I said.

"Then don't hide it."

"I'm not hiding it. I'm investigating."

"Those are different only if you tell someone."

Baggage sat beside the machine. "He is correct."

"You're both becoming unbearable."

"We're concerned," Evan said.

"That's worse."

"Call Tessa."

"I will."

"When?"

I looked at the brown film in the reservoir.

"Soon."

"Maribel."

"I'll call her."

He exhaled. "And don't let anyone clean the machine."

I glanced at Darla, who was already reaching for the mop bucket.

"Put that down," I said.

Darla froze. "I was going to sanitize."

"You were going to erase evidence."

"I was going to sanitize evidence."

"Put it down."

She lowered the bucket.

Baggage sniffed the storage-room door. "The smell continues in there."

I looked at the narrow door beside the ice machine. It led to the supply room, where we kept paper goods, cleaning chemicals, replacement linens, and whatever objects the motel had decided to hide from me until they became legally relevant.

"Why would the smell be in storage?"

"Because the machine's filter is stored there," Darla said.

I turned. "The filter?"

"The replacement filters."

"Replacement filters plural?"

"There are four."

"Where?"

Darla pointed.

The storage room was a disaster in the shape of a rectangle. Boxes leaned against one another like exhausted drunks. Cases of bottled water blocked the back shelves. A mop head hung from a light fixture. Someone had stacked towels on top of a box labeled DO NOT STACK, which was the motel's preferred form of interior design.

The smell grew stronger inside.

Baggage entered first.

"Wet cardboard," he said. "Bleach. Old onions. And something with legal consequences."

"Everything has legal consequences now."

I moved boxes aside. The filter carton sat beneath a case of paper cups, its cardboard softened and stained.

Darla said, "That one's been there a while."

"How long?"

"Since before the flood."

"Which means?"

"Possibly last summer."

I stared at her.

She lifted both hands. "The storage room has a system."

"What system?"

"Things go in."

"That's not a system. That's gravity."

The man from room eleven appeared in the doorway.

I pointed at him. "Stay there."

"I'm not doing anything."

"You're always near the evidence."

"I was looking for towels."

"There are towels in your room."

"They're wet."

"Why are your towels wet?"

He looked toward Baggage.

Baggage looked back. "He has been washing things in the ice machine."

The man's face went pale.

I stepped toward him. "What?"

"I have not."

"You said that very quickly."

"I was answering."

"You were panicking."

"I'm allergic to accusations."

"You're allergic to being caught."

He backed into the doorframe. "I only used the drain."

"What drain?"

"The little one beneath the machine."

Darla whispered, "There's a drain?"

I looked at her.

She shrugged. "I've never gone that low."

Baggage sniffed the floor. "The drain smells like soap and tuna."

"Why does everything smell like tuna?"

"The motel has a theme," Todd called from the lobby.

I crouched beside the machine. A narrow drain line disappeared through the wall toward the storage room. The metal grate was clogged with gray sludge and one bright pink thread.

I pulled on gloves.

"Maribel," Darla said, "Evan said not to touch it."

"He said don't clean it. I'm looking."

"That's how touching starts."

I lifted the grate.

Something slid free and landed on the floor.

A plastic motel key tag.

Room seventeen.

The man from room eleven took one step backward.

Baggage blocked him.

"You are not leaving," the dog said.

"I need air."

"You have already used that excuse."

The man raised both hands. "I didn't put anything in the machine."

"Then why is your room tag in the drain?"

"It isn't mine."

"It says seventeen."

"I'm in eleven."

"That is not a denial."

"It's geography."

The bride appeared behind him. "Room seventeen is where the little boy was sleeping."

"The unsupervised little boy?" I asked.

"He wasn't unsupervised," the man said.

Everyone looked at him.

He swallowed. "Not technically."

I stood. "What does that mean?"

"It means someone was checking on him."

"Who?"

He glanced toward the storage room.

The answer was already becoming expensive.

Before he could speak, the ice machine shuddered. A burst of cloudy water splashed across the floor and struck my shoes.

Darla jumped back.

Todd yelled from the lobby.

The bride lifted her robe.

Baggage barked once, sharply.

The machine began dispensing ice.

Not one cube at a time. A whole avalanche.

Cubes poured into the tray, then over the edge, skittering across the floor in a glittering, filthy wave. They struck the walls, bounced beneath shelves, and slid under the storage-room door. One hit the bride's slipper and lodged there.

She stared down.

"Is it alive?"

"No," I said.

Baggage sniffed a cube. "That one has onion."

The machine kept going.

The tray filled, overflowed, and collapsed under the weight. Ice spread across the lobby entrance, knocking into the legs of the front desk. Todd tried to stop it with a towel. The towel froze to the floor.

"Turn it off!" I yelled.

"I'm trying!"

"You're pressing the light."

"It's the only button!"

Darla lunged for the switch. Her glove slipped. She grabbed the side panel instead, pulled, and tore loose a strip of metal.

The machine shrieked.

A final burst of ice shot forward and struck the public correction.

The paper detached from the wall and landed face-first in the slush.

I watched the words I LIED ABOUT THE MOLD TEST disappear beneath cloudy cubes.

Baggage sat down in the ice.

"This is symbolically satisfying," he said.

"It is not."

"It is a little."

The bride tried to step backward, slipped, and caught herself against the vending machine.

The vending machine woke up.

Its lights flickered.

A bag of chips dropped.

Then another.

Then a packet of powdered cheese.

Todd stared at it. "I unplugged that."

"Apparently it took the criticism personally," I said.

The ice machine finally stopped.

Silence settled over the lobby except for the slow drip of melted cubes and the vending machine's low electrical hum.

The bride looked at her slipper.

The man from room eleven looked at the key tag.

Darla looked at the torn panel.

Todd looked at the chips.

Baggage looked at me.

I looked at the contaminated ice covering the lobby floor, the ruined correction notice, and the brown water pooling beneath the machine.

Then the front door opened.

Tessa stood there with her clipboard.

Of course she did.

Her gaze moved from the ice, to the trapped slipper, to the vending machine, and finally to me.

"Maribel," she said.

"Tessa."

"Why is there ice in the lobby?"

"It escaped."

"From where?"

"The machine."

"Why was the machine operating?"

"It had a moment."

Her clipboard rose.

I pointed at the torn panel. "Before you write anything, I'm investigating."

"Are you?"

"Yes."

"Then tell me what happened."

"The ice is contaminated. The filter storage may have been compromised. There's a clogged drain, a room seventeen key tag, and the machine has been linked to the old route."

Tessa's pen paused. "You found contamination and continued operating the machine?"

"I didn't continue it. It continued itself."

"That distinction will not help."

"I know."

Evan came through the door behind her, carrying a tool bag. His eyes landed on the ice.

"I told you to turn it off."

"I tried."

"You tore the panel off."

"That was Darla."

Darla raised one gloved hand. "The panel was emotionally loose."

Tessa stepped carefully across the ice. Her boots made small cracking sounds.

"Where is the filter?"

"In storage."

"And the maintenance log?"

I felt the lobby change temperature.

"The log is in the office."

"Bring it."

I went to the desk while Tessa crouched beside the machine. Todd began gathering chips. The bride removed the ice from her slipper and placed it on the counter like a specimen.

Baggage followed me.

"Your face is doing the accountability thing," he said.

"My face is doing the calculation thing."

"The calculation is bad."

The maintenance log lay beneath the phone, under a stack of guest complaints and a receipt for six cases of bottled water. I opened it.

The last filter replacement was recorded three months ago.

The next scheduled replacement was marked with a red star.

I turned the page.

The signature line was blank.

I checked the calendar.

The replacement had been due two weeks before the first gray ice incident.

Two weeks before the flood.

Two weeks before I posted the false mold results.

I stared at the empty line.

Baggage leaned over the desk. "You skipped it."

"I didn't know about it."

"You inherited the motel."

"That is not the same as inheriting competence."

Tessa called from the machine. "Maribel."

I carried the log back.

She read the page. Evan looked over her shoulder.

"The filter was due fourteen days ago," Tessa said.

"I know."

"Why wasn't it replaced?"

"I don't know."

Darla cleared her throat.

Everyone looked at her.

She slowly raised her hand.

"I moved the replacement box."

"To where?"

"Room seventeen."

"Why?"

"The little boy needed a place to sit."

I stared at her.

"It was a clean box," she added.

Tessa closed her eyes for one brief second.

Evan took the filter carton from storage and opened it. The replacement filter inside was damp, swollen, and streaked with the same brown film coating the machine reservoir.

The contamination source sat in his hands.

The answer was not the secret passage. Not the man from room eleven. Not even the motel's mysterious tenant.

It was a maintenance step I had failed to verify, a filter I had never replaced, and a log I had never read because I had been too busy lying about mold with a stud finder.

Tessa wrote on her clipboard.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"It means the ice machine remains closed."

"Until I replace the filter?"

"Until it is professionally cleaned, the line is flushed, the source is documented, and the equipment passes inspection."

"Friday?"

"Not if you treat this like the mold test."

I looked at the ice scattered across the lobby, the ruined correction, and the bag of evidence beside the machine.

"So I failed."

Tessa's expression softened by the smallest possible amount. "You found the failure."

"That's not the same thing."

"No."

Evan touched my elbow. "We'll fix it."

Tessa looked at his hand, then at me.

The moment might have become tender if the vending machine had not dropped a third bag of chips onto the floor.

Baggage sniffed it.

"Cheese dust," he announced. "Contamination continues."

Tessa wrote again.

I watched the pen move.

"What now?" I asked.

"Now," she said, "I add the ice machine to the closure order."

The lobby went quiet.

The grace period had been mine for less than a day.

By lunchtime, the ice machine was evidence, the maintenance log was a confession, and the skipped filter replacement had become one more reason Tessa might keep shutting me down.

Baggage nudged the ruined correction notice with his nose.

"Your apology is wet," he said.

"So am I."

"And the tenant behind the wall is knocking again."

Three slow knocks came from behind the office.

Tessa turned toward the sound.

Evan reached for his tool bag.

I looked at the contaminated ice, the storage-room door, and the blank maintenance signature.

The motel had not merely acquired another tenant.

It had acquired a paper trail.

Tessa's Secret Note Leads Me

The paper trail began with a wet apology and ended with Baggage stealing my parking receipt.

He swallowed it before I could stop him, which was impressive because the receipt was three inches long and printed on the kind of thermal paper that usually survives nuclear weather but not a determined watchdog with investigative ambitions.

"Spit that out," I said.

Baggage sat beside the motel's front desk, chewing with bureaucratic satisfaction. "It contains no useful information."

"It contains the address of the county records office."

"I know where we are going."

"You ate the directions."

"I memorized them first."

The ice machine sat behind us with a red CLOSED sign taped across its front. The sign had been printed by Todd in Impact font, because apparently every disaster at the motel needed a visual identity. The maintenance log was tucked under my arm. The damp filter sat in a plastic bag beside it, looking like a sponge that had survived a bad marriage.

Tessa's expanded closure order lay on the counter.

The ice machine had joined the laundry room, the hallway, the office wall, and my remaining dignity.

I had spent the first hour of the morning calling everyone whose name appeared in the maintenance records. The filter supplier claimed they had never delivered to us. The former maintenance contractor claimed he had never worked for us. The county clerk's office claimed they had no record of any inspection irregularities connected to the motel.

Everyone denied knowing anything.

That was how I knew something knew plenty.

"Baggage," I said, grabbing my keys, "if anyone calls, tell them I'm at the county records office."

"Which one?"

"The county records office."

"There are three."

"Of course there are."

He tilted his head. "Should I tell them you are at the one with the mildew?"

"That narrows it down to all three."

Darla appeared from the lobby carrying a bucket, a mop, and a look of deep personal betrayal.

"You're leaving?" she asked.

"I'm investigating."

"You said that before you found the keycards in the dryer."

"And that was productive."

"It got the laundry room closed."

"It got the truth out."

Baggage rose. "The truth is expensive."

"So is ignorance."

Darla looked at the sealed ice machine. "Should I clean the lobby?"

"No."

"Should I clean the office wall?"

"No."

"Should I clean the dog?"

Baggage stepped behind my legs. "I am not evidence."

"You have cheese dust on your ear," Darla said.

"That is unrelated."

I pointed toward the office. "Nobody touches anything while I'm gone. Especially the wall."

A thump came from behind the baseboard.

Darla's mop lowered.

"Especially the wall," I repeated.

The motel had acquired a paper trail, and I intended to find out who had been writing it.

The county records office occupied a beige building beside a tax preparation service and a pawn shop with a hand-painted sign promising CASH FOR GOLD, GUITARS, AND QUESTIONABLE ELECTRONICS. Its parking lot shimmered under the late-morning sun. The asphalt smelled hot enough to fry an egg, though I suspected the county would classify that as an unlicensed food operation.

Baggage jumped out of the truck before I had fully opened the door.

"You're staying in the vehicle," I told him.

"I am part of the inquiry."

"You are part of the reason we were asked to leave the last courthouse."

"The courthouse had poor acoustics."

"You barked at a judge."

"He was ignoring me."

"He was reading a sentence."

"Exactly."

I locked the truck.

Baggage sat beside the front tire and watched me go inside with the tragic dignity of a dog abandoned for forty-five minutes.

The records office smelled like dust, copier toner, and the faint sourness of old carpet. A ceiling fan turned in lazy circles above the waiting area. Three people sat beneath a sign that said PLEASE TAKE A NUMBER, although there was no number dispenser.

I approached the counter.

A woman behind the glass looked up from a computer screen. Her name tag read CINDY, which felt optimistic for a place where time had stopped in 1998.

"I need records connected to the I-16 motel," I said.

Cindy typed slowly.

"Which records?"

"Inspection reports. Property permits. Grant files. Anything involving health closures or maintenance contracts."

She stopped typing.

It was a tiny pause, but I had spent enough time around inspectors to recognize the sound of a door locking.

"What is the property address?" she asked.

I gave it.

She typed again.

"Nothing comes up."

"The motel has been there for decades."

"Then it should be in the system."

"It is."

"You just said nothing came up."

"I'm saying the system is wrong."

Cindy leaned back. "The system is rarely wrong."

"The system is currently telling me my motel does not exist."

"That happens."

"Does it?"

"Sometimes properties are filed under parcel numbers."

"Do you have the parcel number?"

"No."

"Can you find it?"

"Not without the address."

"I gave you the address."

"The legal address."

I looked through the glass at the stacks of paper behind her. "Is there a less legal address?"

Cindy's mouth tightened. "You can request a property search."

"Great. I'd like one."

"That takes ten business days."

"I need it today."

"Then you need a miracle."

I glanced toward the ceiling fan. It wobbled with the slow, uncertain rhythm of a machine considering early retirement.

"Do miracles come with a service fee?"

Cindy slid a form beneath the glass.

The top line asked for the property owner's name.

I wrote Maribel Hart.

The next line asked for the previous owner.

I wrote my aunt's name, then stopped.

The motel had been in the family for years. I had inherited it after my aunt died, along with the key box, the secret passage, the broken vending machine, and a staff that treated basic sanitation as a group suggestion.

Cindy took the form.

Her eyes moved over the page.

"Your aunt's name is in the old files," she said.

"Good."

"Which files?"

"Anything involving the motel."

She looked at the form again. "There are restricted files."

"Why?"

"Because they're restricted."

"That's not a reason. That's a label wearing a hat."

Cindy's gaze sharpened. "You'll need authorization."

"From whom?"

She pointed to a printed sign taped beside the counter.

PROPERTY OWNER ACCESS REQUIRES PRIOR APPOINTMENT.

"I am the property owner."

"Your name isn't on the old records."

"It is now."

"That's not how records work."

"Apparently records work by hiding."

A man at the end of the waiting area coughed into his hand. It sounded suspiciously like a laugh, but I let it go. I had enough enemies without prosecuting respiratory noises.

Cindy returned the form. "Come back with proof of ownership and a prior appointment."

"I have the deed."

"Then bring the deed."

"I have it at the motel."

"Then you'll need to go get it."

I stared at her.

She stared back.

Somewhere outside, Baggage barked.

Cindy glanced toward the doors. "Is that your dog?"

"He's a watchdog."

"He's not registered as a service animal."

"He's not a service animal. He's a conversational animal."

Another bark sounded, followed by the screech of tires.

I turned toward the glass doors.

Baggage had apparently decided the parking lot required immediate intervention. He was trotting in a circle around a silver sedan while a man in a county polo shirt waved both arms.

I pushed through the doors.

"What happened?" I called.

Baggage pointed his nose at the sedan. "The contractor is leaving."

The man in the polo shirt looked at me. "Your dog blocked my vehicle."

"He says you're a contractor."

"I'm a facilities employee."

"Which means contractor-adjacent."

The man glanced at Baggage. "That dog talks?"

"Only when he has something unhelpful to say," I replied.

Baggage sniffed the man's shoes. "He has the smell of old pipes and denial."

The man stepped back. "Keep your dog away from me."

"Gladly. Baggage, move."

Baggage did not move.

The man unlocked the sedan. "I have an appointment."

"With whom?"

"Records."

"About what?"

"County business."

"That is the least reassuring answer available."

He opened the driver's door.

Baggage put one paw on the tire.

The man's face reddened. "Control your animal."

"I'm trying."

"No, you're interrogating me."

"Because you're behaving like someone who has a secret file."

"I don't have any file."

Baggage looked at me. "He has a folder under the seat."

The man froze.

I bent toward the open door.

A brown accordion folder sat on the passenger-side floor, half-covered by a safety vest. A county logo showed along the edge.

The man slammed the door.

"Maribel," he said, "this is not your property."

"Neither is my motel, apparently. Yet here we are."

He moved around the sedan. I followed.

"You need to leave," he said.

"Who are you?"

"Ray."

"Ray what?"

"Ray Miller."

The name struck something loose in my memory. It appeared on the motel's maintenance log, beneath an entry for a filter replacement that had never happened.

I held up the log.

"Ray Miller?"

He glanced at the page.

His face did a quick, ugly rearrangement.

Baggage sat down. "He recognizes the signature."

Ray reached for the log.

I pulled it back.

"You signed this," I said.

"I did not."

"Your name is here."

"Anyone could have written it."

"The signature is in blue ink."

"That proves nothing."

"It proves the ink was blue."

"Don't be clever."

"I'm not. I'm panicking with vocabulary."

Ray looked toward the records office. "You need to speak to the county."

"I'm trying. Cindy says the motel doesn't exist."

"That's not my problem."

"It becomes your problem if you signed maintenance records for a property that doesn't exist."

He took another step toward the sedan.

Baggage's lips lifted.

Ray stopped.

"Call Tessa," he said.

The suggestion landed strangely.

"Why?"

"She handles health inspections."

"I know. She keeps shutting me down."

"Then ask her."

"You're the one who signed the filter log."

"I told you, I didn't sign it."

"Then why are you sending me to her?"

Ray's eyes flicked toward the folder beneath the seat.

Baggage saw it too.

"He is hiding paperwork," the dog said.

Ray swore.

I opened the passenger door.

He grabbed my wrist.

Not hard. Just enough to stop me.

The parking lot went suddenly quiet except for the ticking engine and the loose flap of a nearby campaign sign.

"Don't," Ray said.

There it was.

Not anger. Fear.

I pulled my wrist free. "Now I'm definitely looking."

Ray turned and ran.

He made it six steps before his shoe caught on the concrete parking stop. He pitched forward, windmilled both arms, and landed on the hood of his own sedan with a flat slap that made the alarm shriek.

Baggage trotted over. "His escape strategy requires improvement."

Ray slid slowly down the hood until he sat on the asphalt.

The car alarm continued screaming.

Cindy came out of the records office. Two clerks followed. The man who had coughed in the waiting area stood in the doorway, visibly delighted to have been rewarded for patience.

I retrieved the folder.

Ray covered his face with both hands.

"Please," he said.

That was a very poor choice of word. It suggested the existence of something worth finding.

I opened the folder.

Inside were copies of county inspection notices, maintenance invoices, property maps, and a faded grant application from twenty-three years earlier.

The motel's name appeared across the top.

Not the name I knew.

The document called it the I-16 Transitional Lodging Project.

Under "Community Need," someone had written:

A temporary lodging site for travelers and residents experiencing acute personal disruption, financial instability, or imminent poor judgment.

I read the line twice.

Baggage leaned against my leg. "That is a polite way to describe terrible choices."

The grant file contained photographs of the motel before my aunt owned it. The building looked newer, cleaner, and somehow more suspicious. A sign above the office promised LOW-COST ROOMS, PRIVATE PARKING, NO QUESTIONS ASKED.

The original grant had funded renovations, plumbing, and "controlled access improvements."

Controlled access.

The phrase appeared again in a maintenance agreement dated three years later.

Then I saw the contractor name.

Miller Facilities Group.

Ray lowered his hands.

"You knew," I said.

"I knew the county had old files."

"You knew about the grant."

"I knew my company had a contract."

"You signed maintenance records."

"I told you, not those records."

"Then who signed them?"

He looked toward the folder.

"Someone still uses the old account," he said.

Cindy stepped closer. "What old account?"

Ray stood, brushing asphalt dust from his shirt with wounded dignity.

"I'm not discussing county business in a parking lot."

"You already discussed it in a parking lot," I said. "You just did it while sliding off a car."

He glared at me.

Baggage sniffed the folder. "There is another name."

I looked down.

At the bottom of the grant application, beneath the county approval stamp, a current contractor had signed as the compliance liaison.

The name was familiar from the motel's recent invoices.

Harlan Voss.

The man who had been hired to inspect the old supply line.

The man who had told me the hidden route was "not a structural concern."

The man whose company had billed me for the filter replacement that never happened.

My stomach dropped, but only a little. It had been through too many motel emergencies to commit fully.

"Harlan Voss is still a county contractor," I said.

Ray looked away.

Cindy took the grant file from my hands. "These records are restricted."

"You just let me read them."

"I did not."

"You watched me read them."

"That is different."

"Not enough to make me feel better."

Cindy turned to Ray. "Why is this file in your vehicle?"

Ray's mouth opened.

Nothing came out.

Baggage wagged once. "He is considering a lie."

"Take your time," I said.

A black pickup rolled into the parking lot and stopped beside Ray's sedan.

Harlan Voss stepped out carrying a clipboard.

Of course he did.

His shirt was clean, his boots were polished, and his expression had the smooth confidence of a man who had never personally cleaned a contaminated ice machine.

He looked at me.

Then at the open folder.

Then at Ray sitting beside the alarm-screaming sedan.

"Maribel," Harlan said. "What are you doing with county records?"

I held up the grant file.

"Finding out why my motel keeps getting targeted."

His expression barely changed.

That was the problem.

People who were innocent usually looked confused. People who were guilty looked annoyed. Harlan looked prepared.

Baggage moved between us.

"Harlan Voss knows the old route," he said.

Harlan glanced down at the dog.

"Still talking, I see."

"You still lying," Baggage replied.

Ray stood quickly. "I'm leaving."

"No," I said.

Harlan's hand tightened around his clipboard.

The county building hummed behind us. The sedan alarm shrieked. Heat rose from the asphalt. Somewhere under the silver car, Baggage's stolen parking receipt fluttered loose and stuck to my shoe.

I looked down at it.

The printed time had been altered by hand.

The appointment listed for Ray was not with the records office.

It was with Harlan Voss.

At the motel.

Tonight.

I folded the grant file against my chest.

I had gone looking for proof that inspections were unfair.

I had found proof that the motel was designed for people making terrible choices, that the county had funded the reputation, and that the contractor currently billing me

for repairs had inherited the old access network.

It was progress.

It was also, unfortunately, evidence that Harlan was coming back to my motel after dark.

Baggage looked at me.

"Should we call Tessa?"

I watched Harlan climb into the pickup.

"Yes," I said.

"Before or after we set a trap?"

I tucked the damp maintenance log beneath my arm.

"Both."

The pickup rolled out toward I-16.

Ray's sedan alarm finally stopped.

From inside the county records office, Cindy shouted that I had not been authorized to remove the grant file.

I shouted back that I was bringing it back.

Baggage trotted beside me toward the truck.

"Are you bringing it back?" he asked.

"Eventually."

"Then you are stealing county records."

"I'm borrowing history."

"That is what thieves say."

I opened the truck door.

Behind us, Harlan's taillights vanished into traffic, carrying the current contractor and the oldest secret my motel had ever charged by the night.

The Contractor's Van Vanishes

The contractor's lot behind the motel was supposed to contain three things: Harlan's repair van, the replacement filters he had billed me for, and enough licensed competence to keep Tessa from shutting down whatever remained of my business.

Instead, it contained a rusted chain, two dead pallets, and a raccoon asleep inside a tire.

I stood beside my truck with the grant file tucked under one arm and the maintenance log under the other. The afternoon heat pressed against my face, carrying the smells of hot asphalt, diesel, and the motel's rear dumpster, which had developed a personality.

Baggage sniffed the chain.

"Locked," he said.

"I can see that."

"It is also judgmental."

"It's a chain."

"So are some people."

Behind us, the motel's laundry-room door wore a fresh county seal. Tessa had placed it there after the ice machine incident, right beneath the sign announcing that the laundry room was closed due to contamination, flooding, and what Todd had helpfully added in marker: POSSIBLE BAD SPIRITS.

The certified re-inspection was scheduled for Friday morning.

Today was Thursday.

I had less than twenty-four hours to get the old supply line repaired, the ice machine professionally cleaned, the restricted hallway made safe, and the office wall persuaded to stop thumping like it knew something.

Naturally, Harlan had chosen today to vanish.

I rattled the chain.

From the motel office, Darla shouted, "Did it open?"

"No."

"Try harder."

"It's a contractor lot, Darla. Not a pickle jar."

Baggage looked toward the office. "She would use a wrench on a pickle jar."

"She has."

"Successfully?"

"She broke the jar and blamed the pickles."

I pulled out my phone and called Harlan again.

The call rang four times before launching me into a voicemail greeting delivered in the smooth voice of a man who had never been personally betrayed by plumbing.

"Mr. Voss," I said after the beep, "this is Maribel Hart. I'm standing behind the motel in front of your locked lot. The repair work you promised is due before tomorrow's re-inspection. Call me back."

I ended the call.

Baggage tilted his head. "That sounded polite."

"It was my first attempt."

"How many attempts until you become impolite?"

"Seven."

"Good. I like the seventh."

The rear lot stretched behind the motel between the old supply shed and a sagging wooden fence. Harlan's team had been storing equipment there for weeks, supposedly while repairing the line beneath the restricted hallway. So far, they had removed three boards, charged me for a filter, and left a coffee cup balanced on a pipe.

The cup was still there.

That seemed less like maintenance and more like a threat.

I tried the chain again. The padlock clanked against the gate.

A voice called from behind the shed. "Can't go in there."

I turned.

A man in a gray work shirt emerged carrying a shovel. He had the broad, exhausted face of someone who had spent years being asked to fix things with equipment meant for gardening.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"Deke."

"Deke what?"

"Just Deke."

"Like Cher?"

He stared at me.

"Never mind. Are you with Harlan?"

"Sometimes."

"That is not a reassuring answer."

"I do day work."

"Do you work here?"

"Not today."

"Then why are you standing behind my motel with a shovel?"

Deke glanced at the shovel. "This is a private lot."

"It's behind my motel."

"Private lot."

"I own the motel."

"Doesn't make the lot yours."

I held up the grant file. "This lot is listed in the original property plan."

Deke looked at the folder, then at me.

Baggage sat beside my ankle. "He knows the folder."

Deke's grip tightened around the shovel.

"Does Harlan know I'm here?" I asked.

"No."

"Did he tell you to keep me out?"

"No."

"Did someone tell you to keep me out?"

Deke shifted his weight.

That was enough of an answer to require a second answer.

I reached for the chain.

Deke stepped in front of the gate.

"Ma'am," he said, "you can't enter."

"I am not entering. I'm standing outside, which is currently the only place anyone allows me to stand."

"You need authorization."

"I own the property."

"You need contractor authorization."

"From the contractor who won't answer?"

"That's how it works."

"Then it works badly."

Baggage sniffed the shovel. "It smells like wet dirt and lies."

Deke pulled it away. "Keep that animal back."

"He's a watchdog."

"He's a nuisance."

"He has a more accurate job description than most of the people I pay."

Deke looked past me toward the motel. His eyes landed on the sealed laundry door and then the office window.

"Your inspector coming back?" he asked.

"Tomorrow."

"Then you should leave the lot alone."

That sentence had the smooth, oily quality of advice that had been purchased in bulk.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because the work isn't finished."

"Excellent. I'm here to find out why."

"No access."

"Access to my own repair site is not a luxury."

Deke planted the shovel across the gate.

I looked at the shovel. Then at him. Then at Baggage.

Baggage sighed. "This is the part where you make a poor choice."

"I'm making a necessary choice."

"That is what you called the stud finder."

"I was under pressure."

"You are still under pressure."

I unhooked the chain from the gatepost.

Deke caught the other end.

For one ridiculous second, we stood in a tug-of-war over a chain while the raccoon inside the tire opened one eye and decided neither of us was worth helping.

"Let go," Deke said.

"No."

"You're trespassing."

"I'm not trespassing on my property."

"You're interfering with active work."

"What work?"

He pointed with the shovel.

Behind the shed sat an open trench. It ran from the motel wall toward the old supply line, though "trench" was generous. It was more of a long, muddy accusation. A section of pipe lay beside it, capped with a sandwich bag.

I narrowed my eyes.

"Is that the replacement pipe?"

Deke nodded.

"Why is it in a sandwich bag?"

"Temporary protection."

"It has a cartoon dinosaur on it."

"Good seal."

"The dinosaur is wearing sunglasses."

"Professional-grade."

Baggage leaned toward the trench. "There is a wrench down there."

"Why?"

Deke shrugged. "Dropped it."

"When?"

"Recently."

"How recently?"

He looked at the mud. "Before lunch."

"It's four o'clock."

"Late lunch."

I yanked the chain.

Deke yanked back.

The gate groaned.

Then the padlock snapped open.

Not because of my strength. Not because of Deke's. The lock had simply reached the end of its emotional journey and disintegrated in our hands.

I stumbled backward with half the chain.

Deke stumbled forward with the other half.

The shovel flew over the fence and landed in the raccoon's tire.

The raccoon woke, launched itself through the sidewall, and sprinted across the lot with the shovel clattering behind it like a tiny agricultural ghost.

Baggage barked once.

"Do not chase it," I said.

"I wasn't going to."

"You were leaning."

"I was assessing."

"You were leaning with intent."

Deke stared at the open gate. "That lock was new."

"So was my patience."

He pointed at me. "You can't go in."

I stepped through the gate.

Deke grabbed my sleeve.

Baggage growled.

"Take your hand off her," he said.

Deke froze.

The shovel scraped somewhere near the dumpster. The raccoon disappeared behind a stack of broken chairs. Heat shimmered above the trench.

Deke released me.

"I'm not trying to cause trouble," he said.

"Then stop standing between me and the work I'm paying for."

"The crew isn't here."

"Where are they?"

"Lunch."

"For three hours?"

"Contractor lunch."

"Is that different from regular lunch?"

"More driving."

I walked toward the trench.

Deke followed. "You need to leave."

"I need to see what has been done."

"Nothing."

"That part I can see."

The pipe beside the trench was not only capped with a sandwich bag. It was the wrong size. The original line looked thick enough to carry water to a small prison. The replacement pipe could have supplied a decorative fountain or one ambitious hamster.

I crouched beside it.

Baggage sniffed the pipe. "This is not enough pipe."

"It's not even the correct diameter."

Deke rubbed the back of his neck. "Harlan was sourcing the right piece."

"Harlan has been sourcing it for two weeks."

"He's busy."

"He's hiding."

"That too."

I looked up. "What does that mean?"

Deke glanced toward the motel.

"Deke."

"He said not to finish until the inspection."

"Why?"

"So the county would see the condition and approve the emergency work."

I stared at him.

"That makes no sense."

"It does to him."

"Did Harlan tell you to leave the line open?"

Deke nodded.

"Did he tell you to keep me out of the lot?"

Another nod.

"Did he tell you where he was going?"

Deke shook his head.

Baggage sat beside the trench. "The van is still here."

I looked around.

The contractor's white van had been parked beside the shed all week, its rear doors covered in faded decals advertising plumbing, electrical, and "general solutions," which was vague enough to include arson.

"Where?" I asked.

Baggage pointed toward the far end of the lot.

The van sat behind a stack of plywood.

I marched toward it.

Deke hurried after me. "You can't take anything."

"I'm not taking anything."

"You can't open the van."

"I'm inspecting the equipment."

"That's taking a look."

"Exactly."

The van's rear doors were locked. The side door was not.

I slid it open.

Inside were three empty buckets, a coil of hose, a folding chair, a case of bottled water, and one lonely traffic cone lying on its side.

No tools.

No filters.

No pipe.

No Harlan.

I opened the front door.

The keys were gone.

The dashboard held a greasy fast-food receipt dated yesterday and a handwritten note that said CALL MARIBEL.

I picked it up.

Baggage peered inside. "That is ominous."

"It's not ominous. It's rude."

Deke stood by the rear tire. "Maybe the crew moved it."

"Moved what?"

"The van."

"It's here."

"Not that van."

I looked at him.

He pointed beyond the fence.

Behind the motel's old billboard, tire tracks cut through the dust and disappeared toward the service road.

The van in front of us had no license plate.

I turned slowly.

Deke looked at the van.

Baggage looked at Deke.

"Where did the plates go?" I asked.

Deke's mouth opened.

The raccoon reappeared from beneath the shed carrying the shovel handle in its teeth.

It dropped the handle at my feet and stared at us with bright, judgmental eyes.

"Even the raccoon knows this is bad," Baggage said.

I called Harlan again.

This time the number went directly to voicemail.

I called the office listed on his invoice.

A woman answered on the sixth ring.

"Voss Facilities."

"This is Maribel Hart. I need to speak with Harlan."

"He's unavailable."

"Where is he?"

"I don't know."

"Where is your repair crew?"

"I don't know."

"Where is the contractor van?"

There was a pause.

"What contractor van?"

I closed my eyes.

Behind me, Deke whispered, "That's the wrong answer."

"I'm standing in it," I said.

"Then it's probably not ours."

"It has your company's logo."

"We have several vans."

"Do any of them contain tools?"

"Probably."

"Do any of them contain the repair equipment you billed me for?"

"Probably."

"Do you know which one?"

"No."

The line went dead.

I stared at the phone.

Baggage looked up at me. "You reached the seventh attempt."

"I'm saving the impolite version."

"Why?"

"Because I'm about to need it."

I turned toward the motel.

At the far end of the service road, a white van rolled past the billboard.

The same faded logo flashed across its side.

The driver did not slow down.

"Harlan!" I shouted.

The van accelerated.

Deke ran toward the gate.

I ran after him, but the chain dragged across the dirt and caught around my ankle. I went down hard enough to bite my tongue. The taste of blood joined the afternoon's flavor profile of diesel and poor decisions.

Baggage trotted past me.

"Graceful," he said.

"Not now."

The van turned onto the access road and vanished behind the motel.

I scrambled upright.

Deke reached the gate first. He grabbed the chain, yanked it shut, and stared through the bars.

"Where did it go?" I demanded.

"Road loops behind the highway."

"Then chase it."

"With what?"

I looked toward the contractor van.

No keys.

No plates.

No tools.

No contractor.

The motel's front door opened behind us.

Evan stood there with his tool bag, his expression already braced for damage.

"What happened?" he called.

"The van disappeared," I said.

He looked toward the empty road. "How?"

"It drove away."

"That's not disappearing."

"It disappeared from the schedule, the invoice, the lot, and possibly the legal system."

Baggage returned with the traffic cone in his mouth.

Evan stared at it.

"Don't ask," I said.

"I wasn't going to."

"You were thinking about asking."

"I was thinking the cone is upside down."

Baggage dropped it. "The contractor's team refused access, the van escaped, and nobody answers."

Evan looked at the trench. "Did they finish the repair?"

"No."

He stepped closer and examined the pipe.

His face tightened.

"Maribel," he said, "this line is still open."

"I know."

"And the inspection is tomorrow."

"I know."

"And Tessa is coming back."

"I know."

The three facts stood around us like unpaid bills.

Evan set down his tool bag. "I can patch it temporarily."

"With what?"

"Not this."

He nudged the dinosaur sandwich bag with his boot.

The bag split.

A thin stream of muddy water crawled across the dirt and toward my shoes.

Baggage sniffed it.

"Not potable," he said.

"I wasn't planning to drink it."

"Someone has before."

The water reached the edge of the motel foundation.

I stepped back.

Evan looked toward the office. "We need another crew."

"Licensed."

"Obviously."

"Available tonight."

He gave me a look.

"Fine," I said. "Available tonight and not actively wanted by the county."

"That narrows it."

We spent the next hour calling plumbers, maintenance companies, handymen, and one man named Cletus who assured me he could repair anything except "government water."

Nobody could come before Monday.

One company offered to send someone tomorrow afternoon, after the inspection, which was the plumbing equivalent of bringing an umbrella after the hurricane.

Then Darla appeared with a phone pressed to her ear.

"I found a crew," she announced.

"Licensed?"

Darla hesitated.

"Darla."

"They have paperwork."

"That wasn't my question."

"They have a laminated card."

"Does it say license?"

"It says WE FIX STUFF."

Baggage sat down. "A strong credential."

"Where are they?" I asked.

"Ten minutes away."

Evan rubbed his forehead. "Maribel."

"They can patch the line before Tessa arrives."

"Or create a larger problem."

"That is already the motel's signature service."

Twenty minutes later, a blue sedan and a pickup truck pulled into the contractor lot. Four men climbed out wearing mismatched work shirts. One carried a tool belt. Another carried a leaf blower. The third had a ladder on his shoulder. The fourth carried a paper bag of sandwiches.

The man with the tool belt approached me.

"You Maribel?"

"Yes."

"We're the emergency crew."

"Licensed?"

He glanced at the others.

The man with the ladder said, "We're experienced."

"That is not the same word."

"No," the first man agreed. "But it's a better story."

Evan stepped forward. "Who hired you?"

"Darla."

Darla lifted her hand. "They were the only ones who answered."

The man with the sandwich bag opened it. "We can start after we eat."

Baggage sniffed the sandwiches. "Ham, mustard, and a felony."

I looked toward the motel. The sealed laundry room waited beneath its county notice. The muddy line leaked beside the foundation. The contractor's van was gone, Harlan was unreachable, and Tessa would return in the morning with her clipboard and the expression she reserved for paperwork that had disappointed her personally.

"Fine," I said. "Eat quickly."

The crew ate slowly.

Then they discovered the gate was locked again.

Deke had apparently reattached the broken padlock with electrical tape.

The man with the tool belt stared at it. "That's not going to hold."

"It held for six minutes," Deke said.

"That's not how locks work."

"It worked for six minutes."

While they argued, the man with the ladder leaned it against the motel wall. The ladder slid, struck the office gutter, and dumped a sheet of black water directly onto the front steps.

Darla screamed.

Todd ran out carrying the key box.

The woman with the chicken followed, holding the chicken under one arm.

Baggage watched the crew gather around the leaking pipe.

"They are unlicensed," he said.

"I know."

"They are also confused."

"I know."

"They have brought a leaf blower to a water problem."

The man with the leaf blower started it.

Mud sprayed across the trench, the fence, the side of the motel, and the front of my shirt.

The crew stared at me.

I stared at them.

The chicken clucked once.

Baggage looked at the brown streak across my blouse.

"Temporary replacement crew," he said.

I wiped mud from my cheek.

"Temporary is doing a lot of work in that sentence."

Across the lot, the contractor's empty van sat with its doors open, as useless as a promise. Behind it, the old supply line continued leaking toward the foundation.

Tomorrow, Tessa would return.

The repair was not scheduled.

The original crew had refused access, Harlan had vanished, the van had vanished, and my emergency substitutes had no license, no plan, and apparently no understanding of which machines were appropriate for water.

The man with the tool belt raised a wrench.

"Good news," he called. "We found the leak."

I looked at the muddy water pouring from the wall.

"That was not hidden."

He turned the wrench.

The pipe groaned.

Somewhere inside the motel, the third dryer started running by itself.

Baggage's ears lifted.

"No-and," he said.

"What?"

"The motel has made it worse."

I Accidentally Hire a Clown

B aggage's ears lifted.

"The motel has made it worse."

The man with the tool belt twisted the wrench another quarter turn.

The pipe groaned again.

Every light in the motel blinked at once.

The lobby air-conditioning coughed, blew out a puff of dust that smelled like hot pennies, and died.

Then the pipe burst.

Water shot sideways across the contractor lot and struck the blue sedan hard enough to set off its alarm. The leaf blower man dropped his machine. It bounced once, started itself, and began blowing muddy water in a wide, enthusiastic circle.

Darla screamed from the steps.

Todd shouted, "The key box!"

He was still carrying the heavy box containing keys to motel rooms and facilities, as though the keys might personally negotiate with the plumbing. He slipped on the wet concrete and hugged it to his chest.

"Put it down!" I yelled.

"I can't!"

"Why not?"

"It's full of keys!"

"That is generally how key boxes work!"

The man with the ladder tried to shut off the water by placing one boot over the pipe. The pressure lifted his leg and spun him around. He completed one graceful ro-

tation, lost his balance, and sat down in the mud with the wounded dignity of a man who had expected the pipe to respect him.

Baggage trotted through the spray.

"Your repair crew has discovered hydraulics," he said.

"I noticed."

The crew's leader looked at me through the mist. "Good news."

"If you say you found the leak, I'm throwing the wrench."

"We found the shutoff."

"Where?"

He pointed at the wall.

"The shutoff is behind the wall?"

"Technically."

"Technically is where bad decisions go to rent by the week."

The woman with the chicken emerged from the lobby holding a phone above her head. The chicken sat beneath her arm, damp but furious.

"Is this being fixed?" she asked.

"It is being aggressively relocated," I said.

She turned her phone toward the spray. "Good. People online love a disaster."

"Stop filming."

"Why?"

"Because I'm trying to keep the motel open."

The man from room eleven leaned out of the office doorway. "The internet already knows."

I turned on him. "How?"

He held up his phone. "I posted the ice machine video."

Baggage shook muddy water from his coat. It hit my pants.

"Of course you did."

"It got nine hundred views."

"Congratulations. You've made contamination famous."

The leaf blower roared across the lot. Mud splattered the motel sign, the vending machine delivery door, and the naked cowboy, who had chosen that exact moment to step outside wearing nothing but boots, a hat, and the kind of confidence usually funded by inheritance.

He looked down at himself.

"Is this a work zone?" he asked.

"Yes," I said.

"Then I need a hard hat."

"You need several forms of clothing."

He considered the mud dripping from his hat brim. "I'm not licensed for that."

The pipe continued blasting.

I ran for the office, grabbed the emergency shutoff chart, and found three pages of handwritten arrows, one coffee stain, and a note in my aunt's handwriting that said IF WATER IS EVERYWHERE, START WITH THE BASEMENT.

We did not have a basement.

Underneath that, someone had written, NO, SERIOUSLY, CHECK AGAIN.

I shoved the chart into Evan's hands when he came through the lobby door carrying his tool bag.

"The shutoff is behind the wall," I said.

"So we open the wall."

"Quickly."

He looked past me at the crew, the muddy spray, the naked cowboy, and Todd clutching the key box.

"Do you want it quick or done correctly?"

"Today I'm willing to accept 'not actively flooding.'"

"That's a low standard."

"It's the motel standard."

Evan set down his bag and began examining the wall. He was damp at the shoulders, his dark hair sticking to his forehead, and his expression had settled into the particular calm he used when everything around him had become too stupid to argue with.

Tessa would have called this a violation.

Tessa would have called the entire property a violation with decorative landscaping.

She was coming in the morning. I needed the repairs done before then. I needed the motel to look less like an insurance claim and more like a place where a person could sleep without being sprayed by municipal water.

I also needed to stop hiring people because they owned a wrench.

The thought arrived cleanly and unwelcome.

I had inherited a motel full of broken systems and responded by becoming one more broken system with a clipboard. Every time something failed, I grabbed the nearest person who promised it could be fixed. I did not ask for licenses. I did not ask for references. I asked whether they could come tonight.

That was not management.

That was panic wearing work boots.

"Maribel," Evan said.

I blinked. "What?"

"Hold this."

He handed me a flashlight.

I aimed it at the wall.

"That's your plan?"

"It's the first step."

"I thought the first step was finding the shutoff."

"We found it."

"Behind the wall."

"Exactly."

The leader of the replacement crew wandered over. "We can open that."

"No," Evan said.

The man frowned. "We're workers."

"You're a leaf blower operator."

"I do plumbing too."

"You used a blower on a pressurized water line."

"It moved the water."

"So would a boat."

The man looked at me. "You hired us."

I felt the accusation land because it was deserved.

"Yes," I said. "I did."

Baggage sat beside Evan's tool bag. "She hires according to urgency."

"I know."

"She also trusts laminated cards."

"I know."

"You are being very supportive," I said.

"I am describing the weather."

Evan found a loose panel behind the office desk. He pried it open with a screwdriver. A narrow metal valve gleamed inside.

"There," he said.

The leader stepped forward. "I told you we'd find it."

"You pointed at the wrong wall," I said.

"But emotionally, I was close."

Evan turned the valve.

The water outside stopped.

The leaf blower sputtered and died.

The sudden quiet felt unnatural. Mud dripped from the gutter. The contractor's car alarm continued screaming, apparently unwilling to accept that the crisis had moved on without it.

The crew stared at the pipe.

The leader wiped water from his face. "That's fixed."

Evan looked at the cracked line. "No. It's shut off."

"Same result."

"No."

The man with the ladder stood, leaving a dark outline of himself in the mud. "We can patch it."

"With what?" Evan asked.

The man opened his tool bag.

Inside were two screwdrivers, a roll of tape, a sandwich, and a plastic clown nose.

I stared at the nose.

"Why is there a clown nose in your toolbox?"

The man blinked. "Emergency morale."

"Are you a clown?"

"Sometimes."

"That was not the question."

He picked up the nose. "I do children's parties."

The lobby went quiet behind us.

The man with the leaf blower raised one hand. "He's very good."

"You're a clown-for-hire?"

"Licensed clown-for-hire," he said.

I looked at the laminated card hanging around his neck.

It did, in fact, say LICENSED ENTERTAINER.

Beneath that, in smaller print, it said BALLOON ART, CLOWN SERVICES, MINOR MAGIC.

Nothing said plumbing.

"What made you think I needed a clown?" I asked.

"You called the emergency number on the party flyer."

I looked at Darla.

Darla looked at the phone in her hand.

"I may have searched 'emergency crew near me' and clicked the first number," she said.

"You called a birthday clown."

"He said he had tools."

"I have tools," the clown said.

"You have a plastic nose."

"And a torque wrench in the car."

That was the first useful thing anyone had said in an hour.

"Get it," I said.

The clown jogged toward the blue sedan. The alarm shrieked louder as he opened the driver's door. He reached beneath the seat and pulled out a red metal toolbox covered in cartoon stars.

The woman with the chicken followed him, filming.

"Stop filming," I called.

She kept filming.

The man from room eleven joined her.

Then the bride came out in a robe and slippers.

Then the little boy appeared beside her carrying a paper plate.

Within three minutes, half the motel guests were standing in the lobby and outside the office, recording the clown as he inspected the cracked pipe.

The clown put on the red nose.

"Why are you wearing that?" I asked.

"It helps me think."

"It makes you look less qualified."

"I'm a clown."

He crouched by the pipe, tapped it with a wrench, and listened.

Everyone leaned closer.

The naked cowboy whispered, "He's reading the metal."

"He's listening to the pipe," the bride said.

"He's probably waiting for it to confess," I muttered.

The clown removed the red nose and placed it on the ground.

"Your line is split at the coupling," he said.

Evan crouched beside him. "Correct."

"You need a compression sleeve."

"Correct."

"I have one."

Evan looked at me.

I looked at the clown.

The clown shrugged. "I do birthday parties near old houses."

He opened the toolbox. Beneath the balloon pump and a deck of cards, he produced a proper sleeve, two wrenches, and a roll of plumber's tape.

The guests made a collective sound of approval.

Not laughter. Something worse.

Hope.

The clown worked quickly. He shut the line, cut away the cracked section, and fitted the sleeve with steady hands. No dramatic flourishes. No leaf blower. No sandwich bag. Just the clean scrape of metal, the sharp smell of pipe sealant, and the occasional squeak of his cartoon-covered toolbox.

Evan watched closely.

"You've done this before," he said.

The clown tightened the coupling. "I used to be a maintenance technician."

"What happened?"

"I discovered balloon animals paid better."

The guests pressed closer.

The woman with the chicken angled her phone toward his hands.

The clown glanced up. "Are you filming?"

"Yes."

"Can you get my good side?"

"You're wearing a red nose."

"That is my good side."

He turned the valve.

Water shuddered through the line.

Everyone waited.

The pipe held.

No spray. No mud. No alarm.

The motel had achieved plumbing.

The guests cheered with the alarming enthusiasm of people who had paid by the night to watch somebody else suffer.

The clown bowed.

His toolbox tipped over.

The plastic nose rolled beneath the front desk.

Baggage caught it in his teeth and brought it to me.

"Your employee has a uniform," he said.

"He is not my employee."

"He fixed the pipe."

"That is not how employment works."

"It is how this motel works."

The clown stood. "I can take a look at the HVAC."

I should have said no.

I should have asked for a license, insurance, references, and perhaps proof that he had not recently escaped from a children's party through a bathroom window.

Instead I looked at the dead air-conditioning unit above the lobby. The room smelled like wet drywall, mud, and the chicken's growing resentment. Tessa was coming in the morning. A hot lobby full of guests, mildew, and public videos was not going to improve my inspection results.

"Can you fix it?" I asked.

The clown smiled.

That should have been my warning.

"Probably."

Twenty minutes later, the clown was on a ladder beneath the HVAC panel while half the guests filmed from below. Evan held the ladder. I held the flashlight. Baggage supervised with the grave authority of a dog who had never touched a circuit breaker.

The clown removed the panel and found a nest of wires, dust, and one motel key.

"Room seventeen," he said.

I closed my eyes.

"Of course."

The man from room eleven raised his phone. "This is going viral."

"Put the phone down."

"It already has comments."

"What comments?"

"People want to know if the motel is haunted."

"It is not haunted."

A thump came from behind the office wall.

Everyone turned.

Baggage's ears lifted.

"Not haunted," I said again.

The clown pulled the key from the wiring.

The HVAC unit clicked.

The lights dimmed.

Then cold air blasted from the vents.

It smelled faintly of peppermint and burnt dust, but it was cold.

Beautifully, aggressively cold.

The lobby erupted.

People cheered. The bride spun once in her slippers. The little boy stood directly beneath the vent with his mouth open. The woman with the chicken lifted both arms, and the chicken flapped in protest.

Evan looked up at the unit. "He fixed it."

I stared at the clown.

He climbed down from the ladder, still wearing the red nose.

"You're hired," I said.

He grinned.

Then the lobby lights changed.

The vending machine flickered on. The speakers above the front desk crackled. Somewhere in the ceiling, an old disco beat began thumping.

Todd dropped the key box.

Keys scattered across the floor.

The front sign outside flashed to life.

VACANCIES.

Then, beneath it, another line illuminated in red:

OPENING NIGHT.

I looked at Darla.

She held up the phone. "I might have connected the old event system."

"What event system?"

The disco beat grew louder.

The woman with the chicken started dancing.

The naked cowboy climbed onto the luggage cart.

The bride grabbed the little boy's hand and began spinning him in circles.

The man from room eleven shouted, "I'm going live!"

"No!"

He went live.

The front doors opened as three strangers from the highway wandered in, drawn by the music and the glowing sign. One carried a bottle of champagne. Another wore a sash that said DIVORCED, FINALLY. The third had a portable fog machine.

Baggage watched the fog roll across the lobby.

"This is a party," he said.

"It is not a party."

The clown pulled a balloon from his toolbox and inflated it into a dog.

"That depends on the music."

The lobby filled with cold air, disco lights, fog, mud, guests, strangers, and the unmistakable scent of somebody opening champagne near the contaminated ice machine.

I lunged for the sound system.

The moment I touched the control panel, the speakers boomed.

"WELCOME TO OPENING NIGHT AT THE I-16 MOTEL!"

The guests cheered.

Outside, a car horn answered.

I looked through the glass.

Tessa's vehicle had pulled into the lot.

Her headlights swept over the sign.

OPENING NIGHT glowed red above the entrance.

Baggage sat beside me, the plastic clown nose balanced on his snout.

"Your repairs improved," he said.

I watched Tessa step out with her clipboard.

"And?"

"The public attention is worse."

The woman with the chicken raised her phone toward Tessa.

The clown began making balloon swords.

The naked cowboy challenged the man from room eleven to a dance-off.

I picked up the heavy key box, which was now missing at least six keys and contained one champagne cork.

The HVAC blew cold air over my face.

For one glorious second, the motel was cool.

Then Tessa opened the front door.

"Maribel," she said.

The disco lights spun across her clipboard.

I smiled with the exhausted dignity of a woman who had accidentally hired a clown and somehow improved the plumbing.

"Good news," I said. "The HVAC works."

Behind me, the speakers announced a raffle for a free night in room seventeen.

Tessa looked past me at the crowd.

"Bad news," I added. "Apparently, we're open."

The Party Popper Sets Off Sprinklers

Tessa looked past me at the crowd.

“Bad news,” I added. “Apparently, we’re open.”

The disco lights spun across her face. Behind me, the naked cowboy was attempting a split on the luggage cart, the woman with the chicken was filming him, and the clown was twisting a balloon into something that looked less like a dog and more like a lawsuit.

Tessa lifted her clipboard.

“Why is there a champagne fountain beside the ice machine?”

“Decorative hydration.”

“It has bubbles.”

“So does the hot tub.”

“The hot tub is closed.”

“Then this is the safer option.”

Her eyes narrowed. That was never a good sign. Tessa’s narrowed eyes had shut down my pool, my laundry room, my guest entrance, and one vending machine that had technically been trying to kill people.

Baggage sat beside my ankle wearing the plastic clown nose.

“She has the face,” he said.

“What face?”

“The face she makes before writing.”

Tessa stepped into the lobby. The cold air from the repaired HVAC poured over us, carrying the smell of wet drywall, spilled champagne, and chicken.

“I need everyone out,” she said.

Nobody moved.

The naked cowboy gripped the luggage cart. "We paid for the party."

"You paid for a room," I said.

"Room twelve has a broken lamp."

"That's why you're not supposed to be celebrating near it."

The man from room eleven lowered his phone. "Are we being evicted?"

"No," Tessa said.

"Are we being arrested?"

"Not yet."

He raised the phone again.

"Stop filming," I said.

"I'm documenting."

"You're filming a man in a hat with no pants."

"That's journalism."

Baggage looked at him. "Your standards are low."

"Your dog talks," the man said.

"His standards are lower," I replied.

Tessa moved toward the sound system. "Shut this down."

Darla stood behind the desk with one hand on the controls and the other holding a half-eaten cupcake.

"I can turn off the music," she said.

"Then do it."

Darla pressed a button.

The disco stopped.

For one shining second, the lobby contained only the hum of the HVAC, the hiss of the champagne fountain, and the wet slap of the clown's balloon twisting between

his fingers.

Then the front sign flashed.

OPENING NIGHT.

The speakers boomed back to life with a new song, louder than before.

Darla stared at the controls. "That button made it louder."

"Press another one."

"I don't know what the buttons do."

"Why are you touching them?"

"Because you told me to."

This was how civilization ended. Not with war, famine, or a meteor. With Darla operating an event system she had found behind a motel office wall.

Tessa set her clipboard on the desk. "Cut the breaker."

Todd appeared beside her with the heavy key box clutched to his chest.

"Which breaker?" he asked.

"The event system."

Todd opened the key box.

A jumble of brass keys, duplicate room keys, and one champagne cork rattled inside.

"I have a key for the electrical room," he said.

"That is not the same as a breaker."

"It opens the door."

"Then open the door."

He spun toward the hallway.

The bride caught his sleeve. "Are we allowed to leave?"

"Yes," Tessa said.

The bride looked at the crowd. "But the music just got better."

"It got louder," I said.

"That's what better means at weddings."

The clown lifted a balloon sword. "I can escort people out."

"Put down the sword," Tessa and I said together.

He lowered it.

The first sprinkler head popped.

It made a tiny metallic click above the front desk.

Everyone looked up.

I knew that sound. I had heard it during the laundry flood, the pool shutdown, and the day the vending machine began dispensing warm soup. It was the sound of a building making a decision without consulting management.

Tessa's gaze tracked upward.

"Why is that sprinkler wet?"

"It's near the champagne fountain."

"It's in the ceiling."

"Moisture travels."

A red party popper rolled across the floor and struck the base of the desk.

The woman with the chicken pointed at it. "That's mine."

"Why is it smoking?" I asked.

"It's not fireworks."

"It is smoking."

"It's a celebration popper."

"That is fireworks wearing a fake mustache."

The woman bent to retrieve it.

"Don't," Baggage said.

She froze.

The popper gave a soft, cheerful snap.

A silver burst shot upward.

It struck the sprinkler head.

The sprinkler answered with the enthusiasm of a fire department that had been waiting all day for something to do.

Water exploded over the front desk.

The sound was enormous. The champagne fountain hissed. The speakers crackled. The disco lights spun through the spray, painting the lobby blue, red, and green while water hammered the counter and poured over the key box.

Todd screamed.

The woman with the chicken screamed louder.

The chicken flapped out of her arms and landed on the brochure rack.

The naked cowboy raised both hands. "This is not my fault."

"You lit the popper," the woman shouted.

"I did not!"

"You were holding it!"

"I was emotionally holding it!"

Tessa grabbed her clipboard before it floated off the desk.

"Shut off the water!"

Todd ran toward the hallway.

"Not that way!" I yelled.

He stopped. "Which way?"

"The valve room is behind the laundry corridor."

"The laundry corridor is closed."

"So is the lobby in about three seconds."

Todd turned again.

Darla grabbed a mop and charged into the spray. The mop immediately became a wet noodle and slapped her across the face.

"I found the shutoff!" she shouted.

She had opened the janitor's closet.

A bucket fell out and landed on her foot.

Baggage shook water from his coat. It splattered my jeans.

"Excellent," he said. "The staff has located the cleaning supplies."

"Helpful."

"I am being accurate."

Water raced across the tile, slipped beneath the brochure rack, and poured through the open doorway toward the guest wing. The champagne fountain tipped sideways, sending a fizzy stream beneath the front desk.

The clown grabbed the fountain.

"Where does this go?" he asked.

"Outside!"

He dragged it toward the entrance. The cord caught around his ankle. He fell backward, still holding the fountain, and sent a wave of champagne across the lobby.

The chicken flapped from the brochure rack onto the key box.

Todd tried to catch it.

He missed.

The chicken landed on his shoulder, and the key box slid from his hands.

Keys scattered across the wet floor.

The familiar metallic clatter was almost comforting. Nothing said motel management like hundreds of room keys drifting toward a drain.

Tessa stepped into the water.

"Maribel."

"I know."

"You need to evacuate the wing."

"I'm trying."

"No, you're negotiating with a naked man."

The cowboy had climbed onto the luggage cart again. "I'm not leaving without my hat."

"Your hat is on your head," I said.

He touched it.

"Right."

The bride stood in the doorway with the little boy tucked behind her robe.

"Is the building on fire?" she asked.

"Not yet," Tessa said.

The little boy pointed at the ceiling. "Why is it raining inside?"

"Because the motel believes in amenities," I said.

A second sprinkler head clicked.

I looked up.

It began to spray.

Then a third.

The water struck the disco lights, which flickered and sent a sharp electrical snap through the lobby. The speakers shrieked. Every guest ducked except Baggage, who merely turned his head.

"Power," he said.

"I heard it."

"No, you smelled it."

He was right. Beneath the wet plaster and champagne came the bitter stink of burning insulation.

Tessa grabbed my arm. Her fingers were cold and firm.

"Cut the power now."

"I need to get the guests out."

"They refuse to evacuate."

"I noticed."

The man from room eleven stood ankle-deep in water, still filming.

Tessa pointed at him. "Put down the phone and move."

He glanced at the screen. "The comments say this is the best part."

"The best part is going to be when your phone becomes a melted rectangle."

He tucked it into his shirt.

"That seems worse," I said.

Baggage barked toward the guest wing.

The sound cut through the noise.

"Water is under room nine," he said. "And room eleven. The hallway lights are blinking."

The bride grabbed the little boy's hand.

"Everyone out," I called. "Now."

The crowd stared at me.

The naked cowboy raised a finger. "Can we take our champagne?"

"No."

"Can we take the chicken?"

The woman with the chicken scooped it up.

"Can we take the balloon animals?"

The clown began handing them out.

"Why are you distributing balloons?" Tessa demanded.

"They're calming."

A balloon sword floated past her face.

"It is not calming."

The hallway lights blinked again.

This time, one went out.

Then another.

The guest wing filled with the low electrical hum of something overheating behind the walls. Water spread beneath the doors, thin and fast, carrying soap wrappers, a plastic room key, and one of the motel's decorative seashells.

Room nine opened.

Bride from room nine stepped out wearing a towel, a plastic crown, and the expression of someone who had been promised privacy and received weather.

"Why is there water in my room?" she demanded.

"Sprinklers," I said.

"Why are the sprinklers on?"

"A party popper."

She stared at me.

I pointed toward the woman with the chicken.

The woman raised one hand. The chicken remained tucked beneath the other.

"Technically," she said, "it was a celebration popper."

Bride from room nine looked at the ceiling. "I hate celebrations."

"Get outside," Tessa said.

"I'm not leaving in a towel."

"You can borrow my coat."

Tessa stripped off her inspection jacket and handed it over.

Bride from room nine put it on. The sleeves hung past her hands, and the clipboard clipped to the pocket swung against her knee.

Tessa watched it go.

"That jacket has my inspection notes."

"Then keep it dry," I said.

"It is currently on a woman wearing a crown and a towel."

"Still drier than the lobby."

Another electrical snap cracked overhead.

The clown dropped the balloon pump.

The lights died.

The lobby went black except for the emergency exit sign and the red glow of the OPENING NIGHT sign outside. The sprinklers kept roaring. Water slapped against the tile. Somewhere in the darkness, the chicken made a sound of personal betrayal.

Then the emergency alarm began.

Not the fire alarm.

The old karaoke system.

A tinny voice announced, "Please select your song."

Nobody moved.

The voice repeated itself.

"Please select your song."

Baggage's eyes reflected the exit sign.

"The motel wants a solo," he said.

"I'm going to give it one," I replied.

I grabbed the flashlight from the desk. Its beam bounced over the flooded floor, the floating keys, the overturned champagne fountain, and Tessa standing ankle-deep in water with her hair dripping against her cheek.

She looked at me.

"Where is the electrical room?"

"Behind the laundry corridor."

"The one that flooded yesterday?"

"Different flood."

"That is not better."

"It's the best I have."

We pushed through the guest wing. The water was colder there, running beneath the doors and soaking the carpet. Room eleven's door stood open. The man from room eleven backed out carrying his phone above his head.

"Your room is flooding," I said.

"I know."

"Why didn't you leave?"

"I was getting footage."

Tessa snatched the phone from him and handed it to me.

He stared at her.

"Evacuate," she said.

He left.

Behind us, the naked cowboy appeared wearing a life jacket.

I swung the flashlight toward him.

"Where did you get that?"

"Room six."

"Why does room six have a life jacket?"

"Emergency preparedness."

"You stole it."

"I borrowed it during an emergency."

Baggage walked past him. "He also stole a snorkel."

The cowboy pulled the snorkel from his mouth.

"It was already wet."

We reached the laundry corridor.

The door was locked.

Todd arrived behind us, carrying the key box with both arms. The chicken sat on top of it like a feathery supervisor.

"I have the key," he said.

"Which one?"

Todd looked at the ring.

"I don't know."

"Try the one marked electrical."

"There are three."

"Why are there three?"

"Because one is for the electrical room, one is for the old electrical room, and one is labeled electrical but opens the linen closet."

"Of course it does."

Todd tried the first key.

Nothing.

The second key opened a supply cabinet.

A mop fell out and landed on his head.

The third key opened the electrical room.

Inside, the breaker panel buzzed.

A thin line of smoke curled from the bottom seam.

Tessa stopped behind me.

"Cut the main."

I looked at the switches.

There were handwritten labels taped across them.

LOBBY.

GUEST WING.

LAUNDRY.

OLD ROUTE.

DO NOT TOUCH UNLESS ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY.

The last label had been written in my aunt's handwriting.

Naturally, it was the only switch that looked remotely useful.

"What does 'old route' control?" Tessa asked.

"I don't know."

Baggage sniffed the panel. "It controls something underground."

"That is not comforting."

"Neither is the smoke."

The breaker sparked.

I grabbed the main switch.

Tessa caught my wrist.

"Everyone clear?"

I looked back.

The naked cowboy stood in the hallway with the life jacket. The clown held three balloon animals. Darla had the mop. Todd had the chicken. Bride from room nine wore Tessa's jacket over her towel. The man from room eleven was filming with a second phone.

"No," I said.

"Then clear them."

The ceiling above us groaned.

Water poured through the light fixture.

I shouted, "Out!"

This time, everyone moved.

The cowboy ran first, the life jacket flapping behind him. Darla shoved the clown toward the lobby. Todd carried the key box. The chicken rode on top, furious and dry.

Bride from room nine dragged the little boy by the hand. The man from room eleven finally stopped filming when a spark landed on his shoulder.

I waited until Tessa reached the doorway.

"Maribel," she called.

I pulled the main switch.

The motel gave one enormous mechanical sigh.

Every light died.

The sprinkler noise stopped.

The karaoke system cut off mid-announcement.

The OPENING NIGHT sign outside went black.

For a moment, there was only rainwater dripping from the ceiling and the uneven breathing of people who had just discovered that darkness was less entertaining than expected.

Then the hot-water pipes groaned.

A deep shudder moved through the walls.

From somewhere in the guest wing came a series of metallic clanks, followed by the sound of water draining away.

Baggage sniffed the air.

"The hot water is gone."

"I know."

"No," he said. "It is very gone."

Tessa looked toward the dark hallway.

"How many rooms?"

I checked the emergency light. Its weak beam showed the guest wing fading into black.

"Most of them."

"Lighting?"

"Also most."

She turned to me.

The water had stopped. The fire risk was contained. The lobby was soaked, the electrical system was dead, and the motel had lost hot water and lighting across multiple rooms.

Tessa's clipboard was still clipped to Bride from room nine's borrowed jacket. The woman with the chicken was wringing out one wing. The clown's balloon dog floated against the ceiling.

I looked at the breaker panel.

The switch marked OLD ROUTE remained on.

Baggage stared at it.

"That one is still drawing power," he said.

A faint thump sounded behind the wall.

Then another.

From somewhere beneath the motel, the third dryer started running.

In the darkness, Tessa stepped closer to me.

"Maribel," she said quietly, "what exactly is under this building?"

I watched the old-route switch tremble.

"Nothing I can afford to find tonight."

The dryer thumped again.

This time, something thumped back.

The Guest Who Won't Leave

The dryer thumped again.

This time, something thumped back.

Baggage's ears stood straight up. In the dark hallway, the emergency light painted his wet coat greenish-white, which was not a flattering color for anyone except possibly a corpse.

"Something's behind the wall," he said.

"I gathered that."

"It sounds irritated."

"Everything in this building sounds irritated."

Another thump came from beyond the drywall. The guests in the hallway went silent, except for the woman with the chicken, whose bird made a tiny offended cluck from beneath her arm.

Tessa stood beside me with her jacket missing, her clipboard still clipped to Bride from room nine's borrowed coat, and water dripping from one sleeve. Her hair had gone from inspector-neat to damply homicidal.

"We need to clear the hallway," she said.

"We need to find whoever is making that noise."

"Those are not mutually exclusive."

At the end of the hall, room seventeen's door opened two inches.

A man peered out.

He was thin, gray-haired, and wearing a hotel bathrobe over a button-down shirt, as if he had dressed for a deposition and then remembered he was staying in a motel. His room smelled faintly of coffee and old carpet. A leather folder rested under one arm.

"Is there a problem?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. "The building is without power, hot water, and most of its dignity."

He opened the door wider. "I'm not responsible for infrastructure."

"No one is responsible for infrastructure. That's why it keeps attacking us."

His gaze slid toward the breaker room. Then toward Tessa. Then back to me.

Baggage sniffed the air.

"Room smells like peppermint," he said.

I looked at the man.

"Do you have a peppermint air freshener?"

"No."

"Then why does your room smell like one?"

He tightened his grip on the folder. "I use medication."

"For what?"

"That's private."

"Everything is private until it leaks under the door."

Tessa stepped forward. "Sir, the guest wing is being evacuated while we assess the electrical fault."

He did not move.

"I have a paid reservation through Sunday," he said. "You cannot compel me to leave without proper notice."

The hallway lights flickered once, weakly, then died again.

"Congratulations," I said. "You have proper notice from the electricity."

He leaned against the doorframe. "I'm familiar with tenant protections."

"You've been here one night."

"Length of stay does not negate occupancy rights."

"Neither does saying the word occupancy like you're about to sue the wallpaper."

The man's expression stayed bland. It was the sort of face people wore when they had memorized a legal website and planned to make it everyone else's problem.

Tessa looked at me. "What's his name?"

"Sir?"

"Ray," he said.

The name landed somewhere in the back of my mind. Ray. The appointment listed for tonight. Not the records office. Harlan Voss at the motel. A planned meeting, possibly a trap, because apparently my property had become a low-budget spy facility with worse plumbing.

"Ray what?" I asked.

"Ray Mercer."

"Do you know Harlan Voss?"

Ray's eyes moved toward the black hallway.

There it was. Tiny, but real. The pause. The little hesitation people made when a name had just walked into the room wearing muddy boots.

"I know many contractors," he said.

"I didn't ask about contractors."

"You asked about Harlan."

"And you answered about contractors."

"Perhaps I misunderstood."

"Perhaps your room is full of things you misunderstood."

Tessa came closer. "Mr. Mercer, you need to leave the building."

Ray lifted the leather folder. "I have documentation."

"Wonderful," I said. "Maybe it explains why your door is connected to the wall that just knocked back."

His hand went flat against the folder.

Baggage stared at him.

"You know what's behind the wall," the dog said.

Ray's face twitched.

I pointed at Baggage. "He's usually right."

"He's a dog."

"He's also the most reliable employee on the property."

"Low bar," Darla muttered from behind us.

She had arrived carrying a flashlight in one hand and the key box in the other. The box was still wet, heavy, and missing several keys. The chicken remained perched on top like a feathery manager with no interest in payroll.

Todd followed her, holding the flashlight backward.

"Turn it around," I said.

"I'm lighting my hand."

"Your hand is not the emergency."

"It's the only thing I can find."

I took the flashlight and aimed it at Ray.

He shielded his eyes.

"Please don't shine that directly at me."

"Then step outside."

"I'm not leaving my room unattended."

"Why? Is it planning to escape?"

Ray's gaze shifted again, this time toward the bed.

I moved before he could block the doorway.

He stepped in front of me.

"That is private property."

"So is my building."

"You cannot enter without consent."

"I own the room."

"You rent the room."

"I own the room for the duration of your stay."

"That's not how ownership works."

"It is under temporary lodging statutes."

"Did the statutes also give you permission to ignore an evacuation?"

He produced a folded paper from the folder.

"I have a written notice stating that I may remain until proper relocation is arranged."

"Who wrote it?"

He handed it to me.

The page carried the motel letterhead. My letterhead. The one with the faded blue wave and the typo in "hospitality" that my aunt had refused to fix because, according to her, "people know what we mean."

The signature at the bottom was not mine.

It looked almost like mine if someone had watched me sign once from across a parking lot.

I looked at Darla.

She raised both hands. "I didn't sign it."

Todd shook his head. "I can't sign."

"That has never stopped you before."

"I sign delivery slips."

"This isn't a delivery slip."

Ray folded his arms. "The notice is valid."

"It says you're entitled to remain in room seventeen due to a hazardous condition."

"The hazardous condition is the motel's responsibility."

"Which means I'm allowed to remove you from it before it falls on your head."

"That would be retaliatory."

"Retaliatory against what?"

"Against my complaint."

"What complaint?"

He smiled without warmth. "You know what complaint."

"No, I know about forty-three complaints. The ice machine, the flooded laundry, the chicken, the naked cowboy, the clown, the party, the sprinklers, and one man who says the room eleven mattress is discriminating against his spine."

The man from room eleven, standing near the lobby, called, "It is!"

Ray lowered his voice. "I filed a formal complaint with the county."

Tessa's eyes sharpened.

"With whom?" she asked.

Ray glanced at her clipboard, currently attached to Bride from room nine's jacket.

"With the appropriate office."

"That is not an answer," Tessa said.

"I have a right to confidentiality."

"So do I," I said. "But I'm about to violate mine by screaming."

Behind Ray, something scraped inside the wall.

Not a thump this time.

A slow dragging sound, followed by a metallic click.

Baggage growled.

Ray's shoulder tightened.

I shoved the door.

He caught it.

"Maribel," Tessa warned.

"I'm not entering. I'm opening."

"That distinction is going to be important in court," Ray said.

"Good. Bring snacks."

The door moved another inch. A cold draft slipped through the gap, carrying peppermint, damp concrete, and the sour smell of overheated wiring.

Ray's hand slid from the door to the folder.

The folder dropped.

Papers scattered across the carpet.

One page showed a list of room numbers.

Another showed dates.

A third had a column labeled TRANSFER and another labeled ACCESS.

At the bottom, in handwriting I recognized from the swapped-key notes, someone had marked room seventeen with a black circle.

Ray lunged for the papers.

So did I.

We collided in the doorway. His elbow caught my shoulder. My flashlight flew into the room and struck the wall with a hard plastic clack.

Baggage shoved his nose between us.

"Do not bite him," I said.

"I was considering his trousers."

Ray scrambled backward.

The flashlight beam spun across the room, revealing an ordinary bed, two suitcases, a motel Bible, and a second door behind the wardrobe.

I stared.

Ray moved in front of it.

"Oh, absolutely not," I said.

"That is a maintenance access panel."

"Why is it shaped like a door?"

"Old construction."

"Why is it locked from the inside?"

"Security."

"Why does it have a peppermint smell?"

"Medication."

"You need a new answer."

The hallway crowded behind me. Darla leaned around my shoulder. Todd lifted the key box as if he planned to use it as a weapon, which was optimistic considering it weighed more than he did.

Evan arrived from the guest wing carrying a pry bar.

He looked at the room, the papers, Ray, and the hidden door.

"Please tell me that isn't another passage," he said.

"It's another passage."

He closed his eyes briefly. "The motel is running out of walls."

Ray snatched up the papers. "You're trespassing."

"You're hiding an access door in a room under evacuation," I said.

"I'm protecting my privacy."

"You're protecting a hallway."

"Maintenance corridor."

"Fine. A maintenance corridor with a secret door and a legal notice signed by a ghost."

Tessa stepped into the doorway. "Mr. Mercer, leave the room."

"I have a right to remain."

"Not during an emergency closure."

"I have evidence that the closure is retaliatory."

"Evidence of what?"

Ray looked at her.

The question sat between them, too familiar for strangers.

"You know," he said.

Tessa's face hardened. "I know you are refusing a lawful evacuation."

"You know why I'm here."

"I know you booked a room."

"You told me to come."

The hallway went quiet.

Even the chicken stopped rustling.

I turned toward Tessa.

She looked at Ray, not me.

"I did not tell you to come here," she said.

Ray's mouth curved. "You sent the message."

"What message?"

Tessa's gaze snapped to mine.

"Maribel - "

Ray moved.

He shoved the wardrobe.

It rolled six inches, revealing the hidden door fully. Then he slipped through the opening and slammed it behind him.

"Ray!" I shouted.

I grabbed the handle.

Locked.

Evan wedged the pry bar into the frame.

"Move."

The door splintered open on the second pull.

Behind it was a narrow concrete passage running toward the old route beneath the motel. Damp air rolled out. A string of battery lights flickered along the ceiling, and fresh footprints marked the dust.

Ray was already halfway down the corridor.

Baggage shot past me.

"Baggage, no!"

"I'm pursuing the legal tenant."

Evan followed with the pry bar. I went after them, Tessa close behind.

The passage narrowed near the bend. A metal shelf blocked part of the route, stacked with spare keys, bottled water, filter cartridges, and three boxes of motel soap. The familiar inventory ritual, only now with better organization and worse lighting.

Ray reached the far end and pulled a second door shut.

Evan slammed into it.

The door held.

Ray's voice came through. "You cannot detain me."

"I'm not detaining you," I shouted. "I'm preventing you from wandering into the electrical guts of my motel."

"Your motel has no authority over me."

"It has authority over the walls."

Baggage sniffed beneath the door. "He is standing beside a ladder."

"Of course he is."

Tessa crouched beside the threshold. "Ray, open the door."

"You should not be here."

"I inspect this property."

"You inspect what they let you see."

The words struck harder than they should have.

Tessa went still.

I looked at her.

Ray continued, "You said the old route was sealed."

"I said it was restricted."

"You said no one had access."

"No one was supposed to."

"Then why did you send me the schedule?"

"What schedule?" I asked.

Tessa stood. "I did not send you anything."

Ray laughed once. "You're going to deny the number?"

"What number?"

"The one you use when you don't want county records involved."

Tessa's face went pale with fury, not fear. It was a very specific expression, the one she wore when someone had contaminated a surface and then lied about the bleach.

"Maribel," she said, "I need to see your phone."

"Why?"

"Because someone is using my name."

"Someone has been using mine too. Mine is on a fake eviction notice."

A muffled clatter came from behind the door.

Baggage's head lifted. "He dropped something."

Evan jammed the pry bar into the gap.

The door cracked.

Ray swore.

"Legal-sounding," I said. "Not legal."

Evan pulled again.

The latch tore free.

Ray stood in a concrete utility room with one hand on a metal ladder and the other wrapped around a small black phone.

The room held electrical panels, old pipes, and a folding chair. On the floor sat a canvas bag packed with duplicate keycards.

Ray looked at the phone.

Then at Tessa.

Then at me.

"Give me that," I said.

"It belongs to me."

"So does the building."

He backed toward the ladder.

Baggage blocked the only exit.

"You're cornered," the dog said.

"I'm not speaking to an animal."

"You've spoken to worse."

Ray tried to step around him.

Baggage growled.

Ray stopped.

Evan took the phone from his hand.

Ray's face changed.

Not dramatically. He was too practiced for that. But the bland legal mask slipped, and underneath it was a tired man who had been expecting a different ending.

Tessa held out her hand.

Evan gave her the phone.

The screen lit.

A message thread filled the display.

The contact name was T.K.

The newest message read: YOU SAID SHE WOULD BE OUT BEFORE I ARRIVED.

Below it, another:

THE OLD ROUTE IS NOT SAFE. STOP SENDING PEOPLE THROUGH SEVENTEEN.

Tessa stared.

I looked at her.

"Did you send those?"

"No."

Ray said, "You did."

"I did not."

"You used the number."

"I never gave you my number."

"You gave me the inspection line."

"That line is public."

"Then you should have secured it."

I took the phone from Tessa.

The messages continued beneath the screen lock. Dates. Room numbers. Instructions to move duplicate keys. Warnings about Harlan. One message from a number labeled TESSA read:

KEEP PIKE AWAY FROM THE OLD ROUTE.

Evan saw it over my shoulder.

His jaw tightened.

Ray reached for the phone.

I stepped back. "No."

"You have no right to possess my device."

"I have a right to possess evidence found in my secret utility room while you were refusing evacuation."

"That is not evidence."

"It is a phone full of evidence."

Tessa's voice went flat. "Ray, who gave you access?"

He looked at her.

"Your office did."

"My office did not."

"Then someone inside it did."

The cost of getting what I wanted arrived neatly packaged. I had wanted Ray out. I had wanted control of the building. I had wanted an answer about the thumping, the hidden route, and the inspection manipulation.

Now I had a phone tying the guest network to Tessa's name.

It was exactly the sort of answer this motel provided: technically useful, deeply inconvenient, and damp around the edges.

I called the sheriff's office from my phone. The call went through despite the dead motel system because, unlike every appliance I owned, cellular towers enjoyed functioning.

Ray protested the entire time.

He cited occupancy protections, unlawful search, retaliatory closure, procedural defects, and something about adverse inference that made Baggage yawn.

When the deputy arrived, Ray stood in the guest hallway with his leather folder tucked beneath his arm and his expression restored.

The deputy read the fake notice.

Then the messages.

Then the duplicate keycards.

"Mr. Mercer," he said, "you're leaving."

Ray pointed at me. "She cannot force checkout."

"I can," I said. "The power is out, the hot water is gone, the hallway is restricted, and you have a secret tunnel in your room."

"It's a maintenance corridor."

"Your maintenance corridor has a ladder and a burner phone."

"I'm entitled to retrieve my belongings."

"Pack."

He did.

It took him twenty-three minutes to gather one suitcase, the leather folder, two shirts, a travel alarm clock, and an alarming number of motel soaps. He left the room with wounded dignity and a bag that squeaked every time he lifted it.

At the front entrance, he paused.

Tessa stood beside me. Her face was unreadable.

Ray looked at her. "You know what happens if those messages get out."

"I know what happens if they don't," she said.

He turned to me. "You think this proves something?"

"It proves you're checking out."

He gave me a thin smile. "You'll regret keeping that phone."

"Probably. But I regret most things here. It's practically a loyalty program."

Ray stepped into the dark parking lot.

Baggage watched him go.

"He left something," he said.

I looked back toward room seventeen.

The bed was stripped. The hidden door stood open. Water dripped somewhere inside the wall.

On the carpet beneath the wardrobe sat the black burner phone.

I picked it up.

The screen lit without a passcode.

One new message waited.

T.K.: DO NOT TRUST MARIBEL.

I looked at Tessa.

She looked at the phone.

Baggage sighed.

"Romance," he said, "is going badly."

Tessa reached for my hand instead of the phone.

Her fingers were cold from the flooded hallway.

"I didn't send those messages," she said.

"I know."

The phone buzzed again.

A second message appeared.

T.K.: SHE HAS THE EVIDENCE NOW. MOVE THE THIRD DRYER.

From somewhere beneath the motel, the dryer thumped once.

Then started running.

The Burner Phone Calls the Wrong Person

The third dryer started running beneath the motel, which was impressive because the laundry room had no power, no working ceiling light, and a closure order taped across the door in Tessa's increasingly aggressive handwriting.

I held the burner phone between two fingers.

It buzzed again.

T.K.: DO NOT TRUST MARIBEL.

"Rude," I said.

Baggage sat beside the front entrance, his wet coat giving off the rich perfume of flooded carpet and electrical regret. Outside, the parking lot glittered with puddles beneath the dead vacancy sign. The motel looked less like a place to sleep and more like a crime scene that had lost interest in solving itself.

"Phone is dishonest," Baggage said.

"That's not how phones work."

"It is how this one works."

The screen buzzed.

T.K.: SHE HAS THE EVIDENCE NOW. MOVE THE THIRD DRYER.

I looked toward the hallway. The third dryer thumped again under the floor.

"Do you think it's still moving?"

"Probably."

"Why?"

"It has a job."

"Most appliances have the courtesy to quit when the building loses power."

"This motel has a reputation."

The front doors shuddered in the wind. A strip of Tessa's shutdown notice peeled loose and slapped against the glass. TEMPORARY CLOSURE PENDING REVIEW. The words had been printed in official block letters, but the final R in REVIEW had been stabbed so hard the paper was torn.

I had one goal: get the phone into Tessa's hands before someone else used it to accuse me of something expensive.

Tessa stood beside the dead front desk with her clipboard tucked under one arm. Bride from room nine had finally returned the clipboard, although not the inspection jacket. That was still around her towel, because apparently Tessa's outerwear had become emergency shelter.

Tessa looked at the phone.

"Give it to me," she said.

"I'm going to."

"Maribel."

"I'm walking toward you."

"You're standing still."

"I'm gathering momentum."

"Your momentum is not visible."

That was the trouble with Tessa. She noticed everything. The wet floor. The illegal clown balloon wedged in the ceiling. The chicken perched on the brochure rack. My complete lack of forward movement.

I crossed the lobby.

Baggage followed.

"Why is the dog coming?" Tessa asked.

"He has strong opinions."

"He always has strong opinions."

"He's also the only one here who hasn't been named in a text message."

Baggage looked at her. "Yet."

Tessa's eyes narrowed at the burner phone.

The screen lit again.

T.K.: SHE WILL TRY TO HAND IT TO TESSA.

Tessa read it.

I read it.

Baggage read it, although he claimed not to understand phones five minutes ago.

"Subtle," I said.

Tessa held out her hand. "Now."

I passed the phone across the space between us.

The phone rang.

Not buzzed. Rang.

A loud, cheerful ringtone burst from the speaker, the same little melody the motel's old karaoke system had used before I killed the power. The sound bounced off the wet tile and the dark windows.

Tessa's hand stopped inches from mine.

The screen showed CALLING: TESSA KINCAID.

I stared at it.

Tessa stared at me.

Baggage stared at the phone with the satisfaction of a dog who had predicted a squirrel.

"I didn't dial you," I said.

"It is dialing me."

"That's not a defense."

"I know."

The phone continued ringing.

Tessa's jaw tightened. "Answer it."

"Why?"

"Because it's calling me."

"I'm aware."

"Then answer it."

"I'm trying to avoid making this worse."

"You have already made it worse by standing there while it calls me."

The ringtone grew louder.

From the parking lot, the naked cowboy shouted, "Who's calling?"

"No one," I shouted back.

The phone announced, "Call connected."

I nearly dropped it.

A man answered on the other end.

"Well," he said. "That was quick."

Tessa's face changed.

Not fear. Recognition.

That was worse.

I put the phone on speaker because my hand had gone slippery from the damp air and my own poor judgment.

"Who is this?" I asked.

A pause.

Then the man said, "That depends who's asking."

"Maribel Hart."

"Oh."

The way he said it made my name sound like a bill he had hoped would go to someone else.

Tessa stepped closer. "Identify yourself."

Another pause.

"Still there, Tess?"

The lobby went silent except for water dripping from the ceiling and the third dryer thumping under the floor.

Tessa's fingers tightened around her clipboard.

"Who is this?" she asked.

"You know who this is."

"I know several men who enjoy wasting county time."

"Then narrow it down."

The naked cowboy appeared at the front doors, still wearing the life jacket he had stolen during the sprinkler disaster. The woman with the chicken stood behind him, clutching the bird beneath one arm. The man from room eleven hovered near the parking lot with his phone raised, because apparently a crisis without footage was just a private inconvenience.

I waved them back.

The man on the burner phone laughed softly.

"That sounds like the motel," he said.

"Who are you?" I demanded.

"You're not supposed to have that phone."

"That makes two of us."

"Give it to Tessa."

"I am trying to give it to Tessa."

"Then why is she still standing there?"

"Because your phone has terrible timing."

Tessa reached for it.

The caller said, "Don't let her touch it."

Tessa stopped.

I looked at her.

The caller exhaled. "You really don't know what she's doing?"

"I'm beginning to suspect she's trying to shut down my motel," I said.

"She's trying to keep you alive."

"Her method is expensive."

"Her method is necessary."

Tessa's face went hard. "You have no idea what you're talking about."

"Don't I?"

"No."

"Then tell Maribel why you sent Ray to room seventeen."

Tessa glanced at me.

The movement was small. Almost nothing.

It was also exactly the wrong thing to do when a woman was already holding a phone full of messages accusing her of secret inspection manipulation.

"I didn't send Ray anywhere," Tessa said.

The caller gave a low, humorless chuckle. "You told him to wait for the old route."

"I told him the old route was restricted."

"You told him to watch the third dryer."

"I told no one to watch anything."

"Then why did he have the schedule?"

Tessa looked at me. "What schedule?"

"The one in his folder," I said.

"I saw the folder."

"Did you see the page marked TRANSFER?"

"Yes."

"Did you see the messages?"

"Yes."

"Did you see enough to stop asking me questions?"

"No."

That landed more sharply than I expected.

The phone crackled.

The man said, "She's lying."

Tessa snapped, "You don't get to accuse me from a burner phone."

"Neither does she."

"I'm standing right here," I said.

"That's the problem."

Baggage growled.

The caller went quiet.

"Is the dog there?" he asked.

"Yes," I said.

"Then listen to him."

"Absolutely not," Tessa said.

Baggage lifted his head. "The caller is near the west fence."

I turned toward the glass.

The parking lot stretched under the gray afternoon, puddles reflecting the dead sign and the sagging roofline. Beyond the lot, the fence leaned toward I-16. Cars hissed along the highway, their tires spraying water.

A dark sedan sat beside the dumpster.

Its engine was running.

"Can you see him?" I asked.

Baggage sniffed. "I can smell gasoline, wet wool, and fear."

"Useful but vague."

The sedan's headlights came on.

The caller said, "Move the dryer."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because whoever is inside the building is listening."

The third dryer thumped.

This time, something scraped beneath it.

The woman with the chicken shrieked from the doorway.

The chicken flapped free and launched itself onto the hood of the dark sedan.

The sedan lurched.

Its tires spun in the mud.

The chicken skidded sideways, wings spread, and somehow remained upright.

The man from room eleven started filming.

"Stop filming!" I yelled.

He did not stop filming.

The sedan reversed hard. It struck the dumpster, which rolled three feet and knocked over a stack of empty chemical buckets. The driver's door opened, but no one got out.

Then the car shot toward the exit.

Baggage barked.

I ran outside.

The parking lot sucked at my shoes with every step. Cold water splashed up my calves. Behind me, Tessa shouted my name, which was not romantic in the circumstances. It had the clipped tone of someone about to add another violation to a clipboard.

The sedan fishtailed past the front sign.

The chicken slid off the hood and landed in a puddle.

The woman with the chicken ran after it.

The naked cowboy ran after her.

The man from room eleven ran after the action, which was the only direction he ever seemed to understand.

I reached the lot entrance just as the sedan swerved onto the frontage road. The license plate was caked in mud, but I caught three characters before it vanished into traffic.

The burner phone was still pressed to my ear.

"Did you see that?" I demanded.

"Yes," the caller said.

"Who was in the car?"

"You know."

"I do not."

"You should."

"That is not how knowing works."

The caller sighed. "Maribel, get the phone to Tessa and leave the motel."

"I can't leave."

"Why not?"

"Because I own it."

"You inherited a liability."

"Same thing, currently."

"You're in danger."

"So is my deposit refund."

Tessa reached me, boots splashing through the puddles. Her hair had come loose around her face, and she was carrying the clipboard like a weapon.

"End the call," she said.

The caller heard her. "She's there."

"Yes," Tessa said. "And you're done."

"You still trust her?"

Tessa looked at me.

There it was again. The wobble.

Not a full collapse. Just a tiny shift, like a chair leg loosening under someone who had been sitting too confidently.

"I trust evidence," she said.

The caller laughed. "Then ask her where the phone came from."

"Tessa knows where it came from," I said. "Ray had it."

"Ray had a phone. This one belonged to Harlan."

The name hit the parking lot harder than the wind.

Harlan Voss. The contractor who had vanished with his crew. The man tied to the grant file. The person who had somehow been involved in enough motel failures to qualify as a weather pattern.

Tessa's expression tightened.

"Who are you?" she asked.

The caller said, "Ask her what happened to the original inspection report."

Then the line went dead.

For one second, none of us moved.

The chicken pecked at a wet cigarette near the curb.

The naked cowboy bent over with both hands on his knees.

The man from room eleven whispered to his phone, "This is incredible."

Tessa turned to me.

"Give me the burner."

I held it out.

She didn't take it.

That was the problem.

"Tessa."

"Did you know it belonged to Harlan?"

"No."

"Did you know Ray was working with him?"

"No."

"Did you know someone had access to my inspection line?"

"No."

"Did you know the caller was going to say my name?"

"No."

The questions came fast, clean, and sharp. I answered them because lying would have been pointless. Also because the motel had already produced one burner phone, one secret passage, three duplicate keycard systems, and a dryer that operated through supernatural labor law. I did not need to add perjury to the décor.

Tessa looked toward the building.

The front entrance sagged behind her. Water dripped from the roof. The shutdown notice flapped against the glass. Through the lobby windows, the clown's balloon dog was still stuck in the ceiling, its red rubber nose pointing accusingly at the parking lot.

"Where is the phone?" she asked.

"In my hand."

"Why?"

"Because it called you before I could give it to you."

"That is not an answer."

"It is the only one I have."

The burner buzzed.

A new message appeared.

UNKNOWN: DO NOT LET TESSA TAKE IT.

Tessa saw the screen.

Her face went still.

The motel seemed to tilt around us, though that may have been the parking lot sinking beneath my left shoe.

"I'm going to take it," she said.

"Good."

She reached for the phone.

It rang again.

The screen showed CALLING: TESSA KINCAID.

Tessa's hand dropped.

I answered before she could stop me.

"Who is this?"

The same man said, "You should have listened."

"I'm getting very tired of your mysterious tone."

"You handed the phone to her?"

"Not yet."

"Then don't."

"She is standing in front of me."

"Maribel, if she takes that phone, the motel closes permanently."

Tessa snatched it from my hand.

The caller went silent.

She held the phone to her ear.

"This is Tessa Kincaid," she said. "You have ten seconds to tell me who you are."

The caller breathed into the line.

Then said, "You always did like deadlines."

Tessa's eyes flashed.

"Who are you?"

The line clicked.

She pulled the phone away.

The call had ended.

For a moment, she stood in the rain with the burner phone in one hand and her clipboard in the other. The clipboard was swollen at the edges from the sprinkler water. Her notes had bled into gray streaks. One corner of the page still showed my motel's name beneath a smear that looked suspiciously like a tiny drowned map.

I waited.

She looked at me.

"I'm issuing another temporary closure," she said.

I glanced at the dead sign, the flooded parking lot, and the chicken now sitting on the hood of the man from room eleven's car.

"Another?"

"Pending review."

"Of what?"

"The phone. The messages. The inspection records. The unauthorized access routes. The ongoing electrical activity beneath the laundry room."

"The dryer?"

"The dryer."

"It's not my fault the dryer has initiative."

"It is your property."

"That feels legally broad."

"It is also structurally unsafe."

"We're already closed."

"Now you're more closed."

Baggage sat in the puddle beside us.

"Can a place be more closed?" he asked.

Tessa looked at him. "This one can."

She pulled a fresh notice from the clipboard.

It was damp but legible.

I watched her tape it across the front doors while the burner phone rested in her coat pocket. The words TEMPORARY CLOSURE PENDING REVIEW spread across the glass like a sentence handed down by a very tired judge.

The third dryer thumped beneath us.

Tessa pressed the final strip of tape into place.

"Do not enter the building," she said.

"I own the building."

"Then own it from outside."

She turned toward the parking lot.

For half a second, I thought she might stay. Her shoulder brushed mine as she passed, and the contact was brief, cold, and irritatingly electric.

Then the burner phone rang in her pocket.

Tessa stopped.

I stopped.

Baggage sighed.

Tessa pulled it out and looked at the screen.

CALLING: MARIBEL HART.

The phone rang between us while the motel sat dark behind the closure notice, the dryer pounded under our feet, and the chicken made itself comfortable on the inspector's borrowed future crime scene.

Tessa answered.

"Who is this?"

A voice said, "Ask Maribel what she found under room seventeen."

Tessa looked at me.

I said, "I found a terrible motel."

The caller hung up.

Tessa stared at the dead screen.

Then she issued the closure order again, this time with my name written across the top in ink so hard it tore the paper.

Barkley's Lecture to the Guests

The closure notice tore across the top where Tessa had written my name, which felt less like paperwork and more like a personal insult with adhesive backing.

I took it off the front doors before the wind could finish shredding it. Tessa had gone into the office with the burner phone, her swollen clipboard, and the expression of a woman preparing to cross-examine every bad decision I had ever made. Since that included my inheritance, my emergency crew, and the purchase of three hundred mismatched towels, she had material.

"Keep everyone quiet," she called through the office door.

I looked toward the guest row near the vending machines and grills.

The naked cowboy was arguing with the woman with the chicken over a folding chair. The man from room eleven had his phone out. Bride from room nine was trying to keep the little boy away from a grill full of something pink and sizzling. Darla was carrying a box of charcoal through a puddle. Todd was attempting to repair the vending machine with a butter knife.

"Define quiet," I called back.

"Not on fire."

"Your standards have become very specific."

"They had to."

Baggage sat beside the vending machines, watching the guests with the grim patience of a dog assigned to supervise a kindergarten during a gas leak.

"Your guests are gathering around open flames," he said.

"I can see that."

"They are also hungry."

"That explains the flames."

"It does not explain Todd."

Todd jabbed the butter knife into the vending machine. The machine made a grinding noise, flashed EAT FRESH, and dropped six bags of cheese crackers onto his feet.

Todd looked down.

"I fixed it."

"You assaulted it," I said.

"It responded."

The guests had been told the motel was closed, which they interpreted as "the management has become flexible." Since Tessa was reviewing the paperwork and the county might return at any moment, I needed one quiet hour. One. I would have settled for twenty minutes without smoke, shouting, or poultry entering a restricted area.

Barkley, the motel's elderly watch dog, lay beneath the picnic table near the grills. His white muzzle rested on his paws, and his eyes tracked the crowd with the weary authority of a retired judge.

"I can address them," he said.

"No."

"They are behaving badly."

"That has never stopped them before."

"I have a reputation."

"You ate a flip-flop yesterday."

"It was a poor-quality flip-flop."

The naked cowboy slapped the folding chair. "That is my seat."

The woman with the chicken tucked the bird beneath her arm. "You don't own the chair."

"I have been sitting in it."

"For twelve minutes."

"That establishes residency."

The chicken clucked.

"See?" the woman said. "She agrees with me."

"She has no legal standing," I said.

The man from room eleven lifted his phone. "This is going online."

"Put it away."

"I'm documenting a dispute."

"You're documenting a chair."

"It's about the principle."

"The principle is that none of you can sit down without creating a municipal event."

Barkley rose.

His joints cracked one after another, like someone slowly opening a box of old fireworks. He stepped onto the concrete pad between the grills and the vending machines.

"Enough," he said.

The entire guest row paused.

Even Todd withdrew the butter knife.

Barkley looked at the naked cowboy first.

"You are wearing a life jacket on dry land."

"It's protective."

"It is a flotation device."

"I could fall into something."

"You are standing beside a vending machine."

"Machines are dangerous."

Barkley turned to the woman with the chicken. "And you are holding poultry near an open flame."

"She likes grilled food."

"She is a chicken."

"She has preferences."

"She has feathers."

The chicken pecked the woman's wrist.

Barkley nodded. "Her preferences are clear."

I pressed my fingers to my forehead. This was not how I had pictured using a talking dog. When I inherited a rundown motel off I-16, I expected plumbing failures, bad reviews, and possibly one corpse hidden under a deck. I did not expect the watch dog to become middle management.

Barkley faced the whole group.

"You have been told to remain calm while the inspector reviews the closure paperwork."

The man from room eleven raised his phone. "The inspector shut the place down."

"She did," Barkley said.

"Then why are we still here?"

"Because none of you have the organizational skills to leave."

The man lowered the phone a fraction.

Barkley continued. "You have survived a sprinkler flood, a power outage, a dead karaoke system, a secret corridor, and a dryer that has developed an independent work ethic."

From beneath the laundry wing came a distant thump.

Several guests looked toward the building.

Barkley did not blink.

"You are not going to be defeated by a folding chair."

The naked cowboy folded his arms. "I still want the chair."

"You may have it after the woman with the chicken finishes using it."

"That is not fair."

"Neither is your outfit."

The cowboy glanced down at himself. The life jacket had slipped sideways, exposing one bare hip.

The bride covered the little boy's eyes.

"Look at the clouds," she told him.

"There aren't any," he said.

"Then look at the vending machine."

Todd moved in front of it, still holding the butter knife.

Barkley took another step.

"Everyone will move away from the grills," he said. "The woman with the chicken will keep the chicken away from the charcoal. Todd will stop repairing equipment with cutlery. The man from room eleven will put down his phone unless he wants to record himself being escorted into the parking lot by a dog."

The man from room eleven stared at him.

"You can't enforce that."

Barkley's ears lifted.

"I can bite your phone."

The man put it away.

I stared at Barkley. "That was surprisingly effective."

"I have been saying this for years."

"You usually say it while chewing something."

"I contain multitudes."

Darla set down the charcoal box. "What are we supposed to do instead?"

"Sit," Barkley said.

The guests looked at the scattered chairs.

"Where?" asked the bride.

"Not on the grill."

"That was one time," the naked cowboy said.

"It was an unforgettable time," I said.

Barkley directed them toward the picnic tables. He did it with a combination of barking, glaring, and the occasional pointed look at a pair of legs that had wandered too near the fire. The guests moved, not gracefully, but in the general direction of compliance.

The woman with the chicken carried the bird to the far table.

The chicken immediately climbed onto the tabletop and began eating a packet of mustard.

"Barkley," I said.

"I am aware."

The dog trotted over.

The chicken stared at him.

Barkley stared back.

The chicken dropped the mustard packet.

"Progress," he said.

I should have felt relieved. Instead, embarrassment crawled up my neck. The whole scene looked like a low-budget intervention staged by people who had lost the budget and most of the furniture. My guests were being managed by a dog while Tessa sat inside judging the paperwork and, by extension, my entire life.

Barkley returned to my side.

"You are embarrassed," he said.

"I am the owner. The owner should not need a dog to lecture grown adults."

"You need a dog because the grown adults are worse than puppies."

"That is not comforting."

"It is accurate."

The office door opened.

Tessa stepped out with the burner phone in one hand and her clipboard in the other. The pages were still warped from the sprinkler flood, and the ink had bled into

gray bruises.

"How quiet is it?" she asked.

A plastic fork snapped near the grill.

I looked over.

Todd had somehow acquired it.

"Quiet enough to hear the problems," I said.

Tessa surveyed the guest row. "Why is everyone seated?"

"Barkley gave a speech."

Her gaze moved to the dog.

Barkley sat beside the picnic table, chest out, looking like he had just accepted a medal.

Tessa's mouth twitched.

It was not quite a smile, but it had the same suspicious shape.

"What did he say?" she asked.

"That they lack organizational skills."

"He's not wrong."

"I'm aware."

The naked cowboy raised his hand.

Tessa looked at him. "What?"

"Are we allowed to eat?"

"If the food is prepared safely."

The cowboy looked at the grill. "Define safely."

"No."

"That seems restrictive."

"It is a health inspection."

"It's a cookout."

"It's a closure order."

The man from room eleven lifted his phone halfway. Barkley's head turned.

The phone disappeared again.

Tessa noticed. "Good."

Barkley looked pleased.

I hated how much I liked seeing them agree. Tessa and Barkley had the same expression when confronted with nonsense: narrowed eyes, lowered patience, and the absolute certainty that someone else had caused it.

The woman with the chicken opened a cooler.

A sour smell rolled across the table.

Barkley's nose wrinkled.

Tessa smelled it too.

"What is that?" she asked.

"Marinated chicken."

The bird under her arm made a panicked noise.

"Not that chicken," the woman said. "The other chicken."

"There are two chickens?" I asked.

"There were."

Tessa closed her eyes briefly. "How long has the raw poultry been sitting outside?"

The woman checked her phone. "Since breakfast."

"It is nearly evening."

"It was cool this morning."

"It is not cool now."

The woman looked at the sky. "It's cloudy."

"That is not refrigeration."

Barkley moved between the cooler and the grill.

"No," he said.

The woman hugged the cooler. "I paid for that."

"You paid for food poisoning," Tessa said.

"Can I at least cook it?"

"No," Tessa and Barkley said together.

The woman looked offended by the teamwork.

I took the cooler from her and carried it toward the dumpster. The lid popped open as I walked. A plastic bag of raw chicken slid out, struck my shoe, and burst against the concrete.

The smell was immediate and personal.

The naked cowboy gagged.

The man from room eleven raised his phone again.

Barkley barked once.

The phone vanished.

Darla brought disinfectant. Todd brought the mop. For once, no one opened a closet, triggered a sprinkler, or fell through anything. We cleaned the spill while the guests remained seated.

Partial peace arrived in the least glamorous form possible: everyone was too busy watching me scrub poultry juice off the concrete to start a new argument.

Then the bride's little boy wandered toward the grill.

Barkley blocked him.

"Stay back," he said.

The boy stopped. "Are you the boss?"

"No."

He pointed at me. "Is she?"

Barkley glanced at me.

"Technically."

"That means no," I said.

The boy considered this. "Do you get paid?"

"Not enough."

Barkley nodded. "Now you understand the management structure."

The boy returned to his mother.

For several minutes, the guest row settled. The vending machine hummed. The grills hissed. I could hear traffic rolling along I-16 beyond the fence, steady and indifferent. Tessa sat at the end of the table with the paperwork spread before her, marking notes in the margins of the damaged clipboard.

I watched her from beside the dumpster.

She looked tired. Her hair was still damp from the sprinkler disaster, and one sleeve of her shirt had a faint gray streak from the flooded hallway. She kept showing up to shut me down, and I kept finding reasons to stand close enough to notice the small things. This was either romance or a head injury. With my history, both remained possible.

Barkley leaned against my leg.

"You are staring."

"I am monitoring."

"You are monitoring her face."

"She has the paperwork."

"You want her to stay."

I looked toward the office.

"I want her to finish reviewing it."

"That is not what I said."

"Go lecture someone else."

"I already did."

At the grill, the naked cowboy lifted the lid.

A cloud of smoke rolled over the table.

Tessa stood immediately. "What is burning?"

"Nothing," he said.

The smoke thickened.

Barkley turned. "That is a lie."

The cowboy waved a towel through the air. "It's just a little smoke."

The grill gave a sharp pop.

A red glow appeared beneath the cooking grate.

The man from room eleven whispered, "This is going online."

Barkley barked.

The phone went away.

I ran toward the grill. "What did you put in there?"

"Some oil."

"How much?"

"A reasonable amount."

"Your reasonable amount set off the fire alarm."

As if summoned by insult, the alarm shrieked from the guest row.

Everyone stood.

The little boy covered his ears. The chicken flapped onto the picnic table. Todd grabbed the key box. Darla seized the mop. The bride pulled the child behind her.

Tessa reached for her clipboard.

Barkley shouted, "Do not run!"

Everyone ran.

The naked cowboy sprinted toward the parking lot with the life jacket bouncing against his ribs. The woman with the chicken chased the bird. Todd ran in the opposite direction carrying the key box over his head. Darla swung the mop and struck the vending machine, which dispensed another bag of crackers.

I reached the grill and yanked the propane valve shut.

The flame died.

The alarm continued shrieking.

Tessa marched to the wall panel and slapped the silence button.

Nothing happened.

She slapped it again.

The alarm chirped once, paused, and began announcing in a calm recorded voice, "Please evacuate the premises."

"We are already evacuating," I shouted.

The naked cowboy shouted from the parking lot, "Where do we go?"

"Anywhere that isn't here!"

"That's not specific!"

Barkley planted himself in the center of the guest row.

"Stop," he said.

His voice cut through the alarm.

The guests slowed.

The woman with the chicken stopped chasing the bird. Todd lowered the key box. Darla held the mop like a spear. The man from room eleven stood with his phone in his hand but, under Barkley's stare, did not raise it.

"Walk," Barkley said. "No screaming. No filming. No stealing food from the vending machine."

Todd quietly put the crackers back.

"Stay away from the grills," Barkley continued. "The fire is out. The alarm is confused. This is not a reason to become more stupid."

The guests obeyed.

Not perfectly. The naked cowboy walked backward into a trash can, and the woman with the chicken stepped on a mustard packet. But they moved in an orderly cluster toward the far edge of the lot.

The alarm finally stopped.

Silence dropped over the guest row.

Smoke drifted above the grill, thin and embarrassed.

Tessa inspected the charred cooking surface. "What did you cook?"

The naked cowboy raised one hand. "A hot dog."

I looked at the blackened lump on the grate.

"That is not a hot dog anymore."

"It had a difficult evening."

Barkley sat beside the grill.

"Everyone is calm," he said.

I looked at the guests gathered beyond the parking lines. The bride had the little boy's hand. The woman with the chicken held the bird securely. The man from room eleven had put away his phone. Even Todd had stopped touching machinery.

For once, nobody was shouting.

Nobody was running.

Nobody had opened a hidden door.

I let out a breath.

Barkley looked up at me. "You wanted quiet."

"I got partial quiet."

"You got what this motel can provide."

Tessa approached with the clipboard tucked against her side.

"The paperwork is not finished," she said.

"I assumed."

"And the fire alarm requires service."

"Also assumed."

"The grill is being removed."

"Fine."

She glanced at the guests. "But they listened to Barkley."

"They did."

Her eyes met mine.

"He's effective."

"He's unbearable."

"He gets that from you."

I stared at her.

The corner of her mouth lifted.

There it was again. Not a smile exactly. More like a small breach in the inspection wall.

Behind us, the alarm panel gave one final chirp.

Everyone froze.

Barkley turned toward the building.

The panel remained dark.

"False signal," Tessa said.

"Probably," I said.

From beneath the laundry wing came a heavy thump.

Barkley sighed.

"Not the alarm," he said.

I watched the guests stay where they were, quiet and wary, while smoke curled from the ruined grill and Tessa stood beside me with my closure notice folded under her arm.

For tonight, the motel had not burned down.

The guests had calmed down.

Barkley had won.

Then the third dryer thumped again, and somewhere under the guest row, something began to beep.

The Fire Alarm Triggers a Food Fight

The beeping under the guest row began with the confidence of a smoke detector and the dignity of a dying microwave.

I stood in the lobby, one hand wrapped around the mop, the other gripping a spray bottle labeled SANITIZER in Darla's handwriting. The label had been crossed out and replaced with POSSIBLY SANITIZER, which was not the confidence boost I needed before Tessa's return.

"Find the noise," I said.

Baggage sniffed the floor. "It is beneath the snack table."

"Of course it is."

The lobby still smelled like burnt hot dog, wet mop, and the faint sourness of poultry that had narrowly avoided becoming an official health violation. Beyond the glass doors, the guests waited in the parking lot under Barkley's supervision. The naked cowboy had put on a pair of cargo shorts, which made him look less naked but somehow more suspicious. The woman with the chicken clutched the bird beneath one arm. The chicken looked smug.

Tessa had gone to retrieve her inspection assistant, promising to return and finish documenting the closure.

That gave me perhaps twelve minutes to make the lobby look like a place where food could exist without requiring a criminal investigation.

"Everybody stays outside," I called.

The man from room eleven lifted his phone.

Baggage barked.

The phone disappeared.

"See?" I said. "Teamwork."

"Fear," Baggage corrected.

"Same family."

The beeping stopped.

I froze.

A second later, it started again from beneath the snack table, three short chirps followed by a pause.

Todd crouched beside me. "Maybe it's the alarm panel."

"The alarm panel is on the wall."

"Maybe it moved."

"Nothing in this motel moves where it's supposed to."

Todd reached under the table.

"Don't touch it," I said.

He withdrew a hand holding a packet of cheese crackers.

"That's not the beeping."

"You said don't touch anything."

"I touched the crackers."

"Those are not covered by the warning?"

"Not yet."

Baggage pushed his nose beneath the tablecloth and came out with a small black device clamped between his teeth.

He dropped it at my feet.

The beeping resumed.

I crouched. "What is that?"

"An alarm," Baggage said.

"Helpful."

"It is also sticky."

I picked it up. The device was coated in orange cheese dust and something that smelled like cherry syrup. A strip of tape across the side read THIRD DRYER - DO NOT MOVE, which was not reassuring because the third dryer had already developed a criminal career and apparently now owned office equipment.

Todd leaned closer. "Could be a sensor."

"Could be a tiny lawsuit."

The lobby doors opened.

Darla came in carrying a cardboard box of cleaning supplies, a stack of towels, and three paper trays of nachos.

"Why are you carrying food?" I asked.

"The guests were hungry."

"They're outside."

"They were hungry outside."

She set the nachos on the front desk. One tray tipped. Cheese slid across the counter in a bright orange sheet.

Baggage stared at it.

"Don't," I said.

"I was assessing."

"You were drooling."

"I assess with my entire mouth."

I snatched a towel and wiped the cheese before it reached the clipboard sitting beside the desk. Tessa's clipboard. The one with the closure notes, the warped inspection pages, and enough official authority to ruin my afternoon without raising its voice.

Darla opened the cleaning box.

A bottle of degreaser rolled out, struck the baseboard, and leaked beneath the snack table.

Todd stepped back.

His shoe landed in the cheese from the nachos.

He slid sideways into the vending machine.

The vending machine shuddered.

A packet of peanut butter crackers dropped into the tray.

Then another.

Then six.

"Don't hit it again," I said.

"I didn't hit it."

"You introduced your entire body."

"It was an accident."

"The motel has heard that before."

The alarm device chirped faster.

Baggage turned toward the snack table. "The beeping is becoming impatient."

"Everything here becomes impatient."

I shoved the table aside.

Underneath sat a mess of paper plates, cracker wrappers, spilled mustard, a half-eaten hot dog, two mop heads, and the black device wired to something beneath the floor.

The wire vanished through a gap in the tile.

I stared at it.

Todd stared at it.

Darla stared at the nachos.

"Why is there a wire under the floor?" I asked.

Todd lifted one shoulder. "Old motel."

"That explanation has stopped working."

"It worked for the hidden passage."

"It absolutely did not."

Baggage sniffed the wire. "It smells like burned dust."

"Excellent."

I grabbed the key box from behind the desk. It was heavy enough to kill a man or at least make him reconsider his posture. I set it beside the table and began pulling keys from the labeled hooks.

"Which one opens the floor?" Darla asked.

"The floor doesn't have a key."

"Everything else does."

"Not the floor."

"Have you checked?"

I gave her a look.

She pointed at the key box. "There are keys labeled 'mystery,' 'other mystery,' and 'do not use unless Todd says.'"

Todd nodded. "Those are important."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I haven't been allowed to use them."

The front doors opened again.

Tessa stepped in with a woman in a navy county jacket. The woman carried a metal case and wore the expression of someone who had already found three violations before crossing the threshold.

Tessa's gaze moved from the cheese-slick counter to the nachos, then to Todd's foot, which was still attached to the vending machine by a strand of melted cheese.

Her eyes landed on me.

"Maribel."

"I can explain."

"That is rarely encouraging."

The assistant looked down at the floor. "Is that a live alarm device?"

"It's a temporary sensor."

"Why is it wired through the floor?"

"It came with the building."

Tessa's jaw tightened. "Who moved it?"

"No one moved it," Todd said.

Baggage looked at him.

Todd corrected himself. "No one intentionally moved it."

The device chirped.

The assistant opened her case.

I had seen that case before. It contained swabs, sample bags, gloves, strips, and the sort of tiny instruments that made every surface feel guilty.

"Please clear the snack area," she said.

Darla picked up the nachos.

"Not the food," the assistant said. "The area."

Darla put the nachos down.

"Right."

The guests began drifting in from the parking lot despite my instructions. The naked cowboy came first, now wearing the cargo shorts and carrying a paper plate. The woman with the chicken followed. The man from room eleven entered last, phone held low against his thigh.

Barkley came behind them.

He saw the inspector's assistant and sighed.

"Your timing is terrible," he told Tessa.

"It's consistent," Tessa said.

The assistant pulled on gloves. "No one touches anything."

The naked cowboy raised his plate. "What about eating?"

"No."

"What about holding the plate?"

"No."

"What about emotionally preparing to eat?"

The assistant stared at him.

Barkley stepped between them. "He is difficult when hungry."

"He is difficult when clothed," I said.

The assistant knelt beside the table and examined the wire. The device chirped again. She traced the line beneath the tile, then looked at the scattered food.

"Who prepared these snacks?"

Darla pointed at me.

I pointed at Darla.

Todd pointed at the vending machine.

The woman with the chicken pointed at the chicken.

The chicken pecked the floor.

The assistant slowly removed a sample swab from her case.

"This is exactly the kind of thing I was hoping not to find."

"Which thing?" I asked.

She gestured toward the counter. "Food in an active cleanup zone. Open containers beside chemical supplies. Poultry residue near the guest service surface. A potentially contaminated alarm device placed beneath a food table."

"It wasn't placed there."

"It is there."

"That is not the same thing."

"It is for documentation."

Tessa looked at me. "Maribel."

"I am fixing it."

"You were supposed to be preparing for inspection."

"I am preparing."

The assistant swabbed the orange cheese smear on the counter.

The man from room eleven whispered, "This is incredible."

Barkley snapped his teeth at the air.

The man lowered his phone.

Then the alarm device gave a long, shrill tone.

Every guest reacted at once.

The naked cowboy threw his plate.

It struck Todd in the chest.

Todd stumbled backward and grabbed the snack table.

The table tipped.

The nachos launched into the air in slow, greasy elegance.

For one beautiful second, the lobby became a food-based weather system.

Cheese rose in a golden sheet. Jalapeños spun like tiny green propellers. A paper tray flipped end over end. The chicken squawked and flapped toward the front desk. Darla reached for it and missed, grabbing the inspection clipboard instead.

The clipboard flew.

Tessa lunged.

She caught it against her chest.

A nacho landed on her shoulder.

Another struck the county assistant's metal case and slid down the side, leaving a bright orange trail.

The naked cowboy, trying to avoid the airborne cheese, stepped backward onto Todd's cracker packet. His cargo shorts slipped halfway down. He grabbed the front desk for balance.

The front desk drawer opened.

A storm of motel keys scattered across the floor.

The key box tipped.

Hundreds of keys poured out with a metallic crash, skittering beneath chairs, vending machines, and the assistant's boots.

The alarm stopped.

The nachos landed.

A jalapeño slapped against the lobby clock.

The chicken landed on the county assistant's case and stared at her.

No one moved.

The lobby smelled like melted cheese, industrial degreaser, and the deep regret of a woman who had inherited a motel instead of a sensible business.

Tessa slowly removed the nacho from her shoulder.

"Maribel," she said.

"I know."

"You said you were fixing it."

"I was."

"You created a food fight."

"I did not create it. The alarm created it."

The naked cowboy pulled up his shorts. "Technically, I created the plate."

Baggage inspected the cheese on the floor.

"This is a crime scene," he said.

"It's a snack area."

"It has witnesses."

The assistant crouched beside the nearest spill. She did not look amused. She looked focused, which was worse.

Darla grabbed a mop.

"Stop," the assistant said.

Darla froze.

"Why?"

"Because you're about to spread the contamination."

Darla lowered the mop slowly. "I hate when science is right."

The assistant took another swab, this one from the floor beside the snack table. She sealed it in a small bag and wrote on the label.

Tessa watched her.

"What are you documenting?" I asked.

"Cross-contamination between the food service area and the active maintenance zone," the assistant said. "The surface has visible residue, and the alarm device appears to have been exposed to food debris and cleaning chemicals."

"That can't be a compliance issue."

"It is now."

Tessa's eyes flicked toward me.

The assistant continued writing. "The lobby cannot be cleared for reopening until the area is professionally sanitized, the device is removed or properly enclosed, and the food storage and service surfaces are inspected again."

"But the food is gone," I said.

"The residue isn't."

I looked at the lobby.

Cheese clung to the baseboard. Mustard striped the tile. A cracker had lodged beneath the front desk. The chicken was pecking at a jalapeño near the entrance. Todd stood in the middle of the key disaster with nacho cheese on his shirt.

The assistant sealed the final sample.

"I'll flag this for Tessa."

Tessa held the clipboard tighter.

"You don't need to flag it," I said. "You are standing next to her."

"I still have to document it."

"Of course you do."

The guests backed toward the doors.

Barkley herded them out with his shoulders and a series of increasingly irritated barks.

The woman with the chicken scooped up the bird.

The naked cowboy retrieved his plate from the wall.

The man from room eleven bent to pick up a key.

Barkley growled.

He put it back.

When the lobby finally emptied, the silence felt less like peace and more like the pause before another appliance developed a personality.

I grabbed gloves and began collecting keys.

Tessa stood near the desk, holding the clipboard against her hip. Her hair had fallen loose again. A smear of cheese marked the sleeve of her jacket.

"Don't say it," I told her.

"I wasn't going to."

"You were absolutely going to."

"I was going to ask whether the key box always does that."

"No. Usually it waits until something more expensive breaks."

The assistant packed away her samples.

Tessa looked at me. "This is a new documented violation."

"I heard her."

"It threatens the reopen approval."

"I heard that too."

"You need to stop creating fresh problems while correcting old ones."

"I didn't create the alarm."

"You moved the table."

"I had to reach the device."

"You brought food into the lobby."

"Darla brought food."

"Darla works for you."

"That feels unfairly broad."

Tessa's mouth twitched, but the almost-smile vanished beneath professional exhaustion.

I swept cheese into a pile, gathered the keys, and wiped the desk until the wood showed through the orange smear. Slowly, painfully, the lobby returned to something resembling order.

The alarm device sat in a sealed bag on the counter.

The snack table stood upright.

The nachos were gone.

The chicken was outside.

The contamination remained.

The assistant opened the front door to leave, then paused.

She looked down at the threshold.

I followed her gaze.

A thin yellow streak ran from the lobby floor to the base of the door. Mustard. Or degreaser. Or some new motel substance that would require a committee.

She swabbed it.

Tessa closed her eyes.

Baggage came to stand beside me.

"You restored order," he said.

"I did."

"The order is contaminated."

"I noticed."

The assistant handed the sample bag to Tessa.

"Please add this to the report," she said. "The threshold is affected too."

Tessa accepted it.

I stared at the clean-looking floor, the sealed alarm, and the fresh note forming beneath Tessa's pen.

The lobby was orderly again.

It was also officially worse.

Baggage nudged my knee. "The good news is that no one is eating."

From beneath the guest row, the third dryer thumped.

The assistant looked toward the sound.

Tessa wrote faster.

I picked up the mop.

"Fine," I said. "One disaster at a time."

The dryer beeped twice.

Then the lobby lights went out.

I Break Down in the Office

The lobby lights went out, and every bad decision in the motel immediately became a silhouette.

The alarm device gave one last offended chirp beneath the snack table. Somewhere outside, the naked cowboy shouted, "I can't see my pants," which was technically true and spiritually unnecessary.

Tessa's assistant swept her flashlight across the lobby. The beam caught cheese on the wall, keys scattered beneath the vending machine, and the chicken perched on the front desk like it had been appointed interim manager.

Tessa stood beside me with her clipboard tucked against one hip.

"Everyone stays where they are," she said.

The man from room eleven whispered, "This is going to be incredible."

Barkley barked.

The man put his phone away.

"See?" I said. "Control."

Barkley looked at me. "You are standing in nacho debris."

"Control is a spectrum."

The assistant checked the breaker panel. Todd appeared behind her with a screwdriver, a roll of electrical tape, and the expression of a man who had just been invited to ruin a building.

"No," I said.

"I haven't done anything."

"You're holding the three objects that precede a disaster."

Todd lowered them. "The power may come back if I reset the -"

"No."

Tessa looked at me. "Maribel, the office has emergency lighting."

"I know."

"Then take the inspection materials inside."

Her tone was calm. Too calm. Tessa only sounded that composed when she was about to close something, document something, or look at me as if I were a fascinating mold sample.

The assistant gathered her samples. "I'll finish the report in the office."

The office. My office. The room where the ceiling leaked directly onto payroll, where the filing cabinet stuck unless kicked, and where I had once found a possum sleeping on the copier. I led the way through the dark lobby, stepping over keys while Barkley moved ahead with his nose low.

"Watch the mustard," I said.

"It is degreaser," Darla said.

"Why is that better?"

"It isn't."

The office door stuck halfway. I shoulder-checked it open. The emergency lamp flickered on, bathing the room in a weak orange glow that made the filing cabinets look guilty.

Tessa entered first. Her assistant followed with the sample case. Barkley squeezed in behind them. Darla and Todd hovered in the doorway.

"No," I told them.

Darla looked wounded. "I can help."

"You can help by not bringing a mop into the office."

She glanced down at the mop in her hand. "It's already here."

"Then it has gone too far."

Todd lifted the screwdriver.

"Especially you."

He put it behind his back.

The office smelled like damp paper, old coffee, and the scorched electrical tang drifting in from the lobby. Rain tapped against the narrow window. Beyond it, I-16 hissed with passing tires, everyone else in Georgia apparently capable of reaching a destination without setting off an alarm.

Tessa set her clipboard on my desk.

The sight of it made my stomach tighten.

The assistant opened her case and arranged the sample bags under the emergency lamp. Tessa stood beside her, reading the notes. I watched the pen move across the page.

That pen had shut down my pool, my laundry room, my guest entrance, my lobby, and several portions of my dignity.

It was a very efficient pen.

"What happens now?" I asked.

Tessa did not look up. "The contamination is added to the closure report."

"I know that part."

"The motel remains closed pending sanitation, repair verification, and review of the inspection findings."

"Review by whom?"

"County compliance."

"Which means?"

"Which means I submit the report, and they decide whether your reopening request is accepted."

"Do you recommend they accept it?"

Tessa's pen stopped.

The assistant glanced at her.

I hated that pause. I hated the way it sat between us, heavier than the key box Todd had nearly dropped on my foot last week.

"I recommend," Tessa said carefully, "that you stop giving them reasons to reject it."

"That wasn't the question."

"No. It wasn't."

Barkley sat beneath the desk.

"You are both circling the same puddle," he said.

The assistant blinked. "The dog talks."

"Yes," I said. "He's also the most reliable employee."

Barkley sniffed. "I am unpaid."

"That's why."

Tessa's mouth twitched, but the almost-smile disappeared quickly.

I pulled the repair contract from the top drawer. The paper was creased from being handled too often. Gable and Sons Emergency Restoration had promised to replace the damaged wiring, seal the laundry route, repair the floor beneath the third dryer, and provide the certified report Tessa needed.

The contract was the only reason I had been pretending the motel had a future instead of a long, damp obituary.

"I have a contractor scheduled for tomorrow morning," I said. "They can finish the repairs before Friday."

Tessa looked at the document. "Which contractor?"

"Pike Restoration."

Her expression changed.

Not much. Just enough.

"Evan Pike?" she asked.

"His company."

"He is not certified for the electrical work listed here."

"He has a crew."

"That isn't certification."

"He has tools."

"That is even less certification."

I pressed my fingers against my temples. The emergency lamp buzzed overhead. Somewhere in the lobby, a key slid across the floor with a tiny metallic scrape.

"I can't replace the whole contractor tonight."

"You may have to."

"I don't have another one."

Tessa's gaze softened for half a second, which was more dangerous than anger. Anger gave me something to fight. Softness made me aware that I was standing in a wet office wearing cheese on my sleeve.

"I know," she said.

I looked at her. "Do you?"

"Yes."

"Because it doesn't feel like you know. It feels like you show up, find the newest disaster, and write it down."

"That is my job."

"Your job is to shut me down."

"My job is to keep people from getting sick or hurt."

"Those are not mutually exclusive."

"No," she said. "They aren't."

Her assistant quietly closed the sample case.

The silence afterward was worse than the alarm. It left room for the truth to make itself comfortable.

I looked at the contract again.

"I inherited this place," I said. "I didn't build the tunnels. I didn't wire the dryer. I didn't teach guests to swap keys or hide raw chicken in a cooler until it became a biological weapon. I'm trying to keep it open."

Tessa's voice lowered. "I know."

"Then why does every report sound like I'm doing this on purpose?"

"Because reports are not written to comfort you."

"Could they occasionally be written by someone with a pulse?"

Her assistant looked between us.

Barkley said, "She has a pulse. It is currently annoyed."

Tessa exhaled through her nose. "You want honesty?"

"I want something."

"You are trying to repair a motel while refusing to admit you cannot repair everything yourself."

I laughed once. It came out thin and ugly. "That's rich, coming from the woman who keeps showing up alone with a clipboard and the emotional warmth of a locked freezer."

Her eyes sharpened.

I knew I had gone too far.

Naturally, I kept going.

"You don't ask for help. You don't explain anything. You just appear after a flood, a fire alarm, a food fight, and a burner phone, then act surprised that I'm not managing the apocalypse with proper labeling."

"I have offered help."

"When?"

"Several times."

"When?"

Tessa reached for a folder beneath my clipboard.

She pulled out a single sheet of paper, folded twice.

I stared at it.

"What is that?"

"Your inspection notes from before the laundry flood."

"I've seen those."

"No, you haven't."

She unfolded the paper and set it beneath the lamp.

At the bottom, beneath the official notes, someone had written in blue ink:

Check the old route before Pike arrives. Keep the third dryer unplugged. Do not let Ray access the west corridor. I delayed the inspection by forty-eight hours. Use the time.

My handwriting was not blue.

I looked at Tessa.

"You wrote this."

"Yes."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I tried."

"When?"

"When I left the note in your paperwork."

"I thought it was an old county memo."

"It had your name on it."

"Everything has my name on it now. The closure notices, the invoices, the mold report, the chicken."

Barkley leaned toward the page. "This is the helpful note."

"I gathered that."

Tessa folded her arms. "I was trying to give you time."

"You were watching me."

"I was watching Pike."

"And helping me."

"Yes."

The room seemed to shrink around the desk.

Outside, thunder rolled over I-16. The emergency lamp flickered, and for one stupid second I thought the motel had decided to turn off the office too, just to see what I would say.

I looked down at the note.

"You could have told me."

"You were busy accusing me of manipulating inspections."

"I had a burner phone."

"I'm aware."

"It called you."

"I'm aware."

"It told me not to trust you."

"I'm aware, Maribel."

Her voice cracked on my name. Barely. Enough.

I swallowed.

"I'm tired," I said.

It was not the clever thing to say. It did not sparkle. It would not make a good sign in the lobby.

Tessa waited.

"I'm tired of being responsible for a building that fights back," I continued. "I'm tired of pretending I know what I'm doing because everyone keeps asking me questions like I'm supposed to have answers. I don't know how to fix the dryer. I don't know who has the duplicate keys. I don't know why people keep coming here to make terrible choices, but they do, and then they look at me like I issued invitations."

Baggage pressed his head against my knee.

I put a hand on him.

"I'm scared," I said. "There. That's the honest part. I'm scared I'm not a motel owner. I'm just the person who inherited a disaster and keeps putting towels over it."

No one spoke.

Even Todd stayed quiet, which meant the situation had become medically serious.

Tessa stepped closer.

"You are not incompetent," she said.

"I just started a food fight with nachos."

"You moved a table near an alarm device."

"That sounds like a polished way to describe incompetence."

"You are overwhelmed."

"Same hat, different stitching."

She reached for the note and tapped it once. "I delayed the inspection because I thought you deserved a chance to find out who was sabotaging the motel."

"And did I?"

"You found enough to make yourself a target."

"Fantastic."

"I also contacted a repair company."

I looked up. "What?"

"Quietly. Before the original crew vanished."

"Who?"

"Gable and Sons."

The name hit me harder than the power outage.

"Gable and Sons was the contract."

"Yes."

"Then why did they cancel?"

Tessa's expression tightened.

My phone rang on the desk.

The sound cut through the office. I grabbed it.

The number belonged to the contract manager.

I answered. "This is Maribel."

A man said, "Ms. Hart, I'm calling about the restoration agreement."

I knew before he continued.

The body knows these things. It recognizes disaster by the shape of the pause.

"We're terminating the contract," he said.

My fingers tightened around the phone. "What?"

"We received notice that the site is under expanded closure and that unauthorized access routes may compromise our crew's safety."

"I can clear the site."

"You can't guarantee that."

"I can pay the deposit tonight."

"It's not about the deposit."

"It is absolutely about the deposit. I have one."

"We're refunding it."

"No. Don't refund it. You come tomorrow morning. You do the work. You take the money. This is the easiest arrangement anyone has ever offered you."

"I'm sorry."

"No, you're not."

A pause.

"No," he admitted. "I'm not."

The line went dead.

I held the phone to my ear a moment longer, because apparently I needed to hear silence professionally.

Tessa watched me.

"What happened?" she asked.

I placed the phone on the desk.

"They canceled."

Her face fell.

Not dramatically. Tessa did not do dramatic. She did it in the way a person looks at a bridge after discovering the middle has been removed.

Baggage sat down.

"Bad," he said.

"Thank you for the assessment."

The assistant gathered her case. "Without a certified contractor, the reopening request cannot proceed."

"I know."

Tessa picked up her clipboard.

"I'll submit the closure report tonight."

"Of course."

"I'll include the note."

I looked at her. "The helpful one?"

"Yes."

"Will that help?"

"It may show the county that you were cooperating with the investigation."

"Or that you were hiding evidence in my paperwork."

"I wasn't hiding it."

"You tucked it into a stack of forms."

"I expected you to read them."

"I run a motel."

Her eyes held mine.

"I know," she said again.

That broke something small in me. Not the kind of break that required music. More like a cheap plastic hinge finally giving up after being bent too many times.

"I don't know what I'm supposed to do now," I said.

The words came out raw.

Tessa's hand lowered from the clipboard.

For a moment, she looked less like the woman who kept shutting me down and more like the person who had delayed an inspection, watched Pike, and left me a warning I was too busy drowning to understand.

"You don't do it alone," she said.

I laughed, but there was no edge left in it. "Everyone keeps saying that after they've already left."

"I'm still here."

The office hummed around us. Rain tapped the window. Baggage leaned against my leg. From the lobby came a crash, followed by Todd shouting, "That was not me."

Darla shouted back, "It was absolutely you."

Tessa glanced toward the door.

I wiped my face with the heel of my hand and found cheese on it.

"Romantic," I said.

Her mouth curved.

This time, it was a real smile. Small, tired, and entirely inappropriate for a woman standing in my condemned office with a closure report.

Then the emergency lamp went out.

The office vanished into darkness.

Baggage said, "The motel has chosen silence."

"No," I said, clutching the phone and Tessa's note. "It has chosen another problem."

In the dark, Tessa's hand found mine.

Only for a second.

Then the wall behind the filing cabinet thumped.

Once.

Twice.

A third time.

Tessa's fingers tightened before she let go.

I turned toward the sound.

The repair contract was gone. The motel was still closed. The only person who had quietly tried to help me was standing in the dark beside my desk, and whatever lived behind the office wall had just knocked like it expected to be let in.

We Trace the Grant's Last Recipient

The wall knocked again.

Tessa's hand found mine in the dark, which would have been romantic if the office had not smelled like damp paper, burnt wiring, and the cheese still glued to my sleeve. Somewhere beyond the filing cabinet, something scraped along the inside of the wall.

Baggage growled.

"Please tell me that's a pipe," I said.

"It is not a pipe," Baggage replied.

Tessa tightened her grip. "What is it?"

"A bad decision with hinges."

"Wonderful," I said. "The motel has finally developed a door."

The emergency lamp flickered back on. The filing cabinet stood crooked against the wall, one drawer hanging open. Behind it, a narrow seam showed in the paneling. I had seen that seam before, usually while trying not to notice it. The motel had an astonishing talent for hiding illegal architecture in plain sight.

Tessa released my hand.

I missed it immediately, which was irritating. I had enough problems without my nervous system developing a crush.

"Move the cabinet," she said.

"Why me?"

"Because you own the cabinet."

"That isn't how ownership works."

"It is how inspection works."

Baggage shoved his shoulder against the bottom drawer. The cabinet shifted an inch and dumped a stack of old invoices onto the floor.

Todd appeared in the doorway holding a flashlight in one hand and a butter knife in the other.

"Why do you have that?" I asked.

"For emergencies."

"Name one emergency where a butter knife helps."

"Toast."

Tessa took the knife from him.

Todd looked betrayed. "That's my best one."

Together, Tessa and I dragged the cabinet aside. Dust rolled into the air. The wall panel had a brass latch, green with age. I pulled it.

The panel opened onto a narrow passage smelling of wet concrete and pennies.

Baggage peered inside.

"Old route," he said.

Tessa lifted the flashlight. "The route Pike was warned about."

"And the route your note told me to check before he arrived."

"Yes."

I looked at her. "You knew this was here?"

"I suspected."

"You suspected a secret hallway behind my filing cabinet and thought a note in my paperwork would cover it?"

"I was trying not to alarm you."

"The motel has a talking dog and a dryer that knocks from underground. I am already alarmed."

The passage ran beneath the office toward the laundry wing. Cables sagged from the ceiling. A line of fresh shoeprints crossed the dust.

Fresh enough to make my stomach drop.

Tessa crouched beside them.

"Work boots," she said. "Recent."

Baggage sniffed the floor. "Pike."

"Can you tell that from a footprint?" I asked.

"No. I can tell from the smell of cheap cologne and cowardice."

Todd leaned into the passage. "Should we go in?"

"No," Tessa and I said together.

He nodded. "So yes, but with supervision."

The county archive basement was thirty minutes away, which was an inconvenient distance when a secret tunnel was waiting behind my filing cabinet and my life had finally become a scavenger hunt run by people with clipboards.

We left Darla in charge of the guests, which was a sentence that should have concerned the county more than any inspection violation. Barkley stayed with her, mostly to prevent Todd from dismantling the vending machine for "evidence."

Tessa drove her county sedan. I sat beside her with Baggage in the back, his head wedged between the seats.

Rain slicked the highway. Trucks groaned along I-16, spraying mist across the windshield. Tessa drove with both hands steady on the wheel, her clipboard wedged beneath one thigh.

"You're quiet," I said.

"I'm thinking."

"That's dangerous in this car."

"I'm thinking about the grant."

The restricted grant file had linked Evan Pike to the motel's sabotage and inspection irregularities. At the time, I had assumed Pike was the villain because he had the personality of a wet envelope and the ethics of a raccoon in a cash register.

"Pike didn't apply for the grant," I said.

"No. The motel did."

"Then why is his name in the file?"

"Because he was listed as the final contractor."

"For repairs that never happened."

"Exactly."

Baggage lifted his head. "Follow the money."

"Did you hear that?" I asked.

Tessa glanced in the mirror. "I hear him every day."

"He says useful things."

"He also ate a county evidence bag."

"It smelled like bacon."

"It contained a swab."

"He regrets nothing."

The archive basement occupied the oldest county building, a squat brick structure that smelled of wet stone and copier toner. The clerk at the desk looked at Tessa's badge, then at me, then at Baggage.

"Dogs aren't allowed downstairs," she said.

Baggage sat.

"I am not a dog," he said. "I am an investigative consultant."

The clerk stared.

"He's a dog," I said.

"A rude one," Baggage added.

The clerk sighed and handed Tessa a visitor tag. "Records room is restricted. You'll need a request form."

Tessa produced her badge.

"I need the grant disbursement records for the I-16 motel, including the last recipient and any contractor amendments."

The clerk's expression hardened.

"That file is sealed."

"By whom?"

"County policy."

"Which policy?"

She looked at me. "The one that keeps sealed files sealed."

I leaned on the counter. "That sounds less like policy and more like a sentence someone says when they don't want to look for something."

Tessa touched my elbow.

A small touch. A warning. Also, unfortunately, a pleasant one.

The clerk slid a form across the counter. "Submit a request."

"How long?"

"Ten business days."

"Wonderful. The motel may only be closed for ten business days if nobody breathes near the walls."

Tessa picked up the form. "We need access today."

The clerk's phone rang. She answered, listened, and looked directly at me.

"Is this Maribel Hart?"

I didn't like the question.

"Depends who's asking."

A man's voice came through the receiver, tinny and sharp. "Tell her the file is not hers to chase."

The clerk held the phone away from her ear.

Tessa took it.

"This is Inspector Kincaid."

The man hung up.

Baggage's ears lifted. "Hostile contact."

"Thank you," I said. "We had noticed."

The clerk looked pale now. "I can't help you."

"You just did," Tessa said.

"I did not."

"You confirmed someone is monitoring the file."

The clerk's eyes flicked toward the security camera above the elevator.

Then she looked away.

That was enough.

Tessa pulled me toward the stairwell.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"Basement."

"Without permission?"

"With paperwork."

"You have paperwork?"

"I have a badge."

"That isn't paperwork."

"It is in county buildings."

We reached the records room through a side corridor lined with metal shelves. The air turned colder. Dust coated the file boxes, except for one narrow shelf where the cardboard was clean.

Tessa found the grant series number on an index card.

The box was missing.

"Of course it is," I said.

Baggage sniffed the empty space. "Something was here."

"Everything was here," I said. "It's an archive."

"Recently."

Tessa crouched. A smear of blue paint marked the floor.

I knew that paint.

Pike's restoration trucks were blue. So were the temporary barriers he had left around the laundry wing before vanishing.

"He was here," I said.

"Or someone using his equipment."

"Is there a difference anymore?"

Behind the empty shelf, a vent rattled. A folded receipt slid through the grate and landed at Tessa's shoe.

She opened it.

County Diner. Two coffees. One slice of pie. Paid in cash.

The timestamp was from that morning.

"Someone left this for us," I said.

"Or dropped it."

"Nothing drops conveniently in my life."

Baggage took the receipt in his mouth.

"Do not eat evidence," Tessa said.

He surrendered it.

The diner sat across from the courthouse, glowing yellow through the rain. We took a booth near the window. Baggage occupied the seat beside me, because apparently health regulations did not apply to dogs who spoke in complete sentences.

The waitress brought coffee and glared at him.

"He needs water," I said.

"He needs a leash."

"He has one."

Baggage lifted his paw. "I dislike it."

The waitress set down a bowl anyway.

Tessa spread the receipt between us. "The person who used it signed the table number."

"Table seven."

"Someone is sitting there."

A man in a gray work jacket sat alone, stirring coffee he had not touched. His boots were streaked with blue paint.

I stood.

Tessa caught my wrist. "Let me talk."

"I'm very approachable."

"You threatened a filing clerk with breathing near a wall."

"She understood the stakes."

The man looked up as we approached.

His eyes went to Tessa's badge, then to me.

"Maribel Hart," he said.

"People keep knowing my name without introducing themselves. It's becoming a theme."

He pushed a folder across the table.

"Your motel received the grant," he said. "The final recipient was not the motel."

Tessa opened the folder.

Inside were copies of payment transfers, contractor amendments, and one name repeated across every page.

Mavis Crowe.

I knew the name. Everyone in the county knew Mavis. She owned three roadside properties, chaired the tourism committee, and had once tried to get the motel condemned because my sign leaned six inches to the left.

"Mavis received the money?" I asked.

"Through a nonprofit."

"What nonprofit?"

"Roadside Renewal Initiative."

Tessa's face went still.

The man leaned closer. "The grant was supposed to fund safety repairs. Mavis redirected it through shell contractors. Pike was one of them. The motel stayed unsafe because the unsafe conditions justified repeated emergency contracts and inspection extensions."

My coffee went cold in my hand.

"So the inspections were manipulated to keep the grant money moving."

"And to make sure no certified contractor could finish the work."

Tessa looked at the documents. "Who are you?"

The man's jaw tightened.

"Someone who got paid to keep quiet."

"By Mavis?"

He stood so fast the table shook.

"I said enough."

"You brought us the file," I said.

"I brought you copies."

"Why?"

He glanced toward the diner's front window.

A blue truck idled across the street.

Pike's truck.

The man backed away. "Public evidence. That's what stops her. Not rumors. Not county whispers. Public evidence."

He dropped a key onto the table.

It was old brass, stamped with a number.

Twelve.

Then he walked out through the kitchen door.

Tessa grabbed the folder. I grabbed the key.

Baggage grabbed the pie.

"Put that down," I said.

"It is evidence."

"It is cherry."

"Evidence can be delicious."

Outside, the blue truck pulled away.

We ran after it, but the rain turned the pavement into a skating rink. Tessa slipped. I caught her around the waist. For one startled second, we stood pressed together beneath the diner's buzzing sign, soaked and breathing hard.

Her hands landed on my shoulders.

"This is not an appropriate time," she said.

"I wasn't doing anything."

"You were holding me."

"You slipped."

"You looked pleased."

"I'm allowed one pleasure per catastrophe."

Her mouth twitched.

Then the folder slid from her arm.

Papers spilled into a puddle.

The ink blurred immediately.

"No," I said.

Tessa dropped to her knees, gathering pages. I joined her, pressing wet documents beneath my jacket. The payment records dissolved into gray streaks. The con-

tractor names vanished. The only page that survived was the final transfer sheet, protected by a plastic sleeve.

Mavis Crowe's name remained.

So did one line beneath it.

Final recipient: Hart Motel Holdings.

I stared at it.

"That's my name," I said.

Tessa looked at the page, then at me.

"The grant was paid to your motel," she said.

"But the money went to Mavis."

"Which means the public record makes you look like the operator."

The blue truck disappeared into traffic.

Baggage sat beside the curb, pie box clutched in his teeth.

"We have identified the scheme," he said.

"And lost the proof," I replied.

Tessa rose, soaked and furious. She tucked the surviving page inside her clipboard.

"We get public evidence," she said. "Bank records. Witnesses. The original archive file."

"The hostile contact won't talk."

"Then we find someone else."

"Mavis will know we're coming."

"She already knew."

I looked at her. Rain ran down her face, and the county badge at her chest caught the diner light.

The motel was still closed. The repair contract was gone. My name sat on the grant record like a confession written by someone else.

But Tessa stood beside me now, not across an inspection table.

Baggage dropped the pie.

"It has been compromised," he announced.

I looked at Tessa.

She looked at me.

"Tomorrow," she said, "we make this public."

Across the street, the blue truck's brake lights glowed red at the intersection.

Then it turned around.

The Guest With the Fake Permit

The blue truck made a slow, illegal-looking U-turn across the wet intersection, which was exactly the sort of maneuver that suggested Evan Pike had either spotted us or had recently lost interest in traffic laws.

Tessa grabbed the surviving grant page from inside her clipboard.

"Get in the car."

"I'm already standing beside it."

"Then improve the situation by entering."

Baggage trotted after us, the ruined pie box swinging from his mouth. He had eaten the evidence and was now carrying the container like a tiny, deeply judgmental briefcase.

The truck accelerated.

Tessa opened the driver's door. I yanked the passenger door, climbed in, and Baggage launched himself into the back seat with the grace of a falling sofa.

"Follow him," I said.

"No."

"He's fleeing."

"He may be driving."

"He turned around."

"So did we."

"That feels different."

"It is. I'm licensed."

The truck vanished behind a delivery van. Tessa started the engine and pulled into traffic, but the rain had thickened into a gray curtain. Brake lights smeared across the

windshield. Trucks growled along I-16. Somewhere behind us, the county diner sign buzzed like it had a personal objection to our investigation.

Then the motel appeared through the rain.

The front doors stood open.

That was wrong.

The motel had been closed, restricted, partially condemned, and spiritually unavailable for days. The doors should have been locked. Instead, the lobby glowed with the yellowish light of bad decisions, and someone had taped a handwritten sign to the glass.

OPEN FOR BUSINESS.

Baggage rose in the back seat.

"That is not our sign," he said.

"I know."

Tessa hit the brakes.

The sedan stopped crooked across the entrance drive. I was out before the engine finished coughing.

Inside, Darla stood behind the guest check-in desk wearing a plastic visor, a county-looking lanyard, and the expression of a woman who had been tricked by paperwork but intended to blame the furniture.

Todd was beside her, holding the key box.

The key box was open.

Keys covered the desk, the floor, and one of the lobby chairs. A guest in a silk robe was filling out a registration card. The woman with the chicken stood near the vending machine, holding her bird under one arm and a fresh towel under the other. The naked cowboy had found a pair of motel slippers and was trying to stretch them over his boots.

Darla saw me.

"Good news," she said.

"No."

"We're reopening."

"No."

"A man brought a permit."

"That is not good news."

"He had a stamp."

"That is even less good news."

The man behind the desk turned toward me. He was narrow, polished, and dry despite the rain. His navy jacket bore a county seal that looked almost real, which was the administrative equivalent of a convincing fake mustache.

He held out a laminated card.

"Ms. Hart," he said. "I'm Lenny Voss, temporary compliance liaison. Your property has been cleared for limited occupancy."

I took the card.

The permit displayed the motel's name, the county logo, a case number, and a signature that looked like someone had signed it while riding over a speed bump.

The expiration date was tomorrow.

The room count allowed was twelve.

The motel had twelve rooms.

Someone had done research. That was always rude.

Tessa entered behind me.

Lenny's smile slipped.

"Inspector Kincaid," he said.

"Tessa," I said.

"I know who she is."

"Then you know she doesn't enjoy surprise reopenings."

Tessa took the permit from my hand. Her eyes moved over it once. Then again.

"Where did you get this?" she asked.

"County emergency authorization."

"Which office issued it?"

"Regional compliance."

"That is not an office."

"It is a division."

"Name the division director."

Lenny's smile returned, thinner now. "I'm not required to disclose internal personnel."

Tessa looked at me. "He's not with the county."

Darla lowered her visor. "He showed me the stamp."

"The stamp is crooked," Tessa said.

Darla examined it. "I thought county stamps were naturally crooked."

"Only after someone drops them."

Lenny placed both hands on the counter. "This authorization is valid. If you refuse to honor it, the county can document noncompliance and revoke your operating privileges."

There it was.

The leverage.

He had not come to open the motel. He had come to make me look like I was refusing a lawful order. A fake permit with a real threat attached, because apparently fraud had discovered stationery.

I looked at the registration card.

The guest had written a name, an address, and a phone number. The phone number had too many digits.

The silk robe guest was watching Lenny with the hopeful expression of a man who had been promised a room and possibly a secret.

"How much did you charge him?" I asked Darla.

"Two hundred."

"Darla."

"He said it was a limited reopening."

"Darla."

"He had the lanyard."

"The lanyard is from a conference."

She looked down. A tiny logo read Southeastern Property Management Expo.

Darla frowned. "That could still be county."

"No county employee attends a property management expo wearing a badge that says Guest Speaker."

Lenny reached for the permit.

I held it away.

"Give that back," he said.

"Absolutely not."

"It is official property."

"Then it can stay with the property owner."

His jaw tightened.

The woman with the chicken leaned toward me. "Is he a real inspector?"

"No."

Lenny turned on her. "Ma'am, I am authorized to issue penalties."

The chicken pecked his sleeve.

He jumped.

Baggage came through the lobby doors and shook himself. Water flew in every direction, spattering Lenny's polished trousers and the permit sleeve.

"Your dog is interfering with official business," Lenny snapped.

"Baggage is staff."

"I don't care what he is."

Baggage looked at him. "I am the only one here with a valid license."

Lenny stared.

Darla whispered, "He means rabies."

"I know what he means."

Tessa stepped beside me and held out her hand.

"Permit."

Lenny hesitated.

"Now," she said.

He handed it over.

Tessa turned it toward the lobby light. The plastic sleeve had been heat-sealed, but one corner was bubbling. Beneath the county logo, the paper showed a faint blue line.

I remembered the blue paint on the diner floor. Pike's trucks. Pike's equipment.

Tessa saw it too.

"This was printed on a commercial plotter," she said.

Lenny shrugged. "Many offices use printers."

"Not this county."

"How would you know?"

"Because I issue the closure orders."

I leaned over the desk. "And because the county seal is missing the outer ring."

Lenny looked at me.

I smiled. "I've had enough county paperwork shoved in my face to recognize when one has been assembled by a man with access to a laminator."

The silk robe guest raised his registration card. "Does this mean I don't get the room?"

"You do not get the room," I said.

"But I paid."

"Darla."

Darla winced. "I can refund him."

"With what?"

She glanced toward the key box.

Todd quietly closed it.

The lobby doors opened again.

Tessa's assistant stepped in, carrying her metal case. She took in the open doors, the guests, the scattered keys, the fake permit in Tessa's hand, and Lenny's wet trousers.

"I was gone for twenty minutes," she said.

"Tessa," I said, "this is not what it looks like."

"It looks like an unauthorized reopening."

"It is."

"And a fraudulent permit."

"Yes."

"And guests occupying the lobby."

"Technically, one guest is emotionally occupying the lobby."

The silk robe man raised his hand. "I have nowhere else to go."

"You have a car," I said.

"It's raining."

"So is the entire state."

Lenny moved toward the door.

Baggage blocked him.

"Move the dog," Lenny said.

Baggage sat.

"No."

The naked cowboy, still wearing the slippers over his boots, came to stand behind Baggage. The woman with the chicken joined him. Then Todd. Then Darla, who still had the lanyard around her neck.

The lobby had become a very poorly organized blockade.

Lenny looked at me. "You are obstructing a county representative."

"You are not a county representative."

"You can't prove that."

I lifted the permit. "I can prove this is fake."

"Then you're admitting you altered it."

I blinked.

That was almost clever.

"Why would I alter a permit that supposedly reopens my own motel?"

"To create a dispute."

"For what purpose?"

"Insurance."

"Which insurance?"

He paused.

The assistant opened her metal case.

Tessa's eyes sharpened.

I knew that look. It was the look she wore when a surface had just become evidence.

"Lenny," she said, "where did you get the case number on this permit?"

"From the county database."

"That number belongs to the grant closure review."

His face changed.

Not much. A twitch near the mouth. But I had spent enough time watching guests lie about missing towels to recognize the moment a story lost its floor.

Tessa turned the permit over.

"Who authorized this?"

"I told you. Regional compliance."

"There is no regional compliance division."

"I don't have to stand here and answer harassment."

"You do if you're presenting a county authorization."

Lenny reached for the permit again.

I stepped back.

He grabbed the corner.

The plastic sleeve stretched between us.

For one long second, we stood there tugging on a fake permit while the lobby watched with the solemn attention normally reserved for a dog trying to remove a sock.

Then the sleeve tore.

The paper shot free.

Lenny stumbled backward. His heel struck the low brass stanchion beside the desk. He windmilled, caught the guest bell, and sent it flying.

The bell struck the lobby clock.

The clock fell.

The clock hit the key box.

The key box tipped.

Every key in the motel poured across the floor.

Metal clattered beneath chairs. A ring of duplicate keys spun in a circle and came to rest against Baggage's paw. One key landed in the chicken's water dish.

The naked cowboy slipped on a key tag, grabbed the check-in desk, and pulled the entire registration stand six inches sideways.

The silk robe guest shrieked as the desk drawer opened and a stack of old inspection notes slid onto his bare feet.

Darla lunged for the drawer.

Todd lunged for Darla.

The assistant lunged for the permit.

Tessa caught the paper.

I caught Tessa.

Baggage caught the chicken's water dish.

The chicken caught the key.

For a moment, the whole lobby froze in a tableau of administrative failure.

The chicken stood on one leg, water dish balanced beneath her wing, a brass key clenched in her beak.

Baggage held the dish steady.

Todd had both arms around Darla's waist.

Darla had one hand inside the fallen drawer.

The naked cowboy was kneeling in motel slippers, one boot pinned beneath the registration stand.

Lenny was sprawled against the wall, his county-looking lanyard twisted around his neck.

Tessa stood in my arms, one hand gripping the permit, the other braced against my shoulder.

Her face was inches from mine.

"This is not helping," she whispered.

"I'm aware."

"You're holding me."

"You fell."

"I did not."

"You were about to."

"That is not the same thing."

"Would you prefer I let go?"

"No."

The answer came too quickly.

Neither of us moved.

Then Baggage said, "The chicken has acquired room twelve."

Tessa looked down.

The chicken dropped the key.

It skittered across the tile and disappeared beneath the desk.

Tessa stepped away from me.

I missed her immediately, which was becoming a recurring maintenance issue.

The assistant picked up the torn permit and held it beneath the lobby light.

"Fake laminate," she said. "The paper underneath is a photocopy."

Tessa took it. "And the case number is tied to the grant file."

I looked at Lenny.

He had regained his feet, though one slipper from the naked cowboy had somehow landed on his shoulder.

"Who sent you?" I asked.

He said nothing.

"Was it Mavis?"

His eyes flicked toward the front doors.

That was answer enough.

Tessa folded the permit into her clipboard.

Lenny lunged for it.

Baggage barked.

The sound cracked through the lobby. Lenny stopped so abruptly the slipper slid from his shoulder and landed on his shoe.

"Don't," Baggage said.

Lenny stared at him.

Baggage showed his teeth. "I dislike paperwork theft."

Tessa moved between them. "You're staying until the sheriff arrives."

Lenny laughed. "For what? Carrying a permit?"

"For impersonating a county employee, attempting to force an unauthorized re-opening, and threatening the property owner with fabricated penalties."

"I never threatened her."

"You said the county would revoke her operating privileges," I said.

"That was a warning."

"Warnings usually come with real counties."

The silk robe guest raised his hand again. "Can I have my refund now?"

"No," Darla said.

Everyone turned to her.

She looked startled by her own courage.

Then she added, "Not until we find the money."

"Darla," I said.

"It's a practical concern."

The assistant began photographing the permit, the lanyard, the scattered keys, and the wet streaks across the floor. Tessa wrote notes on her clipboard, her handwriting quick and sharp.

I crouched beneath the desk and found room twelve's key beside the chicken's water dish.

The tag was not our usual metal rectangle.

It was blue.

Painted blue.

I held it up.

Tessa stopped writing.

The blue truck.

The blue paint.

The key.

"Pike was here," I said.

Lenny's silence hardened.

Baggage sniffed the key. "It smells like the secret hallway."

"That is not a useful sentence," I said.

"It is a useful smell."

Tessa took the key from me. "This opens what?"

"Room twelve," I said. "Or the old route."

"Those are not supposed to be the same lock."

"They are now."

The lobby doors rattled in the wind.

Outside, headlights swept across the wet parking lot.

A blue truck rolled past the entrance, slow enough for the driver to see every person inside.

Then it stopped beside the office wall.

Tessa looked at me.

"We need to get the original grant file," she said.

"We need to stop Pike."

"We need both."

The truck's engine revved.

Lenny's face went pale.

Baggage moved toward the office corridor.

"Someone is entering through the old route," he said.

The wall behind the filing cabinet thumped.

Once.

Twice.

Then the office door slammed shut by itself.

Tessa gripped the fake permit inside her clipboard.

I grabbed the blue key.

We had exposed the permit.

We had the evidence.

We also had an angry fraud operator, a compromised lock, and a man moving through my motel faster than we could chase him.

From behind the wall came the scrape of a bolt being drawn.

Baggage bared his teeth.

"Mavis knows," he said.

The old passage door opened.

And somewhere inside the motel, the third dryer started running.

The Scheme Blows Up the Sign

The third dryer thumped behind the wall like a drunk trying to escape a coffin.

I had one hand on the blue key, one hand on Tessa's arm, and absolutely no interest in discovering which of those objects was more likely to get me arrested.

"Back," Tessa said.

"From my own office?"

"From the secret passage."

"That feels less unreasonable."

Baggage planted himself between us and the open panel. His fur stood up along his spine, making him look less like a watchdog and more like a disgruntled throw rug with legal authority.

"Someone is exiting," he said.

"Who?" I asked.

"Someone who smells like peppermint, wet denim, and criminal confidence."

"That narrows it down to half the county."

The dryer slammed again.

Then the motel lights flickered on.

Not all of them. The office bulb glowed weakly, the lobby sign flashed twice, and somewhere upstairs a guest screamed, "My shower is haunted!"

"Darla," I shouted.

"I'm handling it!" she yelled back.

A second voice called, "The water is brown!"

"That's not haunting," Tessa said.

"At this motel, it can be both."

A figure moved inside the passage.

Tessa drew her phone and switched on the camera. I grabbed the nearest object, which happened to be a stapler. It was not a weapon so much as a declaration that I had office supplies and poor judgment.

The figure stepped through the panel.

Evan Pike wore a blue work jacket, muddy boots, and the expression of a man who had spent his morning ruining other people's lives and found the experience soothing.

He stopped when he saw us.

"Well," he said. "This is awkward."

"No," I said. "Awkward is when you accidentally wave at someone who was not waving at you. This is trespassing."

Pike glanced at Tessa's phone. "Put that away."

"Absolutely not," she said.

He smiled without warmth. "You don't understand what you're recording."

"I understand exactly what I'm recording," Tessa said. "A contractor entering a closed property through an unauthorized passage."

Pike looked at me. "She's going to blame you for this."

"People have been blaming me for things I didn't do since I inherited the place. It's becoming my brand."

He took one step toward the office door.

Baggage growled.

Pike stopped.

"Move the dog," he said.

Baggage's lip lifted. "Move yourself."

Pike's eyes narrowed. "That thing is dangerous."

"He's a talking dog," I said. "Dangerous is implied."

From the lobby came a crash, followed by Todd shouting, "The key box has feelings!"

The heavy box clanged against the tile.

Pike flinched toward the sound.

Tessa noticed. So did I.

"What did you do?" I asked.

"Nothing."

"That answer has never once improved a situation."

Pike reached into his jacket.

Tessa raised her phone higher. "Take your hand out."

He froze.

For a ridiculous second, we all stood there: Pike with one hand inside his jacket, Tessa recording him, Baggage snarling at his boots, and me holding a stapler like I had been deputized by Office Depot.

Pike slowly removed his hand.

He held a remote control.

I stared at it.

"What is that?"

"Nothing."

"Your favorite word is doing terrible work."

He pressed the button.

The motel sign outside exploded in a shower of sparks.

The sound cracked through the building. Glass rattled. The lobby lights went black. A red glow flared through the office window, followed by the unmistakable smell of burning plastic.

Everyone screamed.

Even Baggage.

He barked, "The sign is on fire!"

"I noticed!"

Tessa grabbed my wrist. "Outside. Now."

We ran through the lobby.

Guests poured from the rooms in various stages of clothing and panic. The naked cowboy had one slipper on and a towel tied around his waist. The woman with the chicken clutched the bird against her chest. Lenny stood near the fallen key box, still wearing the naked cowboy's slipper on one foot.

Darla held a fire extinguisher backward.

"Turn it around," I shouted.

"I know!"

"You're aiming the handle at the fire."

"It's confusing under pressure!"

Todd was on his knees gathering keys from the floor. "Room twelve is missing!"

"Forget room twelve!"

"I can't. It's emotionally important."

We burst through the front doors.

The motel sign leaned over the roadside like it had just received terrible medical news. The red letters flickered in random combinations.

HART MOTEL had become HAT MOTE.

Then the final R sparked and dropped into the grass.

The sign's transformer popped.

A flame climbed the wiring.

Pike emerged behind us.

I turned on him. "You did that."

He pointed at me.

"No," he shouted over the crackling electricity. "You did. You were seen tampering with the sign last night."

"I was asleep last night."

"Your security footage says otherwise."

"What security footage?"

Pike smiled.

That was the moment I understood the trap.

The motel's camera sat above the office entrance, pointed directly at the sign. If he had staged footage, or placed me near the wiring, or simply waited for me to touch the blue key and then edited the timing, he could make the sabotage look like mine.

He had not just set the sign on fire.

He had arranged the story.

Tessa moved beside me. "Where is the camera feed?"

"In the office," Pike said.

"Convenient."

"Reality often is."

Baggage trotted past us toward the sign.

"Baggage, no!"

He ignored me.

The dog stopped beneath the burning letters, lifted his leg against the support post, and looked back.

"It is poorly secured," he said.

"That is your assessment?"

"It is also warm."

A section of the sign dropped.

Baggage leaped aside as the letter T crashed into the grass. Sparks scattered across the damp ground. The smell of scorched insulation thickened in the air.

Tessa seized the extinguisher from Darla, spun it around, and blasted the base of the sign.

White foam swallowed the flames.

The guests cheered.

The chicken flapped.

The naked cowboy shouted, "That's my kind of reopening!"

"It is not a reopening," I said.

"Then it's a very aggressive closure!"

Pike backed toward the parking lot.

I caught his sleeve.

He jerked away. "Don't touch me."

"You came through my wall, burned my sign, and blamed me on camera. I'm past polite."

He shoved me.

Tessa stepped between us so quickly I barely saw her move.

"Try that again," she said.

Pike looked at her badge. "You're protecting her?"

"I'm documenting you."

"You're compromised."

Her expression went flat. "Careful."

"You delayed inspections for her. You left notes. You manipulated the closure."

The guests went quiet.

Pike pointed at me. "She's been running an unsafe property for months, and you've been covering for her."

Tessa did not look at me.

She looked at the phone in her hand.

"Keep talking," she said.

Pike hesitated.

Behind him, a car horn blared on I-16. A truck roared past, spraying the motel sign with road mist and knocking the fallen R another foot across the grass.

Pike glanced toward the highway.

That was enough for Baggage.

He lunged.

Pike yelped as the dog clamped onto his pant leg. The blue work jacket tore with a satisfying rip.

"Get this animal off me!"

"He's staff," I said.

Baggage pulled backward.

Pike slid through the wet grass and landed on his backside beside the fallen letter R.

The guests gathered around him in a loose semicircle, a deeply underqualified jury.

The woman with the chicken raised her bird like a witness. "He did it."

The chicken pecked toward Pike.

"She agrees," the woman said.

Tessa crouched near the sign's base. She brushed foam away from the metal housing and found a small black device taped beneath the transformer.

"Maribel," she said.

I knelt beside her.

The device had a red light and a tiny lens.

"A camera?" I asked.

"Motion sensor and transmitter."

Pike stopped struggling.

Tessa lifted her phone toward it. "This recorded the sabotage."

Pike's face changed.

Not fear. Calculation.

He looked toward the motel office.

"The footage already uploaded," he said.

"Where?"

"You'll see."

He smiled again.

I hated that smile. It had the smugness of a man who believed technology made him immortal.

Tessa stood. "We need the security feed."

We ran inside.

The office was empty.

The wall panel hung open. The desk drawers had been pulled out. My computer screen showed a frozen image of me standing beside the sign in the rain, blue key in hand.

The timestamp read 2:13 a.m.

I recognized the coat. I recognized the angle.

I also recognized that I had been in bed at 2:13 a.m., where I had been trying to sleep through Todd's argument with a vending machine.

Pike had footage of me near the sign.

He had made sure of it.

"See?" Lenny said from the doorway. "That looks bad."

"Thank you, Lenny," I said. "Your contribution remains as valuable as the fake permit."

Tessa leaned over the computer.

"Don't touch it," I said. "It may be rigged."

"I'm aware."

She unplugged the monitor.

The image vanished.

Baggage sniffed beneath the desk. "There is a wire."

I dropped to my knees.

A cable ran from the computer toward the wall, disappearing through a hole beside the filing cabinet. I pulled the panel wider.

The old passage glowed with a faint blue light.

"Pike's transmitter," Tessa said.

We followed the cable.

The passage smelled of wet concrete, hot dust, and peppermint. The dryer thumped somewhere ahead, each rotation shaking grit from the ceiling.

Tessa kept her phone recording.

I kept the stapler.

Baggage led us around a bend and into the laundry room.

The third dryer spun with no clothes inside.

Its round window flashed blue every time it turned.

"What is that?" I asked.

"Projection," Tessa said.

The dryer door popped open.

A small projector had been strapped inside the drum. It threw the fake footage onto a sheet of white plastic mounted against the rear wall.

There I was on the screen, reaching toward the sign.

The image looped.

Reach.

Spark.

Flame.

Reach.

Spark.

Flame.

The timing was perfect. The truth was not.

I stepped closer.

"Can we stop it?"

Tessa pointed to a power strip behind the dryer.

I reached for it.

Baggage barked, "Do not."

I stopped.

A thin wire ran from the strip to the wall, then down beneath the machine.

"Pressure trigger," Tessa said.

"Of course."

"Back up."

We retreated.

Tessa called the sheriff's office, then the county emergency line. While she spoke, I filmed the projector, the wiring, the false footage, and the blue paint smeared across the dryer's control panel.

Pike had left fingerprints everywhere.

Apparently sabotage made him careless when it involved appliances.

The dryer thumped.

The projection flickered.

A new image appeared.

It showed Tessa and me standing in the office, holding hands in the dark.

I recognized the moment from the power outage.

The image zoomed in on our hands.

Tessa's voice stopped.

Pike had recorded that too.

I looked at her.

Her face had gone still, but not cold.

"Apparently," I said, "we are now evidence."

Her eyes met mine.

"Apparently."

The image looped again.

Our hands.

The dark office.

The brief squeeze of her fingers around mine.

The motel had produced many humiliations, but this one had the decency to be complicated.

Tessa stepped closer to me.

"Maribel."

"I know."

"No, you don't."

The dryer continued turning behind us.

She lowered her phone.

"I should have told you sooner," she said. "About the note. About the delays. About why I kept coming back."

"You kept coming back because I kept violating health codes."

"That was part of it."

"Only part?"

Her mouth curved despite the burning sign, the fake footage, and the dryer broadcasting our hands like a low-budget romance scandal.

"I was trying to keep you from losing the motel."

"That sounds suspiciously like caring."

"It is."

The projector clicked.

The image froze on our hands.

I looked at Tessa. "Are you going to shut me down again?"

"Yes."

I sighed. "There she is."

"Temporarily."

"Less romantic."

"I'm not finished."

She stepped close enough that the dryer's heat brushed my back.

"I'm going to shut down the unsafe parts," she said. "Not the motel."

I stared at her.

"The sign is burned," I said.

"The sign can be replaced."

"The laundry route is full of illegal wiring."

"Then it gets sealed."

"The third dryer is haunted by a projector."

"That is not a health violation."

"It should be."

She reached for my hand.

This time, she did not let go.

"I can recommend conditional reopening," she said. "Rooms that pass inspection. No laundry access. No old route. New sign wiring. Daily temperature logs. Certified repairs under county observation."

"Can you do that?"

"With documented sabotage and live evidence? Yes."

"Even after everything?"

"Especially after everything."

The dryer stopped.

The silence felt suspicious.

Then Baggage said, "The operator is approaching."

Pike appeared in the passage entrance with a length of pipe in his hand.

Tessa shoved me behind her.

I stepped back around her. "Absolutely not."

"Maribel."

"I'm not letting you get hit with motel plumbing."

Pike swung.

Baggage launched first.

The dog hit Pike's knees. The pipe clattered away. Pike crashed into the dryer, which lurched forward and rolled over his foot.

He screamed.

The projector flew from the drum and landed in a basket of clean towels.

The towels began smoking.

"Oh, come on," I said.

Tessa grabbed the extinguisher.

I grabbed Pike's collar.

Baggage grabbed the pipe.

Within thirty seconds, the fire was out, Pike was pinned beneath the dryer door, and the sheriff's deputies arrived through the laundry entrance with the grim expressions of people who had seen too much motel plumbing in one career.

One deputy looked at the smoke.

"Who started the fire?"

Pike pointed at me.

I pointed at the projector.

Baggage pointed at Pike.

The chicken, who had followed us into the laundry room, pecked Pike's shoe.

The deputy sighed. "I'll take all statements."

"Good," I said. "I have video."

Tessa held up her phone.

"I have video too."

Pike stopped pointing.

That was the cleanest victory I had experienced in months.

By late afternoon, the sign had been disconnected, Pike was in custody, and the county had copies of the transmitter, the projector, the false footage, and the blue key. Lenny was still being questioned in the lobby, where Darla had made him sit beneath a handwritten sign reading FRAUDS WAIT HERE.

The sign had originally said NO SMOKING.

Darla claimed it was an improvement.

Tessa stood at the front desk with her clipboard. The heavy key box had been returned to its place, though it now leaned slightly left, as if exhausted.

Guests gathered around her.

The naked cowboy wore both slippers. The woman with the chicken held the bird under one arm. Todd had a roll of caution tape around his shoulders like a sash.

Tessa read from the form.

"Conditional reopening is approved for rooms one through six and eight through ten, effective immediately, pending completion of listed repairs."

Darla raised her hand. "What about room twelve?"

"Room twelve remains closed."

"Emotionally or legally?" Todd asked.

"Both," Tessa said.

Baggage sat beside me.

"Progress," he observed.

"Don't sound so surprised."

"I have witnessed your management."

Tessa continued. "The laundry room, old passage, office wall access, and road-side sign remain restricted. No guests beyond the barriers. No unauthorized contractors. No fake permits."

She looked directly at Lenny.

He looked at the floor.

"And no one," she added, "is to operate the third dryer."

The dryer thumped once from the laundry room.

Everyone turned.

Tessa closed her eyes.

I reached for her hand.

She took it.

The gesture was small, but it changed the air around us. Not enough to make the motel respectable. Nothing could do that without divine intervention and a large insurance payment. But enough to make the future feel less like a threat.

"You're reopening me," I whispered.

"Conditionally."

"You're still shutting parts of me down."

"Only the dangerous parts."

"That's most of the building."

"I know."

I looked at her clipboard, then at our joined hands.

"Does this mean I can take you to dinner?"

Tessa glanced at the burned-out sign through the front windows.

"Is dinner in a room with certified wiring?"

"I can't promise that."

"Then somewhere else."

Baggage sighed. "Romance has delayed operations."

"Romance has improved operations," I said.

"The sign is on the ground."

"It was already leaning."

Outside, the fallen letters lay in the wet grass. HART MOTEL had become a scattered pile of metal and foam, but the motel doors were open again. Cars rolled along I-16. A man in a suit slowed at the entrance, saw the half-burned sign, and turned into the parking lot anyway.

Tessa watched him pull up.

"Terrible choice," she said.

I squeezed her hand.

"Perfect guest."

From the office wall came another thump.

Tessa looked at me.

I looked at Baggage.

Baggage looked toward the passage.

"The old route is not finished," he said.

"No," I said, watching the new guest climb out of his car with a suitcase, a wedding ring, and the unmistakable posture of a man about to make a terrible decision.

"But tonight, at least, it has to wait."

The third dryer thumped again.

Tessa leaned in and kissed me before I could object, protest, or ask whether kissing counted as a reportable sanitation event.

It did not fix the sign.

It did not fix the motel.

It did, however, make the conditional reopening feel like the beginning of something that might survive the plumbing.

Tessa Finally Says My Name

The motel's new sign consisted of three letters, a scorch mark, and Todd standing on a ladder with a paintbrush between his teeth.

"Do not paint the R upside down," I called from the courtyard.

Todd removed the brush. "It looks the same either way."

"It does not."

"It's an R."

"It's a business."

"Not a successful one."

Baggage sat beneath the ladder, watching Todd with the weary suspicion of a dog who had seen too many humans near tools. The evening air smelled of wet grass, hot wiring, and the chicken woman's attempt to grill corn on a borrowed room heater. Somewhere near the office, the third dryer thumped with the steady confidence of a machine that had escaped all reasonable supervision.

Conditional reopening had been granted. The motel was operating again, at least in the legal sense. Rooms one through six and eight through ten were available. Room twelve remained closed, the old passage was sealed, the laundry room had more caution tape than clean towels, and the sign now read HART MO - because the remaining letters were scattered across the grass like the aftermath of a very cheap alphabet explosion.

Still, guests were arriving.

A sedan rolled in from I-16 and stopped beside the office. The driver looked at the half-painted sign, the caution tape, and Todd's ladder.

Then he reversed.

"See?" Baggage said. "Your reputation remains strong."

"People come here when they're about to make a terrible choice."

"He recognized the atmosphere."

I watched the sedan disappear toward the highway and tried not to feel personally rejected by a man who had chosen a chain motel with functioning signage.

Tessa stood near the courtyard fountain, reading the reopening conditions from her clipboard. The fountain had been dry since the flood, but Darla had placed two plastic flamingos in it to "suggest water." One leaned against the other with the exhausted intimacy of a couple who had survived a tax audit.

Tessa looked up.

Our eyes met.

My stomach performed a small, unnecessary cartwheel.

This was inconvenient. I had spent months resenting her inspections, her clipboard, her ability to find a violation in a room that technically had no ceiling. She had shut me down repeatedly, appeared at the motel every time the plumbing made a suspicious noise, and kissed me beside a smoking dryer like that was a normal conclusion to an afternoon involving fraud.

Now she was standing in my courtyard, and I wanted her to stay.

That was the problem.

Wanting Tessa to stay meant trusting her. Trusting Tessa meant admitting that the woman who had kept me at arm's length had also kept the motel from collapsing entirely. It meant accepting that some of her secrecy had been protection rather than betrayal.

It also meant she knew where I kept the spare mop keys, which was an intimacy I had not prepared for.

"You're staring," she said.

"I'm assessing the courtyard."

"You've been assessing the same paving stone for three minutes."

"It's a complicated stone."

"It has gum on it."

"Exactly. Layers."

She closed the clipboard and walked toward me. Her boots clicked against the cracked concrete. The sunset turned the motel windows orange, which was generous of it. The building still looked like it had lost an argument with a storm drain.

"I need to talk to you," she said.

"That phrase has never improved my evening."

"I'm aware."

"Is this about the flamingos? They're decorative."

"They're blocking the fountain drain."

"Then they're also functional."

Tessa stopped a few feet away. Behind her, Darla attempted to drag a patio chair through the lobby doors. The chair caught on the threshold. Todd climbed down from the ladder to help, leaving the paintbrush on the roof.

Baggage watched them.

"Structural decisions are being made," he said.

"I can see that."

Tessa folded her arms. "The county review is complete. Mavis's records are being subpoenaed. Pike is in custody. Lenny is cooperating, mostly because he thinks co-operation sounds better than fraud."

"Does it?"

"Not legally."

"Pity."

"You're cleared to operate under the conditions."

"I heard."

"I mean beyond tonight."

The courtyard seemed to grow quieter, though the third dryer chose that moment to thump hard enough to rattle the office windows.

Tessa continued. "I'll still be assigned to the property."

I looked at her.

"As inspector," she added.

"Right."

"Unless you object."

I glanced at the motel. The broken sign. The caution tape. The flamingos. Todd now trying to balance the patio chair on one foot while Darla shouted directions from underneath it.

"I object to many things," I said. "The chair. The dryer. Todd's relationship with ladders."

"I meant me."

That landed without drama, which was worse. Drama could be dodged. A quiet question had nowhere to hide.

I rubbed my palms against my jeans. "You kept things from me."

"Yes."

"You left notes in my paperwork instead of telling me Pike was using the old route."

"Yes."

"You knew the inspections were being manipulated."

"I suspected. I didn't have proof."

"You could have told me."

"I should have."

The answer took the fight out of me, which felt unfair. I had prepared several excellent accusations. Some had hand gestures.

Tessa stepped closer. "I thought if I told you too soon, you'd confront him."

"I would have."

"You did confront him."

"He burned my sign."

"You also grabbed him."

"He was ruining my property."

"You grabbed him before he ruined it."

"Technically, he was already ruining it."

Her mouth twitched. "That's not the reassurance you think it is."

I looked down at the cracked concrete. A tiny weed pushed through one of the seams, green and stubborn.

"I don't know how to do this," I said.

Tessa's expression softened, but she did not reach for me. That helped. I needed the chance to say the rest without being rescued by a kiss.

"I know how to run a motel badly," I continued. "I know how to argue with contractors, hide evidence from chickens, and identify which guests are lying about the missing towels. I don't know how to trust someone who can shut me down with a signature."

"I don't want you trusting me because I have authority."

"Good, because that would be deeply unattractive."

"I want you to trust me because I show up."

I looked at her.

She gestured toward the motel. "I showed up when the ice machine was contaminated. I showed up when the laundry flooded. I showed up when Pike tried to frame you. I kept showing up because the motel mattered, and because you mattered."

The third dryer thumped again.

Baggage tilted his head. "That was a strong statement. The appliance objects."

"Ignore him," I said.

"I have tried," Tessa replied.

I smiled despite myself.

Tessa took one more step. "I can't promise there won't be inspections."

"I would worry if there weren't."

"I can't promise the motel won't be a disaster."

"That would be a fraudulent promise."

"I can promise I'll tell you the truth when I know it. Even when the truth is inconvenient."

"That sounds exhausting."

"It may be."

"And if I make a terrible decision?"

"You own a motel off I-16. That ship has been visible from space for months."

I laughed, and the sound came out rougher than expected. Tessa smiled at me, and there it was again - that inconvenient internal movement, that ridiculous little shift from guarded to hopeful.

Behind us, something crashed.

Todd shouted, "The chair is fine!"

Darla shouted, "The chair has entered the fountain!"

The chicken shrieked.

Baggage stood. "I will investigate."

"You will not," I said.

"I am security."

"You are emotionally invested in the chicken."

"She has poor judgment."

"She rents here. Everyone has poor judgment."

Baggage trotted toward the fountain anyway.

Tessa watched him go. "He's going to make this difficult."

"He considers that his job."

"So do I."

"That's one of the things I like about you."

The words escaped before I could inspect them for structural damage.

Tessa turned back to me.

"You like things about me?"

"I'm making a limited disclosure."

"Under what conditions?"

"Conditional affection. Rooms one through six only. No access to the laundry."

She laughed, and I felt the tension loosen in my shoulders.

"I like things about you too," she said.

"Such as?"

"You're stubborn."

"That's not a thing to like."

"You keep going when every sensible person would leave."

"Also not flattering."

"You care about everyone here, even when they're impossible."

"I don't care about Todd."

"Todd is currently stuck in the fountain."

"That's different."

"And you make me laugh."

I looked toward the fountain. Todd was indeed stuck, one leg through the flamingo arrangement, while Darla tried to pull him free by his belt. The chicken stood on the rim, supervising with the authority of a tiny feathered foreman.

"I'm not sure that's because of me," I said.

"It is."

Tessa reached for my hand.

This time, I met her halfway.

Her fingers slid into mine, warm from the fading sun. The contact was simple. No emergency. No smoking equipment. No fraudulent permit stretched between us. Just her hand in mine while the motel continued failing in several nearby directions.

"I want to keep going," I said.

"With the repairs?"

"With you."

Her thumb brushed across my knuckles.

"Yes," she said. "Both."

It was not a grand declaration. No music rose from the broken fountain. No county seal descended from the sky to certify our emotional compliance. But something settled into place.

I had spent so long treating every good thing as a trap that I had forgotten some doors opened because someone was standing on the other side.

Tessa leaned in and kissed me.

It was slower than the kiss beside the dryer, less startled and more deliberate. I held her waist. She held the front of my jacket. The sunset warmed one side of my face, and the courtyard smelled faintly of wet concrete, grilled corn, and whatever chemical Todd had spilled near the pool.

Then Barkley barked.

Not Baggage.

Barkley, the watch dog, came trotting from the office with a length of caution tape caught around his collar. He planted himself directly between us and the courtyard path.

"Guarding," he announced.

"We're aware," I said.

He faced the motel, legs braced, tape fluttering from his neck like a very cheap ceremonial sash.

A man in a wrinkled suit stepped out of room eight and headed toward the parking lot. Barkley gave him one sharp bark.

The man stopped.

Barkley narrowed his eyes. "State your intentions."

The man looked at me. "I'm checking out."

"That is not an intention. That is an escape."

"I have a meeting."

"Terrible choice," Barkley said.

The man glanced at the damaged sign, the smoking-looking dryer vent, and Todd still trapped in the fountain.

Then he kept walking.

Barkley returned his attention to us. "Threat neutralized."

Tessa rested her forehead against mine. "Your staff is feral."

"Unhinged," I corrected. "Feral implies planning."

Barkley sat between us, guarding the moment with the grave dignity of a dog who had just prevented a romantic interruption from a man in a wrinkled suit.

Across the courtyard, Todd finally freed himself. The flamingos toppled. Darla shouted for a towel. The chicken stole a piece of corn. The third dryer began thumping again, louder now, as if objecting to our decision.

I squeezed Tessa's hand.

The motel was still broken. The repairs were still waiting. The old passage still hid more trouble, and room twelve remained locked behind a door with a blue-painted key no one trusted.

But Tessa was staying.

I was letting her.

Barkley lifted his head toward the office wall.

"Something is moving behind the passage," he said.

Tessa sighed.

I looked at the caution tape, the crooked sign, and the woman beside me.

"Tomorrow," I said.

The wall thumped.

"Tomorrow," Tessa agreed.

Barkley gave one final bark and settled at our feet, guarding us from the motel, the guests, and whatever terrible choice came next.

The Motel's New Rule: No Traps

Barkley's bark had barely finished rattling the office windows when I marched into the front desk with a roll of red tape, three laminated signs, and the expression of a woman about to outlaw improvisation.

"Today," I announced, "we become boring."

Baggage, sprawled beneath the key box, opened one eye. "That is not your natural state."

"It's a temporary operational condition."

Tessa stood behind the desk with her clipboard tucked against her hip. She had spent the night at home, allegedly, though she had arrived before breakfast carrying coffee and the suspiciously calm look of someone who had slept more than four hours. I had not. The third dryer had thumped until two in the morning, Todd had attempted to repair the lobby bell with a butter knife, and Barkley had spent forty minutes interrogating a vending machine.

The motel smelled of burnt coffee, fresh paint, and the citrus disinfectant Tessa had approved after inspecting it like it might have a criminal record.

Darla stood beside the desk wearing a whistle.

"No," I said.

She touched it. "It's for emergencies."

"You used a whistle last night because room six requested extra towels."

"They sounded urgent."

"They sounded damp."

Todd came in from the staff training area carrying a whiteboard, two folding chairs, and a traffic cone.

"What's the cone for?" I asked.

"Crowd control."

"We have four staff members."

"Five if you count Baggage."

Baggage lifted his head. "I count as management."

"You count as a liability with excellent hearing."

He yawned. "I have filed a complaint."

The staff training area had once been a storage room. It still contained a broken ice machine, a stack of mattresses nobody admitted owning, and a framed painting of a sailboat that had been hung upside down. We had cleared enough space for the whiteboard and taped a large sign over the door.

STAFF ONLY.

Barkley sat beneath it.

"Guests are not staff," I told him.

"Some staff are guests," he replied.

"That is not a loophole."

"It is at this motel."

Tessa set her coffee down. "What exactly is the new system?"

I faced the room.

"We have three rules. Guests check in at the desk. Keys stay in the key box. Closed areas stay closed."

Darla raised her hand.

"What if the guest is already in the room?"

"Then they remain there."

"What if they're in the wrong room?"

"Then we move them to the correct room."

"What if the correct room is closed?"

"Then they leave."

Todd leaned against the whiteboard. "What if they refuse?"

"Then Barkley handles it."

Barkley's tail thumped once. "I prefer voluntary compliance."

"Since when?"

"Since my back began hurting."

Tessa glanced at me. "That's sensible."

I pointed at her. "Don't encourage him."

The first test arrived before we finished taping the third sign.

A man in a wedding tuxedo entered through the lobby doors carrying a garment bag, a bouquet, and the expression of someone who had recently discovered that consequences were not covered by his reservation.

"I need room nine," he said.

"Room nine is occupied."

He looked toward the hallway. "By my bride."

"That sounds like a personal matter."

"She locked me out."

Barkley rose.

The man noticed him. "Is that dog trained?"

"Extensively," I said. "He knows the difference between a guest and a problem."

Barkley sniffed the bouquet. "He smells like panic and rented formalwear."

The man lowered his voice. "I'm getting married here."

"Congratulations."

"Not to the person in room nine."

The lobby went quiet.

Darla slowly removed the whistle from her mouth.

Tessa looked at me over her clipboard.

I pointed toward the new sign. "Guests check in at the desk. Keys stay in the key box. Closed areas stay closed."

"That doesn't address my situation."

"It addresses all situations. That's the beauty of rules. They don't care about your emotional complexity."

The man slapped a key onto the counter.

I looked at it.

Blue tag.

Room twelve.

"Where did you get this?"

"Your night clerk."

I turned toward Darla.

She held up both hands. "He had a bouquet."

"That is not authorization."

"He said it was urgent."

"He is wearing a tuxedo."

"That seemed urgent."

Tessa took the key from the counter. "Room twelve is closed."

The groom's face collapsed. "I thought it was room nine."

"Room nine is occupied," I said.

"By my bride."

"Yes, we covered that."

He reached for the key.

Barkley stepped between them.

"State your intentions," he said.

The groom stared. "I'm trying to get married."

"Poorly."

The man backed away from the key box.

I took the key and locked it inside. "You can wait in the lobby, call your bride, or leave the property. You cannot enter a closed room."

"What if she's in danger?"

"Then call emergency services."

"She's furious."

"That is not an emergency. That is a wedding."

Tessa's mouth twitched.

The groom sat in the nearest chair, bouquet clutched against his chest. He looked like a man waiting for a verdict from a floral arrangement.

Darla leaned toward me. "Should I offer him a towel?"

"No."

"Coffee?"

"No."

"Whistle?"

"Absolutely not."

The front doors opened again.

A woman in a sequined robe swept inside, followed by a chicken wearing a tiny veil.

The bride in room nine.

She pointed at the groom. "You."

He stood. "Marlene."

"You said you were getting ice."

"I got delayed."

"You were gone for three hours."

"I had to make a decision."

"You made several decisions. I saw the texts."

The chicken clucked.

Barkley looked at the bird. "Is that a witness?"

"She knows everything," Marlene said.

The groom glanced toward the exit.

Barkley moved with him.

"Voluntary compliance," the dog reminded him.

The groom sat back down.

I rubbed my forehead. We had made it eleven minutes into the new system.

Tessa wrote something on her clipboard.

"What are you documenting?" I asked.

"Successful prevention of unauthorized room access."

"That sounds almost flattering."

"It is not."

Marlene slapped a phone onto the desk. "He booked room nine for us, but he gave the room to his other bride."

The groom lifted one finger. "Technically, she booked it."

The chicken pecked his shoe.

Marlene nodded. "Exactly."

I looked at the lobby, the bouquet, the chicken veil, and the man whose romantic strategy appeared to involve duplicate reservations.

"Everyone remains in the lobby until the sheriff arrives," I said.

The groom stood again. "You can't detain me."

"I'm not detaining you. I'm preventing you from wandering into restricted areas while you explain your choices to law enforcement."

"That's detention."

"That's hospitality with boundaries."

Baggage came in from the courtyard carrying a mop head in his mouth.

"Boundary breach," he announced.

Todd appeared behind him. "The pool gate is open."

"It is not a pool," I said.

"It contains water."

"It contains rainwater and one traffic cone."

"Still open."

I pointed at Todd. "Close it."

Todd hurried out.

Darla reached for the whistle.

I caught her wrist. "No."

"But the bride is escalating."

"The bride is standing still."

"She's doing it aggressively."

Marlene's chicken flapped onto the counter.

Barkley sat beside the key box. "I am monitoring the bird."

The chicken pecked the room twelve key through the metal slot.

I stared at it.

"Do not," I said.

The chicken pecked again.

Tessa stepped beside me. "The key box is locked."

"It's not supposed to be a challenge."

Barkley looked at the chicken. "She considers it a negotiation."

The chicken knocked the key ring loose.

It fell inside the box with a metallic clank.

Nobody moved.

Then Todd shouted from the courtyard, "The cone is floating!"

Darla blew the whistle.

The sound pierced the lobby.

The bride screamed.

The groom ducked beneath the desk.

The chicken flapped into a stack of registration forms.

Baggage barked at the whistle.

Barkley barked at Baggage.

Tessa dropped her clipboard.

I grabbed for it, missed, and caught the coffee instead. Hot coffee splashed across my hand and the front of my shirt.

The groom crawled backward out from under the desk and collided with the umbrella stand.

The umbrella stand tipped.

Three umbrellas opened at once.

One struck the lobby clock.

The clock fell toward Tessa.

I caught it against my shoulder.

Tessa caught my waist.

The bride caught the chicken.

The chicken caught a registration pen in her beak.

Baggage caught the mop head.

Barkley caught absolutely nothing because, as he explained later, he was “supervising.”

For a moment, the lobby became a storm of umbrellas, feathers, coffee, and administrative failure.

Then the groom, still on the floor, looked up at me.

“Is this normal?”

“No,” I said.

Baggage dropped the mop head. “It is improving.”

The sheriff arrived six minutes later and found the groom under the desk, the bride holding a chicken in a veil, and Tessa pressed against my side while I held a broken clock.

He looked at the new signs.

“New policy?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Working?”

“Exceptionally.”

Tessa retrieved her clipboard. The corner was bent, but the pages were dry.

She turned to me. “This is why the rules need to be enforced consistently.”

“I enforced them.”

“You let Darla issue a key.”

“I did not let her.”

“You allowed her to remain in possession of the key box.”

“That sounds like a technicality.”

“It is a preventable one.”

She said it without anger. That was worse. Anger I could argue with. Calm accuracy simply stood there holding a clipboard.

I looked at Darla.

She removed the whistle and placed it on the counter.

"I'll keep it for actual emergencies."

"What qualifies?"

"Fire."

"Good."

"Flood."

"Good."

"Romantic betrayal."

"No."

She nodded solemnly. "I need that in writing."

By noon, we had moved the key box behind the desk, locked the staff training area, and added a second latch to the laundry room. Todd installed a bell on the restricted hallway gate. The bell rang whenever the gate opened, which was useful because the gate opened every time someone breathed near it.

Barkley took up position beside the front desk.

Baggage lay beneath the counter with a stack of towels over his back.

"You look busy," I said.

"I am on break."

"You've been on break for two hours."

"I am pacing myself."

The next guest tried to check in with a live iguana inside his shirt.

Barkley sniffed him.

"Unauthorized reptile."

The man looked offended. "He's emotional support."

"He is emotionally supporting himself," Barkley said. "Your shirt is moving."

The guest surrendered the iguana to the plastic carrier we kept for emergencies. The carrier had originally held a waffle maker. The iguana seemed unimpressed by

the downgrade.

A woman from room four attempted to use the restricted hallway because it was "more scenic."

Todd blocked her with the traffic cone.

"It's not scenic," he told her. "It ends at a wall."

"Then why is it restricted?"

"Because the wall is private."

I watched from the desk as he redirected her toward the main corridor without touching her, shouting, or offering a key. It was the first time Todd had obeyed a rule without needing to be physically removed from the situation.

I felt something unfamiliar.

Hope, perhaps.

Or indigestion.

At three, Tessa conducted the follow-up check.

She moved through the front desk area with her clipboard, checking the key box, the signs, the latch, and the temperature log. The motel remained ugly, but now its ugliness had been organized into zones.

"Room assignments?" she asked.

"Recorded at check-in."

"Keys?"

"Returned to the box."

"Restricted areas?"

"Marked, latched, and monitored."

"Staff?"

I glanced toward the training room.

Darla was practicing emergency whistle signals into a pillow. Todd was labeling the traffic cone STAFF EQUIPMENT. Baggage was asleep beneath the desk. Barkley was interviewing the iguana.

"Contained," I said.

Barkley looked up. "The reptile has no clear intentions."

"He's in a carrier."

"Exactly."

Tessa checked the last page. "And no unauthorized entry since noon?"

"No."

A sharp bell rang from the hallway.

Everyone turned.

Todd appeared at the gate, holding the traffic cone.

"I opened it," he said. "To test the bell."

"Why?" I asked.

"To prove it works."

The bell rang again.

Barkley stood. "Test complete."

Tessa wrote on the clipboard.

I waited.

She looked at me. "Conditional compliance confirmed."

The words should have sounded clinical. Instead, they landed like a medal.

"Does that mean we passed?"

"It means the motel can continue operating under the current restrictions."

"That is a very inspector way to say yes."

"I'm still an inspector."

"And I'm still the owner."

"And we're still dating."

Barkley cleared his throat. "The romance is interfering with the audit."

I leaned across the desk and kissed Tessa.

It was brief, warm, and entirely free of burning dryers, falling signs, or fraudulent permits. The lobby smelled like coffee and disinfectant. The hallway bell rang once in the background. Somewhere outside, I heard Todd congratulate the traffic cone.

Tessa pulled back first.

"Your system is working," she said.

"It's not a system. It's a collection of threats and locked boxes."

"It's a system."

I looked around.

Darla was no longer issuing keys. Todd was not inside a fountain. The bride and groom had left separately, the chicken had been returned to its room, and the iguana was still glaring from the waffle-maker carrier.

Baggage opened one eye. "Controlled comedy."

I frowned. "Did you just describe my management style?"

"I described your luck."

Barkley sat beside the key box. "The distinction is narrow."

Outside, a car turned in from I-16 and stopped beneath the half-repaired sign. The driver studied the crooked letters, the caution tape, and the red notice on the office door.

Then he parked.

I reached for the registration forms.

Tessa tucked her clipboard under her arm and stayed beside me.

The motel was still the place people came when they were about to make a terrible choice. Now, at least, we knew where to put the keys, how to keep the guests out of the tunnels, and which staff member needed to be watched near a whistle.

That counted as routine.

The hallway bell rang.

Todd shouted, "Nobody panic!"

"No one is panicking," I called.

A beat passed.

Then the third dryer thumped from behind the sealed laundry door.

Barkley's ears lifted.

"Routine," he said.

I picked up the phone as the new guest approached the desk.

"Good afternoon," I said. "Do you have a reservation?"

He glanced at the sign.

"No."

"Excellent," I said. "Those are usually the ones that work out."

Barkley Solves the Last Complaint

The new guest had no reservation, no luggage, and the damp, guilty expression of a man who had just parked beside a sign reading HART MO and decided that was good enough.

I slid the registration form across the desk. "Name?"

"Cal."

"Last name?"

He glanced toward the hallway. "Do I need one?"

"Only if you plan to become a problem."

Tessa, standing beside the key box with her clipboard tucked under one arm, gave me a look.

"What?" I said. "We've established standards."

Barkley sat at my feet, watching Cal's shoes. "He has the posture of a person hiding something."

Cal looked down at the dog. "Does he always talk?"

"Only when he has an opinion."

"He has several," I said.

"Most are correct," Barkley added.

Cal's gaze flicked toward the guest corridor. The motion was quick, but not quick enough. At the Hart Motel, suspicious glances were practically a second form of identification.

I tapped the form. "Name."

"Cal Mercer."

"Any relation to Ray Mercer?"

His mouth opened, then closed.

Tessa's clipboard lowered half an inch.

Barkley's ears lifted. "The question has struck bone."

"No relation," Cal said.

"That was a very fast answer," I said.

"I'm in a hurry."

"Then you're in the wrong motel. We specialize in delays."

He looked past me at the corridor. The caution tape had been removed from the main hallway, but the strip near the laundry door remained, sagging between two hooks like a tired yellow tongue. The third dryer had finally stopped thumping, which meant it was either repaired or planning something.

Cal shifted his weight.

I folded my arms. "What are you looking for?"

"Nothing."

"Excellent. We have plenty of that."

Tessa stepped closer. "Maribel."

"I'm only asking."

"You're interrogating."

"I run a motel. It's the same skill set with worse lighting."

Cal rubbed the back of his neck. "I left something here."

"An item?"

"A towel."

Barkley stared at him.

I stared at him.

Tessa wrote something on her clipboard.

"A towel," I repeated.

"Yes."

"People usually leave towels behind. They don't come back for them like family heirlooms."

"It has my initials."

"Are the initials emotionally significant?"

Cal looked toward the housekeeping closet.

That answered enough.

I took the ring of approved keys from the heavy key box. "Which room?"

"Eleven."

"Room eleven is occupied."

"I know."

"Then your towel has moved on with its life."

"It was in the housekeeping closet."

"Why?"

"I put it there."

"Why?"

He hesitated.

Barkley stood. "The towel has a history."

I looked at Tessa. "Is this what passing inspection feels like?"

"It feels like the beginning of another complaint."

She was right. The last complaint had been about missing towels, filed through the county portal at six that morning. The wording was brief, dramatic, and written entirely in capital letters.

THREE TOWELS MISSING FROM ROOM ELEVEN. UNSANITARY PRACTICES.
POSSIBLE COVER-UP.

The phrase possible cover-up had been especially charming. Nothing says restful morning like being accused of laundering evidence before breakfast.

I had checked the linen shelves, the laundry carts, the rooms, and Todd's truck. I found two towels in room three, one wrapped around the chicken woman's birdcage, and a fourth towel in Darla's locker being used as a scarf.

None belonged to room eleven.

Now Cal Mercer had appeared without a reservation, asking for the exact towel that had triggered the complaint.

Tessa looked at me. "If the county receives another complaint tied to missing linens, they may schedule an additional visit."

"An additional visit," I said. "Wonderful. I was worried we'd run out of clipboards."

"I'm serious."

"So am I. We should install a bell every time you arrive. Maybe a small parade."

"Maribel."

I sighed. "Fine. We'll investigate the towel."

Barkley sniffed the air. "I smell detergent, dust, and deception."

"You always smell deception."

"Because it is everywhere."

We moved into the housekeeping closet, which was less a closet and more a narrow wooden apology packed with sheets, cleaning supplies, spare pillows, and one mop that had been banned from three separate rooms for behavioral reasons.

The air smelled of bleach and lavender detergent. A bare bulb buzzed overhead. Towels were stacked on the shelves in uneven piles, each one labeled with room numbers in Darla's handwriting.

ROOMS 1-6.

ROOMS 8-10.

MISCELLANEOUS, BUT DON'T GET CREATIVE.

I pulled open the bottom cabinet.

Nothing but a dead flashlight, two clothespins, and a plastic spoon.

Barkley pushed past my knees and shoved his nose behind the laundry cart.

"There is a trail," he announced.

Cal leaned into the doorway. "Where?"

"You stay there," I said.

"I'm trying to help."

"You're the man whose towel started this."

"It's not my fault someone complained."

"That is exactly what a person whose towel started this would say."

Tessa crouched beside Barkley. "What did you find?"

Barkley backed out with something clenched in his teeth.

A towel.

It was gray, damp, and marked with a blue C near the hem.

Cal made a grab for it.

Barkley turned away.

"Do not snatch evidence," the dog said.

"I just want my towel."

"That is what all towel thieves say."

I took it from Barkley and held it up. The fabric was cold and gritty. A smear of blue paint stained one corner.

Tessa examined the mark. "This isn't a room eleven towel."

"It has my initials," Cal said.

"It has a C," I said. "That could stand for anything."

"Cal."

"Cover-up," Barkley offered.

"Crisis," I said.

"Chicken," came a voice from the corridor.

The woman with the chicken appeared carrying a basket of folded sheets. Her bird sat on top, wearing no veil this time but looking equally judgmental.

"Don't involve the chicken," I said.

"She saw the towel," the woman said.

The chicken pecked the basket.

"She says it was dragged."

"By whom?"

The chicken pecked again.

"By a dog," the woman translated.

Barkley's head turned.

"I did not drag it," he said. "I relocated it."

I slowly lowered the towel. "You relocated it?"

"It was in the corridor."

"Why was it in the corridor?"

"Because it was following the trail."

"Towels don't follow trails."

"This one did."

Tessa rubbed her temple. "Barkley, where did you find it?"

"Near the laundry door. It moved after midnight."

Cal took another step forward.

Barkley growled.

The growl was not loud. It didn't need to be. It had the quiet confidence of a dog who had once chased a county inspector through a hedge and considered that a professional success.

Cal stopped.

I looked at the blue paint on the towel. "Where did you get the paint?"

He said nothing.

Tessa's attention sharpened. "Cal."

"It was already there."

"On the towel?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"Then why did you come back for it?"

He glanced at room eleven.

The guest corridor was empty except for a luggage cart, a crooked wall mirror, and a vacuum cleaner that had been unplugged since the last time Todd tried to use it as a leaf blower. The carpet smelled faintly of wet wool and the industrial lemon cleaner Darla used in quantities normally associated with chemical warfare.

Cal exhaled.

"Fine," he said. "I painted the initials on it."

I stared at him. "You painted your initials on a motel towel?"

"It was mine."

"It was not yours. It was ours."

"I brought it with me."

"Then why was it in the housekeeping closet?"

"Because I didn't want it in room eleven."

"That sentence has too many doors and none of them lead to sense."

Cal rubbed his face. "I was hiding it."

"From whom?"

He looked toward the end of the corridor.

Barkley followed his gaze.

"The man from room eleven," he said.

Cal flinched.

I knew the man from room eleven. He had checked in three days earlier with a duffel bag, a broken watch, and the firm belief that the motel's vending machine was sending him coded messages. He had also complained about missing towels twice, despite returning each one with the solemnity of a man surrendering classified material.

I lowered my voice. "What did he do?"

"Nothing."

"People who say nothing usually mean something with paperwork attached."

Cal glanced at Tessa. "He kept asking about the towel."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

Barkley sniffed the blue mark. "The towel was used to wipe paint."

Cal looked at the dog. "How would you know that?"

"I have a nose."

"That doesn't explain anything."

"It explains most things."

I turned the towel over. Beneath the blue smear was a faint line of black dust and a sticky residue along the seam.

Tessa touched it with the end of her pen. "This may have come from the old passage."

The hallway seemed to shrink.

The old passage was sealed, restricted, and theoretically empty. The word theoretically had done a lot of work around here and deserved paid leave.

Cal raised both hands. "I didn't go into any passage."

"I didn't ask if you did."

"You were thinking it."

"I was thinking several things. Most involved closing the motel."

He looked miserable now, which was inconvenient because suspicion was easier when people behaved like villains.

"What happened?" I asked.

Cal swallowed. "I saw someone moving near the laundry door last night. I followed him."

Tessa's expression hardened. "Who?"

"I couldn't see."

"Then why the towel?"

"The person dropped it."

"And you picked it up?"

"I thought it was mine."

"You had painted your initials on it."

"I told you. It was mine."

"Your logic is wearing a fake mustache."

Cal pointed toward the housekeeping closet. "I put it in there because the man from room eleven saw me with it. Then he started asking questions. I didn't want him to think I was involved."

"Involved in what?"

"I don't know."

Barkley sat beside the laundry cart. "He knows less than a spoon."

The plastic spoon in the cabinet slid loose and clattered onto the floor.

Everyone looked at it.

"Don't make this worse," I told the motel.

A door opened at the far end of the corridor.

The man from room eleven stepped out carrying three towels and a room-service tray that had never contained room service.

"I knew it," he said.

I closed my eyes briefly. "Of course you did."

He marched toward us. "The towels are moving again."

"They are not moving," I said.

One of the towels in his arms slipped to the floor.

Barkley watched it land. "That one has escaped."

The man pointed at Cal. "He's part of it."

"Part of what?"

"The exchange."

Tessa raised her clipboard. "What exchange?"

"The towels go in. The keys come out."

Nobody spoke.

The corridor hummed with the old fluorescent light. Somewhere behind the wall, a pipe clicked. The smell of detergent thickened as if the housekeeping closet itself were sweating.

I looked at the heavy key box through the open office door.

Then at the towel in my hand.

Then at Cal.

"What keys?" I asked.

The man from room eleven looked offended. "The ones hidden in the towels."

Tessa moved first. She took the towels from him and shook them out one by one.

Nothing fell.

I checked the seams.

Nothing.

Barkley sniffed the third towel and nudged the corner with his nose.

"Fold it," he said.

I folded it.

A small brass key slid from the hem and landed on the carpet.

The man from room eleven made a triumphant noise.

Cal backed into the wall.

Tessa picked up the key. Its tag had been scraped blank.

My stomach tightened.

"Where did this come from?" I asked.

Cal shook his head. "I didn't put it there."

The man from room eleven pointed at him. "He did."

"I didn't."

Barkley sniffed the key. "It smells like the dog."

I looked at him.

He looked back.

"Which dog?" I asked.

"Me."

"You hid a key in a towel?"

"I secured it."

"Why?"

"It was lying near the laundry door."

"Why didn't you bring it to me?"

"You were kissing the inspector."

Tessa's eyebrows rose.

"That happened once," I said.

"Several times," Barkley replied.

The man from room eleven leaned toward the dog. "You've been moving the towels?"

"Correct."

"Why?"

"To prevent unauthorized access."

I stared at Barkley.

He sat straighter, clearly pleased to have reached the part where his actions became noble through explanation.

"The towels were being used as markers," he said. "Guests carried them between rooms. The blue marks indicated which doors had been checked. The keys were hidden in the hems."

Cal's face went pale. "I only painted my initials on one."

"Yes," Barkley said. "You painted a C on the wrong towel."

"And the missing towels?" I asked.

"I moved them."

"To where?"

Barkley turned and trotted toward the end of the corridor.

We followed him past room nine, the ice machine, and the framed photograph of the motel from 1987, when the sign had all its letters and the carpet had only two stains. Barkley stopped at the linen cart parked beside the emergency exit.

He shoved his nose underneath.

A towel slid out.

Then another.

Then another.

I stared at the pile.

Three towels, neatly folded, each with a strip of blue paint along the hem.

The missing towels.

Tessa's mouth tightened. "Barkley."

"I was sorting."

"You were hiding."

"Sorting privately."

I picked up the towels. They were clean, dry, and faintly warm from the cart's metal frame.

The man from room eleven looked disappointed. "So there is no exchange?"

"There is still an exchange," Barkley said. "Humans exchange towels for complaints."

I turned toward him. "You caused the complaint."

"I prevented a larger complaint."

"That is not how complaints work."

"It is how prevention works."

Tessa took the towels from me and checked the room numbers. "These are from room eleven."

"Where did you get them?" I asked.

"From room eleven."

The man from room eleven lifted his chin. "I gave them to Barkley."

I looked at him.

He shrugged. "He asked."

"Dogs shouldn't be collecting linens."

"He was very persuasive."

Barkley's tail moved once.

I pressed my fingers to my forehead. "Let me understand this. You gave Barkley the towels because he asked. Barkley hid them in the linen cart because he saw a key near the laundry door. Cal painted his initial on one towel and hid it because he thought the room eleven man was involved. Then everyone complained about missing towels."

"That is accurate," Barkley said.

Tessa looked at me. "You wanted to close out lingering issues."

"I did."

"Consider them closed."

The blank key tag sat in her palm.

I reached for it. "What about this?"

Barkley's ears shifted.

"That key is not from the current box," he said.

I turned it over. The teeth were worn. A smear of blue paint marked the metal near the bow.

"Where did you find it?"

"Under the laundry cart."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"You were busy establishing rules."

"That was last chapter."

"I have a long memory."

The key fit the old utility lock beside the sealed laundry door.

Nobody moved.

The corridor suddenly felt less like a hallway and more like a question with carpet.

Tessa stepped beside me. "We are not opening that."

"I wasn't going to."

Barkley looked at the lock. "The key is already awake."

"That is not a thing."

The lock clicked.

The door shifted inward by half an inch.

Cold air slipped through the gap, carrying the smell of damp concrete, dust, and peppermint.

The man from room eleven took one step backward.

Cal took two.

I tightened my grip on the towels. "Barkley."

"I did not open it."

The door creaked wider.

Tessa caught my hand. "Maribel."

"I know."

The motel had been stable for almost an entire day. Naturally, it had decided to reward us with a haunted utility door.

Barkley moved in front of us, staring into the dark gap.

"Something is behind it," he said.

"Something is always behind a door here."

"Someone," he corrected.

The third dryer thumped from the sealed laundry room.

Tessa sighed. "I'm going to need another inspection."

"You just passed us."

"I know."

"That feels punitive."

"It's romantic."

I looked at her.

She smiled. "More adventures are coming."

The door clicked again.

I laughed. I couldn't help it. The towels were found, the complaint was explained, the mystery key had been identified, and the motel was once again threatening to produce a person from behind a wall.

At least this time, nobody was accusing me of stealing linens.

Barkley glanced over his shoulder. "You are laughing at the danger."

"I'm laughing at the towels."

"The danger is attached to the towels."

"Then it can wait its turn."

Tessa squeezed my hand.

The door opened another inch.

From somewhere beyond it came a soft scrape, followed by a voice we did not recognize.

"Is anyone there?"

I looked at Tessa, at Barkley, and at the three recovered towels.

Then I reached for the door.

"Apparently," I said, "our next guest is already checked in."

Love, Inspections, and the New Sign

The door opened another inch, and the motel exhaled peppermint-scented air directly into my face.

Barkley stood in front of me, hackles raised, caution tape fluttering from his collar. Tessa's hand remained wrapped around mine. Behind us, the hallway bell jingled because Todd had apparently decided the best way to test it was to lean against the restricted gate with his entire body.

"Is anyone there?" the unseen voice called again.

"Yes," I said. "Several people, though our qualifications vary."

A man stepped through the gap.

He wore a county vest, carried a sealed folder, and had the expression of someone who had never personally been trapped in a laundry passage. I disliked him immediately for his clean shoes.

Barkley sniffed his pant leg.

"State your intentions."

The man looked down. "I'm here for the final clearance."

Barkley glanced at me. "He smells official."

"That's because he's official," Tessa said.

"Many criminals wear vests."

Tessa squeezed my hand. "Maribel, this is Deputy Health Administrator Cole."

Cole extended his hand.

Barkley blocked it.

"Hands visible," the dog ordered.

Cole slowly raised both hands.

I looked at Tessa. "Is this part of the inspection?"

"No."

"Then why is he in the sealed laundry passage?"

Cole pointed behind him. "The old route connects to the service corridor. The county wanted to verify it was sealed from both ends."

"Of course they did." I stared into the dark passage. "Because one sealed door wasn't enough. The motel needed a second sealed door, preferably in a location that smells like wet pennies and regret."

A pipe clicked behind the wall.

Cole flinched.

Barkley's ears shot forward. "Movement."

"It's plumbing," Tessa said.

The third dryer thumped.

Cole looked at her.

Tessa looked at me.

I lifted one shoulder. "The dryer has opinions."

Cole opened the folder. "Before the final clearance, we need to verify the passage, the laundry closure, the exterior sign, the emergency access, and the compliance records."

"That sounds like several opportunities for failure."

"It is a standard process."

"Nothing here has ever been standard."

Barkley nudged my knee. "He has a folder. Folders cause trouble."

"He's not wrong," I said.

We entered the passage.

The air was cold and damp against my arms. Concrete scraped beneath my shoes. Somewhere overhead, traffic rolled along I-16 in a steady growl, a reminder

that civilization was only a few hundred yards away and had chosen not to involve itself.

Tessa kept hold of my hand as we followed Cole through the narrow service corridor. Her clipboard bumped against her hip.

"You're quiet," I said.

"I'm concentrating."

"On the inspection?"

"On not letting you touch anything."

"I'm offended."

"You once repaired a drain with a coat hanger and a serving spoon."

"It held for six hours."

"It flooded room four."

"Room four had been asking for excitement."

Barkley trotted ahead, nose low. Baggage followed behind us carrying a folded towel in his mouth.

I stopped. "Why do you have that?"

Baggage dropped it.

"Evidence," he said.

"Evidence of what?"

"Preparedness."

The towel had a blue stripe along the hem.

I looked at Barkley.

He looked at Baggage.

"We have discussed this," Barkley said.

"I'm not hiding it," Baggage replied. "I'm carrying it openly."

Cole pinched the bridge of his nose. "Is that dog part of the staff?"

"Unfortunately," I said.

"Fortunately," Barkley corrected.

We reached the far end of the passage, where a steel door led behind the laundry room. Cole tested the handle. It did not move.

He checked the hinges, the latch, and the new metal plate Todd had installed after the old key incident.

Todd's voice crackled from the radio clipped to my belt. "The door is secure."

"Why are you on my radio?" I asked.

"I borrowed it."

"From whom?"

"The radio."

"That wasn't the question."

The door gave a soft click.

Everyone froze.

A thin line of light appeared beneath it.

Barkley growled.

Cole stepped back. Tessa moved in front of me.

I leaned around her. "That door was locked."

"It is still locked," Cole said.

"Then why is it making an entrance?"

The light vanished.

The third dryer thumped again, louder than before.

Baggage barked.

Barkley barked at Baggage.

Baggage barked at the door.

Cole startled so hard he dropped the folder. Its papers scattered over the concrete.

Tessa bent to gather them. "Nobody move."

Todd's voice came through the radio again. "Should I turn off the dryer?"

"Yes," I called.

"No," Barkley said.

"Yes," I repeated.

"No," Barkley insisted. "It may be guarding the passage."

"It is a dryer."

"It has been operating without power."

Cole stared at me.

I stared at the door.

Tessa gathered the final sheet. "The dryer is not part of the clearance."

"That's what it wants you to think," Barkley said.

We returned to the laundry room through the main corridor. The door was still sealed with caution tape, though one strip had been decorated with a smiley face in permanent marker. Todd's artistic contribution, presumably.

Cole examined the tape.

"Why is there a smiley face?"

"It improves morale."

"It compromises the seal."

"It's on the tape, not through it."

He looked at Tessa.

She gave him the exhausted expression of a woman who had spent months inspecting my motel and had finally accepted that her career had become a hostage negotiation.

Cole peeled back the tape.

The room smelled of detergent, hot metal, and something faintly burnt. The third dryer sat against the wall with its round door shut.

Its drum turned once.

Then stopped.

Cole checked the power cord.

It was unplugged.

He looked at me.

"I know," I said.

The dryer thumped.

Barkley pressed his nose to the door.

"Open it," he said.

"No."

"Open it."

"No."

Tessa touched my elbow. "Maribel, if we want final clearance, we should identify the source."

"Fine." I pulled the handle.

The dryer door swung open.

A single motel sign letter tumbled out and landed on the floor.

The letter R.

I stared at it.

Todd's voice crackled over the radio. "That's mine."

"You lost it six chapters ago."

"I was storing it."

"In the dryer?"

"It was dry."

Cole crouched and picked up the letter. Blue paint flaked onto his fingers.

He turned it over. A strip of wire dangled from the back.

Tessa looked from the letter to the dryer. "The vibration must have shifted it through the service gap."

"That explanation is disappointingly reasonable," I said.

Barkley sniffed the letter. "It smells like Todd."

"Everything smells like Todd," Darla called from the hallway.

She appeared carrying a mop, a whistle, and the expression of someone prepared to make an emergency worse.

"Why are you carrying all three?" I asked.

"In case of a spill, a warning, or a spill that refuses to listen."

Cole stood. "Who is responsible for the equipment?"

Darla pointed at Todd, who had just arrived with a ladder balanced on one shoulder.

"Todd."

Todd pointed at Darla.

"Darla."

Barkley pointed at both of them with his nose. "Mutual negligence."

I took the letter from Cole. Its metal edge was cold and gritty.

"So the dryer wasn't haunted," I said.

"It may still be," Barkley replied.

Tessa inspected the gap behind the machine. "No obstruction. No active leak. No contamination."

Cole wrote something in his folder.

I leaned toward Tessa. "Is that good writing or bad writing?"

"Writing."

"Very helpful."

He finished, then moved toward the laundry door. "The interior is clear. The passage is sealed. The equipment is disconnected. This portion passes."

A cheer rose from the hallway.

Darla blew the whistle.

The sound ricocheted off the tile.

Cole dropped his pen.

Tessa closed her eyes.

Barkley sat down. "Celebration detected."

"No celebration until the paperwork is signed," Tessa said.

Darla lowered the whistle. "That was a test."

"Of what?"

"Whether the whistle still worked."

"It does," I said. "My left ear can confirm."

By late afternoon, the county team had checked the rooms, the key box, the emergency exits, the temperature logs, the repaired drain, the sealed passage, and the laundry equipment. Room twelve remained locked. The old route remained inaccessible. The towels were returned to room eleven, where the man accepted them with a suspicious nod.

Cal apologized for the blue paint.

The man from room eleven apologized for accusing him of running a towel exchange.

Barkley apologized to nobody.

At the front desk, Cole placed the final form on the counter.

The lobby smelled of lemon cleaner and fresh paint. Sunlight spilled through the dusty windows and lit the crooked registration forms, the heavy key box, and the corner where Todd had repaired the umbrella stand with zip ties.

Tessa stood beside me.

Cole signed the document.

Then he slid it across the counter.

"Full approval," he said. "The motel may operate without conditional restrictions."

For one second, I did not move.

The words looked strange on the page. Too clean. Too official. They did not mention the flood, the sabotage, the hidden keys, the fake permit, the chicken, or the fact that a dryer had been storing part of my sign.

They simply said we were cleared.

Tessa picked up the clipboard. "Congratulations."

I looked at her. "You're not shutting us down?"

"Not today."

"Will you still show up?"

Her mouth curved. "Constantly."

"That sounds threatening."

"It is a professional commitment."

I reached across the desk and pulled her toward me.

The kiss was warm, familiar, and interrupted almost immediately by Barkley.

"Public affection obstructs the registration area."

I pulled back. "The lobby is empty."

"The lobby is never empty. It contains witnesses."

Baggage climbed onto the chair beside the desk. "I approve."

"You weren't asked," I said.

"I rarely am."

Outside, Todd had gathered the remaining sign letters in the parking lot. The sun was dropping behind the trees, turning the cracked asphalt gold. He stood on the ladder with a drill between his teeth while Darla held the base and shouted instructions that contradicted every movement he made.

Tessa followed me out.

"Is this safe?" she asked.

"No."

"Should we stop him?"

"Probably."

Todd tightened the final bolt.

The motel sign flickered.

The first letter glowed.

Then the second.

Then the third.

HART MOTEL.

All the letters lit at once.

The sign buzzed, crackled, and briefly displayed HART M0TEL with a zero where the O should have been.

Todd climbed down.

"It's fixed," he announced.

The O blinked twice and corrected itself.

I stared up at the sign.

For months, it had been missing letters, smoking, leaning, or lying in pieces across the grass. Now it shone above the entrance, slightly crooked but whole.

A car slowed on the frontage road.

The driver looked at the sign.

Then at the motel.

Then pulled into the lot.

Barkley sat beneath the repaired letters, watching the newcomer approach.

"State your intentions," he called.

The driver rolled down his window. "I need a room."

Barkley glanced at me. "Terrible choice."

"Probably," I said.

The driver parked.

Darla clapped once and immediately knocked over the caution-cone storage bucket.

Todd tried to catch it, missed, and fell backward into the hedge.

Baggage barked at the hedge.

Cole gathered his folder and walked toward his county vehicle, shaking his head.

Tessa stayed beside me beneath the sign.

"Dinner?" she asked.

"Something irresponsible."

"Define irresponsible."

"Not cooked by Todd."

"Excellent start."

We took two folding chairs onto the patch of grass beside the entrance. Darla brought stale chips, a bottle of wine she found behind the desk, and a cake with the words FULL APPROVAL piped across the top in icing that leaned as badly as the sign.

Barkley stationed himself between us and the parking lot.

"You are on watch," I told him.

"I am always on watch."

"Even during cake?"

"Especially during cake."

Tessa handed me a plastic fork. Her fingers brushed mine.

The motel hummed behind us. The sign glowed above the entrance. I-16 rumbled beyond the trees, carrying people toward cities, exits, bad decisions, and occasionally my front office.

Tessa leaned against my shoulder.

"So," she said, "what happens now?"

I looked at the repaired sign, the sealed laundry door, and Barkley glaring at a guest who had just parked slightly crooked.

"Now we keep the place open."

"That's the plan?"

"It's the beginning of one."

Barkley's ears lifted. "There is movement near the old route."

Tessa sighed. "Of course there is."

I took her hand.

The sign buzzed overhead, steady and bright.

"Tomorrow," I said.

"Tomorrow," Tessa agreed.

Barkley watched the entrance.

Baggage stole the cake knife.

Darla blew the whistle because she considered this an emergency.

And beneath the restored sign, with full approval in one hand and Tessa's fingers in the other, I decided that whatever came next could wait until after dessert.

Final Thoughts

Somewhere along the way, I stopped trying to outsmart the motel and started listening to the mess it kept whispering - about accountability, about trust, and about the particular kind of love that shows up right when you're out of excuses. The journey turned me from a person who panicked at every fire alarm into someone who can laugh while the sprinklers do their worst, and somehow that feels like growth instead of damage control.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ava Nugent

From Georgia, USA, Ava Nugent brings readers stories inspired by her love of Disney travel, historical romance, adventure, and mystery. Her writing delivers romance with bite, secrets you can't ignore, and humor to keep the suspense from getting too serious.

After years as a travel planner, she now spends her time reading, writing, and—truthfully—using her words to keep the old brain sharp.

Quality Motel

by Ava Nugent

Copyright © 2026 Ava Nugent

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

First Edition: October 2026