

*Also by Lauren Asher*

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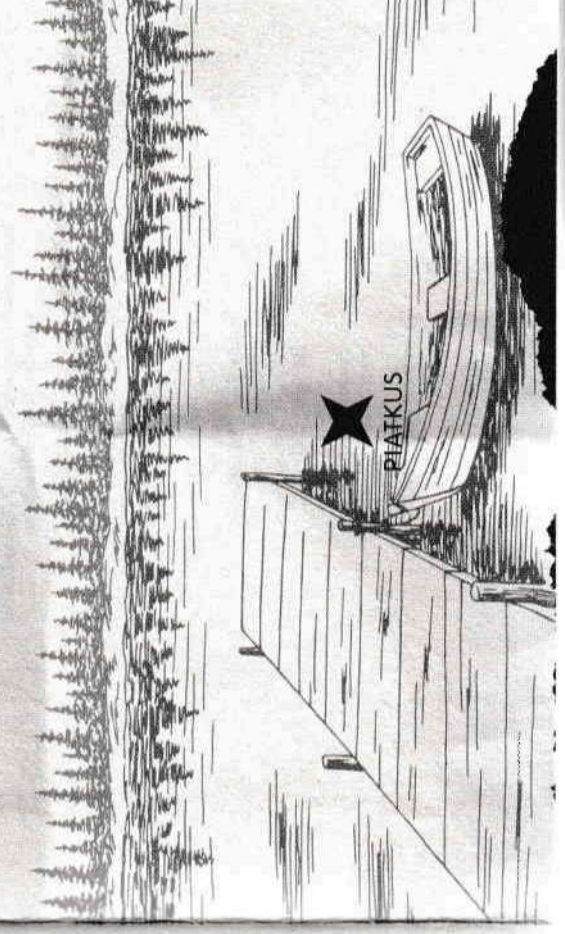
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A marriage of convenience between a grumpy boss and his assistant.

# *Final* OFFER

DREAMLAND BILLIONAIRES

LAUREN ASHER



## CHAPTER ONE

*Alana*

If I had known I was going to die tonight, I would have worn sexier underwear. Or at the very least, I would have dressed in something far nicer than mismatched pajamas riddled with holes and bleach stains.

My mother is probably lecturing me from heaven right now, wondering where she went wrong with raising me.

*Perdona me, Mami. Debería haberle escuchado.*

I do a quick sign of the cross before I aim my handgun at the shadow standing in the open doorway. My heart pounds furiously in my chest, the duration between beats growing smaller by the second. "I'm giving you until the count of five to get out of my house before I shoot. One...two..."

"Fuck." Something heavy smacks against the wall before a switch flips, flooding the entryway of the house with light.

My hold on the gun tightens as I come face-to-face with the one person I never thought I'd see again. Our gazes collide. His blue eyes trace the shape of my face like an invisible caress,



sending a rush of warmth through my body.

Despite the blaring alarm in my head warning me to run far away from him, I can't resist taking in all six-foot-four-inches of Callahan Kane. Everything about him feels familiar, all the way down to the ache in my chest that never left, even after he did.

His easygoing smile.

His unruly dirty blond hair, always unkempt and begging to be tamed.

His blue eyes the color of the clearest sky, sparkling like the surface of the lake under the noon sun.

It's been over six years since I last saw him. Six long years that have hardened me enough to spot his allure for exactly what it is.

*A trap.*

If I look carefully, I can spot the cracks in his façade that he tries to hide behind his beauty and charm. He was always careful about letting people look too closely at the broken person beneath his mask. It was what captured my attention in the first place and what resulted in my downfall.

I was twenty-three when he broke my heart, yet the pain feels like it happened just yesterday. Rather than ignore it, I lean into the hurt and use it to fuel my rage.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I snap.

His smile falters before sliding back into place. "Excited to see me?"

I motion him forward with my free hand. "Thrilled. Why don't you come a little closer so I can get a better shot? I'd hate to miss an important organ."

His eyes flicker from my face to the gun in my hand. "Do you

even know how to shoot that thing?"

My eyes narrow. "Want to find out?"

"Where did you get that?"

"A gift from my mom." My chest swells.

His brows raise toward his hairline. "Señora Castillo bought you a gun? Why?"

I lower the gun and flip the safety. "She always said a woman should be two things—armed and dangerous."

His mouth drops open. "I thought she was joking about having a gun to keep us in line."

"Not everyone grew up in a safe little Chicago suburb with a rotation of nannies and a full waitstaff."

"The same can be said about those who grew up in a happy little summer vacation town where the local cop can be bought with booze and a crisp Benjamin."

I scowl. "For your information, Sheriff Hank officially retired last year."

"A pity for delinquent teens everywhere." His bright grin widens.

Butterflies take flight in my belly. With the way my stomach dips and dives, it feels like thousands of them awoke after spending the last six years trapped in their cocoons.

*He broke your heart. Start acting like it.*

The muscles in my shoulders tense. "Do you plan on explaining what you're doing breaking into my house, or are we just going to stand around here all night?"

"Your house?" His forehead creases. "I think you're mistaken. My grandfather might have let your family stay here because your mother looks after the property, but you don't own it."



My mom didn't *just* look after the Kane house, but she loved it like her own ever since she was hired by Brady Kane to manage the property and help watch after his grandchildren.

*Yet he left you the property, not her.*

My chest throbs. "According to your grandfather's deed of the house, I do."

His body stiffens. "What do you mean?"

"That's between me and him."

"Seeing as I can't exactly go ask him to explain since he's six feet under and all, I'm going to need you to elaborate."

The pain above my heart intensifies. "He said this is my property, and I have a right to shoot anyone who questions otherwise."

He crosses his arms against his chest, drawing my eyes toward the muscles straining beneath his shirt. "Now I know you're lying. My grandfather always hated guns."

"Then how do you explain his little collection in the attic?"

He rubs his chin. "What collection?"

My head tilts. "Maybe you didn't know your grandfather as well as you think you did."

"Oh, and you did?" His chuckle comes off condescending.

I raise my chin. "He spent every single summer here until his accident, so yeah, I think I might know him better than the person who couldn't even bother to call for his birthday."

His eyes dart away. "He and I weren't exactly on speaking terms before his coma."

"I wonder why." Sarcasm seeps into my voice.

He rubs the back of his neck. "I made a lot of mistakes the last time I was here."

"Like getting together with me?"

The muscle in his jaw flexes. "I shouldn't have pursued you the way I did."

My chest might feel as if Cal plunged a serrated knife through it, but my face remains devoid of emotion—a skill perfected over the years.

"No, you really shouldn't have." My fingers tighten around the handle of the gun.

"I regret ruining our friendship."

The invisible knife twists, sinking deeper into my flesh. "Dating didn't ruin our friendship. Your addictions did."

Painkillers. Alcohol. Sex. Cal used all of them to escape the demons in his head, and I was too stupidly in love to see otherwise.

*You can't blame yourself when he was a master at hiding it.*

Yet I still struggle with believing the words I tell myself. My throat tightens from years' worth of repressed emotions, making swallowing difficult.

His jaw clenches, and his sharp bone structure stands out even more. "Believe it or not, I didn't drive all the way out here to fight with you about our past."

"Then why exactly did you come here?" Out of the hundred questions I want to ask him, that feels like the safest one.

"I came to check out the house."

"After six years? Why?"

"Because I plan on selling it."

I blink twice. "No. Absolutely not happening."

"Lana—" His use of the old nickname has my dead heart sparking with recognition.

*No wonder he thought you were so easy last time. All it takes is one silly nickname for you to let your guard down.*

"Don't call me that." My lips pull back.

"Alana," he corrects himself with a small frown. "I don't know what my grandpa told you, but you must have misunderstood him."

"Right. Of course, you assume I must have misunderstood him."

His eyes narrow. "Now you're just being difficult."

"As opposed to what? Naïve and stupid like the last time?"

He ignores my outburst and carries on. "We can clear this up easily. Where's the deed?"

I pause and consider the cons of giving in to his request.

*The sooner you show him the deed, the sooner he'll leave.*

"I'll go get it." I move toward the stairs before throwing him a look over my shoulder. "Don't leave that spot."

"And risk giving you a reason to shoot me? I'm good."

My reply hangs on the tip of my tongue, but I bite down on it. That's the thing about Cal. He can make anyone forget that they're angry with him solely by cracking a joke and flashing a smile. It is his greatest superpower and my personalryptonite.

*You're more prepared now.*

Or at least I hope I am.

I run upstairs and put my handgun away in the safe before searching my documents for the deed. It only takes me a minute to find it stuck between a few other important legal papers.

Cal checks my hands as I walk down the stairs. "No firearm this time?"

I shrug. "I know five different ways to kill a man with my

bare hands, so it's not like I really need it."

His golden skin turns pale. "Please tell me you're joking."

I wish I was. My mom sent me to Colombia to visit my uncle one summer, and he had no idea how to entertain me other than to have me work at his farm and teach me mixed martial arts. I came back a month later with a black belt in kicking people's asses and enough survival skills to compete on one of those outdoor reality shows.

I place the deed on the entry table and point at Brady's signature. "There. Just like I said."

Cal stands beside me while he checks out the deed. He is careful to keep his distance as he reads, but when he shifts his weight, our arms accidentally brush. A current of energy rolls through my body. He's quick to tuck his arms behind his back, although the lingering effect of his touch remains. It's been six years, yet my body reacts as if he only left yesterday.

My frown deepens.

Cal's head shakes after he reads the entire page. "I'm sorry, but whatever deed he gave you is outdated." He points at the date written beside Brady's signature. "This was signed before his updated will."

"What will?"

"The one he rewrote before his accident."

My throat feels as if Cal wrapped his hands around it and squeezed.

*No. That's not possible.* "I'm calling his lawyer right now so we can clear this all up." I move toward the stairs, desperate to go upstairs and grab my phone.

Cal checks his fancy watch. "It's almost midnight. I doubt



Leo would answer a call at this time."

I curse underneath my breath.

He tucks his hands into his pockets. "I'll contact him in the morning so we can sort this out before the realtor stops by."  
"What realtor?"

"The one I hired to help me sell the house."

"Exactly what part of 'I'm not selling my house' are you not understanding?"

"The fact that you're referring to the house as yours to begin with."

My fingers curl into themselves, forming two tight fists to prevent myself from wrapping them around his thick neck.

His eyes drop to my clenched hands before returning to my face. "I think until we get a valid explanation from the lawyer, we should table this. It's late and we're getting nowhere." The front door creaks as he opens it.

"Wait." I hold out my hand. "Give me your key."

He ignores me as he drags his luggage inside. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Well, you're sure as hell not staying here," I sputter.

"Where do you expect me to go?"

"The motel off Main Street probably has a vacant room, plus they have Wi-Fi and colored TV now."

His lips part. "You can't be serious. They caught a serial killer there once."

My eyes roll. "He didn't actually commit any murders on the property."

"Oh, that makes it all better then."

"Mommy, who's that?" Camila calls from the top of the stairs. Her wide blue eyes check Cal out before her gaze swings back

to mine.

I wave her off without thinking anything of it. "Nobody important. Go back to bed, please."

Cal's wide eyes shift from Cami to me. "Who the fuck is that, and why is she calling you *Mommy*?"

"Don't curse in front of my kid." My whisper comes out more like a hiss.

"Kid? How old is she?" Cal trips over his feet in an attempt to get away from me, although he is quick to regain his balance.

"Five!" Cami holds up her hand like she is waiting for someone to high-five her.

All the color drains from his face as he reaches for the wall. "Five. That's— She's— We—"

"It's not—" My response is cut off as his eyes roll to the back of his head.

His legs give out from underneath him, and his body falls forward.

"Shit!" I reach for him.

Our limbs tangle as we both go down. My breath is knocked out of me as I slam into the worn hardwood floor. Cal's head smashes against my stomach, which hurts more than expected but softens his fall. I'm not able to catch his head in time before it rolls off my lap and smacks against the floor. Cal doesn't wince as he lies on the floor, completely unconscious.

"Fuck. That's going to hurt." I roll his limp body back toward me before lifting his head onto my lap.

"Oooh. Mommy's got to put money in the swear jar."

I have a feeling a swear jar is the least of my worries now that Callahan Kane stormed back into my life with a deadly smile and a big problem.



## CHAPTER TWO

*Cal*



I blink up at the ceiling and wait for the blurry chandelier to come into focus. It takes a minute for my vision to clear, although my brain remains a fuzzy mess.

*Why am I on the floor?*

"Oh, thank God you're awake. Are you okay?" Lana leans forward. Her dark waves brush against my face, tickling my skin. She smells like snickerdoodle cookies, reminding me of late nights staying up past curfew together, eating raw cookie dough while hanging out on the dock. My attempt to hold back from taking another deep breath fails, and I'm hit with a second inhale of her cinnamon scent.

I can't remember the last time I dreamed of Lana. Months? Years? This one is more vivid than my others, nailing the smallest details like the tiny birthmark on her neck in the shape of a heart

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and the scar above her cupid's bow.

I reach out to brush the faint white mark above her lips, making the tips of my fingers tingle. The world ceases to exist around me as her gaze crashes into mine.

*God. Those eyes.*

Her brown eyes remind me of the soil right after it rains—with them being so dark, they look black in certain kinds of light. It's an underrated color that rivals all others, although Lana always used to disagree.

My thumb accidentally grazes her bottom lip, drawing a sharp breath from her.

"What are you doing?" She pulls away.

I wince at the sharp pain drilling a hole through the back of my skull.

*You're not dreaming, dumbass.*

"Sorry about that. I didn't mean to make it hurt worse." She lifts my head off her lap. "How many fingers am I holding up?"

"Three," I grunt.

"What day is it?"

"May third."

"Where are we right now?" Her nails graze my scalp, sending sparks shooting down my spine.

"Hell," I hiss.

"Did that hurt?" She repeats the same move. My skin burns from her touch, and heat spreads throughout my veins like wildfire.

"Stop. I'm fine." I pull away and slide across the floor until my back hits the wall opposite her. Despite the distance I gain, the spicy cinnamon smell of her bodywash sticks to my clothes.



It's the same addictive one she has been using for years.

I take another deep inhale because clearly I must enjoy torturing myself.

*God. You're pathetic.* I smack my head against the wall, and it throbs with retaliation.

"Here, mister. For your boo-boo."

*Oh, shit.*

Alana has a daughter. A five-year-old daughter with dirty blond hair and big blue eyes eerily like mine. With me sitting down, we're nearly the same height, although she has a couple of extra inches on me from this angle.

Alana's child—possibly *my* child—stares down at me with round eyes and pajamas that are buttoned incorrectly. Her hair color borders on light brown, with most of the wavy strands falling out of her poorly constructed ponytail.

*Is she mine?*

*God, I hope not.*

The thought is shitty but true. I'm not ready to be a father yet. Hell, I'm not sure if I'll ever be ready. Until this point, I was satisfied with becoming the cool uncle who never really got his life together in time to have any kids. How could I when I'm only able to do the bare minimum for myself?

The kid shakes an ice pack in front of my face while she bounces on the tips of her toes. I reach out mindlessly and grab it from her.

"Are you okay?"

I wince at the sound of the child's voice. It reminds me of Lana's, right down to the slight rasp she has. Another dizzy spell hits me.

Lana rises and kisses the top of her daughter's head. "Thank you, baby. That's sweet of you to help him."

"Do we need a doctor?"

"No. He just needs to get some rest."

"And a strong drink," I grumble.

Lana turns toward her daughter. "See? He's good enough to make bad decisions again. All is well in the world."

Her nose twitches. "That don't make sense."

Lana sighs. "I'll explain in the morning, *mi amor*."

"But—"

Lana points toward the stairs. "Vete a dormir ahora mismo."

*God. She looks and sounds just like her mother.*

Maybe because she is a mother.

My body goes numb.

*Are you having a heart attack?*

From the way my left arm tingles and my heart feels like it might launch itself out of my chest, I wouldn't rule it out.

The kid points at me with a chubby finger. "He don't look so good."

"He'll be fine. He's just got a headache."

"Maybe your kiss will make it all better like my boo-boos."

"No," Lana and I both say at the same time.

"Okay. No kisses." The child crosses her arms with a pout.

Lana's eyes dip toward my mouth. Her tongue darts out to trace her bottom lip, turning the tips of my ears pink.

*You're hopeless. Completely and utterly hopeless.*

"Will you read me a story?" The kid interrupts us, her voice having the same effect as an ice bucket on my mood.

*Could she really be mine? Would Lana hide a kid from me for*