

Sabrina Blaum

A Question of Sincerity



the same old changes

Claudia Khoury hadn't expected her last week at Little Feet daycare to end with a flood, though the stench of sewage seemed a fitting farewell.

A loud bang reverberated, tearing a low gasp from Claudia after she'd ushered the last stragglers back into their parents' cars. She hurried downstairs to see what had happened only to almost slip on water gushing out of the bathrooms, accompanied by an unmistakable scent, as if several toilets had backed up, overflowed, and spilled their entrails onto the floor.

Claudia grimaced as she waded through the hallway into the bathroom to take a closer look. Yup. She'd seen it before. With a sigh, Claudia grabbed her phone and dialed Klara, the owner of Little Feet, who'd already gone home.

"Hey, sorry to disturb you, but we'll have to call the plumber because I think we have a busted pipe. The water is gushing everywhere, and—"

"Did you turn off the water supply?"

Claudia closed her eyes and slapped her forehead. *Of all the stupid...* "I'm on it." She ran before halting. "Uh, where—"

"The basement, Claudia, the utility room."

"Right. Yes. Got it." She hung up and pocketed her phone before racing down the stairs to shut off the central water valve. Thank goodness she wouldn't have to deal with this mess because on Monday, she'd start her new job as a legal expert at Helping Hands, a charity aiding people, mostly women, in getting back on their feet after divorces or coming out of abusive living situations.

Nervous excitement rushed through her; she was one step closer to her original path. It was going to be a world away from wrangling toddlers and wiping sticky fingers, and it was also a chance to finally use her law degree for something meaningful.

She'd now even have a day off since tomorrow, the repair and cleanup crews would still be busy fixing this disaster, probably way into the

weekend too. As such, the daycare would be closed. Might as well. She could use the time to prepare a little more for Monday.



That Sunday, Claudia arrived at her parents' home in their quaint Dallas suburb right before one p.m. for their regular Sunday lunch, which, most of the time, also included her grandmother.

"You're late. Are you all right?" her mother, Mona, asked as she hugged her.

Claudia suppressed a fond eye roll behind her mother's back, knowing she would still be able to sense it without actually seeing it. She worried at the drop of a hat, and Claudia loathed to add to her plate.

"Yes. All's good. I just slept badly last night."

Mona released her and touched her cheek and forehead. "Are you getting sick?"

"No, no."

Mona narrowed her eyes. "Are you sure? I can make you a cup of sage tea."

"That's OK. I'm fine, really." Claudia withdrew. She hated the mere smell of sage, but it had always been one of her mother's go-to remedies when Claudia had a cold or a stomachache. Drinking something that made her nauseous didn't improve things.

Mona hummed. "Come on in. We're all ready, just waiting for you. After lunch, you can tell us about your new job tomorrow." Mona marched ahead into the dining room without looking back to see if Claudia was following.

"I already told you all about my new job." She knew she would have to go over it again, as her mother could hardly contain her happiness over Claudia returning to her true profession.

Her parents had always supported her, but they had clear preferences, and studying law only to work in a daycare had *not* been what they'd had in mind. After failing her first bar exam eighteen months ago and dealing with a terrible case of burnout, she'd taken a break. During this time, she'd done odd jobs here and there, but nothing had stuck. Then, on a whim, she'd applied to work at Little Feet and had continued to work for them until this week, quitting as soon as she'd received the note that Helping Hands would hire her.

"Hi, *hayete*," her father, Kareem, said as she entered the room.

"Hi, everyone." Claudia kissed his cheek.

Kareem patted her shoulder.

"Come, sit next to me." Her grandma, Salma, gestured at the chair next to her.

"Of course, *teta*." She settled into the designated seat.

"Did you lose weight, *habibte*? You're too tall to go on a diet. Men don't like stick women."

Claudia stifled a grimace. Who cared what men wanted her to look like? Besides, so far, none of her partners had had any issues with her on that front. But no, she wouldn't get lost in memories of her ex who'd tried to control every aspect of her life, including her friendships. When Mandy had demanded she end all contact with her best friend, Sammy, because of course every woman Claudia interacted with would want to fuck her, she'd reached the point of no return. While Sammy was a lesbian and their friendship had always been super close, they'd had no inclination to go *there*, despite having had plenty of opportunities to do so. But none of that had mattered to Mandy, and so Claudia had ended things.

So much for not getting lost in ponderings about Mandy. That break-up still stung, and she partially attributed her ongoing fling with Tom to this. She knew they had no future either. She wasn't heartbroken about it, but she still felt drawn to him. He was fun. And hot. They'd met three months ago at a meet-and-greet alumni event at her old law school. She'd attended in part for nostalgic reasons and to tentatively spread her feelers about finding her way back into her field of study.

Having been lost in thought, Claudia looked up to her grandma frowning at her. "I'm fine, *teta*."

Salma turned to Mona. "She needs to eat more. Haven't you noticed? How could you allow her to look like this. She's just skin and bones!"

"She's fine, *oumi*," Mona replied.

While her parents had immigrated to the United States from Lebanon before she was born, Claudia's grandmother had moved here after her husband's passing two years ago, and she split most of her time between Claudia's parents' place and her other daughter Sonia's, who lived in Waco. As always, she pointed out where her daughter could do better—much to Mona's exasperation. But did that stop her mother from doing the same to Claudia? Of course not.

"Have you heard Johnny's back home?" Mona asked.

"Really?" Claudia poked at her food on the plate, hoping her grandma would be fooled by the strategic maneuvering of her food around the plate and not get into another lecture about food and her figure.

"Yes, and you won't believe what happened!"

"Must we gossip at the table?" Kareem asked.

"It's not gossip, but the truth. Janey told me herself. Johnny has returned home like a good son to be there for his mother, and he brought a wife."

"Oh," Claudia exhaled, relief flooding her as this wouldn't turn into a round of "What about him, isn't he nice? He'd make a great husband."

Her mother felt Claudia needed to settle down, and much as with her job, she had... preferences. But Johnny? Never in a million years. She and Johnny's little brother, Theo, had played in the sandbox together. Theo was like a brother, and while Johnny was insanely handsome, it would still feel like incest. She shuddered.

"That's good. About time," Salma grumbled. "Eat, *habibte*."

"Yes, *teta*." Claudia put a fork of *kibbeh* into her mouth since her grandmother, apparently, would *not* be fooled.

"No, no. He eloped, came back with this wife no one has ever met before or even heard of! Janey's besides herself." Mona took a sip of her drink.

Claudia frowned. That didn't sound like Johnny. Besides, she'd always thought he was gay. Last time she'd spoken to Theo, there'd been talk about this wealthy old guy Johnny had been messing with. Of course, he could be bi like herself.

"He did *what*? What's wrong with the wife?" Salma asked in a sharp tone.

"Why would there be anything wrong with her? Wouldn't he then just have avoided his family meeting her all together?"

Both her mother's and *teta's* gazes snapped to her, but they didn't have to say a word for Claudia to duck her head.

"Just saying. Besides, why would he marry someone if there's something wrong with them?" she mumbled.

Mona sighed. She stroked Claudia's cheek. "Infatuation can make you blind, *hayete*."

Claudia nodded. Her mother had a point.



Claudia sighed after setting the fifth alarm in a row on her phone, each one two minutes apart. She'd even rummaged through one of her old storage chests and found her old nightstand clock Sammy had gifted her as a gag one year. She'd set it too. Claudia had had nightmares of oversleeping on her first day, though right now, with her nerves tap-dancing in her stomach, she wondered if she'd manage to sleep at all.

She didn't understand why she was so nervous. Helping Hands wasn't new to her—she'd volunteered as a babysitter for the charity quite a few times. Even though Sammy had sent the job positing to Claudia, she'd first heard about Helping Hands when her favorite tennis player, Lena Geiger, had touted the organization in a post-tournament interview. She'd been curious and had checked them out since Lena had also mentioned they were located in Dallas. Claudia liked their mission and had signed up for volunteer services.

Her phone rang, and at first, Claudia only stared at it, her mind lagging like the slowly buffering stream on her tablet when she watched one of her murder documentaries, quite often pausing the show the instant a gruesome image stood frozen on her screen. She shook her head and answered the phone. "Hi, Sammy."

"Hey, Claud. I was calling to wish you good luck for tomorrow," the soft timbre of Sammy's voice filled her with warmth.

"Thanks. I appreciate it."

"You OK? You sound off."

Claudia wiped a hand along her pants leg. "Yeah, all good. Nerves, I guess."

"I can imagine. It's been a while."

Claudia hummed.

"The interview went fine, right? Are you worried about anything?"

"No, no. Just normal jitters, I think. Yes, the interview went well, after I'd gotten over talking to Elizabeth Lancaster herself, but it was fine." She figured it made sense for the woman who'd started the charity and had turned it into a success to be involved in most aspects, but still, Claudia had faltered a little at first.

Elizabeth had seemed friendly but closed off—the definition of professional with her long, brown hair coiled in a tight bun, dressed in a navy-blue skirt suit with a white blouse and black pumps. Her make-up had been flawless and her smile, while genuine, had held a hint of distance. Claudia had had to ward off a flush, as Elizabeth Lancaster had turned

out to be the type of woman that left Claudia breathless. Her subtle British accent didn't help matters either.

"Hey! Earth to Claudia? Are you sure you're all right?"

"Yes, sorry. Spaced off." She cleared her throat.

"All right. I'll leave you to it. Get some sleep. Send me a text to let me know how it went tomorrow, K?"

"Yeah, sure."

"You'll be fine. I'm sure your boss won't turn out to be a dragon, and if she does, you're not married to the job."

"Right." Claudia sometimes wished she had Sammy's easy-going nature.

"Sleep well."

"You, too." And with that, Claudia hung up.

She gazed at her phone. Almost ten. She should try to get some sleep. While she appreciated Sammy's call, her last comment now also bounced in her head, adding another layer of substance to her already lofty stack of worries. It had never even occurred to her that Elizabeth could be an awful boss.

Claudia had little experience with bosses. Klara, who ran Little Feet, was a moody woman. Fair, but if you caught her on the wrong day, all bets were off. Still, miles lay between the two women. Not to mention that Claudia's gaze had never lingered on Klara's graceful neck, her soft looking skin, or her delicate features.

She needed to keep an eye on this. The last thing she needed was a crush on her boss, especially if she did turn out to be a dragon.

At least, they'd not be in the habit of working together.



Claudia preferred dressing casually, and at the daycare that had been fine, but Helping Hands demanded a different outfit. She dressed in a black suit with a silvery blouse, and while she felt confined and out of place in her attire, she was keen on doing her best at her new job.

At nine a.m. sharp, Tilda Swan, Elizabeth's chief administrative officer, an imperious woman in her mid-sixties with an austere, no-nonsense demeanor, showed Claudia her new office and gave her the rundown of a general workday, granting her access to her computer, and instructing her to check her calendar for her appointments today before leaving the room.

She had the morning to familiarize herself with everything, and at one, her first meeting would start.

Claudia's palms grew damp as she tried to act like the put-together adult she was supposed to be but had never felt she was.

She could do this. She knew she could.

Claudia had spent the last two weeks familiarizing herself with the materials Helping Hands had sent her, and she knew the law enough to handle what they would throw at her. Yet, self-doubt wasn't particularly rational, and when Tilda left her office, Claudia wondered if she should have stayed at Little Feet.

the pettiest of motivations

Elizabeth Lancaster awoke Saturday morning to breakfast in bed—a tray filled with toast, strawberry jam, eggs, a pot of tea, and a bushel of freshly picked daisies. She smiled and turned to face her husband, Tom, who sat next to her on the bed, grinning sheepishly.

“What’s the occasion?”

“I missed you?”

“Is that a question?”

He scratched his head. “No. It’s a fact. I... I know I’ve been insanely busy at work. You’ve just gotten back from your trip to San Antonio last week, and now I’m heading out this coming weekend to Odessa. We barely see each other anymore.”

Elizabeth drank a sip of her tea, repressing a grimace. She never added sugar to her black tea. “Hmm, yes, but every marriage has times like this, when careers have to take priority.”

“Isn’t that bad, though?”

“If it lasts, yes, but when it’s a phase, I see no harm.”

“Your charity is hardly a phase.”

She frowned. “Neither is your job. You just made partner, and if I recall correctly, you worked long and hard hours for it. Not to mention the money that—”

“Yes. And you know how much I appreciated your help.”

Elizabeth tilted her head. “We’re married.”

“Exactly. And I feel like we should try to be more...present. Have you thought some more about what we discussed last month?”

Elizabeth narrowed her eyes. “You mean me not being so controlling and obsessed with Helping Hands and spending more time at home?”

He sighed. “That’s not what I said.”

“Not in those words, no, but I can read between the lines. You knew when you married me that Helping Hands is my priority.”

"Yes, but the charity is a success, and —"

"It was a success five years ago, too."

"My job is busy and demanding. It's different work than you do."

"More important?"

"I didn't say that either."

She held his gaze.

"I meant it's easier for you to delegate things at work. It makes sense you'd do this so we can spend more time together."

"What time? You're gone at least as often as I am. Let's say I'd delegate work—mind you, I'd have to hire new people since Tilda couldn't pick up all the slack—and so I'd sit at home, twirling my thumbs while you're...in court or at the office talking to your clients?"

"Again, I won't be as busy in the future now that I've made partner. I've proved my worth."

"I doubt they're OK with you slacking off now."

He pursed his lips. "It sometimes seems like you don't want to spend more time together."

Elizabeth reached out and grasped his hand. "I do want to see you more. I've missed you, too. But I won't take a different approach to Helping Hands. I love my work, and I'm good at it. I don't want to delegate tasks I enjoy doing or that are important to me. Things will ease again. We could cut or reduce other things. For example, you could take shorter trips with Sebastian. Your monthly outings don't have to be full weekends in the wilderness."

Tom's brows furrowed. "What about your card games?"

"Those are one Friday night a month. You can't compare it to an entire weekend away."

"You never said you minded these trips before."

"I don't. But when we're talking about spending more time together, wouldn't *that* be something we should look at first before we encroach on our work commitments?"

"We'll see. I'll talk to Sebastian. Perhaps we can only head out every other month."

"You do that."

They still managed to enjoy the rest of the weekend together, heading to a local book fair before eating at a new Italian restaurant Elizabeth had been meaning to try.

After some contemplation, Elizabeth had to admit that Tom had a point. Over the last three months, they had let their relationship slide, both consumed by work. She would consider some concessions at Helping Hands if she saw a similar commitment from Tom. She doubted his weekends with his old school buddy Sebastian would see a reduction. In all honesty, Elizabeth had actually enjoyed some of these weekends alone, or she booked her own travels to coincide with such weekends so they wouldn't lose more time.

Elizabeth hadn't had many romantic relationships in her life, and before Tom, she'd only lived with one of her long-term partners, Logan. They'd been together four years in her late twenties and split when... She couldn't even remember. Nothing had torn them apart. They'd just fizzled out. Such was the story of most of her relationships and life—a lack of enthusiasm and passion. Until Tom had entered her life. He added a certain unpredictability, like today, when he ended up delaying her arrival at the office, as he had a rare morning off and had convinced Elizabeth to spend it together in bed.



Right past eleven, Tilda greeted Elizabeth with a frown when she strolled in, unused to her boss showing up late, and too familiar with Elizabeth to hide her displeasure at this shortage in discipline. Elizabeth appreciated Tilda's commitment to Helping Hands, although she wished she'd be more circumspect in her disapproval. To be fair, Tilda was the only one who ever dared to look at Elizabeth in such a manner.

They'd hired a new legal advisor after their old one had retired—a position close to Elizabeth's heart. Many of their patrons needed legal advice or support. She'd interviewed several candidates, all unsuited—too severe, too rigid, too... full of themselves. One even seemed to believe their patrons caused their own predicaments. Elizabeth had felt a migraine jutting at her temples during that quick conversation.

She'd settled on Claudia Khoury, an earnest young woman who brimmed with idealism and enthusiasm the world hadn't yet choked out of her. It would surprise people to learn how much cynicism ran through Elizabeth's veins, given her profession. She preferred to call her attitude realistic; however, others—mostly her best friend Kat—argued the former.

She'd never confess this to anyone, but she'd started Helping Hands because she'd known her mother would hate nothing more.

Elizabeth had left England and moved to the United States after her grandmother had died and left her with a hefty inheritance. Her family, aside from her grandmother, were stifling, and their ambitions for Elizabeth's future had never matched her own. So, once her one true ally had passed and she'd had the means to leave, she'd done just that, much to the vocal displeasure of her mother.

Mary Lancaster ran her home and business affairs with an iron fist. She had little patience for incompetence and failure, something Elizabeth, to her chagrin, seemed to have inherited. They differed in one key aspect, though. Mary believed there were the right and the wrong kind of people, the ones deserving of help, fortune, and happiness, and then the...peasants. She equated wealth with virtue, and that notion had never sat right with Elizabeth, nor with her grandmother.

Still, as much as Elizabeth was her grandmother's grandchild, she also was her mother's daughter, and so she'd housed and nurtured ambition, she'd striven for success and control, yet unlike her mother, she wanted all these things to be...not bad. She didn't want to hurt or dismiss others, although she sometimes struggled to show it.

Oh, she excelled at schmoozing with sponsors and convincing them to support Helping Hands. It was more personal interactions that left her confused at times. Her mother's teachings ran contrary to those of her grandmother, and so she'd often been stuck in the middle, ingesting both their lessons, and trying, often failing, to resolve the tension, the contradictions between them.

So, when she'd reached the United States twenty-three years ago at the tender age of twenty-two, she'd set out to fulfill her grandmother's vision—helping people society had forgotten and neglected—all the while establishing a legacy her mother would long to burn to the ground.

After setting up in her office, Elizabeth sought out to welcome their new hire on her first day. Elizabeth knocked on the door, and a moment later, a rumbled "Come in!" rang out.

"Hello, Claudia. How are you settling in? I'm sure Tilda is helping you adjust." She strode inside, taking in a somewhat ruffled-looking Claudia. Strands of her long black hair had come loose from her bun and her wide brown eyes darted around the room as she tightly gripped a folder.

"Ms. Lancaster, hello. Yes, she did. Ms. Swan has been very thorough. It's just... It's going to take me a moment to get used to it all. It's quite different from my previous employment." Claudia rose and stepped around her desk toward Elizabeth, who'd nodded but remained silent. "Is there something you need?"

Elizabeth's gaze traveled up Claudia's lanky form, dressed in a severe-looking black pantsuit. It stood at odds with the bubbly, almost gregarious woman she'd met during their interview. In fact, for a second there, she'd reminded Elizabeth of a puppy. She supposed first day jitters could do that to a person.

"No, no. I merely meant to ensure you're all set. This is an important position, and I need you at your best. Our patrons depend on our advice, considering by the time they reach us, their legal situation is often precarious."

"I understand. I've studied the information you sent. I'm ready. You won't need to worry." Claudia straightened, and with that, her attitude once again matched the woman Elizabeth had hired.

"That's good to know." Perhaps the boss checking in on an employee before they'd got to do anything wasn't an encouraging sign. Still, Claudia would do well to get used to Elizabeth's tendency to micromanage and be involved in all aspects of her charity. "I'll leave you to it. Tilda will answer any further questions, although you may also seek my advice if you deem it applicable."

Claudia nodded. "Of course. I just wanted to say, I'm really excited to be working here. Helping people."

And there was the puppy. Elizabeth was a cat person through and through, so she startled upon noticing the smile wanting to form on her lips was almost fond. She suppressed it but held Claudia's open gaze. "You're in the right business, then."



Elizabeth arrived home to Raji, her beloved eight-year-old cat. Tom was once more working late, which she'd expected. Their talk this weekend—or more accurately, Tom's request that she work fewer hours—had been an ongoing issue over the last year.

Again, she'd reconsider her stance if he'd reciprocate in kind, yet there had never been any attempt to do so. Aside from this one issue of contention,

they usually got along well, and her mother's doomsday prognosis of their relationship seemed far away.

When Elizabeth had introduced Tom to her family, her mother's first response, when they'd been alone, had been a sniff, followed by the words, "You're fooling yourself, Lizzie. He'll leave you for a younger woman. He's too handsome, and too young. Marrying a man ten years younger! What were you thinking?"

"He's nine years younger, Mother."

Mary had waved her off, and Elizabeth had dropped the topic, leaving the room in search of Tom. He'd been sweet, warm, and attentive, and little had changed since then.

Sure, they'd gotten busier, especially when he'd worked to buy into the firm, and she'd traveled to rope in more sponsors for Helping Hands. But again, such phases existed in every relationship.

Her phone ringing startled her and when she gazed down, expecting a call from Tom to apologize for likely once again working past ten, she smiled at Kat's name instead.

"Hi, stranger," Elizabeth answered the call.

"Hi, Liz. How are you? Sorry I've been absent a bit. Work has been insane. I wish filming came with shorter days." She sighed.

Kat, or better, Kathryn Johnson, starred as the lead actress in a science-fiction show called *Broken Time*, where a group of agents attempts to solve historical mysteries for paying clients by traveling through time. It was a big hit with a dedicated following, and Elizabeth had enjoyed the first season before time constraints and a strange headspace had taken her out of it.

"I suppose that's wishful thinking?"

Kat groaned. "Don't I know it. But enough about that. I don't want to talk about work. Tell me what's been going on with you. And no shop talk either. Someone's birthday is coming up. Got any big plans?"

"Don't remind me. No. I shall just ignore leaving my mid-forties."

"Oh, please. It's not that bad."

"Wait until it's your turn."

"You're in a mood today," Kat said. "Everything OK at work? Tom?"

"I thought there'd be no 'shop talk'?"

"Well, there won't be any from me, but if there's something bothering you, go ahead."

"Everything's fine at work. I just hired a puppy as the new legal advisor after Martin retired."

"Wait, what? A dog? I know Martin had his issues, but replacing him with a dog? And as a cat person, aren't you supposed to be the enemy of dogs?"

"You know full well that I'm not talking about a real animal, and for the record, a cat person doesn't have to hate dogs. I'm...indifferent toward them. I find their energy and commitment exhausting."

Kat laughed. "Yet you hired a human who reminds you of a dog. Do they pee on the carpet? Is that your way of pushing Tilda into retirement?"

"You're ridiculous. No. Claudia is just very young and believes in the good in people, in helping people. She seems very...cheerful at times, though she also has an earnestness that appealed to me during her interview. She'll be a good fit. Besides, I'd never do that! I need Tilda."

"You know, given that you've started a charity called Helping Hands which is in the business of, well, helping people, shouldn't you find such qualities on point in a new employee?"

"Yes, and I'm not complaining."

"Then what are you?"

"That's the question, isn't it?" She had no answer for Kat. She should be happy, or at least content. But something was nagging at her, and she couldn't quite place her finger on it.

a truth that bites

Claudia's first workday had been a whirlwind of anxiety and exhilaration. She'd worked herself into a knot—one of the low points: her awkward run-in with Elizabeth.

She supposed she couldn't really call it a run-in when her boss had checked up on her in her office, though that had to be better than being summoned to appear there, much like the dreaded call to the principal's office. Not that this had ever happened to Claudia, as she'd been too well-behaved in school.

Dealing with patrons—ones who could talk in coherent sentences, who didn't have trails of snot running down their noses or throw tantrums because they were tired but refused to take a nap—had been surreal, but exciting. Claudia hadn't realized how much she'd missed working in the legal field until she returned to it. Today, she'd helped one woman with her custody paperwork, and another asked about applying for a restraining order. Her final patron ended up staying longer and chatted with Claudia about law school since she was considering applying herself.

Her first month at Helping Hands passed much the same, and with time, Claudia's confidence grew. She'd only seen Tom sporadically over the last four weeks, both busy with work, but he texted her early in the week, asking her to come by Wednesday after work. He had an upcoming business trip for the weekend and had suggested they meet before. Claudia had received the message right after Tilda and Elizabeth had expressed how pleased they were with how she fit in at work. In this exuberant mood, she'd agreed right away before calling her mother, who wanted an update on work.

By the time Claudia left Helping Hands on Wednesday, a mellow contentedness, tasting almost like happiness, settled in her chest at how

her life had changed. Yes, it had only been one month, but she had a good feeling about it. For the most part, she'd only seen Elizabeth in passing, but their interactions had been friendly, and so Claudia had also put that worry to rest, especially after the compliment early in the week. Tilda still intimidated her at times, but she had required little assistance and seemed to have won even Tilda over.

Her patrons' issues were mostly straightforward, and so far, she'd not encountered anything she couldn't handle. Claudia hoped this trend would continue.

She arrived at Tom's apartment shortly after five and, once inside, he greeted her with more enthusiasm than she'd expected.

"Someone's in a chipper mood," Claudia said.

"Yes, well, things are going fantastic at work, and I get to see you again." His handsome face broke out into the charming grin that had first piqued Claudia's interest when they'd met.

She chuckled. "Work seems to be going great for us."

Tom stepped closer. "Let's not talk about work. It's been too long, and we won't see each other for a while after tonight."

"What did you have in mind?"

Tom pulled her closer.

"No dinner?"

"Later."

That 'later' never happened as Claudia fell asleep first, and when she came to an hour later, Tom was talking on the phone. Hopefully he was about to order takeout—her stomach grumbled angrily—but the cadence of his voice, soft and affectionate, made her still and listen.

"I'll be home soon. Love you, baby. Yes, I'm sure we can revisit breakfast in bed again. Bye."

Claudia froze, her heart hammering in her chest. *Back home. Love you, baby.* He surely wasn't talking to his *mother*. No. That had to be...another woman? She blanched. Claudia didn't cheat—she'd never betrayed a single soul in her life. In fact, she'd never date anyone who was in a relationship, but this might have changed now, thanks to Tom Pittin. She didn't know what to do. She could ask him, of course, but she'd hate the subsequent conversation. They weren't serious. Just a bit of fun. He was her rebound

guy, really, but he still wasn't supposed to be in a relationship. *Oh, God, what if he's married?*

She recalled how, for the longest time, they'd only met at her place or at hotels, even though he lived in Dallas, too. Tom had said something about repairs or renovations. She didn't remember, as they'd been busy. Claudia gritted her teeth. She couldn't believe it. How dare he involve her in this? She knew she wouldn't get any answers unless she confronted him, but she dreaded that almost as much as the unknown.

Claudia faked sleeping for five more minutes, during which her mind rode on a rollercoaster, but finally she decided to get out of the apartment and call Sammy—she truly should have known better. What lawyer lived in such a small place? Of course, he'd told her he was between houses and planned to buy a home soon. Those were probably lies as well.

She stretched and acted as if she was just waking up.

The mattress dipped when Tom joined her once more, still naked, as if he hadn't just finished a phone call with his *other* girlfriend, or worse, his wife. She could strangle him; or hit her head against the wall.

She had never wanted to be the other woman. The mere thought filled her with a mixture of dread and nausea.

"I'm heading out." She rose and grabbed her clothes, almost tearing her shirt in the process of putting it on.

"What? Already? We haven't eaten yet, and I thought we could spend the night in bed."

I bet you did, you bastard. "Another time. I forgot something I need to take care of." She had always sucked at lying, and coming up with excuses on the spot? How?

"But it'll be at least two weeks until we'll see each other again!" Tom scooted closer, trying to catch her hand, but Claudia pulled back, fully dressed now.

"We can text and call."

He raised his eyebrows. "Video chat?"

Claudia barely smoothened her grimace. "Sure. I'll call you." Without another word, she darted out of the apartment. Yes, he likely knew something was up, but there was no other choice. If she stayed, she'd cause a shouting scene. Or murdered him. And then *she'd* need legal advice. She scoffed. How had things gone from awesome to shit in two seconds?

She sped home, nearly running a red light, but then forced herself to do some breathing exercises. It wouldn't do to get into an accident.

Back home, she immediately called Sammy, who, after some quick research, figured out Tom Pittin was, in fact, married.

"That bastard. Here..." Sammy rattled down a phone number Claudia scribbled on a post-it note.

"Thanks. I will. Bye, Sammy." She hung up, slamming her phone down. Claudia glared at it in disdain as if it were responsible for what she'd done.

She knew she had to do something—she'd been plagued with the urge to confess, to let Tom's partner know what was going on. Sammy had sensed this too. Now she had the chance to do just that.

Claudia sagged onto her computer chair and contemplated her next steps. She needed to think and decide if and when she'd call this Elizabeth. She should likely text her first because cold calling a stranger to tell her she'd been having an affair with her husband didn't sound like a stellar idea.



The rest of the work week went by in a blur, yet dragging at the same time, as if stuck between the sticky fingers of a preschooler. Claudia had been distracted all day, jumpy and nervous. She'd likely scared her patrons or made them see her as an incompetent fool, but she struggled to concentrate on anything other than what she'd say to this Elizabeth woman.

Claudia also wondered who she was, and what she looked like before chastising herself for such thoughts. What did it matter? Besides, she'd only tell her what happened, and be out of her life again. A quick in and out—raining devastation on another in a hot second.

Of course, none of this was her fault, and Elizabeth deserved the truth. Claudia would want to know if it were her.

Come Friday after work, Claudia first stepped under a flesh-melting, steaming shower—at least according to all her lovers who'd refused to join her. Cold or lukewarm showers were the devil. If the lever could still move farther toward red, the water wasn't hot enough.

She'd finished and eaten dinner a few minutes past six, and so she settled on the couch and stared at the yellow note on which she'd jotted Sammy's information about Elizabeth.

But first things first. She needed to end things with Tom, even if it meant he would figure out what had happened. She doubted he'd confess to his wife, and if he did, that would be good, too, right?

Claudia snatched her phone to call him when pettiness rose, and she texted:

'We're done.'

Because what else was there to say? She owed him nothing. Not a *single damn thing*, aside from a swift kick in the —

Her phone sounded.

What? Why? What's going on? Call me!

Claudia closed her eyes. She didn't know what to say. *I don't date married people?* In the end, it would be the confrontation she'd avoided earlier in the week when she'd rushed out of his apartment. And no matter what he said, she'd contact Elizabeth, not only because Claudia suffered from the 'apologizes too often' disease, but she still felt the woman should know. This way, she could make an informed decision on whether she wanted to stay with her cheating bastard of a husband.

Her phone started to ring. Tom.

Claudia rejected the call.

Just let it go. I'm done.

But why? We had such a good time the other night before you rushed off. What happened? Did I say something?

She scoffed. "Good time until your wife called," she muttered into the empty room and blocked his number. There. The end.

Claudia spent the next several minutes staring at Elizabeth's number before heaving a sigh. "Like a band-aid," she mumbled and composed her message.

Hi. You don't know me but there's something important I need to tell you. Do you have a moment? She pressed send before picking up her tablet to watch something.

Her phone chirped right after the intro of her favorite true crime series, *See No Evil*.

Claudia paused the program and reached for her phone on the coffee table. Her eyebrows rose when she read Elizabeth's reply.

Wrong number.

Fair, but not helpful.

I'm speaking with Elizabeth Pittin?

Who is this and what do you want?

Claudia sighed.

My name is Claudia and I want to talk to you.

I'm not a man, so you won't fish me with whatever scam you're running.

This isn't a scam, and I obviously know you're not a man. And 'fish you'?

That's what they call it, right? Catfishing?

Oh. But that's not what this is. I don't know why they call it that.

Indeed. And there's even a fish by that name.

Claudia snorted.

It has whiskers.

What does?

The catfish.

Oh. I suppose. But cats eat fish, so that's still weird.

Claudia canted her head.

I can see that.

It's like naming a cat dogcat.

I don't think cats would appreciate that.

Claudia chuckled.

I'm not sure cats can read, so their offense would be limited.

Also, dogs don't eat cats.

Why were they discussing animals?

Not for lack of trying.

And don't underestimate cats.

Duly noted. I feel there's a story there.

Got a dog that wanted to eat a cat?

The other way around.

A cat that wanted to eat a dog?

Raji would never! He's a perfect angel, unlike my neighbors' demon dog.

Claudia shook her head. What was happening here?

I'm sure your cat is completely innocent.

There was no way she'd say otherwise to a cat-crazy person. She'd once gotten into a fight with Sammy over her cat. Lesson learned, never again. People who loved cats were intense.

Of course he is. But back to business. What do you wish to tell me?

Claudia's smile froze, and she sat up straighter, wiping her hands on her sweatpants.

You're married to Tom Pittin?

Why do you ask when you already know the answer?

Claudia worried her lower lip. This would get ugly, and she hated the idea. Such news was always terrible, but somehow... Band-aid.

I didn't know he was married. I've just ended things with him, but for the last four months, Tom and I were seeing each other.

Nothing.

Claudia stared at her phone, but there was nothing.

Elizabeth? I'm truly sorry. I just thought you should know.

Five minutes passed, and eventually, Claudia gave up and threw her phone next to her on the couch, once more glowering at it. With a heavy sigh, she picked up her tablet. Right after pressing play, her phone beeped. Claudia almost dropped the tablet in her hurry to reach it. She stared at the five words and blinked.

Why should I believe you?

Now what?

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A QUESTION OF SINCERITY

BY SABRINA BLAUM

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