

Callie's Dilemma

P.L. Harris



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Published by Gumnut Press

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ISBN: 978-0-6481800-0-5

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DEDICATION

To Monique Mulligan and Karen Mc Dermott

Thank you for starting me on this rollercoaster journey and encouraging me to follow my dream of becoming a published author.

If it wasn't for the inclusion of my short story *Second Chance at Love* in your *A Bouquet of Love* Anthology, I may never have believed enough in myself to continue this ride.

I look forward to learning and developing as a writer, both traditional and self-published following your guidance along the way.

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CHAPTER 1

CALLIE WESTWOOD'S WORLD WAS turned upside down by three little words. *The new owner*. Her heart skipped a beat as she replayed the message for the fifth time.

“This is Jaxon Carter, the new owner.” She cringed at his frivolous introduction. “I’ll be arriving Tuesday afternoon to discuss the future of The Treasure Trove.”

“The future?” Callie said, disheartened by the lack of emotion in his deep voice. “What does he mean *the future*?”

Callie shook off the foreboding chill that ran up her spine. She unlocked the front door and flipped the sign to *OPEN*. Her body moving in auto-pilot, she made quick work of her morning routine. Callie had worked for Katherine for the past four years, practically running the store as if it were her own. It seemed like only yesterday that they had been rearranging the hat and shoe collection with the furniture display in the window.

Katherine used to say, ‘*The Treasure Trove* is the only place in Patterson Cove that has something for everyone, whether it be a much-loved antique, a pair of shoes, an ear to listen to your woes, or a cup of tea.’

“Damn that lawyer,” Callie hissed as she flicked on the last of the fairy lights on the window display. He said it would take several months before Katherine’s will was finalised. Plenty of time for Callie to get the money together to make an offer on the place when the new owners took over.

A pang of sorrow pitted in the bottom of her stomach. She missed Katherine terribly. Her own mother had been a total waste of space. Katherine

filled that role perfectly, complete with hugs and kisses that overloaded Callie's heart with love.

The familiar croak of Katherine's frog doorbell startled her back to the present.

"Hi, Callie, hope I'm not disturbing you," Lexi said warmly.

"Morning, Lexi," Callie said as she turned the radio on low, the message from Jaxon Carter temporarily forgotten. "It's nine-thirty Tuesday morning, I'm not exactly run off my feet."

Lexi's eyes filled with fondness as she gazed around the shop. "No, I don't suppose you are. I'm not sure about you, but every time I walk in here, I can still hear Katherine's warm, hearty laugh."

"Me too." Callie smiled. "Sort of makes me feel like she's still here, watching over the place."

Lexi frowned. "I know you miss her, but I thought we discussed the idea of you moving on from *The Treasure Trove*. Spreading your wings a little. There's a whole world out there, and it's not like Glenn will be back."

Callie's heart broke at the mention of Glenn's name. Her 'so-called' perfect man. He wasn't so

perfect when he moved away for work and decided a long-distance relationship wasn't *his* style.

"I know." Callie paused. "But things are looking up. I spoke to Mr. Carson at the bank, and he is relooking at my loan, so there's a chance I can buy this place. It will be like a new beginning."

Lexi sighed and plopped the multi-coloured cardboard box on the counter. "I've got a delivery for you, just a small one today."

Callie's excitement bubbled over as she scooped up the box and studied the label.

"Must say, it's the first time I've delivered a box as colourful as that before. Is it a new supplier?" Lexi asked.

Yes, but not for the shop. "Actually, it's my maid of honour shoes for Hope's wedding, I found the perfect colour in this little online store in Vietnam. I'm just glad they arrived in time."

"Ah, of course." Lexi smiled. "The wedding's this weekend, isn't it?"

Callie nodded as she started ripping the tape off the box.

“I’m sure it will be wonderful. Wish Hope all the best for me, when you see her,” Lexi said as she headed toward the door.

“Of course,” Callie called after her in a reassuring tone. She spun, and her eyes caught the glowing red light on the answering machine. Her heart plummeted as she replayed the horrible message one more time.

Callie’s troubled eyes gazed toward heaven. “What am I supposed to do now, Katherine? I know you always told me that I was strong enough to face any obstacle, but I’m not so sure this time.”

Her trembling fingers dialled the bank. *If you are looking down on me, now would be a good time to dish out some heavenly love.*

“Patterson Cove First Credit.” The stark male voice reverberated against Callie’s ear.

She cleared her throat. “Morning, Mr. Carson, this is Callie Westwood.”

“Hello, Callie, what can I do for you?”

Here goes nothing. She took a deep breath and crossed her fingers. “I was just wondering if you were

able to adjust those figures, as we talked about last Friday.”

His groaning sigh hit Callie hard in her chest like a runaway freight train. “I did take another look, but I’m afraid there is no way it can work. You still have a shortfall of fifteen-thousand dollars, so unless you can come up with the money, we won’t be able to approve your business loan.”

Callie struggled to breathe around the panic knotting in her throat. “O-okay. Thanks, Mr. Carson.” Callie replaced the receiver in the cradle.

Why does the value on this place have to be so high? It’s just an antique shop, for Christ’s sake.

Her chest nearly exploded as it tightened and swelled under the pressure of her unknown future.

After a moment of self-doubt, adrenaline shot through her veins. Katherine always had faith in her abilities, now it was her turn to prove her right. “I’m not done yet. It isn’t over ‘til the fat lady sings and I don’t hear any singing yet.”

“You can’t be serious.” Jaxon Carter said, running his hand through his short hair.

Ian sighed, leaning back in his plush leather chair. “Afraid so. Katherine was very specific in her wishes and, as her friend and executor of her will, it is my duty to see that her instructions are followed.”

Jaxon’s chest constricted. “So, let me get this straight. Although Aunt Katherine left the business to me, the only way I can get rid of it is to have this woman quit?”

“That’s right. Katherine was specific in stating that Callie Westwood may stay an employee of *The Treasure Trove* for as long as she wishes, and it cannot be sold, demolished or closed until after Callie wishes to leave.”

Why, Katherine? You knew I was struggling to find my place in this topsy-turvy world, why would you do this to me, knowing that the last thing I want to do is play happy shopkeeper?

“Why not just leave her the shop in the first place?” Jaxon asked.

Ian shrugged. “Apparently, she’s a very headstrong woman and always refused to let Katherine spend any money on her, and as you can imagine that frustrated your Aunt immensely. So, the

only way for Katherine to secure her future was to spell out very clearly in her will that Callie must be provided for, *but* she is not to know about it.”

Jaxon paced Ian’s office. He rubbed his temples. The mundane drone of Ian’s voice was beginning to grate on his nerves. “I can’t believe this.”

His blood turned to ice as the enormity of his inheritance hit home. “My soon-to-be-ex-wife, Heather, will no doubt find out that I’ve inherited a business. She’s threatened to take me to the cleaners in the divorce. What’s one more thing for her to take?”

It was bad enough that Heather had taken his love and crushed it, betraying their marriage vows and shattering his heart in the process. Now, this.

“I really am sorry, Jaxon, but you’re a nice, reasonable man that’s had a few knocks recently.”

Jaxon’s eyes widened. “I wouldn’t call finding out your cheating wife has been working her way through the men in town, a few knocks. I’d say it was an avalanche.”

“Well, I guess the only way forward is to work something out with Callie while keeping the details under wraps.”

Jaxon froze in his tracks, his eyes flashing anger. “Like hell I will. She may not be Heather, but there’s no way I’ll let another woman dictate my future. She’ll be out of there by the end of the week if I have my way.”

“But...”

“No buts, Ian,” Jaxon fumed. “Mark my words, I’ll demolish that shop before I sell it to another selfish... controlling woman, and there’s not a damn thing Callie Westwood will be able to do about it.”

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