



Daddy Detectives, Episode 2

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Description: In book 2 of Tyler and Ian Jamisons Daddy Detectives series, Ian is getting the hang of being a stay-at-home dad to their infant twins. Tyler is investigating the source of the blackmail threat made against Ian.

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Someone is attempting to blackmail my husband —my children's daddy—the man who gives me a reason to wake up every morning because I know I'll get to spend another day with him.

Blackmail my husband? Over my dead body!

As I stare down at the hand-written message in Ian's hands, I'm doing everything I can to hold my shit together. I want to rage. I want to hit something—or rather someone.

But right now I need to maintain my cool because I don't want to scare Ian. He's already freaking out as he stares at that note, reading it over and over as he tries to make sense of it.

Ian,

I know everything.

Your mother was a drug addict and a whore.

And you're no better.

I want a million dollars in small unmarked bills or else I'll take it all to the press.

I have pictures. Lots of pictures. Of you. Of her. Of the filth you were born into.

And trust me, you don't want that shit going public.

I'll send instructions for where to deliver the money.

If you tell anyone, I'll make sure you regret it.

I hold out my hand. "Give it to me, Ian."

He hesitates for a moment, his gaze skimming the sheet of paper one more time. "Who would do this? Who would even have access to photos of me when I was young? I don't even have photos like that." His green eyes fill with pain when he asks the one question I'm sure is on both our minds. "Do you think it's my mother?"

He means his birth mother, of course—the drug addict who ultimately lost custody of him. Not the woman he considers his real mom —Ruth Alexander—the woman who raised him from the age of five and gave him an amazing life filled with unconditional love and support.

I honestly don't know how to answer his question.

"We don't even know if she's still alive," I point out. Given her history of drug use, I wouldn't be surprised if Ian's birth mother was dead. I muster up as much patience as I can. "Give me the letter, baby."

The anguish in his beautiful eyes guts me. I could kill whoever's behind this. The fact that someone wants to hurt Ian makes me see red.

Pinching the corner of the page with his index finger and thumb, he carefully hands the letter over to me like it's a live bomb that could explode in our faces any second.

This sheet of paper is evidence and, unfortunately, it's been contaminated by Ian's fingerprints, and now by mine. Still, if I can't drum up any leads on my own, I'll see if I can get some prints lifted off of it.

I refold the sheet of paper and slip it back into its envelope, which is hand-addressed to Ian. The handwriting is heavy, like a man's. Whoever wrote this used a black permanent marker.

The envelope is not postmarked, which means it didn't come through the postal service. Someone deliberately placed it in our mailbox. And that means we have video of them doing it. I've got every inch of this property covered by surveillance cameras. It's not just our home here behind this tall wrought-iron fence. Our private investigation business is here, too, in a carriage house located across the driveway from the townhouse.

I tuck the envelope into the inside breast pocket of my suit jacket and steer Ian up the driveway to where our office manager, Kimi, is standing guard over the double stroller holding our twin infants.

Ian immediately glances down into the stroller to make sure the babies are okay. William Alexander Jamison—named after my dad, William, and bearing Ian's last name, Alexander—and Elizabeth Ruth Jamison—named after my sister, Beth, and Ian's adopted mom, Ruth.

Two dark-haired babies gaze up at Ian, their pale blue-green eyes blinking in the afternoon sunshine.

Will and Lizzie.

Born to us eight weeks ago through the kind generosity of a surrogate.

"Is everything okay?" Kimi asks. She frowns as she watches Ian push the stroller to the back of our townhouse, to the rear patio door that leads directly into the kitchen.

"Not exactly." I glance down at our petite assistant, with her short, spiky purple hair

and sparkling nose ring. She's definitely a free spirit, dressed in a long flowery skirt and a white blouse with puffy sleeves. "I've got a job for you, Kimi. I need you to find out everything you can about Ian's birth mother. She would have lost custody of him about twenty-five years ago, here in Chicago, when he was approximately five years old. I have nothing else to go on, I'm afraid. I don't even know her name, and I don't want to bother Ian with this. He's going through enough as it is. See what you can dig up."

Kimi nods confidently. "No problem, Mr. J. I'll find her."

"Thanks. Keep this between us for now, okay?"

"Sure thing, boss. Can you tell me what this is about? Knowing that might help in my research."

I exhale heavily. I'm going to have to level with Kimi because I'll need her help with this. "Ian just pulled an envelope out of our mailbox. It was hand-delivered sometime today. For starters, I need you to review the surveillance camera footage so we can try to ID whoever delivered it. And then find out everything you can on Ian's birth mother."

"Do you think she's the one who left the note?"

"I don't know, but it makes sense to start with her."

As Kimi returns to the office, I follow Ian into the house. He has the babies out of their stroller and strapped into their baby seats, which are currently sitting side by side on the kitchen table. He's in the middle of preparing bottles for two hungry babies.

Will is kicking his legs vigorously as he undoubtedly anticipates the arrival of a meal.

Lizzie looks like she's on the verge of throwing a fit.

I catch one of Will's feet and give it a light squeeze. "Hang on, pal. Lunch is coming."

Ian is standing at the kitchen counter with his back to me. He heard me come in, but he has yet to turn around to greet me like he normally would.

I walk up behind him and lay my hands on his hips. "I know you're upset." He doesn't respond, which tells me just how bothered he is. "Ian?" I turn him to face me. "Talk to me."

He swallows hard. "I thought my old life was behind me. All that pain and ugliness." He shudders. "The nightmares. I thought it was all in the past."

"It is in the past. I'll find out who sent that message." I cup his face and make him look me in the eye. "I won't let anyone hurt you."

"Do you think it's my birth mother?"

"Honestly, I don't know. But I promise I'll find out."

"She hurt me then, and she's trying to hurt me now."

"Please try not to jump to conclusions, Ian. One thing I learned as a homicide detective—let the evidence do the work for you. We don't know for sure who sent that message."

"But who else could it be?" His voice breaks. "Who else could have photographs of me during that time? Or of my birth mom? It has to be her."

His eyes tear up, and a few drops spill over onto his cheeks. I gently brush them away with the pads of my thumbs. It infuriates me that anyone would do this to him. “I’ll take care of it.” When I lean in to kiss his lips, I taste the salt of his tears.

One of the babies launches into a full-blown meltdown.

“Your daughter’s hungry,” Ian says, sniffing back tears as he returns to preparing bottles.

I’m blocking his view of the babies, so he can’t actually see who’s making all the fuss, but he recognizes her cry, which impresses the hell out of me. I’m still not sure half the time. You hear one baby cry, you’ve heard them all, right? Apparently not.

I walk over to the table, shrug off my suit jacket to hang it on the back of a chair, and then I unbuckle Lizzie and hold her to my chest. Immediately, she burrows her face against my white shirt, snuffling loudly. “There, there,” I say as I bounce her gently. “Lunch is coming.” I pat her back, and almost immediately she quiets down.

When Will joins in, I cradle Lizzie in one arm so I have a free hand to bounce Will’s seat. That seems to do the trick because his tears stop.

“God, that’s sexy,” Ian says as he brings the bottles to the table.

“What is?”

“You are.” He hands me one of the bottles and sets the other one on the table so he can extricate Will from his baby seat. “You’re a baby whisperer. They respond to you so well. It must be your deep voice. It makes me swoon, too.”

We carry the babies into the living room so we can sit on the sofa, side by side, and relax while we feed them.

Ian kicks off his sneakers and rests his stocking feet on the coffee table. Then he leans his head on my shoulder. He's quiet as he watches Will drink his formula.

My mind is still fixated on the note in my jacket pocket. I'm furious at whoever sent it. It had to be someone from Ian's past. He's right—who else would have access to photos of him as a young child? But surely, whoever it is realizes they can't physically or financially hurt Ian. Embarrass him, perhaps. Humiliate him. Bring back a lot of painful memories, yes. But blackmailing him will do them no good.

He's not going to meet their demands. I won't let him. If he gives in to them now, they'll just keep coming back for more. No. He's not going to pay them a penny. I'm going to find whoever did this and put a stop to the harassment.

"I need to call your parents," I say as I throw a burp cloth over my shoulder so I can burp Lizzie. We've got a regular supply of burp cloths all over the house now, stacked on every table, every piece of furniture. I pat her back firmly, and she obliges me with a loud burp.

"They'll be furious," Ian says.

"I know. But I still need to talk to them. They probably remember more about your birth mom than anyone. They can give me the information I need to track her down."

"Assuming she's still alive."

"Right. In light of that message you received, I'm guessing she is."

Ian props Will up, supporting him with one hand while he pats our son's back. "When I look at these babies, I can't imagine how a parent could possibly neglect their own child." After Will lets out a loud burp, Ian resumes feeding him.

A few minutes later, there's a brisk knock at the back door.

I rise from the couch, holding Lizzie in the crook of one arm. "That must be Kimi. I'll be right back."

"You can leave Lizzie with me, if you want. I can feed them both."

"That's okay. I can walk and chew gum at the same time."

As I leave the living room, Ian chuckles. "Show off."

Sure enough, it is Kimi at the back door. I invite her in.

Immediately, her gaze goes to Lizzie, who's busy sucking on her bottle. "Oh, my God, she's so cute!" Then she gets serious as she returns her attention to me. "I just forwarded a clip of the video surveillance footage to your phone. It's unclear who put the envelope in the mailbox. Whoever it is, they're wearing a pair of baggy sweatpants and a gray hoodie that covers their face." She holds up her phone, showing me the clip. "They look to be of average height and average weight. No discernable features. I can't even tell if it's a man or a woman."

I watch the entire clip. "Play it again." Sure enough, there's not much to go on. The person walked up to our house, so there's no vehicle or license plate to trace. It's impossible to tell anything about the person other than general size, which is useless. I'm guessing five-eight, using the mailbox post as a reference. "Thanks, Kimi."

"Sorry, Mr. J. I know it's not much to go on. I also did a search for news stories at the time Ian went into foster care, and I found an article about a woman named Rhonda Mitchell who lost custody of a four-year-old son. She was convicted of prostitution, drug possession, and child neglect. Her parental rights were eventually terminated, and she was sentenced to ten years in prison. The unnamed child was sent into the

foster care system, and I couldn't find anything on him after that. I forwarded you a link to the article. I couldn't find an obituary on this Mitchell woman, so I'm guessing she could still be alive."

"Thanks. See what else you can dig up on her—a current address or place of employment would be great. I'm going to go see Ian's parents tonight to find out what they know about his birth mother. I'm hoping they can fill in some of the details."

Kimi reaches out to gently brush Lizzie's hair. "It was hard reading that news article, thinking it might have been Ian they were writing about. The kid was described as malnourished and gaunt. If it really is him, it's amazing he turned out so well."

"That's not even the worst part of it," Ian says from the kitchen doorway behind us.

I turn to see him standing there, holding Will in the crook of one arm while he holds the baby's bottle in his free hand.

"The credit goes to the Alexanders. They made sure I had everything I needed—the best therapists, doctors. Everything. They had infinite patience with me. It was exactly what I needed." His expression seems flat, a bit detached.

Kimi flashes her gaze up at me. "I'll get back to work now and leave you guys alone." She catches my eye for a moment. "Let me know if there's anything else I can do." And then she lets herself out.

Both babies are done with their bottles, and now that their bellies are full, they're sleepy. It seems that's all they do—eat and sleep, rinse and repeat. We carry them upstairs to our bedroom to change their diapers and lay them in their bassinets.

Ian sits at the foot of our bed and watches over the babies as they doze off for an

afternoon nap.

I sit beside him, and when I put my arm around him, he leans into me, resting his head on my shoulder. “I’m going to ask your parents if I can come over tonight to talk to them about your birth mother. Do you want to—”

“Yes! Of course, I’m coming. It’ll be nice to see them, and I know they’ll want to see the babies.”

I head downstairs to call Ian’s mother. Ruth answers almost immediately, but I can tell she’s on the move.

“Hi, Tyler.” She sounds breathless. “What’s up? Sorry, I just left one meeting, and I’m on my way to another.”

“Will you and Martin be home this evening? There’s something Ian and I need to discuss with you.”

“Yes. Why don’t you guys come for dinner? Layla and Jason are coming this evening, too. It’ll be nice to have the whole family together. And of course we can’t wait to see the babies again. How about six-thirty?”

“Sounds great. We’ll be there.”

“Tyler? Is everything okay?”

I know she and Martin worry about Ian. They’re afraid something will happen to undo all the progress he’s made. “Everything’s fine—Ian’s fine. But there is a matter we need your help with. We’ll see you tonight.”

After ending the call, I head back upstairs to find Ian stretched out on our bed, his

arms wrapped around my pillow.

He might actually be asleep, so I'm quiet as I sit on the edge of the bed and wait to see if he stirs. He doesn't make any sounds, but I see his body tensing. "Ian?"

There's no response.

He's stress-sleeping. I've learned this is his way of blocking out whatever's bothering him. I turn off the light in the room and lie down next to him. Research on Rhonda Mitchell—if indeed she's who we think she is—can wait. Right now, this is where I need to be.

I lie against him, spooning him from behind. My arm goes around his waist, and I pull him in tight against me. He makes a sleepy sound and sighs when I press my lips to the back of his head. When he links our fingers together, I realize he's not actually asleep. He's just in classic Ian avoidance mode.

"Your mom invited us to dinner tonight at 6:30. Your sister and Jason will be there, too."

He makes a noncommittal sound.

"Please try not to worry," I tell him. "I won't let anyone hurt you."

"It's not me I'm worried about." His voice is muffled by his pillow.

"Then who?"

"Our babies. I keep imagining them in the same situation I was raised in." He shudders.

I tighten my hold on him. “That will never happen.”

“I don’t understand how anyone could do that to a child—leave them alone for hours at a time, in the dark, with little to no food, nothing but water to drink.” His voice breaks. “They’re so helpless.”

“Shh.” I kiss his shoulder before pressing my nose into the crook of his neck and breathing in his scent. When I trail soft kisses along his sensitive neck, he groans quietly.

I’ll never let anyone hurt my family.

I lie beside Ian for a good part of the afternoon, my arm securely around his waist in an effort to reassure him he’s not alone. The emotional scars from his early childhood run deep. Even though the Alexanders gave him all the love and acceptance a child could need, those wounds still lurk in his psyche. It doesn’t take much to bring the nightmares back. The fear of being trapped, of being alone in the dark, of being hungry. He remembers what it felt like to be hungry. It boggles my mind that someone with his resources could harbor such basic fears. As his husband, my job is to make him feel safe. Secure. Loved.

I try not to dwell too much on the horrors of his past because when I do, my anger gets the best of me. And I won’t be any good to Ian if my emotions are tied up in knots.

I’m so warm and comfortable that I end up dozing off for a while. It’s not until Ian stirs that I wake up.

“Looks like nap time is over,” he says as he sits up with a groan. “I’m coming, buddy.”

I sit up, too, and lean against the headboard as I watch Ian pick up our son and cradle him in his arms. He pats Will's back and bounces him gently as he presses his lips to the baby's forehead. "Who's Daddy's sweet boy?" he croons softly.

My chest tightens at the sight of the two of them, and I'm overwhelmed with emotion.

I'm a father.

We both are.

And we're responsible for these two tiny lives.

I never dreamed I could have this in my life, and I owe it all to Ian.

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While I get the babies changed and dressed in adorable matching outfits for our outing this evening, Tyler packs the diaper bags with everything we could possibly need—diapers, bottles, formula, changes of clean clothes, and burp cloths. Forty minutes later, Tyler carries both car seats out to my SUV, while I carry the diaper bags—two of them, purple for Will and pink for Lizzie.

Other than making a couple of visits to the pediatrician for check-ups and vaccines, and a few strolls up and down our quiet residential street, we really haven't taken the babies out much. They're just so young. We're worried about them catching something. So this evening is a big deal. While my parents have come to our house several times to see the babies, this is the first time we've taken them to their house.

It's an easy twenty-minute drive across town to my parents' house. Tyler drives, while I sit in the back seat between the two car seats.

"Here we are," Tyler says as he turns onto my parents' street.

It's a residential neighborhood of old, stately homes. Layla and I grew up in a veritable mansion built by our paternal grandfather in the early twentieth century. Tobias Alexander, who amassed more money in his lifetime than is seemly, was one of those early titans in the telecommunications industry. Upon his death, he left sizeable fortunes to both me and my sister—sums of money and investments that immediately catapulted us to the top of Forbes' most wealthy people under the age of thirty.

Our family home, which is a massive white marble structure that looks more like a stuffy old museum than a private residence, takes up an entire city block in an

exclusive part of Chicago. There's private parking in the rear of the building, along with separate housing for the staff. My parents have a butler and a housekeeper, a maintenance guy, a private chef they lured here from Paris years ago, and various other live-in help.

Probably one of the most notable features of the house is that it has an indoor pond, which is home to Layla's collection of koi.

Tyler drives around to the back and parks next to my mother's BMW. He carries the two car seats to the back door of the house, while I bring in the diaper bags.

Obviously expecting us, Charles, the butler, greets us at the door, opening it wide. He peers down into the car seats. "Just look at those two!" As he studies their striking coloring, he grins up at Tyler. "Well, I can easily tell who it is they take after."

As we step inside, my sister's squeal can be heard all the way across the industrial-sized kitchen. "The babies are here!"

Layla races to greet us, with Jason Miller, her boyfriend and official bodyguard, right behind her. She's wearing her customary outfit—a pair of blue jeans and a burgundy University of Chicago hoodie. Her long black hair is pulled back into a high ponytail, and her striking dark eyes are lined expertly with kohl.

Like me, Layla's adopted. Our parents brought her home from the hospital just days after she was born. When it was discovered that Layla had a defective pancreas, her teenage birth mother, overwhelmed by the idea of taking care of a special needs baby, immediately surrendered custody of her to the state. The birth father, a foreign exchange student from the Middle East, was already out of the picture and had expressed zero interest in his daughter.

Layla takes Lizzie's car seat from Tyler. "I'll carry my niece," she says as she exits

the kitchen. “Ian, bring Will. Mom’s in the front parlor. Hurry up, because she’s dying to see them.”

Jason pauses to shake Tyler’s hand, and then mine. “Good to see you guys.”

“Likewise,” Tyler says, as I steal Will’s car seat from him and follow after my sister.

Before I’m out of earshot, I hear Jason ask, “How’s it going?”

“We’ve got a problem,” Tyler responds, sounding grim.

And then I’m out of earshot and can’t hear any more of their conversation. I follow Layla to my parents’ favorite parlor—there’s more than one in this monstrosity of a house. My mom likes the fireplace and reading chairs in this room, and my dad likes the antique mahogany bar. In fact, he’s pouring himself a shot of something when we enter the room.

Mom sets down her glass of red wine on the small round table sitting between two armchairs. She stands and meets us halfway, a huge smile on her face as she gazes down at her grandchildren. She bends down to get a closer look. “How are they doing, sweetheart?”

“They’re doing great,” I say. “Eating, drinking, sleeping, and pooping. Lots of pooping.”

“And they’re gaining weight?” she asks. “They’re thriving?”

“Yes. Everything’s going well.”

Lizzie wakes up at that moment, her blue-green eyes fluttering as she stares up at some unexpected faces.

Mom unbuckles her granddaughter and gingerly lifts her out of the car seat. “Hello, darling girl.” She kisses Lizzie’s forehead. “How’s my beautiful little angel?”

“Did you talk to me like that when I was a baby?” Layla asks, looking skeptical.

“Of course she talked to you like that,” my dad says as he takes a seat in one of the armchairs in front of the fireplace. He chuckles. “She spoiled you both rotten.”

“Martin! I did not spoil my children,” Mom says, giving him a fake scowl. “Besides, when they’re this age, you can’t spoil them. All they want is love and cuddles.”

Will begins to stir then, wriggling and making those adorable sounds babies make when they wake up.

“Well, let me see my grandson, then,” Dad says as he rescues Will from his car seat.

I smile as I watch my dad, the stern and stoic federal judge, lift his grandson into his arms with kid gloves.

Tyler and Jason join us in time to see my parents fawning over their first grandchildren.

“All right, Tyler,” Mom says, cutting to the chase. The attorney in her is coming out. “Tell us what’s going on.”

Tyler reaches into his jacket breast pocket and pulls out the blackmail letter. He carefully pulls it out of the envelope, unfolds it, and hands it to my mother.

She quickly scans the paper. “Good Lord. Martin, look at this.” She hands the note to my father, whose expression darkens as he reads it.

My dad's gaze goes immediately to Tyler, and the two men stare at each other in silent communication.

"What is it?" Layla asks as she moves in to get a glimpse at the note. "What's going on?"

"It's nothing, sweetheart," Dad says as he begins to fold the sheet of paper so she can't read it.

Layla snatches the page from his grasp, reads it, and then hands it to Jason. "Now what?" she demands. "What are we going to do about this?"

We.

I love my sister. She has more health challenges than any young woman her age should have to deal with, but she always puts others first.

"That's why we're here," Tyler says glancing first at my mom, and then at my dad. "What can you tell us about Ian's birth mother?"

Mom frowns. "You think she's behind this?"

Tyler shrugs. "Right now, she's the prime suspect. Who else would have pictures of Ian's early childhood? So, what do you know about her?"

Mom gazes down at Lizzie, sighing as she gathers her thoughts. "It's been so long. And honestly, we didn't know much about her. Her name is Rhonda Mitchell. She was twenty-four when Ian first went into the foster care system and was placed with us. Children's Services got involved when a neighbor complained that a young child was crying on and off throughout the nights.

She was charged with child neglect and endangerment, as well as prostitution and illegal drug use. She attempted to get herself cleaned up and off drugs so she could get Ian back, and at one point, he did go back to her. But it didn't last long. When she resumed her old habits, the state terminated her parental rights, and we were allowed to adopt him. We attempted to keep in touch with her. I sent her several letters when she was in prison, sharing updates and pictures of Ian. But frankly, she wasn't in a good state of mind at the time. After a couple of years, we lost touch, and we never heard from her again."

"How are you planning to handle this, Tyler?" Dad asks. "Are you going to the police?"

Everyone's talking about me and around me, like I'm not even in the room. I throw my hands up in the air. "Hello! I'm right here!"

Dad softens his expression as his eyes land on me. "I know you are, son," he says consolingly. "But let's be honest. This is something for Tyler to deal with. Right?"

I frown because he's not wrong. "Yes. But still."

Tyler takes my hand and squeezes it as he pulls me close. With one look at him, I can read his thoughts— Please, let me handle this, babe. Let me take care of this—of you.

I nod. "Okay."

"I'm of two minds," Tyler says, quickly switching gears as he addresses my parents. "I don't know if we should involve the police or if I should handle this myself. Do we want to bring charges? Would that help matters or just make things worse?"

Mom holds her hand out, and Jason deposits the letter in her hand. She reads it once more. "In general, there's not enough here to warrant extortion charges," she says,

putting on her prosecutor hat. “Not from the letter alone. You’d have to actually pay the blackmailer. And then, yes, we could bring charges. But even then—”

“Given Ian’s financial standing in this city,” my dad says, “—not to mention the fact his father is a federal judge and his mother is an assistant district attorney—the police will surely act. They wouldn’t dare ignore this.”

“But then we’re possibly dealing with a public trial,” Ruth says, her gaze turning to me. “Unless, of course, the defendant pleads guilty. And there’s no guaranteeing that will happen. I think it’s fair to say we all want to spare Ian from having to testify in a trial.”

“Then no charges,” Tyler says. “I want to keep Ian’s name out of the news. My objective, besides putting a stop to the harassment, is to minimize the impact this has on him.”

When Will starts fussing, Dad hands him to me. “I agree. We want to keep Ian’s name out of the news.”

Charles knocks on the open door. “If everyone is ready, dinner is served.”

* * *

While we’re seated at the dining table, enjoying lasagna, fresh garlic bread, and salad, the babies are dozing in a pair of matching bassinets that my mother purchased for just such an occasion. She was more than ready for our first visit.

I’m trying to eat quickly because I figure they’re going to wake up hungry any second, and I still need to get their bottles ready.

I watch Jason as he quietly programs my sister’s insulin pump to administer the

correct dosage for this meal. Jason is more than just her boyfriend. He started out as her personal bodyguard, chosen specifically because of his medical background. He's a former paramedic. After my sister was abducted by her former asshole-of-a-bodyguard, Sean, my parents contacted McIntyre Security Inc. to hire a new bodyguard, one well-versed in medical care.

In addition to being a type I diabetic, my sister also has schizophrenia—auditory hallucinations, to be exact. She often hears mean girls berating her, cutting her down, whittling away at her self-esteem.

Layla fell in love with her new bodyguard, and fortunately, he returned her feelings. She's never been happier. She now lives with him in his apartment in The Gold Coast.

After I finish my dinner, I excuse myself from the table and run to the kitchen to prepare two bottles of formula. When the bottles are ready, I return to the dining room. Layla steals one of them from me and proceeds to feed Will. I pick up a squirming Lizzie and feed her.

The rest of the family sits around the dining room table, chatting, sharing a bottle of red wine, while my sister and I feed the twins. I notice the sweet smile on Layla's face as she stares down at Will. I notice Jason noticing her. It makes me imagine them getting married one day—I have no doubt that will happen because they're crazy about each other. I wonder if they'll want to have kids. It's obvious Layla enjoys being around the babies.

When dinner is over, and after my parents have shared every scrap of information they remember about my birth mother, Tyler and I pack up the babies and head home.

We change them, dress them in their sleepers, and tuck them into their beds for the night. Once they're asleep, we change into comfy clothes and head downstairs to the

living room to relax.

We end up on the sofa watching Heartstopper on Netflix—an amazing series about British teenage boys falling in love. The show is based on a series of graphic novels.

“Haven’t you already seen this?” Tyler asks as he props his stocking feet on the coffee table.

I prop my feet up, too. “Yes, but I want us to watch it together .”

“But they’re just kids—they’re in high school.”

“You need to see this, Tyler,” I say as I rest my head on his shoulder. “You missed out on teen crushes. You missed out on the pain and agony of navigating adolescence as a gay kid. You missed out on getting teased, being bullied, and having your heart broken because the quarterback of the football team didn’t return your love.”

Tyler tilts his head toward mine. “You were in love with the quarterback? Seriously? That’s so cliché.”

“I know, but he was so dreamy. I suffered through my entire senior year of high school hoping he’d notice me.”

“And did he?”

“Of course not. He was as straight as a flagpole, didn’t know I was alive, and when he knocked up the head cheerleader, I was devastated.” I glance up at Tyler. “What about you?”

“Did I knock up the head cheerleader in high school? No.”

I smack his thigh. “No! I mean, did you ever have a crush on a boy when you were in school? Even just a tiny one? I’ll bet you had a crush on the quarterback.”

“Ian, I was the quarterback.” Then his smile falls. “I never noticed guys when I was in high school. It never even occurred to me.”

“That’s just sad. I bet you were a hot, broody teenager.”

“Broody, yes, but I doubt I was hot.” Tyler lays his hand on mine, which is resting on his thigh, and links our fingers. “I tried dating girls a few times, but it never went well, so eventually I stopped trying.” He kisses the side of my head. “Turns out it was all for the best. I just needed to be patient and wait for you.”

“Aww.”

When Charlie and Nick share their first kiss on-screen, I elbow Tyler. “See what you were missing out on?”

Tyler pulls me onto his lap so that I’m straddling his hips, facing him. He reaches up beneath my T-shirt and thumbs my nipples, sending delicious tingles down my spine. His heated gaze is locked on me, and the TV show gets forgotten. “When I was a senior in high school, you were hardly more than a baby, Ian.”

“Well, when you put it like that.” I cup his handsome face and lean in to kiss him. “It’s a good thing you waited for me.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:47 am

The next morning, while we're sitting at the kitchen table drinking our coffee and feeding two sleepy babies breakfast, I ask Ian, "Will you be okay if I go out for a while?"

Ian glances across the table at me. "You're going to look for her, aren't you?"

I nod. "I'm going to ask Jerry to keep an eye on things here at the house while I'm gone, just as a precaution. Until I have a better idea of what's going on, I don't want to leave you and the kids alone."

Unprotected is what I really mean, but I don't want to say that out loud. I don't want to give Ian more reason to worry. I've seen no evidence that the blackmailer would resort to violence, but I can't take that risk.

Ian manages a smile. "That's a great idea." He and Jerry Harshman, our handyman and office manager, have a special relationship that goes back several years. Ian befriended Jerry when he encountered the homeless man, a U.S. Army veteran, living on the streets of downtown Chicago. Ian would buy Jerry meals at a Mexican restaurant near Millennium Park.

Ian offered to get Jerry a spot in a local men's shelter, but Jerry always refused to accept any housing assistance. When we opened the private investigation business, we hired Jerry to manage the renovation of the carriage house. He brought all of his formidable logistical skills from working in the U.S. Army to his new job, which included everything from keeping the facility running smoothly to ordering supplies.

Jerry lives on-site, in an apartment above the PI office. The guy knows how to handle

himself, and I'm confident he can protect Ian from any threat.

After kissing Ian goodbye, I leave him to wrangle the kids while I head across the driveway to the office. When I walk inside, Kimi waves from the reception desk.

"Good morning, Mr. J." She runs her fingers through her spikey hair, mussing the strands deliberately. "How's Ian?"

"He's okay. Anything new on the research front?"

She perks up, smiling. "Yes." Kimi turns her computer monitor toward me, and I find myself looking at a dated mug shot. Even without being told, I know who this is. The resemblance between this woman and Ian is uncanny. They have the same curly light brown hair and the same green eyes.

"That's her mug shot, obviously," Kimi says. She switches to a new screen—Instagram—and scrolls through a few of Rhonda's posts. "She lives in Roger's Park and works as a server at Ambrose's Diner. I'll send you the address of the diner and a recent picture of her."

"Thanks, Kimi. Is Jerry here?"

She points to the ceiling. "Upstairs."

I head toward the stairs. "I'm going to ask him to keep an eye on Ian while I'm gone. You need to keep an eye out as well, for anything or anyone unusual. Don't hesitate to call 911 if you feel unsafe for any reason."

"Will do," she says, giving me a salute.

Jerry's apartment takes up half of the second floor of the carriage house. I knock on

his door, and it opens almost immediately, as if he heard me coming up the stairs. He's got a half-eaten red apple in his hand.

He finishes chewing, swallows, and tosses the apple core into a trashcan. "Hello, Tyler. Come in."

I step into a tidy and well-organized space. The apartment is nothing fancy. There's an open floor plan, with a living room and kitchen, and down the hallway is a bedroom and a bathroom. The apartment is part of his compensation package.

"What can I do for you?" Jerry asks as he washes his hands and dries them. He grabs a bottle of water off the kitchen table and takes a swig.

Jerry Harshman is a formidable man. I'd put him at about six-two. There's not an ounce of fat on his body. He's in his late sixties and wears his gray hair in a military buzz cut. His tanned skin is weathered and wrinkled. His sharp, steely blue eyes miss nothing.

"I need to ask a favor, Jerry."

He nods. "Happy to be of help, sir."

I've told him a dozen times he doesn't need to call me sir, but he insists. I think it's the military in him. I withdraw the blackmail note from my jacket pocket and hand it to him.

His brow furrows as he scans the writing, his jaw tightening. "Any idea who sent this?"

"Not exactly, although I do have my suspicions. That's where you come in. I need to track down my primary suspect, but I don't feel comfortable leaving Ian at home

without protection. Would you—”

“Of course.” He opens a closet door and pulls out a Glock tucked into a chest holster. He straps the holster on, and then he checks the gun to make sure it’s loaded. “Do you want me inside or outside of the townhouse?”

“Inside, if you don’t mind. I want someone there with Ian, just as a precaution. And I suspect Ian would appreciate your company.”

Jerry pulls a light tan jacket out of the closet and slips it on, effectively hiding the fact he’s carrying a handgun. “Understood.”

“I’d appreciate it if you’d stay with him until I return. I don’t want him left alone.”

“Yes, sir.”

One of the things I appreciate most about Jerry is how efficient and reliable he is.

* * *

I leave the office and slide into the driver’s seat of my ten-year-old black BMW, which is parked beside Ian’s flashy new Porsche SUV. When we were expecting the babies, he traded in his bright blue Porsche 910 for the larger family-sized vehicle.

As I start the engine, I watch Jerry cross the driveway and disappear behind the townhouse.

Roger’s Park is a quick fifteen-minute drive. At this time of day, there’s not much traffic to contend with. My first stop is at the diner where Rhonda Mitchell reportedly works. I just hope she’s working the first shift.

After finding parking on a side street, I walk into the diner and recognize her immediately. She's a rather attractive woman, with curly brown hair pulled back in a ponytail. She's wearing an apron over a black pencil skirt and a white blouse and currently taking a couple's food order. She looks vastly different from the woman I saw in a mug shot. The dark shadows beneath her eyes are gone, as are the splotches on her cheeks—clear signs of drug use.

When she spots me, she gives me a welcoming smile and says, "Seat yourself anywhere you like, hon. I'll be right with you."

I take a seat at the corner booth at the back of the restaurant, which gives me an unrestricted view of her. I pick up a laminated menu off the table and scan it. A few minutes later, she approaches my table holding a pot of coffee.

"Coffee?" she asks.

I nod as I gaze up at her nametag—Rhonda. Confirmation. "Please."

The table is already set, so she turns the mug in front of me upright and fills it. "Do you know what you want, or do you need time to look at the menu?"

"To be honest, I didn't come here to eat."

She gives me a quizzical look but doesn't say anything.

"Actually, I came here to see you."

"Me?" She frowns, her brow wrinkling. "Whatever for?"

"You're Rhonda Mitchell?"

She nods. “Who wants to know?”

I pull my ID out of my jacket pocket and show her. “Tyler Jamison, private investigator.”

Her frown deepens, and she seems honestly perplexed. “What do you want with me?”

“To start with, I need information. You gave birth to a son, Ian, 30 years ago. Is that correct?”

Her expression falls. “What’s this about? Is Ian okay?”

“He’s fine.”

She releases a sigh, looking clearly relieved. “I haven’t seen him, or heard from him, since I lost custody.” Her frown returns. “What do you want with me? I served my time—ten years in state prison, and then five years of parole. I’ve been clean ever since I got locked up and started a rehab program. I don’t do drugs anymore. I don’t even drink. I work an honest job, and I have a good life. I don’t want any trouble.”

“As I said, I’m simply looking for information.”

Her green eyes tear up. “Is he happy? Please tell me he is. That’s all I want for him—to be happy.”

“He is. He’s married now and has two kids.”

Her expression transforms instantly, that frown replaced by a look of pure joy. “He has kids?” She wipes her cheeks. “I guess that makes me a grandma, doesn’t it?”

“I guess it does.” I’m pretty sure Rhonda Mitchell isn’t our suspect. “Would you do

me a favor?”

She shrugs. “Yeah, if I can.”

I take my notepad and pen out of my inside jacket pocket and lay them on the table. “Please write something on the pad.”

“Why?”

“Just do it, please. You can write anything.”

She picks up the pad of paper and pen and writes something quick. I glance down to see her signature. She has a light hand, her letters fluid and curving. It’s a very feminine signature. Rhonda Mitchell did not write that blackmail note.

Taking a chance, I withdraw the blackmail note from my jacket pocket and hand it to her.

She opens the sheet, and as she skims it, her eyes widen. The blood drains from her face as she drops into the seat across from mine.

“Where did this—I didn’t write it,” she says, meeting my gaze head on. “Is this why you’re here? Oh, my God, does Ian think I sent this to him?” She shakes her head and presses her right hand over her heart. “I swear to God, I didn’t. I would never do something like this. I did hurt him years ago, yes, but I’m a different person now. I would never hurt a hair on his head.” She hastily refolds the note and hands it back to me.

“Did you recognize the handwriting?” I ask. I watch the myriad emotions flitting across her face, ranging from confusion to sadness to finally anger.

She looks away, staring out a window at the street.

“Rhonda, who wrote the letter?”

Her attention snaps back to me. “You said you’re a private investigator. Did Ian hire you? Does he think I’m the one trying to blackmail him?”

“No, he didn’t hire me. I’m his husband.”

For a moment, she’s speechless. Her mouth opens, but nothing comes out. I brace myself, because if she reacts badly, it’ll only add to Ian’s pain.

“My son is gay?” she finally asks.

“He is. Do you have a problem with that?”

She looks confused for a moment, but then she shakes her head. “No, I don’t have a problem with it. I just want him to be happy. Earlier you said he has kids.”

“Yes. We have newborn twins, a girl and a boy.”

Her lips curve into a smile. “Twins? I’ll bet he’s a good daddy. He always was such a gentle soul.” Her demeanor cracks then as fresh tears start falling. “Excuse me.”

Rhonda jumps up from the table and runs to the restroom, leaving me sitting here wondering who sent that letter to Ian if she didn’t do it.

I believe her. But whoever wrote the letter has access to Rhonda’s personal belongings, namely the photographs.

I drink my coffee as I wait for her to reappear. I’m not going anywhere until I get

answers.

* * *

When Rhonda finally emerges from the bathroom, she's composed, although her eyes are bloodshot and rimmed in red. She's definitely been crying.

She returns to my table. "I'm sorry, but I need to get back to work."

I lay cash for my cup of coffee on the table and stand. "Rhonda, who wrote the letter?"

"My boyfriend, Gary. That's his handwriting. I'm sure of it."

"What's his last name?"

"Sharp. Gary Sharp. We've been together about six months. He recently moved in with me."

"And he knows about Ian?"

She nods. "I told him about my history, my time in prison. I wanted to be transparent, you know?"

"I presume he knows Ian's wealthy."

Now Rhonda looks guilty. "He does. I've been keeping track of Ian through new articles. I've read about the things he's done for the city, the money he's donated."

"Do you have photos of Ian from back then?"

She nods. “I have an album of pictures of Ian and me, from when he was born up until I lost custody.” Her voice breaks. “That’s all I have left of my son—photographs and memories. I doubt Ian has any good memories of me, of our lives together, but I do. It wasn’t always bad.”

“And I suppose Gary has seen these photos?”

“Yes.”

“Rhonda!” She jumps when a male voice calls to her from the kitchen. “Customers are waiting.”

“I’m sorry, but I need to get back,” she says, smiling apologetically as she backs away.

“Of course. Where’s Gary right now?”

“Probably at home. He’s between jobs, has been for a while. He usually sits home and watches TV.” She rattles off the address. “I assume you’re going to pay him a visit.” When I nod, she adds, “Do me a favor—when you see him, tell him to pack his stuff and get the hell out of my apartment. I want him gone by the time I get off work this evening.”

I take out my wallet, withdraw a business card, and hand it to her. “Here’s my contact info. If you need me, reach out.”

She scans the card before tucking it into her apron pocket. “Thanks. If you would, please tell Ian—” She winces. “Never mind. I doubt he wants to hear anything from me.”

“Rhonda—”

“No, it’s okay.” She looks resigned. “I understand. I lost my right to be part of his life a long time ago. Just—if you tell him anything about me, please tell him I wish the very best for him, and for you and your kids. I just want him to be happy.” She pulls her order pad from her apron pocket, jots something down, tears off the top sheet, and hands it to me.

As she walks away, I glance down at the note to see her name and phone number.

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:47 am

As I stand at the kitchen sink getting ready to sterilize baby bottles, there's a knock at the back door. My heart jumps into my throat, and my first impulse is to call Tyler. But then I remember he said he'd send Jerry to stay with us.

I wipe my hands on a kitchen towel and turn to face the door. Relief floods me at the sight of Jerry's profile partly visible through the frosted glass.

"Hey, thanks for coming over," I say as I open the door for my friend.

Jerry steps inside and surveys the kitchen. "I hope I didn't startle you."

"No, not at all. Tyler told me you'd be coming by."

"He asked me to wait with you until he gets home." He glances at the kitchen counter, which resembles a baby bottle processing center. "I see you're washing bottles."

I chuckle. "It seems like that's all I do these days. They go through bottles as fast as I can sterilize them."

"That makes sense. I guess two babies are twice the work of one."

Speaking of the babies, the twins are in their baby seats on the kitchen table. I arranged them so they could see each other. One of them will coo, and then the other one will respond. It's adorable watching them attempt to communicate in their own way.

Jerry stands before the babies, his hands on his hips, and studies them. “You sure got some good-lookin’ kids, Ian.”

My smile morphs into a huge grin. “I think so, but I might be a little biased. Would you like to hold one of them?”

Jerry looks my way and scowls. “I probably shouldn’t. I’ve never held a baby in my life. I wouldn’t know the first thing about how to do it.”

“It’s easy. I’ll show you.”

He unzips his jacket and holds it open, revealing the black handgun tucked into his chest holster. “I’m armed.”

“Oh, right. Why don’t you take it off and hang it in the front closet? That’s where Tyler keeps his.”

Jerry hangs his jacket on the back of one of the kitchen chairs. Then he unbuckles his holster.

I point down the hall. “You can stash it on the top shelf in the front coat closet.”

Jerry disappears down the hall. I hear the closet door open, then close. And a moment later, he’s back in the kitchen.

He walks to the sink, washes his hands thoroughly, and dries them before holding them up in the air like a surgeon ready to don a pair of sterile gloves. “I’m ready.” His voice is deep and gruff, befitting his impressive stature. “Show me what to do.”

I unbuckle Will from his baby seat. “Hold out your hands and grip him carefully, but gently. Make sure you support his head.” As I lay Will in Jerry’s arms, I show him

how. “Cuddle him against your chest so he feels secure.”

I pick up Lizzie and do the same. “Why don’t we go sit in the living room? We’ll be more comfortable in there.”

We both end up sitting in rocking recliners.

Jerry stares down at Will. “He looks like Tyler.”

That makes me smile. “They both do.”

“I take it Tyler’s the father? I mean, the biological father. I guess you’re both fathers.”

I nod. “Yes, Tyler is their biological father. We—actually, it was my idea.”

“How are the kids gonna address you? I mean, if they call both of you dad , it’ll get confusing real quick.”

“I’m Daddy, and Tyler’s Papa.”

Jerry nods. “Well, that works.” He gazes down at Will, bouncing him gently in his arms. “Hey, little fella.” He turns his attention back to me. “It’ll sure be fun watchin’ them grow up.”

When the doorbell rings, Jerry rises to his feet. “I’ll get it. Where can I put him?”

“You can lay him on the couch. He can’t roll off.”

Jerry lays Will down with extreme care, then places a couch pillow between the baby and edge of the seat cushion, just in case. Then he goes to the door. “It’s that friend of

yours, that young Hispanic fella, with a pretty redhead.”

I smile. “Those are my friends Miguel and Ruby. It’s okay, I’m expecting them.”

Miguel Rodriguez, who works for Tyler’s brother-in-law’s security company—McIntyre Security Inc.—was once my bodyguard, back when someone was stalking me. Miguel saved my life and got himself shot in the shoulder in the process. We’ve been good friends ever since.

I hear the front door open, and then quiet voices as Miguel introduces his girlfriend to Jerry.

“Hola, ” Miguel says, grinning as he and Ruby walk into the living room. Ruby’s holding two small white gift bags.

I stand and meet them halfway. “It’s good to see you, man,” I say to Miguel, giving him an awkward one-armed hug as I cradle Lizzie with my other arm. “Hi, Ruby.”

Ruby gives me a smile, but she immediately turns her attention to Lizzie. “Oh, Ian. This one is Lizzie, right? She’s adorable.” Then she looks around the room. “Where’s Will?”

“On the sofa.” I nod across the room.

Ruby walks closer to spot Will lying behind the pillow. “Oh, my goodness. He looks so much like Tyler. They both do.”

I’m amazed that Ruby’s here. When Miguel first met her—he was assigned to be her bodyguard when someone was terrorizing her—she suffered from agoraphobia. She hadn’t left her apartment in a couple of years. Miguel stayed in her apartment with her while he investigated the source of the threat. He discovered the guilty party and

saved Ruby's life. And in the process, they fell in love.

Miguel's been working with Ruby to help her overcome her fear of going out in public. Ruby has since moved in with Miguel, in his apartment in a secure building owned by McIntyre Security, along with a lot of Miguel's fellow employees.

Miguel glances around. "Speaking of Tyler, is he here?"

"He's on assignment," Jerry says.

Miguel studies me a moment, and something he sees in my expression prompts him to ask, "Ian, is everything okay?"

I shrug. "Not really. Someone's trying to blackmail me."

"What!" Instantly, Miguel goes into protector mode. When Ruby instinctively takes a step toward him, he wraps his arm around her and pulls her close. "Ian, tell me everything."

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:47 am

It's a short drive to Rhonda's apartment complex. The place is obviously run down. There's graffiti sprayed on the trash dumpsters in the parking lot. A few broken-down vehicles are parked out front. The lawn is more weed than grass, and the shrubs haven't been trimmed in ages.

I enter a large brick building and take the stairs up two flights. I locate Rhonda's unit down the hallway to the left. There's a Welcome sign on her door, as well as a No Soliciting sticker. I hear a TV game show playing inside.

I knock, but there's no answer.

When I knock a second time, a male voice inside yells, "Can't you read? We're not interested!"

I wait a moment, mentally rolling my eyes, and then I knock for a third time, more forcefully this time. The third time is the charm. If he doesn't open the door—

"Hold your damn horses!"

The door opens, and I'm hit with a strong waft of marijuana. I stare hard at the man standing before me—a dishwater blond who hasn't shaved for a few days. He's wearing a pair of jean cut-offs and a ragged T-shirt bearing the NASCAR logo. He's barefoot.

He narrows his blue eyes on me. "What the hell do you want? Can't you see the sticker?"

“I’m not selling anything.”

“Then what do you want? I already gave at the office.” And then he chuckles.

The irony is not lost on me. He’s jobless. “Are you Gary Sharp?”

His eyes narrow. “Who wants to know?”

I flash him my ID. “Tyler Jamison, private investigator.” It’s times like this I wish I still had my Chicago homicide detective badge.

Fear flashes in his eyes, and then it’s gone. “What the hell do you want?”

“Can I come in? We need to talk.”

“Fine, but make it quick. I’m busy.” He opens the door wider, takes a step back, and waves me inside. Once I’m across the threshold, he closes the door. “What’s this about?” His tone is more cautious now, not quite so flippant.

I figure the best approach is a direct one. “It’s about the blackmail letter you sent Ian Alexander.”

Gary freezes. “I don’t know what you’re—”

“Don’t waste my time, Gary. I just spoke with Rhonda. By the way, she asked me to give you a message: She wants you out of the apartment before she gets home from work this evening.”

Gary shakes his head as he takes a few steps back. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

I pull the note from my pocket, open it, and hold it up for him to see. “Does this ring a bell? Or do you need a refresher?”

He attempts to swipe it from my grip, but I’m ready for that. I fold it back up and return it to my jacket pocket.

“Get out,” he says, reaching for the door knob.

He moves to open it, but I grab him by his shirt collar slam him up against the door. “I could call the police and tell them to bring you up on extortion charges, or—” I twist the front of his shirt, pulling it tight across his throat. “I could take matters into my own hands.”

The fear is back in his eyes. Obviously, he’s a bully, an opportunist. But as soon as he comes up against someone stronger, someone who fights back, he cowers.

“Look, man, there’s been some mistake,” he says, his voice betraying his unease. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. I didn’t do nothing.”

I happen to glance over at the sofa where he’d been sitting. There’s an open bottle of beer on the coffee table and a bag of potato chips. Next to the chips is an old photo album.

My stomach knots.

After I release Gary, I cross the room and pick up the album. Even though I know what I’m going to see before I even open it, I’m not prepared for the faded color photos of a toddler with curly brown hair and big green eyes.

Ian.

My Ian, so small and helpless.

My heart thuds painfully as I flip through the pages. The images progress chronologically, from birth to about four years of age. He's alone in most of the photos, usually sitting on the floor playing with toys. A couple of the images were taken outside at a park, pictures of Ian sitting in a toddler swing, or sitting at the top of a colorful plastic slide. There's one of him sitting in a sandbox holding a little yellow toy shovel. Beside him is a plastic yellow bucket.

Maybe it's my imagination, but I see shadows beneath his eyes. He's pale and gaunt, with hardly any muscle at all. There's a wariness in his gaze as he stares at the camera.

And then I remember the stories he's told me—about being locked in an upstairs bedroom for hours and hours on end while his mother was downstairs doing tricks for drug money. He'd sit alone in the dark, with little more than water and a box of cold cereal, and dream of Batman or Superman coming to his rescue.

My heart breaks for him all over again.

With the photo album tucked under one arm, I grab a fistful of Sharp's T-shirt and slam him against the wall, hard. "If we hear another word from you, I promise you'll regret it."

"We? "

"I'm Ian's husband. If you fuck with him, you fuck with me. You got that?"

"Husband? What the hell are you talking about?"

"He's my husband! What's so hard to understand?"

Sharp ponders my words for a minute, and then his eyes widen. “Oh.”

“Right. Oh! So if you fuck with him, you fuck with me. Is that clear?”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it.” That’s when he notices the photo album tucked under my arm.
“What do you think you’re doing with that? It’s mine.”

“It’s not yours. It’s Rhonda’s, and it’s coming with me for safekeeping.”

As I head for the door, I remind him about what Rhonda said about wanting him out of her apartment. “I’d get out if I were you.”

* * *

Once I’m in my car, I drive a few blocks away before I pull over to park on a side street. The photo album is calling to me. I look through it again, this time more slowly, studying each image.

There’s one of Ian sitting cross-legged on the living floor playing with superhero figures. Another one of him playing with toy cars. His limbs are stick-thin, and he appears grossly underweight to me.

As I stare at these photos, my chest tightens until I’m having a difficult time breathing. I was about twenty years old when some of these later pictures were taken. I was almost out of college by that time and ready to begin my career as a police officer. And during that entire time, this sweet little boy was suffering.

All I can think is thank God Rhonda was forced to give up her parental rights and that the Alexanders were able to adopt him. They gave that little boy everything he needed to heal from his ordeal and grow into the amazing man he is today. Yes, he still carries those scars and wounds with him. I imagine he always will. But in spite of

his dark early years, he was able to overcome the trauma and grow into the ray of sunshine he is today.

I pull out Rhonda's note and send her a quick text message to let her know I spoke to Gary and I borrowed the photo album for safe keeping. I also tell her I told Gary to move out of the apartment.

I start my engine and pull out into traffic with one goal—I just want to go home and be with my little ray of sunshine. I want to hold him and kiss him and make up for every second of misery he endured.

On my drive home, I call Ruth so I can update her and Martin. I get her voicemail, which is not a surprise, so I leave her a detailed message. Then I head home to Ian. I don't know if he's ready to see these photos, but he deserves to know of their existence. They document a painful part of his life.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:47 am

Ruby and I are sitting together on the sofa giving the babies their midafternoon bottles when I hear a car pull into the drive. At first, I feel a rush of panic, but almost immediately I relax. If it's the blackmailer, he or she is hardly going to pull into our driveway and announce their presence. Besides, I'm surrounded by not one, but two bodyguards who won't let anything happen to us.

Jerry peers out the front window. Miguel joins him, his hand automatically going to his lower back, where I imagine he's carrying a handgun.

"It's Tyler," Jerry says in his calm, monotone voice.

Miguel lowers his hand as he follows Jerry to the front door. A moment later, Miguel steps outside, calling to Tyler. Then the door closes, and we can't hear anything they're saying.

I glance beside me at Ruby, who's sitting stiff as a board, looking more than a little tense. I think she's still affected by the stalker who terrorized her not that long ago.

"Everything's fine," I say as I pat her knee. "Besides, Miguel would never let anyone hurt you."

She looks my way, her pretty blue eyes wide, and nods. Nervously, she tucks her red hair behind her ear. Her pale cheeks are a bit flushed, making her freckles stand out. "I'm okay."

"Thanks for coming over today," I say. "I haven't seen you two in ages."

Ruby doesn't leave their apartment often. The fact that she did so today, for me and the babies, says a lot.

She smiles down at Lizzie in her arms. "I wanted to see the babies."

"I guess you got more than you bargained for, didn't you?"

"I suppose so. But Miguel's here. I'm not worried. Really."

"Remind me to tell you about the time Miguel saved my life."

The front door opens again, and a moment later, Tyler and Miguel walk into the living room, followed by Jerry.

I rise to my feet, Will cradled in my arms as he sucks on his bottle. I notice something tucked underneath Tyler's arm. "What's that?"

He sets it down on the coffee table. "Later."

Then he walks right up to me, takes Will from me, and hands the baby and his bottle to Miguel. When he pulls me into his arms, my breath rushes out of me, and I forget about everyone else in the room. His strong arms bring me in close, his blue-green eyes gazing into mine for the longest time. There's so much emotion in his eyes, so much he's trying to tell me, but we're not alone, and maybe now isn't the time.

"Did you find out who—"

"Yes," he says.

"Is it my birth mother?"

“No.”

The rush of relief I feel at the news is so powerful my knees almost give out. Tyler grips my elbows to hold me steady.

My birth mother betrayed me, and hurt me, scarring me for life. I’ve tried to put it behind me and move on, but I’ve only been partially successful. If I found that she was still betraying me, years later, I don’t think I could take it. “Then who?” I ask.

“Her boyfriend. And I’m taking care of it.”

“I think we should go and let you guys talk,” Miguel says.

There’s a flurry of activity then, as Lizzie and Will, who are both well into their sleepy milk comas, are tucked into their bassinets. Jerry gives Tyler a quiet update, and then everyone leaves.

The house is silent now, with the babies asleep and Tyler quietly observing me.

His entire focus is on me . “I saw the photos, Ian.”

I’m wondering if it’s my imagination that his voice cracked a bit as he said those words.

He nods at the photo album he laid on the table. “I took it for safe keeping until this is sorted out.”

I stare at it, half expecting it to strike out and bite me, or maybe explode.

“Do you want to look at the pictures?” he asks. His voice is hesitant, as if he’s cautioning me to think that through before I answer.

“I’m not sure.” I don’t know if I can face seeing visual reminders of the years of torment I lived through.

“I suggest you don’t,” he says, his voice low and gentle. “At least not yet.”

I nod. “Okay.” My gaze returns to his. “You saw them?”

“Yes.” He lifts his hands to cup my face, still staring deeply into my eyes. “I saw them, and they broke my heart. Seeing you like that, looking so lost and sad.” Tyler’s eyes harden, pain radiating through them. “I will never let anyone hurt you again, babe. Never .”

My throat tightens, and my voice shakes. “That’s got to be the most romantic thing anyone has ever said to me.”

Tyler’s thumbs gently wipe my cheeks. That’s when I realize I’m crying.

“Shh,” he murmurs. “It’s going to be okay, I promise.”

And then he presses a kiss to my lips, so gently it breaks my heart.

“Do you want to hear about your birth mother?” he asks. “I had a rather lengthy conversation with her at the diner where she works.”

“I don’t think so. I’m not sure my heart can take it.”

Tyler pulls back to look me in the eyes, his gaze filled with compassion. “Actually, babe, I think maybe you do.”

* * *

Just as we're finishing our dinner, Tyler's phone rings. He picks it up, frowns at the caller ID, and takes the call. "Tyler Jamison." He listens for a few moments, growing more and more tense by the second. "I'm on my way."

"What was that about?" I ask the second he ends the call.

He stands. "That was Rhonda Mitchell's nurse calling, at Rhonda's request. Gary Sharp attacked Rhonda when she got home from work today. She's in the ER. She's pressing charges."

My stomach knots. "What kind of charges? What did he do?"

"From the sound of it, he tried to kill her." He gives me an apologetic look.

Someone attacked my birth mother? I can barely wrap my mind around the fact she's still alive, and now I've learned that someone tried to hurt her?

"Babe, I'm sorry to take off again," Tyler says, "but I need to go to the hospital."

"I'm coming with you."

Tyler frowns. "I don't think that's a good—"

"I'm coming."

Tyler sighs. "Fine. Then what do we do about the babies?"

"I'll call my sister and see if she and Jason can watch them."

He frowns. "Are you sure? Ian, this could be—"

“Yes, I’m sure. I’ll call Layla.”

Thirty minutes later, Layla and Jason are at our front door. Tyler lets them in, giving them a quick rundown.

I show them where the prepared bottles are. “They’re sleeping upstairs in our bedroom right now, but when they wake up, they’re going to be hungry.” I’m rambling nervously. “Their diapers are—”

Jason clasps my shoulder. “We’ll manage just fine, Ian. You guys go.”

A few minutes later, Tyler walks me out to his car. He opens the front passenger door for me, and I slip into the seat. By the time he’s sitting behind the wheel, I’m buckled in and ready to go.

Or, as ready as I’ll ever be.

As Tyler starts the engine, he glances over at me. “You okay?” He squeezes my hand.

I lean my head back and close my eyes. “Yes.”

“Are you sure you want to come along? You don’t have to. You can wait here.”

“No, I’m going. She’s—” My throat catches. “She’s my mother. I should be there.”

Tyler links our fingers and rests our joined hands on his thigh as he backs out of our driveway. He holds my hand the entire way to the hospital, never letting go once.

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Ian is silent on the drive to the hospital, and I'm worried about him. He's been on the edge since he received the blackmail note, and finding out his birth mother is still alive has been a shock. I think he assumed she was dead—probably of a drug overdose. But she's not. And he's struggling to process that information. I know he resents her for how she treated him when he was young, but I have to think there are some tender feelings in there as well, perhaps buried deep. Really deep.

I park in the emergency room parking lot, and we walk in together. Ian hangs back and lets me do all the talking at the information desk.

“We're here to see Rhonda Mitchell,” I tell the woman seated at a computer. “We were just notified that she was brought in.”

The woman types something into the computer. “And you are?”

Ian steps up to the counter. “I'm her son.”

I certainly wasn't expecting him to say that.

“She's in room number five.” The woman presses a button, causing a large, automatic door to swing open. “Right through there. Take the first right and then turn left. Her room will be at the end of the hall.”

“Thank you,” Ian says as he leads the way.

I'm right behind him, wondering where this sudden confidence came from. This is a good thing, right?

We follow the signs to room five. There's no door, but a privacy curtain is drawn. I hold the curtain aside so Ian can enter.

Rhonda is lying on a wheeled bed, a white blanket covering her up to her waist. Her left arm is hooked up to an IV. Her right arm has been splinted, and I imagine it's probably broken. A machine beside the bed is reading out all kinds of numbers on a screen—pulse, blood pressure, oxygen saturation. I quickly scan the readings. At least her vitals appear stable.

Ian stops in his tracks and stares at the battered woman lying on the bed. He takes a quick step back, and I catch his shoulders to steady him.

This is the first time he's seen her, and unfortunately she looks like she's in bad shape at the moment. There is a blood-stained bandage wrapped around her head, covering her forehead. Both of her eyes are bruised. Her top lip is split open and swollen. It looks like her nose might be broken—it's so swollen it's hard to tell.

Her eyes are closed, and it doesn't seem she's aware of our presence.

“Look at her,” Ian says, his voice so quiet I can barely hear him over the beeping of the machine.

I squeeze his shoulders. “This is my fault, Ian. I antagonized Sharp, and Rhonda walked into a landmine.” Damn it. I should have warned her not to return to her apartment until she was sure he was gone.

Ian turns to face me. “It's not your fault.”

“Ian?” Rhonda's voice is barely audible. When he turns to face her, tears are streaming down her cheeks, and her eyes are wide in disbelief. “Is that you?”

When Ian leans back against me, I slip one arm around his waist. He just stares at her.

“Rhonda, I’m sorry,” I say. “I should have warned you—”

“It’s not your fault, Tyler,” she says. “He was gone when I got home. I thought it was safe, but he came back later. Like an idiot, I didn’t set the chain lock. And he still had a key.”

Ian pulls away, and I release him as he takes a step forward. Then another one. “Is it really you?”

Rhonda nods. “Yes, honey. It’s me.” Her face crumples. “Your mom—or at least I used to be.” She shakes her head as she studies him. “I can’t believe you’re a grown man now.”

Ian stares at her, frozen.

I turn him to face me, and I’m not surprised to see his eyes are filled with tears. “Are you okay? We can leave—”

“No.” He turns back to Rhonda and takes a few steps closer until he’s at her bedside. “Why did you do it? Why did you lock me up, in a dark room, for hours on end?”

Her eyes are so bleak, she looks broken, not just physically but emotionally as well. “I did it to protect you, honey. I was afraid they’d hurt you—the men. Some of them would have tried if they’d known you were there.”

When Ian stumbles, I catch him and lower him into a chair. Mother and son, they’re both lost. They’re both broken-hearted.

I crouch down in front of Ian and take his hands in mine. They’re shaking.

“Did you hear that?” he asks.

“Yes, I did.”

“She was trying to protect me.” His voice is so hopeful, as if he’s desperate for that to be true. Desperate for an explanation that makes sense.

“I know.”

And then the dam breaks, and he falls into my arms, sobbing, as years of pain and suffering rise up and pour out of him.

* * *

The ER doctor, a petite black woman, and I speak in hushed tones outside Rhonda’s room. According to the officers who escorted her here, Gary Sharp beat her with a baseball bat. She has a possible head injury, a broken nose, and a broken right arm. There’s a lot of bruising as well.

“She’s lucky to be alive,” the doctor says. “According to the police report, a neighbor heard the commotion and called 911. Otherwise, if he’d kept it up, he probably would have killed her.”

I glance into the room at Ian, who’s still sitting in the chair, staring straight ahead at a wall, deep in thought. My guess is he’s reliving old memories, perhaps seeing them in a new light. Maybe his mother wasn’t the monster he always thought she was.

Rhonda is staring at her son like she’s desperately trying to memorize the sight of him. Like she’s afraid this is her one and only chance—that she’ll never get to see him again.

“We’re sending her to Imaging for an X-ray of her arm and an MRI of her head. She’ll be tied up in testing for a few hours.” The doctor glances at Ian. “Is he okay?”

“He’s her son,” I say. “This is the first time they’ve seen each other in twenty years.”

“Yikes.” The doctor nods. “It might be best if he comes back tomorrow. She’ll be more clearheaded then, better able to talk to him. Certainly in less pain.”

A hospital staff member steps into the room and prepares to move Rhonda’s bed. Ian doesn’t put up any resistance when I lead him out of the ER, out into the parking lot.

I walk him to the front passenger seat and open his door. “Let’s go home.”

“Do you think she’ll be okay?”

“She’ll be fine. If you want to see her again, we’ll come back.”

Ian is quiet on the drive home, lost in his thoughts. I imagine he can’t get the memory of Rhonda’s battered face and body out of his head.

When we arrive home, we find Layla and Jason sitting on the sofa in the living room, each holding a sleeping infant. Empty baby bottles and burp cloths are lying on the coffee table.

“How’d they do?” Ian asks his sister as he peers down at Lizzie, who is sleeping soundly in Layla’s arms.

“Fine,” she says. “They got hungry about half an hour after you left. We fed them, and then they fell asleep again. We’ve been staring at them ever since.”

“How’d it go with Ian’s mom?” Jason asks.

“She’s pretty banged up,” I say. “She has a broken arm, nose, and a possible head injury, but it sounds like she’s going to be okay.”

“How do you feel?” Layla asks her brother.

Ian sighs, as if he doesn’t know where to begin.

I reach down and take Lizzie from Layla. “Why don’t you come upstairs with me?” I ask Jason. I think it would do Ian good to have some time alone with his sister. “Help me put the babies to bed.”

Jason stands, shifting his hold on Will. “Sure.” He follows me into the hall and toward the stairs.

“I thought we’d give them some time to talk,” I say.

Jason nods. “Layla’s been worried sick about Ian since she found out about the blackmail note.”

We take our time changing the babies’ diapers and putting them in bed. By the time we return to the living room, the siblings are seated side by side on the sofa, their arms around each other. Layla’s eyes are red and damp, as are Ian’s.

After Jason and Layla head home, I take Ian by the hand and lead him upstairs to our bathroom. I turn on the water in the shower stall, and while the water heats up, Ian strips, numbly going through the motions as he drops his clothes on the floor.

I know Ian. I know what he needs right now.

I join him in the shower to quickly wash myself, then I step out to let him finish up. While he’s doing that, I pull on a pair of sweatpants, towel dry my hair, and then head

up to the rooftop greenhouse—Ian's safe place. It's dark out now, and a few stars are visible. Because of all the lights, living in a city doesn't allow for much stargazing, but it's the feeling of openness that he craves—lying under the expansive sky is the antithesis of being locked inside a small room.

I tidy up the room, turn down the bedding, and switch on the baby monitor so we'll be able to hear if the babies need us. Just as I finish lighting the half-dozen candles scattered around the room, I notice Ian standing in the doorway. Like me, he's dressed only in a pair of sweatpants. His chest is bare, as are his feet. His hair is slightly damp after towel-drying it and finger combing his curls.

When I hold out my hand, he comes right to me and places his hand in mine. We're about the same height, so he stares directly into my eyes, communicating without words what he needs from me.

But there's no need for him to tell me, because I already know.

His hands slide down to the waistband of my sweats, and he slowly pushes them down, freeing my erection. Then he drops to his knees on the thick rug underneath our feet. He grips the back of my thighs and leans in to lick the length of my cock, from the base to the tip, slowing to swirl his tongue over the tip.

Ian's groan is not nearly as loud as mine. My husband has a wicked tongue, and he knows how to use it. I reach down to grasp his head, my fingers sliding into his thick curls. I try not to direct him, but it's hard not to. Besides, I don't need to. He knows what he's doing. He knows how to ratchet up my desire and drive me crazy until I'm desperate to come, and then he'll back off, edging me, making me suffer a while.

I'm not really sure which one of us is in charge here. On the surface, it's me because he's naturally submissive, and he loves my physical strength, but the truth is, if he crooks his finger, I come running. I never experienced sexual satisfaction before

being with Ian. After years of failed relationships with women, it turns out I was looking in the wrong place the whole time. When we met, Ian pulled me kicking and screaming out of the closet, and now he owns me body and soul.

As Ian draws my cock deep into his hot, wet mouth, I see stars. He grips my thighs, his fingers digging into my muscles.

Groaning, I tighten my hold on his head as I begin to move, thrusting slow and deep. Every nerve in my body fires, and my pulse pounds. My erection throbs, and my balls tighten. Heat streaks up my spine. When I'm close—so close—I withdraw from his mouth, reach down, and pull him to his feet. I kiss him then, devouring his mouth with mine and relishing the sound of his whimpers and groans. Our erections collide, both of us hard and aching. He's as ready and needy as I am.

I guide him onto the bed and follow him down until our bodies are stretched out side by side. Ian takes a moment to gaze up at the glass ceiling, at the night sky and a sprinkling of stars. I roll toward him and turn his face to mine. We kiss, long, languid deep kisses, our tongues stroking. I wrap my fingers around his thick erection, and he cries out his pleasure at my touch. I squeeze him and then start stroking. I capture his precum and spread it over the crown of his cock.

I rub myself against him, our erections hot and hard, pressing close, pressing hard. I grasp the back of his head and hold him still for a kiss. Our lips cling, our tongues tease and stroke, our harsh breaths mingle.

Blindly, I reach over to open the top drawer of the bedside table and pull out a bottle of lube. With a sigh, Ian rolls to his belly and spreads his legs. I lube myself, then him, before settling myself between his thighs, opening him up, teasing him, getting him ready for me. And when I finally guide myself into him, he lets out a long breath. Slowly, gently, I sink in, deeper and deeper until my body covers his, pressing him into the mattress. He whimpers, a sound half submission and half discomfort as his

body adjusts to mine. Soon those whimpers turn to ones of pleasure.

I start to move, slowly at first, letting him adjust to me. He fists the sheet, his whimpers turning into moans. This is what he likes, for me to cover him with my body, pinning him down, making him feel completely enveloped and protected as I rock into him. I reach for his hands, linking our fingers, and pin his to the mattress. In this position, I can kiss his neck, behind his ear, or capture his mouth. He pants and moans beneath me and shivers beneath my touch. He groans and whimpers and shudders as I thrust, gently at first, and then harder and harder.

His body is so hot and tight and slick, I have to grit my teeth to keep from coming too soon. I slow my movements, gliding smoothly in and out. Ian's breathing is heavy and fast, and his voice cracks as he cries out my name, begging and pleading, the words nearly incomprehensible.

After my orgasm shoots through me, I release his hands and roll us to our sides so I can reach around him and wrap my fingers around his erection. Still buried deep inside him, rocking slowly, I wrap my slick fingers tightly around him and stroke him firmly.

"God, Tyler, please," he moans, his voice hoarse, the words desperate. "Oh, God, yes!" He bucks his hips uncontrollably, which only forces me deeper inside him. "Tyler!"

He's so close. I press my lips to the back of his head and mutter, "Come for me, baby. That's it. Come for me."

With a shuddering cry, he comes, hot spunk coating my fist. His body shakes and his back bows as he empties himself.

When I finally pull out, he turns to me, and we share soulful, aching kisses. "God, I

love you,” I say against his trembling lips.

“Love you, too,” he gasps.

We roll to our backs, and Ian rests his head on my shoulder so he can gaze up through the glass roof at the inky night sky.

“Do you think she was telling the truth?” Ian asks.

“Who? Rhonda?”

“Yeah. When she said she locked me in my room to protect me from her tricks.”

I kiss his forehead. “I do. There are a lot of sick fucks in the world who would love to get their hands on a little boy.”

He shudders. “I guess that sort of changes things, doesn’t it? I always assumed she just wanted me out of the way, that I was a hindrance. Or that she couldn’t be bothered with me. Ruth will always be my mom,” Ian says, as if he’s thinking aloud, trying to process everything. “Nothing will ever change that. Ruth and Martin saved my life. I owe them everything . But maybe I could get to know Rhonda better. I suppose we could be acquaintances, or maybe even friends one day.”

“So, you want to see her again?”

“Yeah. I want to make sure she’s okay, that she doesn’t need anything. The least I can do is help her out financially. I owe her that much.” He presses a kiss to the edge of my jaw, then chuckles. “I’m a sticky mess.”

“Me, too. Let’s clean off and hit the hay.”

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The next morning, Ingrid opens her front door and waves us inside. We're each carrying a car seat holding a sleeping infant. Tyler's mom gazes down at the babies with a beaming smile on her face. "And how are my two littlest angels?"

"Doing well," I say as I carry both car seats down the hall to the back of the house, where the kitchen and sitting room are located.

Ingrid's cottage is small, but so cozy. Besides the kitchen and sitting room, she has two bedrooms, two bathrooms, and a lovely back patio. She lives in the private, gated McIntyre family community—the McIntyre Compound, as Lia affectionately refers to it—across the street from Tyler's sister, Beth. Lia and her hottie rockstar husband, Jonah Locke, live next door to Ingrid.

"I'll bring in the diaper bags," Tyler says as he heads back out the door to our vehicle.

Ingrid and I transfer the sleeping babies into a pair of bassinets in her sitting room. Once they're tucked into their little beds, she pulls me into her arms for a mama bear hug.

Since the moment I met her, Ingrid Jamison has been one of my biggest champions. We bonded over baking Tyler's favorite chocolate chip cookies. She's like my second mom and a BFF all rolled into one. I swear she loves me like I'm one of her kids.

Ingrid's tall for a woman—about five-eight—and slender. Her blonde hair is long and straight, her complexion pale like cream, and her eyes a lovely sky blue. Tyler's

much younger sister, Beth, takes after their mom, favoring her Swedish ancestry. Tyler is dark haired with a swarthy complexion, like his father had.

Ingrid knows my painful history with my birth mom, about the abuse and the neglect. She knows all about Rhonda's drug addiction at the time, about the prostitution and her eventual imprisonment.

She goes up on her toes to kiss my cheek. "Tyler told me about the attack on your birth mother. I hope she'll recover quickly. Are you okay?"

"I'm all right," I say. "It's a lot to process. She said she did it to protect me—from the men. I should be grateful, right?" I'm finding it difficult to speak around the painful lump in my throat. I don't know if I'll ever be able to talk about my past without feeling the corresponding pain that comes with those memories.

Ingrid tucks a strand of my hair behind my ear. "A mother will do anything to protect her child from harm, sweetheart. Even lock him away."

"We're going back to the hospital to see her again. I want to make sure she's okay and that she has everything she needs. I can do that much for her at least." I feel tears pricking the backs of my eyes.

Ingrid lays her slender hand against my chest, right over my heart. "There's an infinite amount of space for love in here, darling. And you can't have too many moms. If you find yourself wanting to love Rhonda one day, that's perfectly fine. Or not. It will always be your choice. And no one will judge you for your decision."

Tyler walks into the sitting room with a diaper bag slung over each shoulder. He sets them on the sofa. "Everything's in here, Mom. Diapers, more clothes if you need them, burp cloths, bottles, formula." He studies his mother. "You sure this is okay?"

Ingrid laughs. “Honey, I’m perfectly capable of taking care of two babies. I raised two of them myself, you know, not to mention I babysit your sister’s kids all the time.”

At the mention Tyler’s sister, the front door opens, as if right on cue.

“Hello!” Beth calls as she comes down the hallway. She’s a much younger carbon copy of their mother, tall, slender, with straight, long blonde hair and blue-green eyes. “I saw the Porsche pull in,” she says, “so I had to come see the babies. By the way, Shane sends his love. He’s at home with our kids.”

Beth greets her big brother, throwing her arms around his neck and going up on her toes to kiss his cheek. Then she does the same with me, and I wrap my arms around her, squeezing her until she laughs.

She pulls free and asks, “Now, where are they?” as she crosses the room and zeroes in on the bassinets. She bends down to get a good look at first one and then the other.

Lizzie is awake now and mewling like a kitten.

“Come to Auntie Beth, sweetheart,” she says as she scoops her namesake into her arms and kisses her forehead. “Hello, little sweet pea.”

“Babe?” Tyler asks, his gaze locked on me. “Are you ready to go?”

When he holds his hand out to me, I take it. “Yes. Let’s do this.”

Tyler’s phone rings then, and he checks the screen. “It’s your mom.” He accepts the call. “Ruth, you’re on speaker. Ian’s here with me. We’re at Ingrid’s.”

“Hi, honey,” Ruth says.

“Hi, Mom,” I say.

“I’m just calling with an update,” she says. “The police picked up Gary Sharp. He’s being charged with aggravated assault with a deadly weapon and attempted murder. He’s being held in the Cook County jail. His arraignment is scheduled for Wednesday at 9 AM. I just wanted you both to know.”

“Thanks, Mom,” I say. “We’re on our way to the hospital now to see Rhonda.”

There’s a pause on the phone line, and I imagine my mom’s having a bit of difficulty processing the news that Rhonda is suddenly in my life again, at least for the moment. I’m not ready to even think about the future. “Mom?”

“Yes, I’m here, honey.”

“Are you okay with this? With me seeing Rhonda?”

“Of course I am, sweetheart,” she says, sounding far chipper than she did a moment ago. “You know I support whatever you want to do.”

* * *

When we arrive at the hospital, we stop at the information desk to check on Rhonda’s status. She’s been moved out of the emergency room and admitted to the hospital. That’s encouraging. It means her condition is stable now. The woman at the reception desk gives us her room number. She’s on the fifth floor.

After stopping twice to ask for directions, we eventually find our way to her room. Her door is partially open, and we can hear voices coming from within.

A nurse steps out. “You can go in. She’s awake.”

I step into her room, Tyler right behind me. Rhonda’s lying in bed, her head propped up. The room is quiet and the lights are off, but the blinds on the windows are up, letting in some natural light.

She turns to us and smiles. “Ian!” She sounds almost surprised to see me. “And Tyler. I’m so glad you came.”

I sit in the chair beside her bed, and Tyler goes to stand by the window.

“How are you feeling?” I ask.

“I’ve been better,” she says. “But it’s not too bad. They operated on my arm last night and put pins in my elbow.” She lifts her arm, which is now encased in a bright green fiberglass cast. “Maybe you can sign it before you leave.”

“Sure.” I glance over at Tyler, who’s pretending to look at the view outside the window. He’s giving us space. “I wanted to make sure you’re all right.”

Rhonda blinks back tears. “I’m doing okay. I honestly didn’t know if I’d see you again. I mean—after everything that’s happened—I wouldn’t blame you if you didn’t want anything to do with me. I made a lot of mistakes with you. Some mom I am, right?”

My throat tightens as I think about everything I want to say. I want to be open and honest with her, and I don’t want her to get the wrong idea and think everything is fine between us. But I also don’t want to hurt her. “You should know that Ruth Alexander will always be my mom.”

Rhonda nods. “I understand, and I don’t blame you, Ian, honestly.”

I nod, too, glad to see we're on the same page. "She saved me, you know. My dad, too."

Rhonda continues to nod. "They sound like wonderful people."

"We can be friends, though," I add, hating the look of resignation on her face. Her eyes—so much like my own—radiate sadness.

She smiles. "I'd like that."

"And you won't have to worry about anything—medical bills, rent, groceries. I'll help you out. I'm... kind of wealthy."

"I know you are. I've followed you in the news over the years. I remember when you made a huge endowment to that Chicago arts organization. And when you donated a new recreation building to the children's club. I was so proud of you. I knew then that you had a good heart, that you'd grown into a fine young man."

"I can't take credit for the money. I inherited it from my grandfather."

"Still," she says, "you've done so much good with it."

I shrug, uncomfortable with the praise when I feel I don't deserve it. "I just wanted you to know you don't have to worry about money."

Rhonda swallows hard. "Thank you." Her tears overflow, streaming down her cheeks. "I always loved you, Ian. I want you to know that. And I'm so sorry for what you went through as a little kid. I swear, I did what I thought was best. I just wanted to protect you."

I hand her a tissue, and she gingerly dabs her wet cheeks. I don't even realize I've got

tears on my own cheeks until I feel Tyler's comforting hands on my shoulders.

Rhonda smiles up at Tyler. "Ian's lucky to have you in his life."

"Actually, I'm the lucky one," Tyler says.

When he moves in closer and cups the back of my neck, I instantly relax.

Rhonda smiles as she notices the exchange between us. "Tell me about your babies."

I pull out my phone and show her some photos. "These were taken in the hospital, right before we took them home."

"I'm curious," she says. "Can I ask about the mother?"

"We used a surrogate," Tyler says. "A wonderful woman here in Chicago who helped us become fathers."

"They're beautiful," Rhonda glances up at Tyler. "They look like you —their hair and coloring."

"Tyler is their biological father," I say proudly as I reach up to squeeze his hand resting on my shoulder.

"Ian insisted," Tyler says. "I wouldn't have cared either way."

Rhonda's fighting a huge grin. "I can't believe I'm a grandma. I hope I can meet them one day. I mean, if you're both okay with that. No pressure." When she shifts her position in bed, she winces.

We talk for a while, just chatting in general. I ask her about her job at the diner. She

asks about my adopted family.

A hospital staff member brings a lunch tray into her room and sets it on the bedside table.

Tyler pats my back. “We should go, babe, and let Rhonda eat and get some rest.”

As I stand, Rhonda reaches for my hand. I grasp hers, and she squeezes mine. “Thanks for coming, honey.”

I squeeze back. “It was my pleasure.”

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When we leave Rhonda's hospital room, I ask Ian to wait in the hall for a moment. I step back into her room, close the door behind me, and approach the bed. I keep my voice low, not wanting Ian to overhear what I have to say, as I level my best don't-fuck-with-me gaze on her. "Rhonda, I'm all for redemption and second chances, but if you hurt him, you will answer to me . Is that clear?"

Her eyes widen slightly, but she surprises me with a small smile. "I meant it when I said Ian was lucky to have you in his life. He has his own personal guard dog."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

Her smile widens. "Good. Because that's how it was meant."

I rejoin Ian out in the hallway.

"Everything okay?" he asks as he peers around me and through the open doorway at his mother. "Is she okay?"

"I think she's going to be just fine."

Once we're back in the car, I call my mom to check on the babies.

"They're fantastic," she says over the speaker phone. I can hear the joy in her voice. "They just had their bottles and diaper changes, and now they're both sleeping. Beth and I are just staring at them in awe."

"Do you mind keeping them a little while longer?"

“Of course not, sweetheart. Take your time.”

“Thanks. I’d like to take Ian out for lunch.” I glance over at him to confirm he’s on board with the idea. Okay? I mouth to him.

Nodding, Ian lays his hand on my thigh, and I link my fingers with his. He smiles at me like I just performed a miracle.

“Where would you like to go?” I ask him after I end the call.

He grins. “Can we go to the fondu place?”

I groan, as he knew I would. “Do we have to?”

“Just think about it—food dipped in melted cheese. Strawberries dipped in chocolate. What could be more divine?”

“Steak and a baked potato.”

He hits me with his puppy dog eyes. “Please? We haven’t had fondu in a while.”

“Fine.” I squeeze his hand. “We’ll go to the fondu place.”

“Yes!” I think he just mentally did a fist pump in the air.

I shake my head as I pull into traffic. “You are so easy to please.”

* * *

Lunch at the fondu place is actually not bad. Ian’s delighted with his charcuterie board featuring a variety of cut-up breads and veggies with a variety of sauces for

dipping. I go for the meat lover's option, which includes a few different cuts of beef, pork, chicken, and potatoes. We each have a glass of wine. Or rather two, in Ian's case, as he's not driving.

For dessert we share an assortment of cut-up fruit and cake to dip into melted chocolate. Ian dunks a bright red strawberry into the chocolate and feeds it to me. Of course I return the favor because I know it'll make him happy.

After our meal, we head back to my mom's house. Mom and Beth are seated on the sofa, each one cuddling a baby.

"Did you have a good visit with Rhonda?" Mom asks.

"Yes," Ian says. "She seems to be doing well, all things considered."

We visit for a while longer with my family. Then we pack up the babies and take them home. After I help Ian get them into the house and settled, I head across the driveway to the office to check on things there.

I find Kimi sitting at her desk, laughing as she scrolls through one of the social media apps. "Kittens lip-syncing," she explains as she shows me her phone screen. "At least there's one good thing about AI."

"Let me know when AI can wash my car." And then I proceed to update her on Gary Sharp's status.

"Good," she says. "I'm glad he's behind bars—the prick. Hey, we had two new client inquiries this morning. Are you interested in taking on some new cases?"

"Sure. Forward the information to my e-mail, and I'll read through them."

Kimi salutes me as I walk past her desk. “Will do, boss. How’s Ian?”

“He’s holding up well.”

I’m sitting at my desk going through my e-mail inbox, checking out potential new client inquiries. One woman wants me to get proof her husband is cheating on her so she can take him to the bank. A man thinks his wife is cheating on him with her yoga instructor.

My phone chimes with an incoming text message from Ian.

Ian: I’m taking the babies outside for a walk.

Me: Don’t go far. I’ll join you shortly.

I read through a few more e-mails and spend a few minutes cleaning out my junk folder. It seems I get far more spam e-mails than legitimate ones.

I reply to the proposed new clients and suggest we schedule initial phone calls to start. I’m happy to take on new cases, but right now, I mostly want to stick close to home until this incident with Gary Sharp is settled.

Even though Sharp is behind bars, and I don’t believe Rhonda is a threat to Ian, I still have an uneasy feeling. I can’t pinpoint exactly why, and that bothers me, but I feel like there are loose ends that still need to be tied up.

After two decades as a homicide detective, I’ve learned to listen to my intuition.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:47 am

I've pushed the babies up and down the driveway a couple of times now, keeping one eye on the door to the carriage house as I watch for Tyler to come out. He said he'd join us as soon as he could.

On another pass down to the bottom of the drive, I pause and glance back to see if he's coming yet. Unfortunately, no. I'd like to walk down the street to the Lake Michigan walking path, but not without Tyler.

While I'm down here near the street, I check our mailbox. There are several pieces of mail here, all junk. I grab the envelopes and glance through them—junk mail, junk mail, junk mail, water bill, junk mail. When I glance at the last piece in the stack, my heart stutters. The envelope is addressed to me, but there's no postage mark. The weird thing is, it's not in the same dark heavy handwriting as before. It's written in blue ink in tiny capital letters.

Gary didn't write this.

Someone else did.

But who? The only other person who knows my history is Rhonda, and she's not involved. Besides, she's in the hospital. She couldn't have done this.

I glance around, scanning both sides of the street, but I don't see anyone lurking. I put the rest of the mail into a pocket on the stroller and open the hand-addressed envelope. Inside is another handwritten note.

Ian,

If you think this is over, you're wrong.

Dead wrong.

A wave of dizziness washes over me, and I grip the stroller handle hard. This doesn't make any sense. Rhonda's in the hospital. Gary Sharp is in jail. Neither of them could have left this letter here in our mailbox.

My skin is crawling, and I can't shake the feeling that someone is watching me. I scan the sidewalk in front of our house, looking for someone who shouldn't be here. I glance at the few parked cars on both sides of the street, but I don't see any that are unfamiliar. There is a white work van I don't recognize parked a block away, but I can't see through its heavily-tinted windows.

As I pull out my phone to call Tyler, I hear a sound behind me. A footstep, the scuff of a shoe on the sidewalk. I turn to face a man wearing ragged blue jeans and a black hoodie. His thinning blond hair is pulled back in a ponytail. There are shadows beneath his bloodshot eyes, and his narrow face is gaunt.

"You fucked up everything!" His voice is low and grating. "Gary said this would be easy money." He takes a menacing step forward.

As my heart slams into my ribs, I push the stroller behind me and plant myself between this guy and our babies. "Don't you dare come near my kids."

When he keeps coming, I shove him back and watch as he struggles to keep his balance.

He regains his footing and comes at me a second time. "You fucker!"

I grab his wrists and grapple with him. "Tyler!"

I hear Tyler's shout, followed by the sound of his steps hitting the pavement. A moment later, he rushes past me and slams into the man, tackling him to the ground and pinning him in place.

Tyler shoots me a quick glance. "Get inside!"

A moment later, Jerry is racing down the driveway, followed by Kimi.

"Take the babies inside," I tell Kimi as I push the stroller in her direction. There's no way I'm leaving Tyler out here to deal with this alone.

Tyler and the stranger are on the ground, wrestling for control. Even though the blond is thin and wiry, he's strong. They grapple with each other for another minute before Tyler manages to roll on top of the guy, straddling the man's hips. His face is locked in a grimace as he slams his fist into the guy's face, once, twice, a third time.

I don't think the guy is fighting back anymore.

Jerry grabs Tyler's wrist before he can throw another punch. "Stand down, man. He's not going anywhere."

Tyler frisks the unconscious man and finds a switchblade and a wallet. He tosses the knife out of reach and hands the wallet to Jerry.

Jerry flips open the wallet and frowns. "His name's Eric Sharp."

"Sharp?" I say. "Oh, my God, he must be related to Gary."

"Probably his brother," Jerry says.

Tyler flips Eric onto his belly and pins him down with a knee to his lower back. He

pulls out his phone and calls 911. While he's talking to the dispatcher, he glances up at me. "Did he hurt you?"

"No. I'm fine." I'm having trouble catching my breath, and my head is spinning. That's when I remember the note I found in the mailbox. It's lying on the ground where it got trampled when I tried to keep distance between this creep and the babies. I grab the note and hold it up for Tyler to read. "This was in our mailbox."

As Tyler skims the page, his expression darkens. He glances down at the man on the lawn. Eric Sharp is groaning as he starts to wake up.

Tyler scans me from head to toe. "You sure you're okay?"

"I'm okay, really. Just shaken."

The faint wail of police sirens grows louder by the second.

"Why don't you go inside and check on the kids? The cops will be in shortly to get your statement."

I smile at my superhero. "You must be sick of coming to my rescue."

"Never," he says, his gaze boring into mine. "Now, go inside, Ian. Please." He's using his I'm-the-boss-so-do-what-I-say voice, which is a total turn-on.

"Whatever you say, dear," I say as I start walking up the drive to the front door, where Kimi is waiting anxiously.

* * *

Eric Sharp is taken away in an ambulance. The police come inside to take my

statement. Tyler, Jerry, and Kimi give theirs.

After a brief investigation, we learn that Eric is indeed Gary's brother, and that they were both in on the blackmail scheme from the beginning. When the cops go to the hospital to interview Rhonda, she says she didn't even know Gary had a brother.

"Is this finally over now?" I ask Tyler as we're lying in bed that night up in our rooftop sanctuary.

"I think so. I certainly hope so. At least we know Gary Sharp has no more siblings. But until we know for sure, you still stay in the house with protection. And you won't leave the house without me. Is that clear?"

"Yes, dear ," I say as I roll toward him and kiss his cheek. "Whatever you say."

He smacks my bare ass. "Don't get smart with me."

I can't help smiling. "What will happen if I do?"

Tyler grins. "Try it and see." He rolls us so that he's lying on top of me, our erections nestled together. He kisses me, deep and slow, the kind of kisses that go on for ages. His tongue strokes mine, and his fingers pinch and tweak my nipples, making me squirm. His hand slides down between my legs to cup my balls.

"Tyler, please ," I beg.

And then he gives me what I need—his fingers wrapped tightly around my cock. My precum is dripping, easing his grasp. He spits in his palm, then slides his fist down the length of me, from base to tip. He strokes me until I'm half a heartbeat from coming, but then he backs off.

I groan. “Not fair!”

“Patience, baby,” he whispers. “Patience.” And then he’s sliding down the bed to kneel between my open thighs. He grasps the base of my erection and draws the rest of me into his hot, wet mouth. He sucks me in deep, stroking me with his hand and tongue, driving me absolutely wild until I’m a whimpering, panting mess.

When I feel his slick finger slide into my ass, stroking me in just the right place, I see stars. The pleasure is too much, all the stroking and licking and teasing. I cry out, loud and hoarse. A moment later, I’m coming, my spunk pumping into his hot mouth. He swallows every drop as his finger slides in and out of me, drawing out my orgasm.

By the time Tyler rolls me onto my belly and pushes into me, I’m a puddle, all sensation and boneless pleasure.

“You’re mine,” he growls quietly into my ear.

“Yes!” I gasp, struggling to catch my breath.

“Mine to love. Mine to protect. Mine to fuck.”

“God, Tyler! Yes!”

When he comes, filling me with his heat, he collapses on me, driving himself even deeper. He thrusts slowly in and out, marking every inch of me.

There’s no question who I belong to. None at all.

This man owns me.

Two weeks later

I'm not sure this is a good idea, but Ian insists it's something he needs to do. That it's a key part of the closure he needs regarding the trauma of his early childhood. But I'm not convinced he's going to get any closure from looking at photos of his early life. If anything, I'm afraid this might set him back. These photos are physical reminders of what he endured before the state of Illinois terminated Rhonda Mitchell's parental rights—and rightly so. She may be in a much better place now—sober and drug-free, with a stable job and an apartment—but back then, she was wholly unsuitable to be a parent.

And Ian suffered as a result.

Just thinking about what he went through makes my gut clench painfully.

I hear footsteps behind me.

“I'm ready.”

I turn from the front parlor window to face Ian, who's standing in the doorway holding that damn photo album clutched to his chest. I know for a fact he hasn't even cracked the cover yet. He's too afraid.

The babies have just had their evening bottle and baths, and they're down for the night. At least that's the plan. We've learned the hard way that babies don't always stick to the plan. If we're lucky, they'll sleep through the night again. They're almost three months old now, and they're sleeping longer and longer at night, which means

we're finally starting to get more sleep.

Ian's eyes are wide with apprehension.

I honestly don't know if seeing these photos will help him or hurt him. "Babe—"

He heads for the bar, where I have two shots of whiskey already poured for us. "No, really, I think I'm ready." He picks up one of the glasses and knocks back the liquor. He coughs and winces as he sets his empty glass back on the bar.

Yeah, sure, this is a good idea. It's already driving him to drink.

"Tyler, please," he says, as if he can read my mind. "I want to do this."

I attempt to relax my posture because apparently I'm telegraphing my unease. "Okay, fine."

After I knock back my shot of whiskey, I pluck the album from his grasp, take his hand, and lead him across the hall to the living room. I motion for him to sit, and he does. "Okay, we'll try this. But if you—"

"Give it," he says, reaching up and taking the album from me. He pats the sofa cushion next to him, and I sit.

We're sitting close enough that our shoulders brush, our thighs touch. We couldn't get physically closer if we tried. Not unless he sat on my lap.

"You can change your mind anytime," I remind him as I lay my arm along the back of the couch. I brush the back of his neck with my fingertips, and he shivers. "Just close the book and walk away."

“I can’t keep running, Tyler. I need to face this. Maybe my memories are worse than the reality, you know? Maybe they’re overexaggerated. It’s possible.”

I scoff. “I doubt that, babe.” I’ve seen the photos. I’ve studied them with a detective’s eye until they’ve become seared into my brain. There are signs of clear neglect. Ian didn’t overexaggerate anything.

Ian stares down at the photo album lying on his lap. “Still, I need to know.”

And then he cracks the front cover. It’s one of those old-style photo albums, the kind with sticky pages covered with clear plastic sheets. There are multiple color photos stuck on each page, mostly faded Polaroids.

The layout is neat and chronological, starting from Ian’s birth. The first few pages are what you’d expect. He’s a newborn, and there are a lot of shots of him wearing sleepers and onesies, or wrapped up tight in receiving blankets. Pictures of him in one of those little baby bathtubs.

There are several photos of Rhonda holding her new baby, beaming like a proud mom. I wonder who took those pictures. A friend, maybe? A relative? I realize I know nothing about the rest of Ian’s biological family, if there is anyone else. When the state took Ian from Rhonda, weren’t there any other family members who could have taken him in? I’m guessing there must not have been anyone since he ended up in the foster care system.

There’s a photo taken a few months later of Rhonda giving Ian a bottle. She looks tired, her long hair limp and dirty. There are dark shadows beneath her eyes.

The next few pages are also unremarkable—Ian sitting on a blanket on the floor playing with blocks, Ian playing with a stuffed animal. From what little we can see of the apartment, it looks pretty bare bones, furnished with old, mismatched and

threadbare pieces of furniture that look like they've seen better days.

It's not until a few pages later, when Ian has reached an approximate age of three, that there are more noticeable red flags. Ian looks pale, gaunt. There are dark shadows beneath his eyes. The child is skin and bones. Clearly, he's not thriving. I refrain from stating the obvious, but based on the tightness in Ian's expression as he stares at the photos—his pinched lips, his white-knuckled grip on the album—he sees it, too. A shudder ripples through him.

I slowly sweep my thumb back and forth against the back of his neck. I'm here, babe. I'm right here. "You don't have to do this, Ian."

"Yes, I do." His voice shakes. And then he turns the page to see a photo of little Ian sitting on his bed, clutching a Batman doll in his thin little arms, staring at the camera with haunted eyes. Ian gasps. "I wasn't sure if he was real or not," he says in a hushed voice. "I thought maybe I dreamed him up."

He means Batman, of course.

Shortly after Ian and I first got together, he told me that, when he was young, he used to fantasize that someone would come rescue him—Superman or Batman or a cop. Those childhood fantasies took on a whole new meaning for him when we met. Suddenly, he had his very own cop—me—his own superhero. A real-life protector.

Ian tears up as he stares at that photo. He traces his finger over the faded image. "I always wondered what happened to him."

"What, to Batman? It didn't go with you when you left Rhonda?"

"No." He shakes his head. "I never saw it again. I would have remembered if I'd had it at the Alexanders' house." He chuckles tearfully. "If I had, I'm sure I'd still have it

today.”

The rest of the photos are pretty much the same—that of a small, malnourished, sad little boy with dark circles under his green eyes. There are no more pictures of Rhonda in the album. Just Ian. It’s a photographic record of a neglected child. Abruptly, we come to the final page of photos. The album is maybe a quarter full. There are maybe two dozen photos in all. That’s the only record he has of his life before the Alexanders took him in.

In contrast, the Alexanders have an entire bookcase filled with photo albums featuring their two adopted children. I know, because Ruth made me look through them all.

Ian slams the photo album shut. “How could any parent do this to a child?”

I take the album from him and draw him into my arms. I don’t know what else to say. I don’t know how to banish those painful memories.

Just as I feared, seeing these photos has opened up a floodgate in Ian. The words tumble out of him.

“She’d lock me in my room upstairs, for hours and hours, all night long. In the dark. The windows were boarded up, so I couldn’t see outside. There were no lights in my room. It was just dark . I’d cower in the closet with my toys, hungry and thirsty and cold, listening to the awful sounds coming from downstairs. Sounds I didn’t understand. Sometimes I’d hear her screaming. Sometimes she’d be crying. Some of the men would yell.”

When Ian looks at me, the pain in his eyes takes my breath away. “Sometimes I’d hear the doorknob to my room rattling, as if someone was trying to come in. I always thought it was my imagination playing tricks on me, but now I’m not so sure.”

I stand and pull him to his feet. “Come with me.”

He follows obediently as I lead him up two flights of stairs to the spacious rooftop greenhouse—to his happy place. His safe place. While I turn on the baby monitor, he stands gazing up at the night sky, at the stars above, and at the lights coming from the high-rises that make up the city skyline.

I cross over to him and turn his to face me, firmly gripping his jaw. “I’ll never let anyone hurt you again.” It’s a promise, an oath, that I’ve made many times before. And I’ll keep making it as often as he needs to hear it.

Ian swallows hard as he nods. “I know.”

“Because you’re mine, and I protect what’s mine.”

Tears spring into his eyes. “I love you. You accept me for who I am, and you’ve never once tried to change me.”

My eyes narrow. “Change you? Why in the world would I want to change you?”

“Because I’m a hot mess,” he says with a shaky laugh. “I’m emotionally high maintenance. You know I am.”

I cup his face in my hands. “

No, you’re perfect.”

Three months later

Tyler

Ian's sitting cross legged on the living room carpet, one baby propped up on each thigh. They're leaning back against his torso as he reads them a story about baby bunnies. Will keeps trying to make a grab for the book, probably because he wants to chew on it. Lizzie is relaxing, lounging back against Ian, content to sit on her Daddy's lap, her thumb tucked into her perfect little rosebud mouth.

Every single day, I am amazed at Ian's parenting skills. He has an endless supply of patience. It's like he can read their minds—he knows what they need, when they need it. I love watching him with our kids. I love how attentive he is, how gentle. I do my share, too, when I'm home, because I want to be a good father. But it comes naturally to Ian, whereas I constantly feel like I'm second-guessing myself, unsure, afraid of making mistakes.

“There's the mommy bunny,” Ian says as he points to an illustration in the book. “And there are her baby bunnies. One, two, three. The mommy bunny loves her three babies.”

Will makes another failed attempt at the book, and Ian chuckles. “Slow your roll, pal.” He tickles Will to distract him. Once that is successful, he leans down to kiss the top of Lizzie's dark head.

When we hear a knock at the front door, Ian's head snaps up. “She's here.” His spine stiffens.

She being Rhonda. We invited her to come for dinner. Ian wants to know more about his early childhood. He wants to know the why of it all. He also wants her to finally meet her grandchildren.

I rise from the sofa. “I’ll get the door, babe.” As I walk past Ian, I pause to run my fingers through his curls because I find I can’t walk past him without wanting to touch him. I smile when he leans into my touch.

Rhonda’s waiting on the other side of the front door, looking a bit apprehensive as she takes in the two-story brick facade of the townhouse. I’d bet money she’s never stepped foot in The Gold Coast neighborhood before today.

I open the door wide. “Hi, Rhonda. Come in.”

She steps inside and gazes around the foyer, peering into the formal parlor to her right, then to the living room on her left. She’s holding a baby gift bag.

Ian waves from his spot on the living room floor. “We’re in here.”

Rhonda looks at me first, as if waiting for permission to come into our home. I close the door behind her and gesture to the living room. “Please, make yourself at home.”

She gives me a grateful smile before she heads to the open doorway. Two steps into the room, she pauses in her tracks and stares at the sight of Ian holding our twins, her eyes widening. “Oh, my God.” She covers her mouth with her free hand. “They’re so beautiful.”

Ian beams up at her. “I think so.” And then he winks at me. “Just like their Papa.”

Rhonda surprises me when she takes a seat on the rug in front of Ian, facing him, facing the babies. “Hello, sweethearts,” she says to the babies in a soft, cooing voice. Smiling, she tears up. “It’s so nice to meet you. I’m your Grandma Rhonda.”

She sets the gift bag on the floor. “I brought them each a little something.” She reaches into the bag and pulls out two small, floppy stuffed animals—a baby giraffe and a baby elephant.

Will leans forward and reaches for the elephant.

“You want this one, sweetie?” Rhonda asks him as she attempts to hand it to him.

Will makes a valiant effort to grab hold of the toy, but he fumbles it, and it falls to the floor. He lets out a frustrated squawk.

Rhonda picks it up and presses it into his grasp. “Here you go, sweetie.”

Immediately, Will starts chewing on one of the elephant’s ear.

Lizzie sits quietly, just staring at Rhonda.

“And this one is for you,” Rhonda says as she offers Lizzie the floppy giraffe.

Lizzie pushes back closer to Ian.

“Don’t take it personally,” Ian says as he beams down at our daughter. “She’s not nearly as outgoing as her brother.”

“Can I hold her?” Rhonda asks Ian.

He glances briefly at me, and then he says, “Sure.”

Rhonda reaches for Lizzie, transferring her from Ian’s lap to her own. She hands Lizzie the stuffed giraffe. “Hi, sweet girl.”

Lizzie’s eyes widen as she glances over at Ian. She doesn’t cry, but she looks a bit

concerned. I have to bite my lip to keep from smiling. Lizzie is definitely Daddy's girl.

"Aren't you a pretty little girl?" Rhonda asks.

Lizzie glances up at me this time, her dark eyes wide and beseeching. When her bottom lip starts to quiver, I automatically step in, reaching for her and propping her on my hip.

"She's shy," I say to Rhonda, as if I need to justify wanting to hold my own daughter.

Will throws the stuffed elephant on the floor and holds out his arms to Rhonda.

She beams. "Come here, honey." She scoops Will into her arms and deposits him on her lap.

While she's chatting with my son, I glance down at Ian, who's watching Rhonda intently. There's an odd expression on his face—something I'm not used to seeing. Maybe he's wondering how she can be so loving with her grandchildren when she exposed Ian to such an awful environment when he was little.

"I need you to explain," Ian blurts out. Right to the point.

Rhonda's smile falters as she nods. "I know."

Lizzie lays her head on my shoulder and rubs her eyes. "I think it's naptime," I say. I step forward and lean down to scoop Will up with my free arm. "I'll take them upstairs to bed and give you two some time to talk."

After I get the babies changed and in their bassinets, I switch on the baby monitor. When I return to the living room, Rhonda and Ian are seated in the two armchairs in front of the fireplace, clearly deep in conversation.

“Do you want privacy?” I ask Ian.

He shakes his head. “No, stay. Please.” And then, to Rhonda, he carries on the conversation. “You locked me in my bedroom for hours at a time, in the dark! Do you have any idea how scared I was?”

Rhonda pales. “I’m so sorry.”

“Do you have any idea how much that traumatized me? How frightened I was? It still affects my life.” He glances at me. “It affects my relationships. Hell, I’m a grown man, and I can’t stand being in the dark.”

Her eyes tear up. “I’m so sorry, honey.”

“I don’t want an apology ,” Ian says, frustration edging his voice. “I want to understand how and why.”

“All right.” She sighs heavily as she runs her fingers through her hair. It’s a nervous trait Ian shares. “Your father left me right before you were born.”

“Wait, what?” Ian says. “I know nothing about him. Who was he, and why did he leave? Were you married?”

“No, we weren’t married. His name was Carter Lynch. He was about ten years older than me. We weren’t married because—well, he was already married.”

Ian leans back in his seat, his expression dumbfounded.

“He never wanted to be a father,” Rhonda said. “He already had a bunch of kids with his wife. He didn’t want any additional responsibility.”

“I don’t understand,” Ian says. “If he didn’t want a kid, why did you—” He freezes. “

Oh. I was an accident.”

I move to stand behind Ian’s chair so I can rest my hands on his shoulders.

“We got drunk one night and forgot to use a condom, and I ended up pregnant. He may not have wanted you, but I did. I was scared of going it alone, sure, but I wanted you. The problem was, I worked a minimum wage job, and with the cost of rent and utilities and food and daycare, I just didn’t bring in enough to make ends meet.”

“Were you using drugs then?” Ian asks.

She shakes her head. “Honestly, no. That didn’t come until later. When I was pregnant with you, I was totally clean. But not long after you were born, I was desperate for cash, so I started doing tricks to supplement my income. Before long, I was making more at that than I was at my job working at a convenience store, so I quit my job. I stayed home, and that saved me from paying for daycare because I could keep you at home with me. But after a while, what I was doing got to me, and I couldn’t handle the pressure. One of my regulars offered me drugs, and I started using to escape, and before long, I was addicted. It was a vicious cycle. The more I did drugs, the more tricks I had to do to pay for them. It got so bad that my apartment became a revolving door. I would do several tricks a night. Then they started coming during the day, too. It got out of hand, but I needed the money, so what could I do?”

She turns to stare out the window. “Eventually, they started asking about you. Not all of them, of course, but some. They saw your toys on the floor, your pictures on the walls, the high chair in the kitchen. They realized I had a little boy. Some of them were curious at first. When a couple of them started showing interest in you—suggesting that they could—” She shudders. “That’s when I started locking you in your room whenever a trick was in my apartment. It was to protect you, Ian. I didn’t know what else to do. There was nowhere else for you to go. I had no friends, no family to watch you. I had no one.”

Pretty soon both Ian and Rhonda are in tears and on their feet, hugging, crying together. I'm glad. I want Ian to find resolution with his birth mom. And while I'm inclined to believe Rhonda's take on things, part of me will always be a bit reserved where she's concerned. She could hurt him again so easily, it scares me. And I swear to God, if she does, I'll make sure she regrets it.

After Rhonda leaves, Ian and I head upstairs to our bedroom, where hungry babies are starting to stir. Ian lies on our bed with the babies while I go downstairs to make up bottles. We end up feeding them in our bed, both of us propped against the headboard, each holding a baby.

After they're done eating and have burped, we lay Will and Lizzie side by side on the mattress between us and watch them interact with each other. They roll to face each other and reach out to hold hands. They sound like they're having an actual conversation, gibbering in a language only they can understand.

"I hope they'll always be close," Ian says as he brushes Lizzie's hair.

I reach for Ian's free hand. "I imagine they will."

Lizzie manages to grab Will's hair and tug hard. Will bursts into tears, which startles Lizzie, who follows suit.

"Let go of your brother's hair, sis," Ian says as he gently extricates Will's hair from her tiny grasp. "That's not nice, sweetie. We don't pull hair." He picks Lizzie up, kisses her plump cheek, and sits her on his lap.

I pick up Will, who's still crying and bounce him in my arms until he stops. He reaches for my nose.

"They're getting so big," Ian says wistfully. "We're going to have to move them to their cribs soon."

The babies' nursery, which is right next door to our bedroom, is decorated and fully furnished with two of everything—matching cribs, dressers, changing tables, rocking chairs—it's just waiting for the little occupants to move in. We've been reluctant to move them out of our bedroom, but Ian's right. The time is coming soon. Once they're able to sit up on their own, the bassinets won't be adequate for safe sleeping.

Lizzie lays her head back against Ian and sticks her thumb in her mouth. She gazes up at me, looking so pensive I wonder what she's thinking.

Later that night, after the babies are sound asleep, Ian falls asleep in my arms, his head on my shoulder. I stroke his back lightly and marvel at the unexpected turns my life has taken. If someone had told a younger me that this was my future, I never would have believed them. I thought I was destined to remain a bachelor forever. And I was okay with that. Until the night I stumbled upon a distraught young man sitting on a boat dock, about to pass out, in shock over the murder of his close friend. That night changed my life, my priorities. My everything.

Suddenly, I had someone who needed me, someone to take care of, to protect.

And now, I have three someones who need me.

* * *

Thank you for reading Episode 2 of Tyler and Ian's series, Daddy Detectives. I love these characters too much to let them go. I hope you enjoyed this second installment. Stay tuned for Episode 3, which is a real doozie. Imagine swoonworthy Tyler on territorial overdrive when a shameless admirer zeroes in on Ian. I'm envisioning these stories as TV episodes, each a short read. I hope you approve. If you haven't read their first three full-length books, I hope you'll check them out, starting with Somebody to Love .