



Mine to Protect

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Description: Ignoring David Black was one of the hardest things to do, but where I come from, family comes first. Now my husband was dead and there was no one else I trusted to protect me or my boys except my ex-best friend. Too bad we didn't know what I needed protection from.

As the owner of Blackguard Security, it was my job to protect the people who hired me. But Kassandra Bennett was once my best friend. The one person I shared everything with. Protecting her and her children wasn't just a job. It was personal. I would do anything to bring her closure about her husband's suicide. Except every answer only brought more questions. Ones that weren't easy to solve.

Can Kassandra and David trust those in their lives or was someone out to stab them in the back?

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CHAPTER ONE

Kassandra

I walked through the front door of my house after a late meeting with a client to find my husband's shoes just inches inside the entryway.

With a frustrated sigh, I kicked them out of the way. It didn't matter how many times I asked him, or how many years we were married, I always walked into the same thing—his shit strewn everywhere while I walked behind him and cleaned it up. He was worse than a toddler.

Today I was tempted to find his ass and kick it.

The client I just met with was indecisive. Normally that wouldn't bother me, but a normal one-hour meeting ended up lasting three hours.

Three fucking hours of wasted time, considering she still didn't make a decision about any of the rooms I was hired to redecorate.

Thankfully, she paid well for my time. Her husband was wealthy and said money was no object. It was a good thing too, since my husband liked to live well outside of our means. I just wished this particular meeting hadn't been today of all days. My feet were killing me and I just wanted to sit down and relax.

I moved through the house and into the kitchen to find both of my sons sitting at the table. Mikey Jr., my almost eighteen-year-old son, had a textbook open and was

feverously writing notes in a notebook, while his younger brother by two years sat across from him. He also had a notebook open, but instead of writing, he was tapping the pencil against the paper.

"Hey, boys. Where's your father?"

Any hope that dinner would be waiting when I got home slipped away as I glanced around the rest of the kitchen.

I don't know why I expected any differently. Michael hadn't cooked once in the nineteen years that we'd been married.

"In his office," Mikey answered without looking up from his homework. "He stomped in the door about an hour ago and headed straight into his office without a word."

Of course he did. Because why would my husband acknowledge his two children? I was a little surprised he didn't demand dinner, or to know when I would be home to cook it. A small favor in the grand scheme of things.

"Why don't you order pizza for dinner tonight? It'll get here faster than it will take me to make something."

I earned two extra hours of work, so we could afford the splurge. If Michael could spend our money on useless shit, then I could take one night off from cooking when all I wanted to do was fall flat on my face in bed.

"Sounds good to me!" Mikey was already pulling his phone out. Neither of the boys ever argued about getting pizza.

"How was your day?" I walked up to Nate and ruffled his slightly curly, dirty-blond

hair.

"Not bad." Nate shrugged but didn't look at me. "I got a C on my math test."

I softened my voice for my next question. "Did you try your best?"

Nate struggled with math. No matter how much he studied, he always froze up when it was time to take the test. His teacher knew he attempted to do well and offered plenty of extra credit projects to counteract the poor test scores, but it still upset Nate to see the grade.

"Yeah, I did."

"Then that's all that matters. I'm proud of you."

"Dad's going to flip his lid. He told me anything lower than a B was unacceptable."

My husband was an asshole.

Scratch that. He was an inconsiderate asshole.

Michael didn't give a shit that his son got test anxiety or that Nate tried so damn hard to please him that the added pressure probably made things worse. My husband didn't care about any of that because all he wanted was the perfect family to parade around his friends.

"I'll deal with your father just as soon as I get out of these work clothes," I promised, kissing the top of his head. "Don't worry about a thing."

Nate would worry anyway. It was who he was, and who his father conditioned him to be.

I asked myself for the hundredth time if I was making the right decision by staying with their father, or if I was the one screwing up my kids' lives. Divorce in my family wasn't an option, I reminded myself as I climbed the stairs to the second floor.

I stepped into the master bedroom and headed straight for my closet. I needed comfy pants and a sweater after the day I had. Screw Michael and his "you need to be guest-ready at every moment of the day" attitude. If someone other than the delivery guy wanted to stop by tonight, they could see me looking less than put together for once in my damn life. I didn't have it in me to care. I would catch shit for it later, but with any luck he would keep himself locked in his office for the rest of the night and I wouldn't have to deal with him.

What kind of marriage did I have that I wished to avoid my husband?

The kind I regretted, unfortunately.

I wish I could blame it on young love and the pressure of my parents, but only half of that was true. I fancied myself in love with Michael in high school, when the truth was I had a crush on his best friend.

His very unavailable best friend.

Michael, David, Madalyn, and I were inseparable. All throughout high school, if you saw one of us, then you found the rest. So when David and Madalyn started dating, it was only natural for Michael and I to start as well. It was fate.

Or so I thought.

But the truth of the matter was I envied my best friend for snatching David up first. He was the perfect gentleman. The man everyone in our class wanted to date. I hated myself for the jealousy I harbored for two people who mattered so much to me.

I should've been happy for them. Instead, I allowed myself to settle into an unhappy relationship. Which led to an unhappy marriage.

My penance, I guess.

With comfy clothes now on my body, and my work clothes in the hamper, I felt marginally better. Not great, but that wouldn't happen until I had a glass of wine and some carbs in my belly. I choked down a measly salad for lunch that did nothing to fill me up. It annoyed me that Michael's little digs about my weight got to me.

I wasn't fat. I knew that. Sure my hips were wider than they had been in high school, but hello, two kids and aging. My boobs were a little saggy, but again, two breastfed kids would do that to a woman. There were just some things that no amount of dieting and exercise could fix. For a woman who was going to be fifty later this year, I thought I looked pretty damn good.

Michael obviously disagreed. Hence the numerous affairs he had outside of our marriage. I should've cared. I should've been outraged that he was cheating on me.

I wasn't though. I was just grateful he no longer expected me to meet his needs. If Michael wanted to spend his free time with some twenty-year-old bimbo, then have at it. I had plenty of toys to satisfy me, though a limited amount of time to use them considering how much I worked.

"Mom, the pizza is here!" Mikey yelled up the stairs. I hadn't realized how much time I spent feeling sorry for myself while getting changed.

Rushing down the stairs, I quickly grabbed my wallet to pay and tip the young delivery driver. I waved him off with a, "Thank you so much!" as Mikey took the steaming hot boxes into the kitchen.

"Your father didn't come out while I was upstairs by chance?"

Both boys shook their heads and I sighed. I was in a no-win situation. Michael would grumble that I bothered him while he was "working," then he would bitch that I ordered pizza for dinner instead of taking the time to actually cook something.

But if I ignored him altogether, I would hear about it later anyway. God forbid the man was responsible enough to come out to eat when I knew for a damn fact he would've heard Mikey scream up to me that the delivery guy was here. His office was no more than ten feet away from the front door.

"Grab some plates. I'm going to go tell your father dinner is ready."

I walked the short distance to the office and knocked on the door before I convinced myself he could fend for himself. No matter how much I hated my husband, I still tried to be a good wife, if for no other reason than Michael couldn't bitch about me to others. He most likely did anyway, but I could confidently say I tried.

When there was no grumble to come in, I knocked again. Louder this time. I waited a full minute and still nothing. I was tempted to walk away, knowing that I tried, but curiosity got the better of me. Michael never ignored a knock on his office door. Even if he was busy on the phone, he would've opened the door just to give me a stern look.

Twisting the knob, I found the door unlocked. With a gentle push, I poked my head through the opening and froze. My brain couldn't quite comprehend what my eyes were seeing.

Michael hung from the ceiling directly in front of his desk. His neck was bent at an unnatural angle as his feet just dangled midair.

My brain finally caught up as I stepped into the room and slammed the door shut behind me.

Fucking Michael!

There was no way I could let my boys see their father like this. I didn't care about Michael; he was the inconsiderate, selfish asshole who opted to take his life while his sons were in the other room.

No, I was worried about Mikey and Nate. They would blame themselves for not checking on him sooner, for not seeking their father out when he came home, even though to do so would've landed them in trouble for disturbing him.

I looked around the room and cursed. Was it bad that I felt nothing about seeing my husband dead other than relief that I wouldn't have to listen to him complain about my state of dress or my lack of a home-cooked meal?

Probably, but I would worry about that later. It could be the topic of my next therapy session.

I walked straight for the desk, and that was where I found the note. I was careful not to touch anything because I've watched a million episodes of Criminal Minds . I knew all about DNA and fingerprints when it came to evidence.

Kassandra,

I made a mistake. I got too greedy. I thought I was smarter than them and could take their money and then return it before they noticed it was missing. I was wrong. They aren't the type of people who forgive easily. Torture is more their style and I could never handle that. I did the only thing I could think of to make it go away. I hope you understand my decision.

Sincerely,

Michael

I crumbled the note and tossed it down on my husband's desk. Screw evidence.

And just who the fuck was the they he kept mentioning?

With one last look at his dead body, I stormed out of his office and went to do what I always did: protect my sons from their father and his shitty decisions.

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CHAPTER TWO

David

I stepped off my private plane and took a deep breath of the cooler air. I missed Boston. Despite it being my primary residence, I had spent the last few months in New Mexico. Ever since I discovered I had a thirty-one-year-old daughter, I wanted to spend every minute with her that I could.

I was met on the tarmac by Boston's team leader, Matthew. Most people referred to his team as my black ops team, but to those on it, it was Cobra. They were fast and struck without warning.

"Thanks for meeting me."

"Anything for you. I'm just glad to see you're back up north."

I was glad to be back as well, even if the reason for my return was a depressing one. I wasn't particularly fond of funerals. Truthfully, who was?

"What's the status of the team?"

Cobra worked mostly by themselves. Matthew was great about keeping me in the loop about their operations, but the day-to-day stuff was worked out amongst themselves.

"The guys are getting antsy. This is the longest we've been stateside in years."

Matthew's team did the majority of their work overseas. They never spent more than a few days at a time in the States, but this time, they were going on nearly two weeks.

"Be on standby to travel to Pennsylvania. I just dropped off one of the Phantom guys to take care of a personal problem and something tells me it won't be the quick visit he's hoping for."

Gage was bailing his high school girlfriend out of jail. He thought I wasn't aware of his history with her before asking me for a lift, but I never hire someone without fully knowing their past. Dani, the ex-girlfriend, had a rough past of her own and there was no way Gage was going to be able to walk away from her.

"You got it. Anything we should know?"

"You're stateside, so please try to keep the messes to a minimum. I prefer to have people owing me favors, not the other way around."

Matthew chuckled. "Fair enough, but I meant about the situation we'll be walking into."

I knew what he meant. There was nothing Cobra couldn't handle, so the need for information was strictly for Matthew to gauge how bored they would be. My request that they don't make a mess was my way of telling him not to get carried away.

"I'll let you know when I have something more concrete to share."

"Works for me. I brought your vehicle, like you asked. Are you headed into headquarters or stopping home first?"

Cobra rarely stepped foot inside the Boston headquarters, but if that was where I chose to go, Matthew would follow me, despite it not being part of his job

description. He was loyal like that.

"Neither. I'm going to get changed. I'm already late for a funeral. No need to follow me. I can handle this one on my own."

I headed straight for the small bathroom inside the hangar. While I could've flown in my suit, I much preferred not to wear it when I was in the cockpit. The damn thing was too stuffy. I got used to either jeans or cargo pants while in New Mexico. It was a drastic change from the three-piece suits I wore while I lived in Boston.

Yes, I was still the boss of the Phantom team, but their headquarters were less rigid than the Boston office. Boston was my main headquarters and people expected to see me in a suit. Phantom didn't care either way.

By the time I changed and emerged from the bathroom, Matthew and whoever picked him up were long gone. I should've at least asked which of his team members it was. My current situation had me floundering a bit to get my bearings in order. It wasn't every day that a person hears their former best friend committed suicide.

I couldn't remember the last time I spoke to Michael. It didn't matter that we lived in the same city all our lives. We were no longer in touch, and that was fine by me. Michael wasn't the same person I knew years ago.

On the drive to the cemetery, I did my best not to think about the phone call I received yesterday.

I had been so surprised by the name on the screen that I almost didn't answer it.

Kassandra Long.

Well, Kassandra Bennett now since she married that prick.

At first I thought it was some cruel joke. But the more I looked into Michael's life, the more I realized everything she told me was true.

Then she asked if I could fly out today. She wanted to speak to me after the funeral. How could I say no? There was a time when I would've done anything for her and maybe that was still true; I did just fly halfway across the country, after all.

The cemetery was one of the most prestigious in Boston. I should know, it was the one my parents planned to be buried in. Only the best for them. Anything less would be sacrilege. Michael was always of the same mindset, even though he didn't have the finances to back it up. It took me years to realize he resented that part of my life. A part I never asked for, nor wanted. Money wasn't important to me like it was to Michael.

Sure, I enjoyed the wealth my grandparents left me but only to help others. It was because of them I could start Blackguard Security and make it the success it was today.

Outside of the company jet I purposely learned to fly, I didn't live extravagantly. The SUV I drove was the same as the rest of the fleet my employees used. My house here in Boston was average sized at best, considering I lived alone. I didn't wear thousand-dollar suits because that was a ridiculous amount to spend on any article of clothing.

The money my company made went right back to those who worked for me. They were the reason I was successful, so it was only fair I paid them in accordance. I had an inheritance. I certainly didn't need to take a dime from the company as well.

I parked my SUV and walked up to where the service was being held. Despite my best efforts, I was late. I despised tardiness but there was nothing I could do, and it wasn't like Michael cared. He was dead and I doubted Cassandra minded. Not after what she told me about his death and certainly not after what I learned from my

research.

Not wanting to disturb anyone, I stood off to the side and looked around at the sea of mourners, all dressed in various degrees of black for a man who didn't deserve it. There was a time in my life when I would've considered him a good friend, but that changed when the man stole my best friend from me.

I glanced to the side where Cassandra stood with her two sons. My best friend since middle school. In high school it was the four of us. Madalyn, Cassandra, Michael, and me. We did everything together. Then I went to the Marines and it all changed. Madalyn disappeared, taking a daughter with her that I didn't know existed, and Michael made sure Cassandra slowly stopped communicating with me.

The letters I once received weekly became few and far between until they ceased to come at all. My visits home, that I once looked forward to because I could see Cassandra, were no longer happy occasions. Suddenly, she was too busy for me.

It wasn't until one specific visit that I managed to corner her at the local grocery store and begged to know what happened to our friendship. I learned that day that she was forced to choose between me and Michael. Of course she chose her husband, and I couldn't even blame her. Like the gentleman I tried so hard to be, I stepped away, and stopped trying to contact her.

I wouldn't know until nearly two decades later the mistake I made.

I left her vulnerable.

I let Michael isolate her.

Just like so many others in her life, I missed the signs. Until it was too late.

Or maybe not. Because today we weren't just burying Michael. We were burying her piece-of-shit husband. She managed to save herself and her two sons, but now it was my turn. After twenty years she called me. She needed my help and I wasn't about to let her down again.

Kassandra and her boys were now mine to protect from the crapshoot her husband left behind. I would make sure his shitty decisions never touched them again.

CHAPTER THREE

Kassandra

A wake was supposed to be a gathering of friends and family to share memories and pay respect for the loss of a loved one.

In my case, it was more like a form of torture.

I let Michael's parents convince me it was a good idea to have it in my home. It was what Michael would've wanted , they said. I should've told them I didn't give a shit what Michael wanted considering he hanged himself barely twenty feet away from where his children sat and did their homework.

But I didn't have it in me to argue. They offered to pay, so it wasn't like I had a good reason to deny them.

Not only did Michael screw his family by leaving me to deal with whatever they problem he had, but there was also the fact that no life insurance policy company was going to pay out when the death certificate said “suicide.”

Even in death, Michael was a pain in my ass.

I glanced around my house at the so-called mourners. Not a single person bothered to check on me or the boys before today. They showed up at the funeral because it made them look good, but after today, I wouldn't hear from them again.

Well, except for one person.

David Black.

I knew the moment he showed up at the funeral. My body responded to him the same way it did back in high school. Butterflies in my stomach would take flight any time he was near and it was like I was drawn to him. I had to force myself during the funeral not to take my eyes off the priest.

It wouldn't have been appropriate to be seeking out another man when my husband wasn't even in the ground yet. Unlike Michael, I had taken my vows seriously.

"Hey, Mom?" Nate's unsure voice pulled me from my musings. "Grandma is looking for you."

I turned to my youngest and plastered a smile on my face. Just like I knew they would, both of my boys blamed themselves for Michael's death, despite me telling them it wasn't their fault. They couldn't understand what they did wrong for their father to no longer want to live.

It was hard to bite my tongue and not badmouth their father. I knew Michael's selfish choice had nothing to do with them. I also knew he didn't even consider how his actions would affect them when he made his decision.

"Where is she?"

"In the kitchen. She had a question about the food."

Of course she did. There was probably something not up to her standard. "Okay. You can head outside if you want."

Nate looked down at his shoes. "Grandma said it's rude to ignore people who came here to offer us their condolences."

Mrs. Bennett could fuck a duck for all I cared. I took a deep breath, pushing down my anger, and smiled. "I'll deal with your grandmother. Go ahead outside and get some fresh air."

My son didn't need to be told twice. He rushed outside like the devil himself was nipping at his heels. It was bad enough that at fifteen years old he had to attend his father's funeral, but to be forced to participate in this sham of a wake was too much. I didn't care what it said about me as a person. Let everyone in the neighborhood talk about me. It wouldn't be the first time.

As soon as I stepped into the kitchen, I knew my day was about to get worse.

"Who in their right mind serves sliders at a wake?" Michael's mother screeched at the poor server unfortunate enough to be holding the tray of food in question.

"I picked it," I interrupted before the server could be forced to speak up. It wasn't her fault Mrs. Bennett and I didn't see eye to eye about how today should go.

I wanted everyone out of my house as soon as possible. A large meal prevented that, but finger foods would get people to leave that much faster.

I nodded for the server to head out and waited until it was just Michael's mother and me in the kitchen alone before I spoke again.

"I picked the food that I felt was best considering I don't want people in my home all afternoon."

"It's my son's funeral . He deserves the best and for people to see he was well loved .

Sliders show that we don't care about his life!"

I threw my hands up in the air. "A man who hangs himself while his children are home doesn't deserve the best! He's lucky I had a funeral at all considering the hell he's putting my children through!"

She waved me off. "Clearly he wasn't thinking straight when he did that. He was a good son, father, and husband. He deserves to be honored in death."

Oh sure, because a good husband cheats on his wife with bimbos on the regular. The only thing Michael didn't do was pay for it. At least not to my knowledge, but considering how much money he went through, anything was possible.

"I am honoring him," I bit out. "I've opened my home for people, but as a grieving widow, I deserve to have some peace. People milling about my home for hours on end won't give me that, so yes, I chose something that would get people moving along faster. Sue me!"

I was done with this conversation. Maybe I would take my own advice and go outside to hide until people left. Spinning around, I stopped suddenly when I realized we had an audience.

"David." His name was nothing more than a whisper on my lips.

"Oh, David . . ." Mrs. Bennett charged past me and pulled David down for a hug. "It's so good to see you. Michael would be so happy you came. He missed spending time with you."

I kept the snort to myself. Michael was the reason neither of us spoke to David anymore. It wasn't allowed. Michael was too busy being jealous of his friend's life to continue a friendship past high school.

"It's good to see you as well, Mrs. Bennett. I'm so sorry for your loss."

How petty did it make me that I was sick of hearing that line? I wished like hell that Michael hadn't killed himself, but was I sorry he was dead? Nope, not even a little bit. Good riddance as far as I was concerned. But I couldn't exactly scream that to every person who showed up to offer condolences today, regardless of how badly I wanted to.

"Thank you, David. You were always such a good friend to my boy."

It was a good thing her back was to me because no amount of restraint kept me from rolling my eyes. Michael's mother was laying it on thick. Probably in hopes that David would tell his parents and keep the Bennetts in their good graces.

The joke was on her. David hated his parents. I doubt that changed over the years. Last I'd heard, he hadn't spoken to them since his time in the Marines.

"Thank you for saying that. If you don't mind, I need to steal Cassandra for a moment."

I didn't miss the surprise on her face before she schooled her features and plastered on a fake smile. "Absolutely. Be sure to tell your parents I said hi."

It was really annoying how predictable this woman was. It was no wonder Michael turned out the way he did.

I excused myself and led David out onto the front porch. I took a deep breath of the fresh air and let it relax me. I don't know if it was the fact that the house was stuffy with so many people in it or if it was seeing the man who'd led every one of my fantasies for the last thirty years that had me tied in knots.

I had a feeling it had more to do with the second than the first.

"I'm sorry . . ."

I held my hand up to stop him. "Please don't tell me how sorry you are for my loss. I'm sick of hearing it. I told you on the phone what happened, so there's no need for the formal bullshit when we both know it's not necessary."

David cleared his throat. "I wasn't going to say that. I know your feelings on this whole thing."

I continued to look out toward the street and crossed my arms over my chest. "Sorry, I'm just over this whole thing . I want everyone to leave so I can try to make sense of my life."

"So kick them out," David said so matter-of-factly that it made me snicker.

"I wish I could. I'm not sure how much of my conversation with Mrs. Bennett you heard, but doing so right now would set her hair on fire. She's already mad at me that I didn't have a four-course meal for the wake."

"Only in this neighborhood would someone think a meal like that is how we should honor the dead."

He wasn't wrong. My house was one of the smaller ones in the neighborhood but only because we couldn't afford the kind Michael really wanted. To live on this street meant we were one of the Boston elite. I didn't care about things like that, but Michael sure did. If my boys hadn't lived here since they were born, I would sell it in a heartbeat.

I tilted my head and looked up through my lashes at David. Time certainly was kind

to him. He was as handsome now as he had been as a teenager. "Thank you for coming."

David shoved both hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels. "I told you I would only ever be a phone call away."

Telling David to stay away was one of the hardest things I've ever had to do. It killed me to know that I was choosing between him and Michael. I so badly wanted it to be him, but circumstances at the time didn't make that an option.

"I know, but that promise was a lifetime ago."

He shook his head. "It doesn't matter. I never break a promise."

I looked down at my heels and wished I'd taken the time to change my shoes when I came home. There was no reason I couldn't have switched to black flats in my own damn home.

I haven't exactly been in the right mind since I found the note.

Speaking of, I pulled my phone from the pocket of my dress. Thank God for modern fashion and putting pockets in dresses these days.

"The police took the original but I remembered to snap a picture. This is why I asked for your help."

I handed David the phone and watched the multitude of emotions flicker across his face. Most of which were the same as the ones I felt when I first read it. I just had to hope David meant it when he said he would be there for me because there was no way I could handle this mess on my own.

CHAPTER FOUR

David

I read the letter once. Twice. Even three times to make sure I didn't miss anything and still I couldn't find the words to describe how badly I wanted to dig Michael up and murder him myself.

How the fuck could a man leave his wife and two underage sons to clean up the mess he made?

"Do the police know who they are?"

Kassandra looked up and shook her head. It killed me to see the stress in her eyes. I could only imagine what had been going through her head when she found the note.

Not to mention Michael dead in his office.

"No, they don't. They asked me a million questions, but I don't have the slightest idea who Michael could've been talking about. We didn't exactly have the best marriage the last few years."

I wondered what not the best meant? And why the hell did she stay in a marriage if it wasn't good?

There were half a dozen questions I wanted to ask but it wasn't the time, nor was it my place to ask, so I kept my mouth shut for the moment. Instead, I stuck to the note.

"Do you mind if my company looks into this? They would need to do a very in-depth search of Michael's life and, due to the marriage, yours as well."

I didn't give a shit about Michael. I would gladly dig up every ounce of dirt I could find on the man, but if there was something Cassandra didn't want my teams to look into, then I needed to know now.

"That's fine. I have nothing to hide, but I'm sure Michael did."

I couldn't keep my mouth shut any longer.

"Why did you stay with him if things were so bad between the two of you?"

Kassandra sighed but she didn't look away nor did she look embarrassed when she answered. "We both know that, in our families, divorce isn't an option, and I would never put my boys through that. Michael and I didn't fight. We would have to talk to each other for that to happen. He did his thing and I did mine. Unfortunately, his thing was sleeping with women half his age and apparently getting into bed with bad people."

Her confession surprised me. The Kassandra I knew as a kid would never tolerate that bullshit.

"He cheated on you?" I couldn't keep the venom out of my tone.

"Is it really considered cheating when I didn't care that it happened? Hell, I practically encouraged it. It meant he left me alone."

I was speechless.

No, wait. That wasn't true. My mouth wasn't done asking questions. "What happened

to the girl who believed in soul mates and happily ever afters?"

Madalyn and Cassandra would always talk about fate and romances like it was the most magical thing in the world. Granted Madalyn ended up leaving me and hiding a pregnancy, so clearly her view on that stuff changed. Maybe Cassandra's did as well.

"Reality happened."

Kassandra turned around and headed back inside without another word. And I let her go. I had to wrap my head around a few things before I could talk to her more, considering nothing was what I thought it was. I walked away when she asked me to because I was convinced Michael was the love of her life and I would never interfere with that. To find out that wasn't the case was fucking with my head. I would never have stayed away so long if I knew she was miserable. I just couldn't understand why she waited so long to confide in me.

Since I wasn't going to get the answer right now, I pulled my phone from my pocket and dialed the one person who would be able to get me the information I needed.

"Well, hello, boss man. What can I do for you this time?"

I rolled my eyes heavenward and prayed for patience. Bree might be the best person to access information but she was a literal pain in my ass. She wouldn't know how to be professional if it slapped her in the face.

Granted I liked her, and she was clearly good at her job, but there were some days a simple hello, request information, and a goodbye would suffice. I would never get that with Bree.

"I need you to find out everything you can on Michael Bennett." I rattled off the information she would need to start the search.

"What exactly am I looking for? Dirty secrets? Espionage? Are you giving me a direction or is this one of those I can do what I want?"

God help me. It was a wonder how Chance dealt with her on a daily basis. The man had the patience of a saint.

"Dig up everything you can find. He hanged himself and left his widow a note about taking money from some shady people. I want to know who these people are and just how deep he was in with them."

"What a dickasaurus. Only a pussy would take the easy way out of life when someone is after them."

My thoughts exactly. Now I know why I kept Bree as an employee. Despite how annoying she was, she wasn't afraid to say it like it was. More people needed to be like that in life.

"So you'll find out what you can?"

"Of course. I'm going to go through his life with a fine-tooth comb. I'll know every damn move he made. Too bad he's already dead and won't know how extensive of a rectal exam I plan to do on him."

That's an image I don't need in my head.

"Thank you. I appreciate it."

"Anything for you, boss man."

Bree ended the call as I shook my head. I really should be used to her nonsense by now. I pushed the conversation with Bree out of my head and dialed another number.

I would be using both teams on this one.

"Calling to check in so soon?" Matthew snickered as a way of answering my call.

"You know me better than that."

I didn't have to check in with Cobra. They did their job with minimal input from me. It was exactly the way we both preferred it.

"So then to what do I owe the honor?"

I suddenly realized how similar Matthew and Bree were. Both could be comedians when they wanted. The difference was, Matthew knew when to be serious. I had yet to see that from Bree.

"After you finish up in Pennsylvania, I need you back here in Boston."

Matthew huffed. "So we'll be stateside for a while longer."

It wasn't a question and I knew how much Matthew and his team were going to hate that. Their assignment in Pennsylvania, and the one I was about to ask them to do in Boston, wasn't the kind of job description they were used to. Babysitting was well below their skill level.

"I have Maddox getting me information and I'm going to need your assistance once she gets it to me. I have a feeling this is going to turn into a shit show."

"Wait, Maddox is a she?"

Cobra only knew Bree by her code name Maddox. It was how Matthew preferred things to be. When I explained that I was starting a similar team to theirs but in New

Mexico, Matthew had only one request: that they rarely worked together, and the few times they were forced to, no personal information was exchanged. I had a feeling that was all about to change but I would leave that up to Matthew to decide.

“Yes, but one of the Phantom guys already snatched her up.”

"Well, isn't that a damn shame? Is there any reason our own technical analyst couldn't get you the information? And why are you pulling us and not one of the other Boston teams?"

This wasn't Matthew being disrespectful. When I started Blackguard Security, Matthew was the first one I called. I liked to think of him as a silent partner, the only person who was privy to the business decisions I made.

Cobra was formed to be as separate from the rest of Blackguard Security as possible. The other Boston teams were all legit. They handled the mundane aspects of the security sector. The private security, the babysitting, the jobs within the United States or foreign countries that followed the letter of the law.

Cobra did none of that. They skirted the line more often than not. They took out threats to the United States without government approval. They prevented wars from being started. If they ever got caught, there would be no one to bail them out. Not legally anyway, but I would never let their asses swing like that.

"It's personal and I need my best on this one. We both know Maddox puts our Boston analysts to shame, and despite how your team feels about being stateside, I need you on this one."

I didn't have the slightest clue what Michael got himself into, but my gut was saying it was bad. Michael's ego was big. For him to take his life meant he had to accept defeat, and for a man like that, it wasn't easy to do.

It didn't mean he wasn't a coward. Michael was one hundred percent a fucking coward for what he did.

"Alright," Matthew sighed. "As soon as we wrap this up, I'll check in with you about where you want us located."

"Thanks. I'll see you soon." I shoved my phone back in my pocket and looked up and down the street. I would give Kassandra some time alone before I bombarded her with the fact that I would be staying close for the foreseeable future. I doubted she was going to like my plan but there was no other choice.

I wasn't leaving her to face this unknown threat alone.

But I couldn't exactly tell her that with a house full of people. So instead, I would use the time to get a lay of the land. To revisit the old neighborhood I hadn't stepped foot in for nearly twenty years.

CHAPTER FIVE

Kassandra

I walked throughout the house and picked up random plates left by those who stopped by to offer their condolences. It disgusted me that these same people showed their faces simply to keep up appearances, but couldn't bother to throw away their trash on the way out. So much for helping a grieving widow.

Not that I wanted these people's help. None of them were true friends. They wouldn't give a shit about the mess Michael left us in, except to gossip about it behind our backs. I could only imagine what they were saying about Michael's suicide. His parents wanted to keep it hidden, but not me. The world needed to know what kind of person he really was. Maybe then they would stop looking at him like he was some hero.

Not likely. They would find some way to blame me.

The thought had me tossing a plate in the trash bag harder than necessary.

"Hey, Mom. Mrs. Archer left a batch of cookies for us."

I watched Nate's nose turn up in disgust, and for the first time in several days, I chuckled. Everyone on the street knew Mrs. Archer couldn't bake to save her life. She was probably one of the few people who meant well by the gesture, but the cookies would likely break a tooth. And if they didn't, I'm sure she mixed up a few ingredients.

"Just put them on the counter for now. I'll get rid of them later after I write her a thank-you note."

Everything about this funeral was draining. Maybe even more so knowing that I needed to figure out this crap about Michael and the money he borrowed. We lived on a tight budget to begin with, so it wasn't like I had a lot of spare cash to hand over. The good thing was I could sell off a lot of Michael's unnecessary purchases to help defer some costs. I would do everything I could to keep my boys in the house they grew up in, even if I hated it. Everything I've ever done was for them.

Mikey stepped into the kitchen and gave me a strange look. "Is there a reason some strange dude is walking around our backyard?" His thumb pointed in the direction of the back door.

I rushed over to the door while simultaneously yelling at them to get upstairs.

"Mom, we aren't leaving you to deal with some stranger on your own." Mikey already had his phone in his hand and was probably calling 911 when I realized who it was.

I let out a deep exhale. "He's no stranger."

Mikey lowered the phone and looked at me. "I've never seen him before today."

Of course they hadn't; I pushed David away long before they were born, and it wasn't like I was allowed to have any pictures from when he and Madalyn were friends with us.

"Your father and I went to high school with him. His name is David Black. He owns a security company."

They didn't know about the note Michael left or the problems that came with it. The

police officer wanted me to talk to them, so they could stay vigilant, but I shot the idea down. Neither Mikey nor Nate needed to know just how much of an asshole their father really was. I would take that secret to the grave with me.

Michael might've been an absentee father who put a lot of pressure on his sons, but they still loved him, and I would protect that at all costs.

"So, why is he still here? Everyone has left."

I should've put more thought into this plan. To be honest I should've had a plan to begin with. Neither of the boys were stupid. They would see straight through any lies I tried to tell. With any luck, I could skirt the truth enough to not actually lie.

"He's an old friend. I asked him to stick around so we could catch up. I'm sure he's just looking around because that's what he does for a living. There's no need to worry."

I don't think Mikey believed me but he didn't question my explanation and I was grateful for that. I didn't have it in me to continue acting like everything was fine. I was barely keeping my shit together.

Thankfully now that everyone was gone, I was able to ditch the heels. I still had my dress on but only because it was actually pretty comfortable. I originally purchased it because the material felt like butter on my skin. I liked to wear it when I met with clients, but now I'm thinking the funeral ruined it for me. I would never be able to wear it again without thinking about how much it reminded me of Michael and the shit he pulled.

"I'm going up to my room to call Brittany."

"Tell her I said hi and it was nice seeing her there today."

Mikey waved me off. Brittany was his high school sweetheart. They were the same age and had been dating now for two years. As much as I cringed at the thought of him following in my footsteps, I knew Brittany wasn't like that. She wasn't from around here. She moved to Boston in ninth grade and her family was solid middle class. I'd spent plenty of time with both her and her parents. They weren't like a lot of other parents in my son's school. They didn't care to impress anyone.

"Mom, is everything okay?"

I didn't like the worry in Nate's eyes.

"Yeah, honey. Why wouldn't it be?"

"You've been upset this week. More than usual. Are things going to be okay?"

I should've known I wouldn't get anything past Nate. He might struggle with test taking but he was wise beyond his years, a quality his father could never see, nor understand.

"Everything's going to be fine. It's an adjustment and a lot to juggle but I can handle it. Haven't I always been able to keep all the balls in the air?"

Nate giggled. "Yeah, Mom. Your second job should be a juggler in a circus. You're very good at it."

It was a joke Nate and I shared. He liked to tease me about how many objects I could juggle. Metaphorically, I could handle a dozen. In real life, I couldn't even toss one ball without dropping it.

"I love you, even if you like to make fun of me." I smiled up at him. Even at fifteen years old he had a good three inches on me.

"I love you too, Mom. I'm going upstairs to study. I missed my math test today but I want to take it tomorrow even though Mrs. Johnson said I could have a few more days."

I smiled at his work ethic. I knew it was because of the way his father pushed him but I was still proud of the man he was becoming.

"I'm proud of you!" I hollered when he was halfway up the steps.

All I got was a wave as a response but it was good enough. I knew he accepted the praise even if it embarrassed him.

I was only alone for a few minutes before a knock on the glass caught my attention. David stood there with the glow of the yard lights at his back.

I took a quick glance at the staircase before walking over to open the door.

"Hey." David waited until I stepped back and waved him in. "I didn't want to interrupt your time with your boys."

His thoughtfulness was just one of the many reasons I kicked my own ass over the years for letting him get away. Even if he never knew how I felt about him, at least I could've had his friendship. Instead, we lost out on so many years because I let Michael dictate my life.

"Thank you for that. Mikey was asking who you were but I haven't told them about the mess their father left us in."

David certainly got better at hiding his expressions since high school. As a teenager it only took one look to know exactly what he was thinking. Right now, I couldn't tell.

"That's good. They don't need to know."

I scoffed and crossed my arms. "The police officer felt differently. He said I should tell them so they know to stay vigilant."

"You can have them stay vigilant without having to tell them about what their father was into. No kid deserves to know those kinds of things."

I instantly felt better at David's reassurance.

"Thank you, I needed to hear that. I was second-guessing my decision. I never claimed to be a perfect mother but I've always put my kids first. The cop made me feel like I was being selfish by keeping it from them."

David nodded. "Any time." Then he cleared his throat. "While people were leaving, I took the time to walk the neighborhood and to check out your property. I'm going to strongly suggest you get a security system installed. I can have a team out here tomorrow morning to set it up."

"I don't think that's necessary."

Translation: I couldn't afford that. I had yet to go through Michael's office, but thankfully I wasn't one of those stupid women who let her husband control things and never knew where the money went. Kudos to the women who could trust their husbands with that task.

I wasn't one of them, despite how many times Michael tried. Call me a control freak, but I needed to know where my hard-earned money went and to ensure our bills were being paid. Michael might've been okay with jeopardizing our kids' lives, but I wasn't.

And based on the note he left, it was clear he had some money trouble.

"It wouldn't cost you anything and it would make me feel better."

I crossed my arms over my chest. This conversation was headed only one way and I needed to put up my defenses.

To prepare for battle.

"I'm not having you pay for a security system for me. That's not why I called you."

It was bad enough I needed his help to find out who Michael owed money to. I didn't want to use more of his company's resources than necessary. And I sure as hell didn't call him to mooch money off of him. The boys and I would survive, even without the life insurance payout.

"I never said it was, but if the people Michael stole money from come looking, don't you want to protect your sons?"

"That was a low blow."

Using my kids wasn't fair, but I understood why he did it. If there was anything that would sway me, it was that.

"I know it is," he conceded, "but it's with the best intention in mind."

I knew that as well. Which was why there was no heat when I blew out a frustrated breath and mumbled, "Fine."

David chuckled. "You don't have to sound so enthusiastic about it."

I wasn't. It looked like going over my finances was suddenly pushed to the top of my to-do list. There was no way I planned to let David pay for the system, but we could fight about it later.

"I don't have to sound happy about it. I just need to do it to protect my boys."

"I'm glad you said that. This should make you accept my next suggestion that much easier. I'm going to be staying with you and the boys here at the house until further notice."

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CHAPTER SIX

David

Kassandra's jaw dropped open and I couldn't fathom why. My suggestion made perfect sense.

"You can't sleep here. How would I explain that to my kids?"

I hadn't thought about that.

It didn't matter though. There was no way I was leaving them in this house alone. Even without Bree's report, my gut was telling me whoever Michael got in bed with, wasn't going to back down anytime soon.

"Tell them I need a place to crash for a couple of days."

It was the first thing that popped into my head but it wasn't the worst suggestion I had.

"You realize that means you'll be sleeping on the couch, right? This is a three-bedroom house and my sons each have their own room."

I shrugged. "I've slept on worse things."

Not exactly a lie. In the Marines there were times a rock was the only pillow I had, but that was twenty years ago. My body was much younger. Now I much preferred

the comfort of a bed.

I was sure Cassandra was going to continue arguing with me on this but she surprised me. With a reluctant sigh, she hollered, "Mikey! Nate! Can you please come down here for a minute?"

They didn't holler back why she wanted them like I thought teenagers might. Granted, what did I know about that age in life? I was deprived of the opportunity of knowing Addison when she was that young.

I pushed the bitterness down. It did me no good to dwell on it. Madalyn wasn't around for me to be angry at and my relationship with Addison was going well. Other than her choice in men, but that was something else I wasn't going to think about.

Mikey and Nate rushed down the stairs with concern in their eyes.

"Everything okay, Mom?"

The one I knew to be Mikey, based on the report I pulled, stepped up to her protectively, putting himself between me and his mother.

Already, I knew I was going to like this kid. I just wondered if he was always this protective or if it came about because his father died. Was he forced to step into the role of man of the house long before this?

"Yeah, sweetheart." Cassandra cupped Mikey's cheek. "I wanted you to meet David Black. Remember I told you he was an old friend of mine and your father's? Well, he's in town for the funeral, so I offered for him to stay with us for a couple of days."

So her son had seen me outside. I thought he may have. I did my best to stay out of sight but it would appear her oldest was more conscious of his surroundings than I

gave him credit for. I would need to keep that in mind for the future.

Mikey peered over at me. His look said it all. He didn't trust me. I just couldn't tell if that meant he planned to argue with his mother, or let it be.

I got my answer seconds later.

"If that's what you want and not something you're being pressured into."

Oh, he was good. Her oldest was no dummy. I would bet my yearly salary that Mikey knew exactly what was going on with his parents. I would even hedge to bet he knew there was more to his father's suicide than Kassandra was saying, but for her benefit he was playing along.

"You don't have to worry about me, sweetheart."

Kassandra had clearly gotten good at evading questions from her kids. It was no wonder Mikey seemed suspicious and appeared to know more than he was letting on. If his mother was constantly having to try and answer without lying, the kids would eventually start to see through that.

I gave them a little space and walked around the house instead. The floor plan wasn't big by any means. The downstairs consisted of a kitchen, living room, bathroom, and what I assumed was Michael's office. The door was closed and locked, but based on the information Kassandra provided on the phone, it made sense that was the room Michael died in. I couldn't fathom why she would continue living in the house after what happened.

There was nothing overly fancy about the place. The home didn't scream money like most of the houses in this neighborhood did. There was artwork on the wall and framed photographs of the family. Unlike the home I grew up in, a person could tell

that the people in this house loved each other. Or at least Cassandra loved her boys. There were very few pictures of them as a family of four. One could assume Cassandra was a single mother based on a majority of what I found.

"I grabbed you a blanket and pillow from the closet." Cassandra hugged the two close to her chest, like a barrier she needed between us.

"Thanks. Did the boys go back upstairs?"

Kassandra glanced over her shoulder to the steps. I had been so focused on the pictures that I hadn't paid attention to what was going on behind me.

"Yeah. Mikey wanted to call his girlfriend back and Nate will probably study some more. He has a math test tomorrow. He hates taking tests. They make him nervous, so he ends up making silly mistakes despite knowing all the material."

One side of my lips turned up in a small smile as I was thrown back to our days in high school.

"Just like his mother."

Kassandra's smile wasn't nearly as bright. Clearly, reminiscing about that time in our lives didn't bring the same joy it brought me. That or the fact that she passed down that particular trait her son didn't sit well with her.

"Unfortunately, yes. His teachers are better about it than mine were, but it still bothers him to see those low scores. He'd exhaust himself with studying, just to make his father proud."

My smile is instantly gone. "Michael wasn't proud of him?"

How could that be? Michael was there just as I was when Cassandra struggled. He knew all about her inability to take tests.

"Michael was . . ." Cassandra paused as if searching for the right word. ". . . difficult?" It sounded more like a question. "He knew Nate struggled just like I did, but I think the need to impress people overshadowed his ability to see Nate's failure as anything other than disappointment. Nate hated to bring home anything below an eighty because it disappointed his father."

It was wrong to speak ill of the dead, so I kept my mouth shut. I already knew Michael was an asshole and so did Cassandra. No point in rehashing it out loud.

"So, a girlfriend, huh?" She mentioned Mikey going upstairs to call her, and I needed a change in subject. "How hard was that pill to swallow?"

Kassandra chuckled. She still had yet to put the pile from her arms down, and I didn't ask her to. If she needed the shield, then I would allow her to have it. Soon she would realize it wasn't needed.

"Hard. I'm not sure how serious it really is but she's a nice girl. Her family doesn't put pressure on her like most do in this area. She's quiet and sweet. Always polite when she comes over and doesn't push Mikey away from the things that are important to him."

"So, she's a mini version of you?"

There was that laugh again.

"I guess you could say that. I never really thought about it."

"I look forward to meeting her, then." Cassandra didn't look happy with my statement

and I realized my error. "Not that I need to," I was quick to add. This was uncharted territory and it felt like I was walking through a field of landmines.

"No, it's just . . ." Cassandra cleared her throat. "Michael was never interested in meeting any of the boys' friends and he took an instant dislike to Mikey's girlfriend. I think because she was so quiet."

Fucking Michael again. He was going to keep popping up, I just knew it.

"Why don't I take those?" I reached for the linens in her hands. "I'm sure you're tired after the day you've had."

"Oh, geez." Cassandra let out a nervous huff. "I completely forgot why I had them in my hands."

I laughed to break up some of the tension in the room. I didn't want her nervous around me but I figured it would take more than a few hours to accomplish that.

Kassandra shoved the pile at me. "I should go say goodnight to my kids and then go to bed myself. Maybe snuggle up with a book or put some trashy TV show on to numb my mind."

Without the blanket in her hands, she was wringing them in front of her. I decided to put her out of her misery. "Goodnight, Cassandra. You don't have to worry, I'm here so you can go get some sleep. You and the boys are safe. I'll see you in the morning."

The relieved exhale she let out was worth the crappy night of sleep I was going to get. "Goodnight, David. If I forget to tell you later, I'm really glad you're here."

Kassandra spun on her heels and rushed out of the room. I watched her go and was stuck rooted in the spot for longer than necessary.

"Get your shit together," I grumbled out loud to myself and turned back to the sofa, AKA my bed for the foreseeable future, despite having my own place not far from here. I let out a sigh and dropped the load of linens on the couch. I needed to grab the bag I stashed outside. Sleeping in a suit wouldn't be comfortable, and now that I'd promised Cassandra I would keep them safe, I wouldn't be leaving the premises.

With a quick glance up the stairs to make sure Cassandra wasn't coming back down, I slipped out the back door and grabbed my small duffel. I had a change of clothes to get me through the night, and then once Cassandra went to work tomorrow, I could stop home to grab more.

I wasn't gone more than a minute, but it was enough time for me to walk back into the living room and find I was no longer alone.

"Uh . . ." I stumbled to a stop. "I think your mother went upstairs to bed," I said, pointing in the direction of the staircase, like an idiot.

"I know. She came in to say goodnight but mentioned she was going to take a bath first. She'll be hidden in there for a good hour." Mikey looked older than his seventeen years, standing by the arm of the couch with one leg crossed over the other and his arms folded on top of themselves.

"Was there something I can do for you?" I didn't normally get nervous, but for some reason, I was sweating bullets standing there under the watchful eye of Cassandra's oldest son.

"What are your intentions with my mother?"

I faltered. "I'm sorry? I'm not sure what you mean. I'm just a friend of your parents who needs a place to crash for the night."

Mikey scoffed. "Don't bullshit me. I know who you are. I've heard my father talk about you on the phone to his friends. He said you're rich and own a house just down the street. Every time he spoke your name, it was with disgust in his voice. So I'm going to ask again, what are your intentions with my mother? Because right now she can't handle anymore crap. My father left her with enough shit to deal with."

I ran through a gambit of emotions while he spoke. Proud that he was willing to call me out. Anger toward a dead man for bringing me into his world despite not allowing me near his family. Happy that Mikey wanted to protect his mother so fiercely, and back to anger for what I could only assume was the mess this young man was talking about.

"You're right. I own a house two blocks away but I doubt your mother knows that. I've done everything in my power to stay away after she asked me to. At your father's request, of course. There was a time when he and I were great friends. I'm not sure when that changed, but I respected your mother enough to follow her wishes. I don't know what your mother told you about your father's death but there is reason for me to stay and ensure your safety."

Mikey stood up straighter. He was big for his age, a little over six feet and probably had more growing to do. "She refuses to tell us anything but I know my father was in trouble. I would hear him whispering on the phone at night. At first I thought it was with one of his many mistresses, but then I heard him telling someone he would get their money to them."

I knew Michael was a shitty human being, but hearing that he cheated on Cassandra, and her son knew about it, was the icing on the cake.

"Do you remember when that was?"

He shrugged. "A couple weeks ago, I guess. I have trouble sleeping, so I wake up

most nights to come down and get a drink or snack. I don't remember the exact night, but I know the next day my parents were fighting about money. My mother was trying to tell him that they didn't have anything extra this month because I need a new pair of hockey skates but he kept arguing. That night before bed, I told her I could make the pair I have last a couple more months but she refused to hear it."

Nope, I lied. That was the icing on the cake.

"So you play hockey?" I needed to steer the conversation away from Michael and how horrible a father he was before I said something I would regret.

"Yeah." Now Mikey looked embarrassed. "I got a full ride to play hockey at a D1 school."

"That's amazing. Congratulations." Pride filled me for Kassandra's son's accomplishments. She was raising one hell of a young man. Getting accepted into a D1 school was hard enough but to get a scholarship to one was even harder. Mikey should be proud, not embarrassed.

"Thanks. You know, not even my father congratulated me. I mean he bragged to his friends about it, but he never told me he was proud of me. I remember exactly what he said when I told him. 'I need to tell everyone the news. They're going to be so jealous.' Then he ran off to his office like he did every time he was home. I swear he spent more time in there than he did with us."

"You know he loved you, right?"

I had to believe that Kassandra would never have stayed married to Michael if he didn't love his children deep down. The man was a selfish prick, but I know he loved Kassandra and she loved him.

"I know. He was different when we were younger. It wasn't until the last few years that things got bad. After he lost his job, he turned into a completely different person."

I made a mental note to have Bree do a deeper dive into Michael's former job and reason for unemployment. She was already looking at the financial aspect, so it wouldn't be hard to get more information.

"I know you've heard this a million times today, but I'm sorry for your loss. I can't imagine it's easy to lose a parent so young. You don't know me very well, but if you need anything, don't be afraid to ask. I can't replace your father but . . ." I lifted my shoulder because truthfully, I didn't know where I was trying to go with that. The last time I fumbled this much was when I met Addison for the first time.

Thankfully Mikey chuckled. "I think I know what you mean."

Well, I'm glad one of us did.

We stood in uncomfortable silence for a few moments. I didn't know what more to say to the kid who wasn't so much a kid anymore. I never had the opportunity to help raise Addison, so this was way out of my league.

"I should probably go back upstairs," Mikey said awkwardly, as he pointed his thumb in that direction.

"Oh, yeah. Sure. Umm, goodnight."

He didn't say anymore, and I watched him jog back up the stairs before dropping my head to my chest. That was the most awkward conversation I ever had and I wasn't sure if there was any coming back from it. Cassandra's son was going to avoid me like the plague and I wouldn't blame him.

I was going to need some help if I didn't want to keep putting my foot in my mouth, and I knew just who to ask from my team.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Kassandra

I swiped on a little lip gloss and stared at my reflection in the mirror.

Do I need a little more mascara on my lashes?

I put the tube of gloss down and reached for the mascara but stopped myself. I wasn't going to do this. Not anymore. I tried for years after Mikey and Nate were born to glam myself up, in hopes Michael would give me some attention, to no avail. It wasn't until I joined an online support group that I realized there was nothing wrong with me. A man needed to accept me for who I was. I didn't need to change for him.

The same would apply to David, even if I wasn't supposed to be thinking about him that way.

I was a recent widow.

I'd hurt him once by cutting off our friendship in favor of Michael.

Besides, he didn't harbor the same feelings I did. Madalyn was the love of his life, and despite how things ended between them, he never moved on. And to his parents' utter dismay, he never got married.

That was three solid reasons that we couldn't have a future together, and I needed to remember that. Spending extra time getting ready in the morning wasn't going to

change it.

I looked at the watch on my wrist.

Shit!

And it was making me late. Gah!

I rushed out of the bedroom and almost fell straight on my ass as my stocking feet slipped around on the hardwood floor. Instead I bumped my shoulder against the wall and threw my hands out to catch myself.

"Mikey! Nate! We need to be out the door in five minutes!" I yelled on my way down the stairs. Both of my boys liked to sleep in when they could. It wasn't the height of hockey season, so Mikey didn't have to be up super early in the morning, which meant he slept as long as possible.

I came to an abrupt halt just inside the kitchen. In all my rushing around, I completely missed the smell of bacon and eggs being cooked.

"Ah . . ." I didn't know what to say. Mikey and Nate were sitting at the kitchen table, each of them shoveling down a plate of food with orange juice in front of them.

"We'll be ready to go." Nate was the first to look and speak around a mouthful of food.

"Please don't talk with your mouth full."

"Sorry."

I didn't correct him the second time. There were some battles that weren't worth

fighting over and this was one of them. Not right now anyway. I was just happy they looked ready to go to school without me having to yell at them to move their asses.

"Who made breakfast?"

"David did," Mikey answered before he shoveled the last piece of bacon on his plate into his mouth.

David was nowhere in sight. The blankets I gave him last night were folded neatly on the couch. I wondered if he slipped out in the early morning. I was a little disappointed if that was the case. He mentioned being there to protect us, so I figured that meant he would still be here when I woke up. I glanced around the kitchen like I expected the man we were discussing to pop out of the pantry.

He didn't. And it would've been awkward if he did.

"Did he leave?" I told myself I wasn't going to ask, but of course my mouth had other ideas.

"No, he said he needed to make a few phone calls," Mikey answered on his way to the sink. He rinsed off his plate and loaded it into the dishwasher. I smiled to myself. I might've married an idiot but he gave me two great sons. And I was going to do everything in my power to make sure they were nothing like their father.

"Are you both ready for school?"

"Yup." Nate popped the last bite off his plate and then followed in his brother's steps to clean up from breakfast. "Love you, Mom."

I sighed both at Nate's words and the fact that I was going to miss David's breakfast because I took too long getting ready. I bet he made kick-ass eggs and the bacon

looked to be the perfect amount of crispy.

"Love you too." I spun on my heels and came to an abrupt stop when I almost crashed into David.

"You're going to leave before eating breakfast?" He looked just as disappointed as I was about the fact.

I glanced at the time of the microwave. "I'm running late." My voice held the same disappointment David's did.

"I'll make it into a breakfast sandwich that you can take with you." David was already moving around me to follow through on his statement before I could say anything. "Breakfast is the most important meal of the day. Go ahead and finish doing what you need to. I'll bring it out to you in two minutes."

I didn't bother to argue. I wanted that sandwich more than I wanted anything else in my life at the moment. I couldn't remember the last time someone made me food outside of a restaurant. "Thank you."

Mikey and Nate were already by the front door putting their backpacks over their shoulders. I forced myself to walk away from David's magnetic pull and follow my kids out the door. I could be a few minutes late to work, but my kids couldn't afford to be late to school.

"I love you both." I pulled them each into a hug and gave them a kiss on their cheek. Both had to bend down to accommodate me, despite being near five foot seven in my heels. "Please drive safe and text me when you get to school," I told Mikey.

It was the same thing I told him every time he drove.

"I will, and I love you, too. I'm going to hit the gym after school but should still be home before you get out of work."

"Okay." I didn't know if my kids were so mature that they didn't mind telling me their plans without me having to hound them for it, or if it was a result of how their father acted, but I was grateful for it. I never had to worry about what they were doing because they told me.

I was standing in the same spot moments later when David came outside. "Here you go. A bacon, egg, and cheese sandwich to go." The sandwich was wrapped up nicely in a paper towel and piping hot.

"You didn't have to do that." I took the sandwich from his outstretched hand and held it close. It was the nicest thing anyone had ever done for me, and I was seconds away from tearing up for it.

"I know I didn't have to," he said. "I wanted to."

I stood there awkwardly, not exactly sure what to do. Should I hug him? I mean, I really wanted to, but not because he made me a breakfast sandwich.

Should I say something? Shit, I didn't thank him.

"Thank you," I blurted out quickly. "No one ever makes me breakfast," I tacked on, like that would explain why I was acting weird. But instead of smiling, David now wore a frown.

"You deserve to have breakfast made for you."

Time to change the subject. There was no way I was ruining this morning by bringing up all the flaws of my deceased husband.

"I have to go. I truly appreciate you making breakfast for us. I'm not sure what your plan is for the day," I rambled, "but there's a spare key under the mat you can use. I'll be home sometime later but I'm not exactly sure what time." I decided that if I didn't start walking to my vehicle, I was more than likely going to continue spewing nonsense.

"Have a great day at work, Kassandra," David said to my retreating back. "Oh, and we'll be talking about leaving a key in an obvious place later."

I waved off what he said and rushed to open the car door. It wasn't until I was safely behind the wheel, and no longer physically exposed to him, that I took a real deep breath. He affected me so much that it was hard to think and do simple things like take oxygen into my body so I could survive around him.

I backed out of the driveway slowly. No need to get into a fender bender with David watching. I've made enough of an ass out of myself since he came back that I didn't need to add to it. I'm sure I'll have plenty of other chances while he's here.

It wasn't until the first red light that I allowed myself to take a bite of my breakfast. I closed my eyes and moaned as the combination of fluffy eggs, crispy bacon, and melted cheese hit my taste buds. Either the sandwich was just that good, or the fact that it was made by someone else made it taste so much better. Regardless, I was savoring the goodness when a horn blared behind me. My eyes flew open to see the light had changed to green, and I sighed with frustration.

Stupid impatient people in city morning traffic were ruining my happy buzz.

I managed to make it to my office building without further incident. I was only able to take two more bites but that just meant I could eat it without interruption at my desk.

I was chewing the last bite when my assistant walked through my office door but came to a stumbling stop.

"Wait, are you actually eating breakfast on your own? As in, I don't need to remind you or force it down your throat when you start to get cranky from lack of food?" Amanda popped her hip out with a smirk.

Amanda had been my assistant for the last five years, and she was every man's wet dream. At five foot nine, with long blonde hair, stunning blue eyes, and lashes a woman would kill for, she looked more like a model than an assistant. She was exactly the kind of young woman Michael loved to hit on. When she first started, he would make excuses to stop in and see me just so he could try and flirt with her. Thankfully, Amanda was quick to put him in his place. She once told me she lived and breathed by the girl code, and cheating spouses were a big no-no to her. Amanda couldn't understand why I never divorced him.

"I am, but only because someone beat you to it."

"Hold up." Amanda's heels clicked across the tiled floor before she settled into the guest chair on the other side of my desk. "Who the hell beat me to it, and what's with that look on your face?" She waved her finger at me.

"What look?" I mock scowled but couldn't hold it for long. I was too busy feeling happy to give it my all.

"Is that a smile?" Amanda gasped. "Lips turned up. Sparkle in the eyes." She slapped her hands on my desk. "Yup, definitely a smile. What sorcery is this? Better yet, who is he? Because that's not your 'my kids did something amazing' smile. That's a smile only a man can give you."

Apparently, I paused too long before answering.

"Wait, did you get laid ?" This gasp was much louder.

"Shhh!" I hissed. "Keep your voice down! I don't need anyone else hearing you and starting rumors."

"Ummm. It's only the two of us here, remember? That big glass door out there keeps everyone else on this floor from hearing anything."

Oh, right. I rented a small office space for my interior design company, and it was only me and Amanda who worked here, but still.

"Okay, fine," I conceded, "but you still need to keep your voice down, and no, I didn't get laid. Kinda hard to do when just yesterday I was busy pretending to mourn my dead husband and taking care of my kids."

"Mikey is seventeen and Nate is fifteen. They aren't toddlers who need babysitters. I'm sure if you told them you were going out for a few hours, they would be fine on their own."

I rolled my eyes. "That's not the point. Yesterday was about Michael. Not me."

Amanda huffed and crossed her arms. "It's always about Michael. Him offing himself was supposed to change that for you."

My assistant didn't hide the fact that she couldn't stand my late husband. If it was up to Amanda, she probably would've thrown me a party when he died. She would've named it too.

A "Kassandra is finally free of the douchebag" party, if I had to guess.

"It's only been a few days."

"Fine, but that smile is because of a man, so spill."

There was no use denying it. Amanda wasn't just my assistant. She was my best friend, which was sad really, considering she was fifteen years younger than me.

"Do you remember when I told you about David Black?"

I stupidly got drunk one night and spilled all about my high school crush on David, and how if there was any man who could break my dry spell, it would be him.

"Hunky David Black the millionaire who owns a very successful security company right here in Boston? How could I forget? We cyber stalked him that night, and if I remember correctly, I encouraged you to call him up to dust off the cobweb . . . down under." The last part was said in the most cringe-worthy of an Australian accent I had ever heard.

"Yes, the one and the same. Well, I did call him after Michael passed and he flew in yesterday for the funeral. He needed a place to stay, so I offered him my couch, and when I woke up this morning, he had made breakfast for me and the boys."

"Hold the phone." Both of Amanda's hands went up and she scooted to the edge of her seat. "You mean to tell me you had that sexy-as-fuck man in your house last night and you made him sleep on the couch ? What the hell is wrong with you, Kassandra? A man like that you invite into your bed and beg him to ravish you. Has our friendship taught you nothing over the years?"

I laughed. "I'm not you. Besides, in high school he was in love with my best friend. He doesn't even know I've had this crush on him all these years. Not to mention Michael forced me to push him away. I didn't think it would look good to drag him into my bed after not seeing him for so long."

"Oh, honey," Amanda tsked. "There is never a wrong time to drag a man into your bed. Especially when it's been as long as it has been for you. We've worked together for what? Five years, right?" I nodded my head. "And as far as I know, you haven't let a man anywhere near you in all that time, and for God knows how long before that. I think it's time."

My cheeks heated and it wasn't from the hot flashes I occasionally got. It was closer to eight years since I had sex. Ever since I found out Michael was screwing around on me, I refused to let him touch me. I didn't want him anywhere near me and told him as much.

I could still remember the argument we had that night over it.

"Is that perfume I smell on you?" I pushed him away. "It smells like something a hooker would wear."

"What the fuck do you expect, Cassandra? You refuse to give me the kind of sex I need without whining, so I had to go somewhere else to find it," Michael slurred, as he swayed, the whiskey mixing with the smell of the cheap perfume.

The kind of sex he was referring to was his selfish need to get off without giving me a single orgasm.

"Fine, get your dick wet somewhere else, but don't think for a second you'll come home and stick that diseased penis anywhere near me."

"Fine," Michael childishly huffed back. "I don't want your overused vagina anyway."

That was the beginning of the end for us.

"Kassandra?" I came back to the present to Amanda waving her hands in front of me.

"I'm not wrong, am I?"

I sighed. "No, you're not, but that doesn't mean I'm going to jump into bed with David. I'm pretty sure he's still hung up on Madalyn. He never got married, and you saw when we looked him up, he's never been photographed with the same woman twice."

"Exactly. He's the perfect man to get back out there with. Let him rock your world and then you can get back on the proverbial horse. Find yourself a man who treats you better than that asshat of a husband ever did."

I didn't want to tell Amanda that wasn't possible. My feelings for David were so deep that I doubted I could ever have anything casual with him. My heart would get involved and then it would shatter when he didn't return the feelings.

Instead I changed the subject.

"How about we talk about work instead of my personal life? You mentioned another project right before everything blew up."

By "blew up" I meant my husband killed himself because he likely had some bad people after him, but I was intentionally pushing that to the back of my mind for now.

"Yes!" Amanda bounced in her chair. "Your favorite LLC is back and has another house they want you to design. Do you think we'll ever figure out who this mystery company is, and why they want you to design so much for them?"

"Probably not," I chuckled. "As long as they keep paying well and allow me complete control of the designs, I won't question it too much. They're my favorite jobs to take."

I didn't tell Amanda that I thought about the company, and owner, often. They

purposely kept themselves hidden, and that alone piqued my interest, but like I told her, I wouldn't question it too much. At the end of the month, whoever this mystery company was, they were the reason I could afford to continue giving my kids what they wanted and needed in life.

CHAPTER EIGHT

David

I watched Cassandra drive away, and when I knew she was safely out of my sight, I turned back to her house. I lifted the doormat, and sure enough, the house key was exactly where she said it would be. Shaking my head, I slid it into my jeans pocket. There was no way I would be putting the key back in the “hiding” spot. It was the first place people checked when they wanted to break into a house.

Heading straight for the kitchen, I had a long list of things I needed to get done before Cassandra and her boys got home. Cassandra mentioned no one had ever made her breakfast, so I had to assume that meant Michael didn't clean up either. I wasn't surprised. He liked the pampered life without the means to provide for it.

He had lost his job, so while Cassandra was out busting her ass to keep them financially stable, the least he could've been doing was taking care of things around the house. I figured the chances he was doing that were slim, so I made sure any messes I created were cleaned up. I wasn't about to make more work for Cassandra, or her boys.

I'd just gotten the dishwasher started and the counters wiped down when the doorbell rang.

Right on time. Not that I expected any differently from the men on my team.

I opened the door and was greeted by a smiling Rhett. "Nice digs, boss, but I'm pretty

sure your place is a couple of blocks that way." He pointed down the street to where I knew my house was located.

"You know why I'm here, so don't start any of your shit. And make sure to wipe off your boots before you walk through the house. I don't have time to be mopping floors today."

Rhett chuckled. "Look at you, becoming domesticated. Never thought I'd see the day."

"Keep up your shit and you won't see it either. I'll kick your ass and put you out of commission."

The fucker continued to laugh. He was the youngest of six siblings and knew how to get on people's nerves. "Then who would help Logan set up all the cameras you want installed?"

The asshole had me there. "Correction, I will kick your ass after you install the cameras and put you out of commission."

"That sounds more like the boss I know." Rhett rocked back on his heels. "So do you plan on telling us who this mystery house belongs to, and why we're hooking up the state-of-the-art system, our most expensive one, by the way, at no charge?"

I rubbed my fingers across my forehead and sighed. "Has anyone ever told you that you're too smart for your own good?"

"Yeah, my siblings, my entire life, but I just figured that's what family does."

Speaking of family, Rhett gave me the perfect opportunity to change the subject to one I knew he wouldn't want to talk about. "About that. Have you told your family

you're back in the States yet? This time for longer than usual?"

The scowl was instant. "You know damn well I haven't, nor will I."

"And why not? From what I'm told, you're all very close."

"Because they're all married and some are even having kids. I'm the black sheep that doesn't want any part of that kind of life. I travel the world taking out enemies the American people are never even told about. They don't need my kind of fucked up in their perfect lives."

Well, now he was just pissing me off considering I was the reason he took the assignments he did. "Zack would never judge you for what you do. You were the one who followed in his footsteps, if I remember correctly."

"Yeah, at first, but now he's a family man. He got his high school sweetheart back and they're popping out kids left and right. We aren't the same anymore."

"He wouldn't judge you," I repeated.

"It doesn't matter. My family doesn't need to know I'm stateside. End of story. Now, I need to go help Logan with the security system. Matthew called and said he's handling your request in Pennsylvania."

Rhett walked away a lot less happy than when he showed up, and I felt bad that it was my fault his mood changed. I intentionally hit a sore spot to deflect from my current predicament and that wasn't okay.

I decided to dial Matthew, even though Rhett just told me things were being handled.

"Hey, boss," Matthew answered on the second ring.

"Hey. Rhett mentioned you made it to Pennsylvania okay."

"Yup. Parker is currently driving the other car to your place in Pennsylvania to drop it off. Then I'm going to pick him up and go check out the house you mentioned. I have cleaners on standby to deal with the mess after we see its condition."

The house he was referring to was Gage's, or more accurately, the one he grew up in and bought from his parents. Someone shot it up last night and now Gage needed me to take care of it. While I was handling my own problem here in Boston, Gage was handling his in Pennsylvania.

"Keep me posted. I want your team in Pennsylvania to back Gage up. You're closer than pulling his own team in."

"Roger that. Just send the rest of the guys down after you're done with them. I'm sure they'll be happy to have something to do."

I wasn't sure sitting around waiting for an MC to attack was what Matthew had in mind about making his team happy. They were used to constant action, even if sometimes their assignments required them to stay in a holding pattern.

I said my goodbyes and hung up the phone. I needed to go find Rhett and apologize for pushing him. My team deserved an explanation for the assignments I sent them on, even if this one was personal to me.

The problem was I couldn't explain my sudden need to be there for Cassandra. Yes, in high school she was a great friend, but it was more than that. I fell in love with Madalyn because of her outgoing personality. She shined brighter than anyone I had ever met. Everyone in school wanted to be around her and I was no exception.

But with Cassandra it was different. We had a deeper connection. She was my best

friend. I could talk to her about anything and always felt comfortable in her presence. That didn't change just because we spent years apart. I instantly felt that connection again the second I was around her and the need to protect her was bone deep. I would do anything to make sure she was safe.

I hadn't been this vulnerable since high school, and based on how I acted toward Rhett, I wasn't handling it properly.

I went outside in search of the two men who were here to help. I found Logan on a ladder, but Rhett was nowhere in sight.

"Have you seen Rhett?"

Logan didn't bother to look back at me when he answered. "He stormed away and said he was going to work on the front. I'm guessing his bad attitude is your fault, since on the ride over he wouldn't shut the fuck up."

"You could say that. I'll go fix it."

"Appreciate it." Logan was a man of few words. Most of his teammates made up for it. Rhett and Matthew talked the most. They were goofy when not on an assignment. Graham was equally as quiet, but that had more to do with the fact that he was trying to raise a teenager with a narcissistic ex who made seeing his son difficult.

I reminded myself I needed to talk to him about teenagers, but that would have to wait until after I apologized to Rhett.

I found him in the front yard stomping around just like Logan said.

"Are you going to be pissy for long?"

"Maybe." Rhett grabbed a box from the truck and pushed past me. "I'm told I can hold a grudge better than any of my other siblings and that's saying something since Zack is the dramatic one."

I smirked. Zack worked for a buddy of mine and I had the pleasure of meeting him a few times. The man was over-the-top dramatic, but in a funny way.

"I didn't mean to overstep, but you know how I feel about family. I never intended for your team to spend so much time away from them."

"It doesn't bother me. We stay in touch through text messages. My family is all up in each other's business, so they wouldn't know how to let me slip away."

I didn't agree, but it wasn't the time to further push Rhett. He would figure it out on his own when the time came.

"I have to run a few errands including stopping into the office. Call me if you need anything. I'm not sure I'll be back before you're done, so just lock up on your way out."

"Will do, and you know how the system works, so you can show the owner the setup."

I thought about how that conversation was going to go. It was likely Cassandra would be pissed I went behind her back and had it installed so quickly, but I wouldn't apologize. It needed to be done.

"Oh, and, Black?"

I stopped my forward progression to my SUV and looked back at my employee. "I know you push because you care. I'm not mad. I'm just not ready to be the brother

they deserve."

"You're a good man, Rhett. I wish you could see that about yourself."

I managed to get back to Kassandra's house about fifteen minutes before the boys got home. I was still trying to figure out how to relax around them since I had yet to call Graham like I wanted to. Time got away from me.

Mikey was the first to walk through the kitchen and stumbled to a stop when he saw me. "You're still here. And you're putting away the dishes."

I paused putting a dish in the cabinet and tried not to overthink his words. I had to remind myself they weren't used to seeing anyone other than their mother doing chores.

"Yup. I made the mess, so it's only fair that I clean it up. I was also thinking about starting dinner before your mom got home. How does chicken marsala with grilled asparagus and baby potatoes sound?"

Nate and Mikey exchanged a look but it was Nate who spoke up. "You're going to cook dinner too?"

I shrugged like it was no big deal when I could see it was anything but. It was obvious what a shitty person Michael was. "Why not? I got home before your mother and managed to stop at the grocery store for what I needed. No reason I can't have dinner ready for when she comes home."

They exchanged another look. "Can we help?" Mikey asked.

I smiled. "Absolutely, but I'm not looking to get either of you in trouble, so is there something you're supposed to do after school?"

It was blatantly obvious I didn't know the first thing about teenagers. Did they have chores? Homework? I wanted to make Cassandra's life easier not throw a wrench into anyone's routine.

"Just homework, but I did mine during study hall," Mikey answered.

Nate looked down at his feet and mumbled. "I have some math homework to do."

I remembered what Cassandra said about Nate's difficulties with math, so I offered, "I can help you if you like. I used to help your mother all the time when we were in high school."

Nate picked his head up and the uncertainty on his face nearly gutted me. He should never have been made to feel bad about the struggles he faced.

Finally, he shrugged. "Yeah, if you want."

So that was how we spent the next hour until Cassandra came home from work. I helped Nate with his homework and they both helped me prep dinner in between math problems. It was surprisingly normal and even made me feel like I had this whole teenager thing under control.

CHAPTER NINE

Kassandra

This was the first day I didn't dread coming home, and that made me the worst mother in the world. I loved my kids. They were my everything, but having to go home every night to their worthless father would drain me even before I walked through the door. Somehow I knew today would be different.

Maybe it was because Michael was finally out of our lives. Even though he died days ago, planning the funeral was exhausting. Today was a fresh start and it began with a cooked breakfast. Already things were looking up.

I unlocked the front door and was instantly greeted by laughter. I stopped and just let myself soak up the sound. I missed my boys being this happy and carefree.

It was in that moment that it hit me. I thought I was doing the right thing by not divorcing Michael, that I was keeping my family together, but the truth was I subjected my sons to misery. They had to watch me walk around sad and utterly heartbroken. That wasn't fair to them and I vowed to do better.

Slipping off my shoes and putting them in their proper spot, I followed the sound of the laughter to the kitchen and once again just paused. David stood at the stove cooking something that smelled fantastic. Mikey was helping him, and Nate was at the table doing his homework, but instead of looking frustrated, he was smiling.

"Rap it for me again!" David pointed a spoon in Nate's direction and my son did as he

was asked.

I had to catch the formula between the bouts of laughter but Nate gave the correct answer to one of the formulas that had been stumping him for weeks. I was so damn proud of him.

Mikey was the first to notice me. "Hey, Mom! Dinner's almost ready."

"Okay ..." I was so surprised that I didn't know what else to say. I walked over to Nate and kissed him on the head. "How was school today?"

With a wide smile spread across his face, Nate answered, "It was good! I finally figured out this math formula, so the test tomorrow is going to be great."

"I thought the test was today?"

"It was supposed to be, but the teacher was out sick, so she pushed it back. Said we had an extra day to study and it's a good thing. David helped me figure out the part I couldn't understand."

I glanced over at the man we were discussing. He was too busy stirring whatever was in the pan but I could see the small upturn of his lips and knew David was listening to us. He was giving Nate his time to shine without stepping in, and I fell for the man just a little more.

"I'm happy to hear that. Now tell me what smells so good in here?"

"Chicken marsala, herbed smashed baby potatoes, and grilled asparagus." Mikey beamed. "David offered to teach me how to make it."

"Well, I must say it smells fantastic in here. I can't wait to taste it. I'm just going to

run upstairs and change out of my work clothes real quick."

Seeing how happy both of my boys were lifted some of the weight off my chest from when I first walked in. I might've done them a disservice before, but things were better now. I dashed out of the kitchen and upstairs to my bedroom, and stripped out of my dress and tights, throwing them both in the hamper.

I contemplated putting on my new since-Michael-died "at home" outfit but decided against the sweatpants for a pair of jeans instead. They wouldn't be as comfortable but at least I wouldn't look like a bum. I paired an oversized sweater with it that was super soft and made up for the fact that the jeans would be poking into my stomach. Lastly, I touched up my mascara before heading back downstairs.

By the time I emerged back in the kitchen, the table was set and the delicious-smelling food sat in the middle.

"Would you like a glass of wine with dinner?" David slid up next to me and asked.

I looked up at him through my lashes. "I would love one, thank you. And thank you for cooking dinner. You didn't have to do that after cooking us breakfast this morning."

"It's my pleasure. I'm the one who had spare time today while you worked. It's the least I could do so that your evening was a bit more relaxing."

If he continued to do and say things like that, I was a goner. It was going to be hard enough for me not to fall madly in love with him more than I already was. I'd wanted to believe that some of the feelings I'd had for him as a teenager were just superficial and would fade over the years. So far that wasn't the case.

Conversation around the dinner table was lighthearted and fun. The laughter I first

walked in on continued, and for once, dinner wasn't tense and full of forced conversations. The food tasted as good as it smelled, and overall, the evening was perfect. I wanted to freeze the moment forever.

"That was delicious." I leaned back in my chair and put my hand on my stomach. The jeans no longer sounded like a good idea now that I was overly stuffed. "Thank you so much for cooking tonight." I looked between all three of them since I learned throughout the dinner conversation that Nate helped in between his homework.

"It was fun," Mikey replied, standing up with his plate, but I stopped him.

"Nope, leave that there. You all cooked, so it's only fair that I clean up."

All three of them tried to argue back at once but I wasn't having it. I put my hand up and the talking ceased.

"I insist. I appreciate what you all did, but I would feel terrible if you cleaned up as well, so please let me do it."

Mikey was the first to agree. "Okay, but only because I promised Brittany I would call her after dinner to help her with a history project she has due this week."

"Make sure you're not giving her the answers," I whispered when he leaned in to kiss my cheek.

"I never do. Love you, Mom."

"Love you too."

"I'm going to go see if any of my friends are online since I finished my homework early for once." Nate raced out of the kitchen but I yelled after him, "Love you!"

He rushed back in and gave me a kiss on my other cheek. "Love you, too."

I chuckled and laughed at his eagerness. It was rare that homework took him less than three hours a night, so it was nice to see him getting to do something fun in the evening.

"And then there was one." David smiled.

He helped me gather the dishes in silence. I wanted to argue that he too should be sitting down to relax, but I got the feeling nothing I said would matter, so I accepted the help without a fight.

I was rinsing off the last dish to put into the dishwasher when I finally spoke. "Thank you for this, and I don't just mean cooking dinner. Spending time with Mikey and Nate. Michael never did that, and walking into the house tonight to hear laughter was a nice surprise."

David stopped what he was doing to lean back against the cabinets. He folded his arms over his chest and his one foot crossed over the other before he spoke. "You know you don't need to compare us, right? I don't need to know all the ways Michael failed you over the years."

I set the dish down into the sink and rested both hands on the edge of the sink before dropping my chin to my chest with a heavy sigh. "I'm sorry. It's just hard for me not to compare the two of you. I've done it since high school."

I didn't miss the way he tensed next to me. "What do you mean?"

I decided I was done hiding my feelings.

"Madalyn had you, so by default, that left me with Michael. But it was always

obvious Madalyn won the lottery while Michael was a cheap replacement. It was a stupid thought process and probably why my marriage was doomed from the beginning."

I focused on starting the dishwasher. I couldn't look him in the eye after that confession. He would know that my shitty marriage was just as much my fault as it was Michael's. Our entire relationship was spent being grouchy that he wasn't the man I truly wanted.

"Truth be told, I set Michael up for failure right from the beginning." The confession slipped out of my mouth before I could think better of it but I was glad I finally admitted it out loud. Over thirty years was a long time to keep that secret.

"You did no such thing." David touched my arm. "Hey, look at me." I slowly brought my gaze up to him. "There's no reason Michael couldn't have been a better husband to you. I doubt you ever told him he was a cheap replacement."

I snickered. "Nope, I definitely kept that to myself."

"Exactly. So there was no reason for him to neglect you or your children. And there was no reason for him to isolate you from others."

I turned around and mimicked his position. "He was jealous of you, you know that. I wasn't the only one who settled. He was drawn to Madalyn just like everyone else was. I think he hated that you had her. I remember how happy he was when she left you and never came back. Things were better there for a while, but then he found out I was writing you letters and everything changed. He was mad all over again."

"Why did you stay with him if things were bad? I would've helped you leave him if that's what you wanted."

I gave him a sad smile. "I was pregnant when Michael told me I needed to stop talking to you. I figured it would be selfish of me to pick you over my family. Then when I lost the baby a few weeks later, I figured it was too late. I had ruined things between us."

"You could have never ruined things between us. All it would've taken was a phone call and I would've come to you. You were my best friend."

Were . I really hated that word. Mostly because I didn't want to just be friends with him. I wanted to be so much more to him.

CHAPTER TEN

David

"If I had called you, then I never would've had Mikey and Nate," Cassandra replied, "and they're my world. I wouldn't trade them for anything. Not even my time with Michael."

I wanted to smack myself.

"Of course not. I hadn't meant it that way."

Truthfully, I didn't know how I meant it. My mouth was spewing shit without input from my brain and it was showing. I was doing a good job of putting my foot straight into my trap.

"I know, and believe me there were dozens of times over the years I thought about calling you. The six months after Michael lost his job was probably when I thought about it the most. He was unbearable to deal with, but I was convinced I needed to prove I could handle it, and I did. I made sure my boys never wanted for anything, even if it meant working more than I liked."

"How is the business going?"

Kassandra's smile lit up the entire room. "Amazing. Most of my clients are easy to work with. I have the occasional person who thinks they know better than a designer but I get through it. My favorite client reached out with another job this week, so that

makes me happy."

I wanted to see that smile on her face forever. I knew exactly what job she was talking about, but I kept my mouth shut. I wasn't ready to share all of my secrets just yet.

"That's good. It's never truly work if you enjoy what you're doing."

"That's what I tell Mikey all the time. He wants to make it to the NHL and I keep reminding him it will never be work if he continues to love it as much as he does now."

"I could tell by the way he talked to me tonight about it. How did he get started with hockey?"

I wanted to learn as much as I could about her boys. Michael was never athletic, so I was interested in hearing about how Mikey's love for hockey was nourished.

"It was kind of a mistake really. Michael wasn't good about participating in family time, so I would try different activities each week to see if there was anything he would enjoy doing with us. From the second Mikey stepped out on the ice, he fell in love with it. Michael didn't care, of course, but I found a youth league for him to join shortly after that, and the rest is history. He hasn't stopped skating since."

"I look forward to going to one of his games."

Kassandra's face took on that sad, pensive look again. "I don't think Michael ever attended any of his games. Sure, he had no problem bragging when Mikey got his scholarship, but to actually watch his son play?" She shook her head. "Not a chance. He always had some excuse as to why he couldn't be there."

Kassandra continued to give me reasons to hate Michael. I didn't want her comparing us but I could see why she did. I wasn't even back in her life for two days and already I was being a better role model to her children than her husband ever was.

"Well, I promise to attend as many games as I can. I travel for work sometimes, but if I'm in Boston, then I'll make sure to go."

I would find a way to balance life between Boston and New Mexico if it was the last thing I did.

"Why are you doing all this, David? I pushed you out of my life years ago and now you're acting like those years didn't exist. You're the same man I remember."

I didn't have a good answer for her, so I shrugged. "I'm not sure. I'm not going to lie and say it didn't hurt when you cut off our friendship, but I never blamed you. I blamed Michael plenty but never you. I always knew if you ever called me, I would be there for you. A friendship like the one we had isn't something that just goes away."

I was starting to see that what we had was more than a friendship, but now wasn't the time to figure that out. It had only been days since she lost her husband. There was a mystery threat out there that my team needed to figure out, and she had two great boys who didn't deserve someone coming into their lives as more than a friend at the moment.

It was absolutely the wrong time to start anything.

Yet, I didn't remember any of that when she asked her next question.

"Is that all we are? Friends?"

My fingers traced along her arm of their own accord. My body wanted to be closer to her even if my brain was telling me it was a bad idea.

"I'm not sure, but I think it would be smart of us to start there right now. After high school you were my lifeline when everything else was going to shit. I, at least, want my friend back."

"I'm sorry Madalyn left and broke your heart. It killed me when Michael asked me to stop talking to you because I knew losing her was still fresh on your mind."

The mention of Madalyn had me pulling away.

"You two were best friends. Did she tell you why she left?"

I knew it shouldn't matter because what happened was so long ago, but I needed to know who, besides my parents, were involved in deceiving me. I still couldn't speak to them, despite how many times they tried. And they would again, just as soon as they realized I was back in the area. Nothing got past them for long.

"No, she never spoke to me about it. She left me just as much as she left you."

"So you didn't know she was pregnant with my child?"

Kassandra looked like I slapped her. "She was what? " There was no mistaking the shock on her face and in her tone. Kassandra had never been a good actress, so it was safe to say she didn't know.

"Yup. I found out after Madalyn died that I have a daughter."

"Wait, when did Madalyn pass away? And how?"

“A couple months ago, and she was sick.”

"Oh man." Cassandra shook her head. "But wait? That would make her . . ."

"Thirty-one years old." I missed thirty years of my daughter's life and even now I wasn't fully in it. We talked and spent time together, but Addison didn't need me. She had the love of her life, Liam, and I was lucky to get some affection from her.

"No, I had no idea." Cassandra covered her mouth with her hand and tears pooled in her eyes. "That's horrible. When did you find out?"

"A few months ago. I was sent an anonymous tip, so I had it checked out. Turned out to be true."

"Where does she live?"

I let out a laugh. "In New Mexico. She fell in love with a friend of mine and lives with him. He's great for her, even if that's hard for me to admit."

"Is he . . ."

"My age?" I chuckled. "Yes, he is. Believe me, it was a tough sell at first, but since I didn't raise her, I figured I couldn't tell her how to live her life." Then I shrugged. "And like I said, he's great for her. Treats her like a queen. What more could a father ask for?"

"That's a lot to take in. How are you dealing with it all?"

Kassandra had a heart of gold. She had her own tragic story but it didn't stop her from worrying about mine.

"I'm doing better. I'm still mad at Madalyn but I'm more pissed that my parents knew this whole time and kept it from me."

"I'm sorry"—she held her hand up—" what? " she spat with disgust. "They knew and never said anything?"

"According to Addison. My daughter," I clarified. "She said my parents knew about the pregnancy and forced Madalyn to leave. I have yet to speak to them about it, but I wouldn't be surprised. They weren't as easily enamored by Madalyn, like I was."

They had hoped my love for her would eventually fade away as nothing more than a high school crush. They had big plans for my future. In the end, I snubbed my nose at everything they ever wanted for me.

"I just can't believe they would stoop low enough to do something like that." I gave her a look and she rolled her eyes. "Never mind. They would totally do that because an out-of-wedlock pregnancy would never fit into the lifestyle they shoved down your throat."

"I haven't talked to them in years, but I'm guessing nothing has changed."

Kassandra shook her head. "This neighborhood is still the same. People only care about what others think, and if you aren't part of the country club, you might as well be trash. Michael subscribed to that life. I didn't."

"How could you possibly stay for so long?"

She gave me a sad smile. "You know you aren't the first person to ask me that. My assistant would ask me on the regular, especially after she found out about Michael's extramarital affairs."

"I still can't believe he cheated on you ..." I could hear the growl in my tone.

Kassandra shrugged. "It wasn't that big of a deal, and honestly, after the shock wore off, I was relieved. He stopped expecting sex from me and I was fine with that. I was too repulsed by him to even pretend I wanted him to touch me. Besides"—she waved her hand around like what she had to say next was no big deal—"he preferred his women much younger than me. You know, heavily endowed." She made the gesture for big breasts. "I could never compete with that."

"There's no comparison. You're absolutely stunning and there's not a damn thing wrong with your body."

The opposite actually. I was having a hard time keeping my eyes off her. Especially when I saw what she wore to work. Her outfit hugged every delicious curve. And her jeans were no better. The damn things looked like they were painted on her legs. The oversized sweater did nothing to take away from her sexiness. If anything, it only made me want to peel it off so I could see what was underneath.

I had to stop my thoughts from the avenue they were taking. It wasn't appropriate. Not right now.

"I appreciate you saying that." Kassandra cleared her throat. "I have some designs to work on. Do you need anything before I go upstairs?"

"Nope, I have a few calls to make anyway. Teams I need to check in with."

"Okay." She pushed off the counter and headed toward the staircase. "If I don't see you later, have a good night."

"Goodnight, Kassandra."

I waited until I heard her footsteps on the floor above me before I smacked my forehead. Way to make things uncomfortable.

I was so damn far out of my realm that I didn't know which way to go anymore. I needed to figure my shit out, and fast, before I screwed things up.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Kassandra

It was déjà vu.

Well, almost.

I was once again in my bathroom in the morning swiping on lip gloss and mascara, but unlike yesterday, I wasn't running late. I made sure to add an extra fifteen minutes to my morning routine to make up for the fact that despite telling myself not to do it, I was trying to impress David.

It was silly. He already admitted Michael was stupid for stepping out on me, that I was beautiful without all the fanfare. Yet somehow I felt the need to compete with the dozens of women he'd had on his arm over the years.

It was ignorant and completely unnecessary but my heart refused to listen to my head, so at the moment, I was going with it.

I ran my hands down the navy pencil skirt. It fit me like a glove and paired nicely with the sheer white blouse I tucked in. A camisole underneath kept my bra from showing and I liked that the thin lines running throughout the blouse matched the navy in my skirt. This was one of my favorite outfits because I knew how good it made me look, despite my age and the fact that I had two children. My forties were good to me, but the closer I pushed to fifty, the less confident I felt. An outfit like this helped boost my self-esteem.

I took one more look at myself in the mirror before grabbing a pair of heels and heading downstairs. Today was nothing like my previous morning. I walked down the steps with much more confidence, and I didn't need to worry about killing myself on the hardwood floor.

The smell of French toast and fresh brewed coffee hit my senses before I fully made it down the stairs. Like a hound on the hunt, I let my nose guide me straight into the kitchen.

Once again Mikey and Nate were at the table, scarfing down breakfast. This was two mornings in a row I didn't need to rush them along and it made me wonder what kind of magic David wielded.

"Good morning," David greeted me with a smile.

"Morning." I returned his smile and headed straight for the coffee maker. Yesterday I missed out on my morning routine, but today I wouldn't be denied. I closed my eyes and moaned when the aroma hit my taste buds for the first time of the day. There was nothing better than that first hit of coffee.

Except maybe an orgasm to start the day, but I wouldn't know anything about that.

When I finally popped my eyes back open, I was met by a set of lustful hazel ones. I swallowed hard. It was one thing to dream about that look. It was an entirely different thing to experience it.

"Are you always that happy about coffee?" David whispered.

I glanced to where my sons were sitting at the table but neither was paying attention to us. They were too busy shoveling food in their mouths and scrolling through their phones.

My body temperature was suddenly a few degrees hotter than normal and I was sure my face reflected the change as I tried to nod yes.

"Those sounds should be illegal outside of the bedroom." David winked.

I, on the other hand, choked. On air? Spit? God only knows. If my face wasn't red before, it was now as I tried to get my breathing under control.

"Mom, are you okay?" Mikey raced to my side. I tried to wave him off, and Nate as well, when he joined, but all three men stood around me just staring. My boys with concern in their eyes, but David's eyes twinkled like he knew exactly what caused my coughing fit.

"I'm good." I managed to get the two words out on a croak. Two hard thumps on my chest were all it took for me to feel confident I wasn't lying.

"What happened?" The concern on Nate's face didn't disappear.

"Wrong pipe," I tried to explain without meeting anyone's eyes. It was obvious David knew differently but my kids weren't used to playful banter amongst the adults in the house. They were lucky if Michael and I spoke at all.

"Are you sure you're good?" I glanced up and met Mikey's skeptical glare. He was glancing back and forth between David and me.

I needed to take the attention off of us. "Yes, I promise I'm good." I looked at the clock on the stove. "You better hurry up and finish breakfast. I don't want you to be late."

"I was done anyway." Both Mikey and Nate grabbed their plates off the table and cleaned up before giving me a kiss goodbye. I didn't bother following them outside.

My feet were too busy being rooted to their spot.

David was kind enough to wait until we heard Mikey's car pull away before he spoke.

"So about those moans . . ."

I smacked his chest even though he chuckled. "You can't say that stuff in front of my kids."

David frowned. "Why not?" I didn't have to answer though. He put two and two together, then cursed under his breath. "They aren't used to seeing this kind of interaction between you and Michael."

"Michael and I barely spoke. When we did it was to fight or throw snide comments at the other. I did my best to keep that away from Mikey and Nate but the tension was always there. They had no grand illusion that their parents loved each other, so it's safe to say they never witnessed us teasing the other."

"Maybe they should," David grumbled. "How else do you expect them to know what a healthy relationship looks like?"

His question almost took me out at the knees, and I had to force myself to stay upright. I was proud when my response sounded normal to my ears. "I should get going. I don't want to be late for work."

David looked disappointed, but instead of calling me out on my escape, he offered to pack my breakfast up to go.

I took the reprieve and used the opportunity to rush out to my vehicle. I didn't make a habit of tucking my tail between my legs but this morning it felt necessary. I was feeling vulnerable and I needed time to regroup.

Minutes later, David brought a lunch bag out, but gone was his usual confidence. He looked almost shy when he handed the pail over to me through the open window. "I'm sorry if I overstepped. That wasn't my intention."

"You didn't," I sighed. "I'm just a little overwhelmed and confused at the moment."

"Then I'm sorry I added to it." He tapped twice on my door before turning around and heading straight back inside.

If I was smart, I would've followed him and explained further. However, I let my anxieties take hold and drove off to work instead.

The day flew by. Probably because I purposely kept myself busy so that I wouldn't think about David and the dejected look on his face when he walked back into the house that morning. The last thing I wanted to do was hurt him more than I already had over the years. He was here to help me, but I didn't know what to make of his comment.

I liked him. That feeling never went away. What I didn't understand was, did he feel the same way or was it merely physical attraction?

I could handle feelings.

I couldn't handle a romp in the sheets that didn't lead to anything.

Sex had to mean something to me. There needed to be an emotional connection between the two participants. I would never survive if I had sex with David and then he walked away.

This is the exact reason I wanted to be busy all day . I groaned and chided myself. Thankfully, my phone chose that moment to ring.

The relief I felt only lasted a second though when I saw the caller was Mikey. He never called me after school unless something important came up.

"Hey, is everything okay?"

I face-palmed my forehead. There was nothing subtle or calm about my question.

"Ummm. Not really. A guy approached me in the parking lot after school while I was waiting for Nate to come out. He gave me an envelope to give to you and said if you didn't want to lose more of your family, you would take it seriously." Mikey's voice sounded much calmer than I'm sure he felt. My son was extremely overprotective of his brother and me. "He looked really shady, Mom."

"Is Nate with you now?"

"Uh yeah, he's walking across the parking lot now. I can see him. He'll be at the car in like three seconds."

"I want you to head straight home and tell David exactly what you told me. Don't stop anywhere. Don't speak to anyone else. Straight home. I'm leaving the office now. I'll meet you there."

I fumbled to pull my purse out of the bottom drawer of my desk.

"Mom, what's going on?"

"I'll explain everything when I get home, but I need you to do as I ask. I'll text David and let him know he needs to be there, okay?"

"Yeah, I got it. I'll head straight home and tell David what happened. I love you."

"I love you too, Mikey. Tell Nate I love him and I'll see you both soon."

I shot off a text to David, then grabbed my keys and purse before I raced out of my office. My work could wait. My family couldn't.

CHAPTER TWELVE

David

I paced the entryway as I waited for Mikey and Nate to get home from school. All Cassandra said in her text was that I needed to be here because something happened with Mikey after school and it was important he talked to me as soon as possible.

She didn't answer my text when I asked for details. The chances were good she was driving and didn't want to text at the same time but the suspense was killing me. The need to fix whatever the problem was, was getting higher by the minute.

When I finally heard Mikey's car pull into the driveway, I rushed outside to get eyes on them.

A sigh of relief escaped my body when I saw that both boys were in one piece.

"What the hell happened?" I met Mikey halfway up the sidewalk. He held out an envelope as his answer.

"Nate, let's get inside," he called to his brother, then walked into the house with him.

I stayed outside and opened the envelope. My blood instantly boiled. It took all my willpower not to crumble the note and slam my fist into the house. The only thing that kept me in check was the fact that Cassandra wanted me to talk to Mikey. I refused to disappoint any of them, so with a calming breath, I followed the boys inside.

I found them both in the kitchen rustling through the pantry for something to eat. "Mikey?" I waited until he faced me before asking. "Who gave you that note?"

He lifted one shoulder. "No idea and he didn't bother to give me a name. He shoved the envelope at me, told me to give it to my mother and said if she didn't want to lose any other family members, she would take it seriously. I called Mom right away."

"What's going on?" Nate had a bag of chips in one hand and a can of soda in the other when he asked.

I gave him the "one second" gesture. I had to get the information out of Mikey while it was still fresh in his mind. "What did he look like?"

"Shady, if you know what I mean. A gray zip-up but the hood was pulled down over his head. A few years older than me. Baggy pants. It all happened fast that I didn't get a good look at him. I was more worried about calling my mom and making sure she was okay."

"Your school has cameras, right?" I was already pulling my phone out to text John and have him pull the footage. I could ask Bree but she was working on other things and John was fully capable of pulling local footage.

"I think so."

"Is anyone going to tell me what's going on?" Nate tried again.

"Someone is looking for the money your father owed them. They figured they could get it by threatening to hurt the both of you."

Mikey cursed. "Of course Dad would leave Mom with his shit to clean up." I didn't bother to correct him since that was exactly what Michael did. Committing suicide

didn't erase the debt owed. It just transferred it to those he left behind.

"Does Mom know?" Nate looked between the two of us.

It wasn't my job to tell Cassandra's secrets, so I kept my mouth shut. She was on her way home and it was up to her to decide how much she wanted to tell them.

"If she didn't, she will now. I got the feeling that guy wasn't kidding. I should've gone after him."

"And chance getting hurt?" I challenged. "No way. Your mother wouldn't have wanted that."

Mikey's chest puffed up. "I'm the enforcer for the team. I'm used to throwing down gloves. I'd usually reserve that side of me for the ice but I would've happily made an exception for my family."

"I'm sure you would, and I'm not saying you couldn't take the guy, but that's not what your mother would've wanted. You have a full-ride hockey scholarship. The last thing she would want is for you to mess that up because of your father's mistakes."

He deflated before my eyes and I felt bad. "Yeah, I don't need to add anything more to her already overflowing plate."

Screeching tires stopped all conversation as the three of us headed for the front door. We were greeted by the door slamming open and Cassandra racing through it. "Mikey? Nate?"

She yanked both boys to her as soon as she was close enough to get her hands on them. "Oh thank God. I nearly had a heart attack trying to get here."

"Ah, Mom? It usually takes you a lot longer to get home from the office. Just how fast were you driving?" Mikey scolded his mother. I was interested in her answer as well. There was no way she should've been able to get here this fast unless she broke several laws.

"That's not important right now. What is important is that the two of you are safe."

"We are, but you need to tell us what's going on. I know you've always tried to protect us from the messes Dad got into, but you can't keep doing that. We need to know."

Kassandra pulled away and looked at her oldest. I imagined she was seeing just how grown up he was. Mikey still had some boyish features, but his build was all man and I doubted he was done growing yet.

"You're right. How about we take this into the living room? There's a lot we need to discuss."

I didn't wait for an invitation to join them. I was likely interfering on family time, but I too needed all the information I could get. Kassandra told me some of it, but I had the feeling there was more she wasn't saying.

Kassandra sat on the couch with her boys on either side of her. I took a spot on the smaller couch and waited for her to start.

"I never lied to you about how your father died. I wanted you to hear it from me, rather than from some careless stranger. What I didn't tell you about was the note your father left me. Without going into too much detail, the gist of it was your father took money from someone and couldn't pay it back before they found out. He thought that taking his own life would solve the problem."

"So Dad just assumed these people would stop caring about their money just because he was dead?" Mikey asked in disbelief and Cassandra nodded her head. "What a joke," he hissed. "Dad killed himself because he was a coward who couldn't fix his mess, so instead, he left you to deal with it. I'm glad he's fucking dead." He jumped off the couch and stormed up the stairs.

I got up to go follow him but Cassandra stopped me with a wave of her hand. "Give him some time to cool down. He's entitled to be mad."

"He's also not wrong, Mom. That's a really crappy thing Dad did to you."

"I know it is. I'm not saying it isn't, but I can't change it. I can't bring your father back and force him to handle his own problems. All I can do is try to fix them so they don't affect you and Mikey."

"How can I help?" Nate asked.

"Right now I'm not sure, but can you give me a few minutes to talk to David alone? I promise I'm not shutting you boys out but I need to plan and I can't do that without a clear head."

Nate kissed his mother's cheek. I found both boys did that a lot. "Sure thing. I'll be upstairs when you're ready to talk some more."

I waited until I was sure Nate was in his room before I asked, "There's more, isn't there?"

Kassandra fell back into the cushions with a tired sigh. "Of course there is, but first show me the note."

I leaned back and dug the note out of my pocket where I'd shoved it before meeting

the boys in the kitchen earlier. "It's pretty damn straightforward."

She took the note out of my outstretched hand and snorted after she read the simple sentence it contained. "They want me to give them the hundred and fifty thousand Michael owes and they won't hurt my boys. How generous of them to give me two weeks." Cassandra tossed the piece of paper onto the coffee table before going back to leaning into the couch cushions. "Do these people really think I have that kind of money just lying around?"

She closed her eyes and I watched the reality of the situation consume her. This morning she had looked relaxed when she came downstairs and now the weight of the world was sitting on her shoulders and causing her to curl into herself.

"I can't say for sure, since I don't know who Michael was spending his time with, but it's more likely they don't care. Michael stole that money; they're going to do whatever is necessary to get it back."

Kassandra threw her hands in the air. "Well, that's just great! There's equity in the house and some in my business but I doubt scraping together a hundred and fifty K is going to be easy. Fuck you, Michael, for putting me in this position." The last sentence was merely a whisper but I didn't miss the defeat in her tone.

"I can pay the money back for you."

She glared at me. "I can't let you do that. This is my problem, not yours."

"Actually, it's Michael's problem, but like you said, we can't exactly resurrect him so he can solve it on his own."

Kassandra scoffed. "Like he would, even if we could bring him back."

My lips turned up at the corners. "You're right, he wouldn't, so it doesn't matter either way. You shouldn't have to deal with this, not alone anyway. Let me help. I have the means to make the problem go away."

I could only hope paying these people off would make them leave her alone, but my gut was saying it wouldn't be that easy. And I always trusted my instincts.

"I can't let you do that."

"And why not?"

"Because it's a lot of money, David!" Her exasperation with me wasn't warranted.

"I'm well aware of that, but I can easily get it to you before the deadline."

It was chump change really. If I wanted to, I could've had it ready for her the next day.

"I'm not taking your grandparents' money."

I smiled at her. Sometimes I forgot she only knew the teenage me. I hadn't needed my grandparents' money in a very long time. Not since it helped me start my very successful security business. People didn't realize how well the government paid to handle the problems they didn't want people to know about.

"Then I guess it's a good thing it wouldn't be their money."

"How are you so calm about this?" She flung herself back into the cushions once again. She had to be giving herself motion sickness with how much she was leaning forward and back throughout this discussion.

"Oh, I can promise you there's nothing calm about me right now. If Michael hadn't killed himself, I would've done the honor for the shit he's putting you through. And you haven't even told me all of it yet."

Kassandra sighed. "I knew Michael was having money troubles. When he lost his job five years ago, I insisted he let me take over the bills. He didn't want to at first. He only relented when I noticed we were past due on several things. I went that day and made sure everything was switched into my name. I changed all our online passwords. I cut up his cards. I treated him like a child but I didn't care. There was no way I was going to ruin my credit, or our family, because he liked to spend money on useless crap."

"A year ago he started talking about some new business venture. He had this friend who would help him start it up. Before you ask, I have no idea who the friend is. He never told me when I asked, and honestly, I thought he was lying. Nothing ever came of it. But the last couple of months he was getting cocky again. Asking me for more money, promising a big payday soon. I just ignored him. We were finally getting ahead on things and I didn't want him to ruin it, so I told him we didn't have it. We fought about it. He demanded to see our finances but I refused. I didn't trust him not to blow it."

She dropped her head into her hands. "God, maybe if I'd just listened to him a little better, I would know more about what was going on."

I couldn't take being so far away from her anymore. I left the smaller couch and sat down next to her. Taking one of her hands in my own, I set about comforting her. "This isn't your fault. No amount of listening was going to change the outcome. Michael was selfish and greedy. I know it's not nice to speak ill of the dead, but it's the truth. There was nothing you could've done to stop him from taking that money. If you don't have the money now, you wouldn't have had it then."

"That's true," she huffed.

"I know it is, so how about you stop dwelling on the past and start letting me help you with your future?"

"It's a lot of money," Kassandra whispered.

I rubbed my thumb along her palm. "I'm aware, but I have it, so please let me help you."

I could see the indecision written all over her face. I could also see when she finally decided to take me up on my offer. It wasn't an easy decision for her to make, so I didn't gloat when she answered. "Okay, I'll let you help me."

"Excellent." I lifted her hand and placed a kiss on her knuckles. "You won't regret it."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Kassandra

I was absolutely going to regret letting David help me. My heart was involved and that was never a good thing.

"On one condition," I added before he got too excited.

"Uh -oh. I'm not going to like this, am I?"

I shook my head. He was definitely not going to like it, but I needed to put the stipulation in place anyway. For my sake.

"You need to let me pay you back." I stopped him before he could say anything. "Not immediately. Not even in the next year. But slowly you need to let me pay you back. It's the only way I can let you help me." I was desperate to put some kind of barrier up. Things got murky when money was involved and I didn't want that to happen to us. I needed David in my life now more than anything, and that was a scary thought.

"Fine. I'll let you pay me back but only after the boys graduate from high school. They come first and I won't be the reason they miss out on something."

He drove a hard bargain but they were terms I could accept.

"Deal."

"Do you think we should go talk to Mikey?"

I squirmed in my seat. "Actually, I think I should go talk to him alone. I owe him an explanation."

"Okay, but I'm here if you need me."

I smiled at him as the wall around my heart splintered a little more. Michael had done a good job of destroying it, but at the rate David was going, I just knew he would knock the wall down and piece my heart back together.

"I know you are."

I rushed out of the room before I said more. One of these days I was going to blurt out exactly how I still felt.

Upstairs I knocked on Mikey's door and waited for him to holler that I could come in. I found him on his bed playing with his hockey stick. He was juggling the puck like he did often when he was thinking.

"Can I come in and talk to you?"

He didn't take his eyes off what he was doing but he nodded "yes," so I took that as enough of an invitation to come in and sat down in his desk chair. I made sure to be completely out of the way of the puck. I knew from experience they could hurt when hit by them. Having a hockey player for a son meant I learned that lesson early on. His father never practiced with him, so that left me. I was quick to get out of the way when Mikey swung.

"Are you excited for college to start this summer?"

The university that drafted him wanted him to start after graduation so he could condition with the team. It meant that, in a few short months, my first baby was going to be out of the house. I wasn't sure I was ready for that.

"I'm excited to play hockey at another level. I'm not happy to be leaving you and Nate here all alone. Especially after what happened today."

"Oh, honey. You can't miss out on enjoying your life because of your brother and me."

"Why? You did."

Ouch! That stung. Only because it was true though.

"I'm your mother. It's expected of me to make sacrifices for my children."

"You should've left him, you know."

Mikey was no longer bouncing the puck, so I took the opportunity to roll closer to him and explain. "I know I should've. I thought I was doing the right thing by staying with him, by keeping our family together. I realize now that was foolish of me." I shrugged my shoulders. "I guess I thought I was sheltering you from the bad that was happening between us but now I realize you saw it all."

"Not all of it, and I never thought twice about it until I saw Brittany's parents together. They're affectionate all the time and she thinks it's so gross."

I chuckled. "I can imagine why she would think that. You would probably be the same way if you saw me kissing someone."

Mikey didn't say anything at first. He just stared down at the floor like it was the most

interesting thing in the world.

"What's on your mind, Mikey?"

"Would it be weird if I wasn't grossed out by it but, instead, encouraged it?"

"What do you mean?" I'm pretty sure I knew what he meant, but this was one of those times I needed him to spell it out for me. Like the time I had to give him the sex talk. There was no room for hypotheticals.

Mikey threw himself back on the bed like he used to when he was a toddler and didn't want to answer a question. It was hilarious to see a six-foot man do it, even if it wasn't nearly as dramatic.

"I want you to date, Mom. I want you to be happy. I want to see a man treat you the way Mr. Smith treats his wife. Brittany might think it's gross but I think it's nice after all these years they still kiss and touch each other, even when people are around."

It was sweet he felt that way. "Honey, your father just died. It wouldn't be appropriate for me to jump into a relationship so soon."

That had Mikey sitting back up. "Screw appropriate. The two of you haven't had a good marriage in years. And I'm not stupid. I know Dad cheated on you plenty. You deserve better."

It killed me how observant he was. That this whole time he knew what was going on and never said anything.

"I know I do." Mikey didn't look like he believed me and who could blame him. I let his father treat me like crap for over a decade. "Trust me, I know I deserve better but I'm not going to just jump into any old relationship just because your father is now

gone. I want to focus on you boys and find myself again. Staying with your father did a number on me and it wouldn't be fair to dump those problems on someone else."

I didn't go into details but I needed to find my self-worth before I even considered dating again.

"Just promise me if a man is interested, you won't turn him down because of us?"

"I promise."

"Okay."

"Can we talk about what you said downstairs?"

"I don't take it back," Mikey grumbled. "I know we're supposed to love our parents but Dad ignored us. He never showed up for a single game. He didn't attend any school events. The only time he talked about us was when he wanted to brag to his friends. The only person he cared about was himself. His death was no different."

I sighed, and had to agree with him. "You're entitled to your feelings. I'm not going to argue because everything you said is true. I wish it had been different. I tried to overcompensate by attending all your stuff in hopes that you and Nate didn't notice your father's absence, but clearly I failed."

"No, Dad failed. You did everything right."

"I wouldn't go that far," I chuckled.

"You're right. There was that time you had us show up to a party in costumes when the family didn't celebrate any holidays."

"Oh my God . . ." I dropped my head into my hands. "I forgot all about that. In my defense, the party was Halloween weekend and I could've sworn I heard one of the other parents saying it was a costume party."

"I thought the mother was going to stroke out when we walked in," he howled.

"So did I. I've never been so humiliated in my life. I don't think they ever invited us back to another party they had."

"That's okay, we weren't even friends. I didn't know why you said yes to the party anyway."

I slapped his knee. "Thanks for telling me that now!"

We both continued to laugh at the memory. There were so many good times we'd had just the three of us. So what if Michael didn't want to be a part of it? That was his loss. My only concern was making sure my kids were okay from the trauma, but based on how Mikey acted, I think he was going to be just fine. And Brittany was one lucky girl.

"I need to go check on your brother and see how his math test went today."

"He was smiling when he came out, so I think it means he did good."

I hoped so. It was hard watching your son struggle the same way you did as a kid and not have a solution to fix it. The math these days was different and some of my strategies didn't work when I tried to help him.

"That's good. I'll see you downstairs for dinner. I love you."

"I love you too, Mom."

I would continue to tell him that every time we spoke.

I knocked on Nate's door next. I was granted the same entry as before, but unlike Mikey's spotless room, Nate's was a mess. He thrived on chaos and I learned early on that it was better to let him have it because really it was a clean mess. There were no dirty dishes or clothes lying around. Nate just needed to be surrounded by stuff.

"Hey, Mom."

"Hey, kiddo. I came to see how you did on your test today. It got a little overshadowed by the letter but I didn't forget it was today."

"I got an eighty-seven on it. That's why I was late getting out. I stopped by to see my teacher and ask how I did."

I wrapped my arms around him and squeezed. "An eighty-seven is amazing. I'm so proud of you!"

"Thanks, but all the credit goes to David. I have no idea what he did yesterday but it just clicked when he explained it to me."

"Don't for a second sell yourself short. You've been studying your butt off and it paid off. Be proud of yourself."

Nate smiled. "I am."

"Good. Now tell me about the rest of your day."

We sat there for the next thirty minutes and just talked. It was relaxing to simply sit back and enjoy time with my son. I could worry about the Michael mess later.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

David

It had been two days since Mikey received the note and I was no closer to figuring out who sent it than I was before.

Whoever gave it to Mikey was smarter than we gave him credit for. He knew where the cameras were in the school parking lot and how to avoid them. Which means the person either studied the area ahead of time or was a former student. I had John looking into that last angle and pulling all males who attended the school over the last five years. We would expand it to ten years if needed, but based on Mikey's description, my gut was saying he wasn't that old.

The problem was he couldn't see the kid's face clearly, so even when I showed Mikey the pictures, he picked out a handful of possibilities from each year. It gave us a lot of names to work with but nothing solid to move forward on. John was good but even he couldn't pull information on dozens of men in less than forty-eight hours. He had other work that was taking up some of his time.

"I don't know how you do it, man."

We were sitting on a bench across from the high school Mikey and Nate attended. I asked Graham, another member of Cobra, to meet me and figured this was as good of a place as any. He was a big dude. Well over six and a half feet of solid muscle with a nasty scar next to his eye from when he almost lost it a few years back while working for me. Most people steered clear of him because of how he looked, but he was one

of the nicest guys on his team.

"Do what?"

"Not worry every second of every day about your kid and the dangers your job puts him in. I would completely understand if you told me to shove it and never went back out with Cobra again."

"I wish I could say it gets easier but that would be a lie. I guess it helps to know I can't see him except for my approved visitation days."

Graham's ex was a bitch. A wealthy one too. She used every tool at her disposal to ensure Graham got as little time with his son as possible, all because he left her when she cheated on him while he was out on deployment.

"You know the offer is always open to help you find a really good lawyer."

When Graham was in the Army, he didn't have the financial resources to fight his ex the way he should have for custody. Things were different now; I paid a hell of a lot better than the Army did.

"If we start spending more time in the States, then I just might take you up on that offer. For now, this works with my schedule. I talk to him every day and you let me come home for my scheduled visits no matter what assignment I'm on."

"Because I know you're a good father who loves your son."

"So why the sudden interest in kids? Last time I checked, Addison was all grown up."

I laughed. "That she is. I worry about her too but I know she's in good hands. I'm asking because of my friend's kids."

"Is this the same friend who got a premium security system custom installed just the other day?"

"The one and the same."

"So then not just a friend." Graham quirked a brow at me.

I sighed and settled more comfortably into the bench. "I'm not sure what she is. We were friends in high school. She was actually best friends with Addison's mother. Ended up dating another friend of ours and married him. We lost touch over the years but she called me when he killed himself because he left her in a bit of trouble."

Graham whistled. "I can see why you aren't sure."

"It gets even more complicated. She has two boys. Seventeen and fifteen. Their father was in their life, but . . . not, if that makes sense. He didn't actually participate in shit but . . ."

"But he was their father, so you have to walk a fine line between calling him a piece of shit and not speaking ill of the dead."

"Exactly."

"Do you care about their mother?"

I scrubbed my hands across my scruff. "I think I do."

"You think? Pretty sure you need to be more than I think if you plan to date a woman who has kids."

"I know, I know." It annoyed me how flustered I sounded. Women didn't rattle me. I

never let them get close enough to do so. After what happened with Madalyn, I never saw myself settling down. I enjoyed a woman's company, but when the night ended, we went our separate ways. Cassandra wasn't like that though.

"You clearly have something on your mind, so why not tell me? Maybe saying it out loud will help you figure shit out."

It wasn't a half bad idea. It certainly couldn't make things any worse. "In high school there were four of us. We did everything together. Madalyn and I started dating first, and shortly thereafter, Cassandra and Michael began dating. It was perfect actually. The four of us hung out all the time anyway, so things didn't have to get weird when only two of us started dating."

Graham nodded his head like it made complete sense.

"Anyway, Madalyn was the kind of person that people gravitated towards. She was outgoing and everyone wanted to be around her. I think that's what drew me to her in the beginning. I was always quiet, so we balanced each other out. Cassandra was different, more like me. She was happy to be in the background and go with the flow. She was my best friend. She was the person I wanted to talk to about everything. When Madalyn left for no reason, it was Cassandra who talked to me constantly and kept me from going crazy."

"Then, when I shipped out, we exchanged letters nonstop. Until eventually, I started getting less and less of them. It wasn't until I was home after one of my deployments that I confronted her about it. She told me Michael didn't want her talking to me anymore."

"And she chose him over you," Graham correctly surmised.

"She did and I didn't blame her. They were married. I was just the best friend. I

stepped away and moved on with my life."

"But now she's back in it."

"Now she's back in it," I repeated. "And the way I look at her and think about her is not the least bit friendly."

"Let me guess, now you're questioning what you felt back in high school?"

Graham hit the nail on the head.

"Madalyn was supposed to be the love of my life," I said. "The reason I never dated after her was because she was it for me."

"Or . . ." Graham dragged the word out. "Hear me out before you say anything. Or maybe she was just your high school crush and it was Kassandra who was the love of your life, but you couldn't see it back then because you were enamored by someone else." Graham paused, and added, "Or neither of them could be your love because why the hell would you take advice from a man who was stupid enough to marry a narcissist?"

The tension of the conversation eased and I snickered at Graham's words. "I doubt you knew when you married her that things would turn out like this."

He settled more into the bench like I did. To someone walking by, it would look like we were two men just relaxing, without a care in the world, but that wasn't the case. Both of us were scanning our surroundings like we did every second of the day. We were just better at hiding it than most.

"You're right. She was charming when I first met her. I was easily swept up in her charisma. Her true nature didn't come out until after our son was born, but this

conversation isn't about me. It's about you."

I sat quietly for a few minutes and watched the high school across from us. I didn't know why today of all days I felt the need to be here, but I refused to go against my instincts.

"You're right, you know. This whole situation is fucking with my head. I keep wondering if Madalyn hadn't been so full of life, would I have dated Cassandra instead? And if I did, how much better would her life have been?"

"I'm going to play devil's advocate here, but how do you know her life would've been better? You were deployed more often than not. It's not easy being a military spouse. Take it from someone who went through that pain. There's no guarantee the two of you would've made it. Now, I'm not saying I believe in destiny or any of that shit, but maybe this was how things weren't meant to go for the two of you."

I thought about what Graham said, and then what Cassandra said. If things had been different then, she wouldn't have Mikey and Nate. And I wouldn't have Addison. It didn't matter that I just met her, I couldn't imagine her not being in this world and making my best friend happy.

"Do you always have to make so much damn sense?" I groused.

"Did you miss the part where I married a narcissist? I don't even know why you're listening to me. I clearly don't know shit about love."

"Not true. You'll get your chance again."

"Ah, no. I don't want another try at love. I've got my son and a great job. There's nothing more I need. Well, except maybe to interrogate a certain gray zip-up kid." Graham nudged my shoulder and jutted his chin in the direction of the school.

Sure enough, across the street was a kid who looked exactly like the one we had a surveillance picture of, down to the same outfit he'd worn when he gave the note to Mikey.

"I guess I know now why I felt the need to meet here today. Let's go see if we can have a nice little chat."

We were off the bench and strolling casually across the street like two men in no hurry to get anywhere. When in reality, I felt the complete opposite. I wanted to tackle the kid like a linebacker sacking the quarterback for the worry he caused Cassandra.

I waited until we were only a few feet away before I spoke up. "Hey, kid? Can you help me with something?"

The kid looked around like he was trying to figure out who I was speaking to. By the time he realized it was him, I was close enough to snag his elbow just as he was about to take off.

I swung him around so his back was against the chain-link fence and Graham and I were crowding his space.

"Where are you trying to go in such a hurry? I said I need your help with something."

"I don't know nothing."

If I had to guess, the kid was barely older than Mikey, but I got the impression he lived a much harder life than most did at his age.

"Well, considering that's a double negative, it would imply you do, in fact, know something," Graham stated the obvious. The kid looked back and forth between us

trying to figure out what the hell we were talking about.

"Never mind that. You delivered a note to a boy here in the school parking lot two days ago. I need to know who asked you to pass it along."

"Wasn't me." The kid violently shook his head.

I snickered when the old-school Shaggy song started to play in my head.

"You okay, boss?"

I looked at Graham and smirked. "His response made me think of a song. Now it's going to be stuck in my head."

I could see the moment it clicked for Graham. "Shit, now it's going to be stuck in mine too."

"Uh, can I go now?" The kid whose name I needed to get already tried to shimmy away but there was no getting past us. The kid was scrawny as shit underneath the baggy clothes.

"Not so fast. You got a name?"

"Benny?"

I quirked my brow at him. "Are you sure? Because you said it like it was a question."

"Yeah, I'm sure." Benny tried to puff his chest out, but compared to Graham and me, it looked more like a toddler trying to stand up to an adult.

"Okay, Benny. Tell us who asked you to deliver the note."

"I told you, I don't know nothing."

Benny here needed to go back to high school and give English class another try.

"See, I'm inclined not to believe you because I have a picture here that shows otherwise."

I yanked the surveillance picture I had John pull from the parking lot, and shoved it in Benny's face.

"That ain't me."

"How do you know when you didn't even look at it?"

Benny's eyes were glued to the ground. When it was clear he wasn't going to pick his head up to look at the picture, I moved it so Benny was forced to see it.

"Considering you're wearing the exact same clothes in the picture, I know you're lying."

"Fine, it was me." Benny pushed the picture away with his hand. "So what?"

The kid had a lot of attitude for someone who was going against two men twice his size. We weren't going to hurt him, but there was no way Benny could know that.

"I just want to know who asked you to deliver the note."

"I don't know!" Benny screeched. "Dude stopped me a block away and asked me to bring it here. Gave me a hundred bucks to do it."

"How did you know who to give it to?"

"Dude showed me a picture. It was easy money. I didn't ask no questions. I did what he said and left."

I believed him. I wasn't sure why, but I felt like he was telling me the truth.

"How did you know to avoid the cameras?"

"This is my hood. I know how to get around without being seen."

So he was a street kid just trying to survive. I would put money on the fact that he probably didn't graduate high school. Who knows when he dropped out, or how long he's been living this way.

I pulled all the cash I had out of my pocket. It wasn't much but it was a few hundred bucks. I added my business card with it as well.

"Here, take this. If the guy comes around again, call me. I'll handle him."

Benny grabbed the money and the card. Without another word, he took off down the street.

"You think he's going to call?"

I shrugged my shoulder and watched until Benny rounded the corner, out of my sight. "Maybe, maybe not, but he just made more now than he did from our mystery person, so I have to believe that will mean something."

"Money talks."

"It sure does."

"But it puts you back at square one," Graham said.

"Maybe. I'll have John check the cameras in the area. Maybe he can pick up where our mystery man paid Benny."

It was more information than we had before sitting on the bench, so I would take it. For now, at least.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Kassandra

I was going stir-crazy.

Correction, I was passed stir-crazy and well on my way to committing murder just to get some time out of my house.

Don't get me wrong, I loved my family. I loved that Brittany was coming over every night to spend time with Mikey and keep him occupied. I loved that Nate was finishing his homework with enough time to play online with his friends. Normally that much computer time would drive me bonkers, but he deserved it considering how hard he was working.

What I didn't love was that each night after dinner, David snuck away to work. Things were supposed to be different now that Michael was gone. I was no longer supposed to feel like a prisoner in my own home.

I was grateful David cooked breakfast for us every morning. I adored the fact that, most nights, dinner was ready or underway by the time I got home. It took a load off my plate, but that was the problem. I wasn't busy enough. I now had spare time, and I didn't know what to do with it.

Six days and everyone was busy except me.

And now I sounded like an ungrateful hag.

Gah! I let out a frustrated grunt and stomped out of my bedroom. I couldn't take it anymore. There was only so much work I could bring home before I started to let it consume me, and I wasn't about to let that happen.

I went in search of David. I found him pacing the living room with his phone attached to his ear. He was in the middle of a heated discussion with someone, and for the briefest of seconds, I considered walking away and not bothering him. But then I stopped. That was what I had done with Michael on more than one occasion and look where it got me.

"Let me call you back," David told whoever was on the other end of the call as soon as he saw me standing there. "Is everything okay?"

It was now or never. I took a deep breath and let everything I was feeling pour out. "No, everything's not okay. Being stuck in this house is driving me mad! Bringing home designs to keep me busy is starting to make me hate my career path. Not having enough to do around here is frustrating the hell out of me. I used to hate that Michael never contributed to a single thing but now you're being kind and cooking meals, helping Nate with his homework and just overall being perfect and it's making me feel useless!

"Oh God . . ." I dropped down on the couch and buried my head in my hands. "And now I sound like a nagging bitch," I grumbled.

David sat down next to me so that we were touching from shoulder to hip to knee. Every part of my left side was smashed up against his right.

"No, you don't. I'm sorry if me taking on all those things made you feel useless. I just wanted to help."

I groaned again. Why did he have to say all the right things?

"Too fucking perfect ..."

I should've known my whisper wouldn't be quiet enough for him to miss.

"Are you talking about yourself?"

I gave him a look that showed just how frustrated I was. "No, I was talking about you!" The words were far snappier than I wanted them to be.

"Sorry to tell you, but I'm far from perfect."

"See? Even you saying that makes you pretty damn perfect."

David wasn't going to win this argument. It was one of those "women logic" things that had no real logic at all. Only a fellow woman would understand.

"Now I'm confused."

"Exactly!" I threw my hands in the air.

"I feel like there's a part of this conversation I'm missing."

I flopped back into the cushion with a huff. "There is. Half of it is going on in my head."

He mimicked my position, but with a smile on his face, compared to the scowl I wore. "Well, at least I know now that it's not just me. I was starting to wonder if I was blacking out for seconds at a time."

I smirked at him. "How is it you know exactly how to calm me down?"

"Oh, I don't know shit. I was completely winging this whole ordeal. My next tactic was to throw a Snickers bar at you. Supposedly when people are cranky, that's what you give them. At least that's what all the commercials on TV say."

I howled out a laugh. That was not what I expected from him at all.

"I come at you whining and your solution is candy. You just might have the female population all figured out."

David lifted his one shoulder. "I doubt that's true but it was worth a shot. So, do you want to talk about everything you said was bothering you?"

Now that I wasn't running off anger and adrenaline, I didn't feel as confident. This was normally when I would back away and say no. Brush off my concerns and let them stew without ever tackling them head-on. But I was trying something new.

"I'm not really sure what to say."

"Okay, so let's start with me helping around the house. Would you like me to stop doing that?"

"No!" God, I was starting to regret my word vomit from minutes before. "Mikey and Nate can't stop raving about your cooking. Before you, breakfast consisted of cereal or maybe popping waffles in the toaster, but that was it. I never woke up in time to actually make something. I'm not sure how you do it."

David gifted me one of his smiles. "One of the perks of being an early riser. Once I'm up, I'm up. And I need to start doing something immediately otherwise boredom sets in and no one wants to see that."

"I mean, I kinda want to see it," I grumbled. It would be nice to know he was normal

like the rest of us.

"For you, I will try," he chuckled. "Okay, so keep making breakfast, but what about dinner and helping Nate with his homework? I never meant to overstep."

"You didn't, and I know you hate when I compare you to Michael, but he's the only person I have any experience with. Coming home was always hectic for me. I had to figure out dinner and then spend hours fighting with Nate to get his homework done. It was all I knew. Now suddenly, I have all this free time and no one to spend it with. Mikey is busy with Brittany. Nate can finally game with his friends. And you . . ."

"And I'm hiding away working, just like Michael did," David sighed, but I had to be honest with him, so I nodded my head yes. "I'm sorry," he continued. "This isn't normal for me. Yes, I work a lot but I don't usually have people around me. This week has been exceptionally difficult. My technical analyst is trying to figure out who sent the note, as well as who Michael was in bed with. One of the guys on my team from New Mexico is in Pennsylvania right now and shit there is coming to a head, so I had to send the team I had watching us down there, so now I'm worried about you and the kids, and your safety. I have a pregnant technical analyst in New Mexico who is driving everyone batty. Add in the sexual frustration, and it's just a lot at once. Obviously I'm not handling it well."

Now I felt even more foolish. Here I was complaining he was helping too much when David had his own problems to take care of.

"I didn't mean to add to your worry," I said quietly.

David grabbed my hand and laced our fingers together. "You're not. Keeping you, Mikey, and Nate safe is my top priority."

"Right, but your teams need you elsewhere."

He snorted and shook his head. "If my teams needed me, then they aren't as good as they should be. Neither of my top-tier teams need me for anything other than to run interference for them. And that's all I'm doing when I take calls. They're great at the boots-on-the-ground stuff, but when it comes to working with agencies or handling anything delicate, that's where I come in. I'm paving their way and that's something I can easily do from here. It just sucks that I can't have the team I want watching you. I trust my other Boston teams, but Cobra is the best. They are the ones I want looking after you when my attention is split between the boys being in school and you at work."

"Is me going into work a problem for you?"

I loved being able to leave the house and spend time working on my designs outside of my bedroom, but if it put my safety at risk, then I would suck it up.

"No, I have someone watching your office building. It might not be who I want, but it's someone I trust nonetheless. Just like I have someone watching the school. It's how I have time to make dinner for you every night. I delegate well."

"And we still don't know who is behind the threat?"

David scrubbed at the short beard on his face. It was one of the few times I saw him show his frustration. "Not a clue, which is concerning in itself. There should be some kind of paper trail we can follow but there's nothing. I haven't seen anything like it before."

"I wish there was some way I could help you."

I didn't know the first thing about technology other than the basics. I didn't pay enough attention to Michael's life to know who he spoke to. I was happy keeping our stuff separated as much as humanly possible.

"You don't need to help. I just need to figure out how to manage it all without shutting you out, like I have been."

Something else David said just hit me. Something I completely glossed over until now. I wasn't sure how to ask about it, so I cleared my throat and stumbled through my question.

"You ummm . . . mentioned . . . sexual frustration. Did I . . . hear that . . . correctly?" I sounded like a blubbing idiot but some of the embarrassment fell to the wayside when David's cheeks had a hint of pink to them.

I was pretty sure he was blushing.

"Yeah, you did."

"Care to explain?"

David was off the couch and pacing the living room before I finished the question. This was obviously a whole new level of frustration for him.

"You have to know I find you attractive. I've said as much."

He had, but he'd also avoided me. I didn't get to say that to him though because he continued to talk.

"You also have to know how good you look every day when you go to work. I mean, come on! Every outfit hugs your perfect curves like they were made specifically for you. I'm jealous of how closely your clothes get to touch you."

Well now, that was just silly, but again, he didn't let me get a word in.

"But you look equally as good when you come home and change. I don't think there's a single thing you don't look sexy in. It's driving me mad."

I raised my hand like a schoolgirl and waited for him to notice me.

"Are you seriously raising your hand right now?" he huffed.

"Uh, yeah. You haven't let me say anything since you started pacing, so I figured this was my best shot at getting your attention. It worked too."

"Sorry, what were you going to say?"

Any other time I would never consider this, but David wasn't the only one sexually frustrated. I was long overdue, so what the hell?

"I may have a way to help you with that."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

David

Kassandra's voice was laced with something I hadn't heard from her before.

"Oh?" I sat next to her again and laced our fingers together.

She suddenly had my full attention since it was clear I'd been denying her that lately. I hated when she compared me to Michael, but as it turned out, I was acting just like him.

"I don't want you to think when it comes to us. I need to know for sure that I'm everything you want."

I've wanted to pull her into my arms since it dawned on me this was more than just friendship. The only thing stopping me was the fact that for once, since high school, I didn't want casual. Kassandra and I could never be that.

"I've already told you," she continued, "Michael was a cheap replacement for you. It was always you, David. Since the very beginning, you were the man I wanted. My timing just sucked." She shrugged her delicate shoulder.

"No, your timing was just right," I argued. "Now I get to help you raise two amazing boys into the men they are clearly meant to be."

Her face softened and I knew in that moment I was making the right choice. This

wasn't just about her. Cassandra was a package deal, and if there was one thing the last week had taught me, it was that I wanted to be a part of that package, not looking in from the sidelines. I wanted to be in the thick of it all.

I wanted to help around the house. To see Nate flourish in math and to go to every one of Mikey's hockey games.

I wanted to see them both graduate and I wanted to do it with Cassandra by my side and in my arms.

Kassandra stood up from the couch and pulled me with her. "Come with me."

She didn't know it yet but I would follow her to the ends of the earth if it meant I got to be this close.

I walked close behind her, up the stairs and down the long hallway. Both Mikey's and Nate's doors were closed and no sound was coming from their rooms.

Like a lost puppy, I followed Cassandra into her bedroom. The first thing I noticed was the room matched her personality. There was nothing masculine about it.

"Michael hasn't slept in here in over five years. I completely changed the room when he started spending the night elsewhere or in his office."

I liked that this place was solely hers. I spun her around so she was wrapped up in my arms and cradled her cheek in my palm.

"I'm glad you told me, but it doesn't change the fact that, no matter what, I am spending the night with you. Nothing is going to stop me from having you in my arms."

The lightest pink dusted the apple of her cheeks.

“Please don’t let me overthink this. It’s been so long since I’ve had anything other than my toys and it’s only ever been Michael. I know it hasn’t been the same for you, so again please . . .”

I shut her up the only way I could think of. By taking her lips with mine. She didn’t want to overthink and I wasn’t about to let her. She wasn’t the only one who was nervous, but unlike her lack of confidence, I knew I could make her forget her dead husband.

The kiss was everything I thought it would be and so much more.

Passionate.

Sexy.

Loving.

All wrapped up in one.

Our tongues dueled. Her hands were everywhere. My arms, my back, my neck, in my hair. She even grabbed my ass so that my rock-hard cock was pressing even more so into her belly. She lit up at my hands and lips on her, and I couldn’t wait to see what she did when I had her in bed.

I grabbed the hem of her oversized shirt and yanked it up. “I need this off you.”

Her hands were in the air immediately. If her soft belly hadn’t grab my attention, I would’ve compared her to an eager toddler ready to be undressed.

“So fucking sexy,” I sighed.

Kassandra didn't bother with lace bras but the cotton one she wore was no less beautiful. Especially with her tits spilling out of it, and the fact that with one snap of the hooks, it was lying on the floor.

I could see the doubt was starting to creep in the longer I stood there staring at her. So instead of letting her mind take over, I backed us both up until her knees hit the bed and I was falling down on top of her.

“I plan to devour every inch of this delectable body by the time morning comes.”

With one arm looped behind her back, I scooted us up the bed until her hair fanned the pillow. I started with her neck. Teeth grazing, I noted every shiver, every chuckle, every moan. I catalogued it for the future because there was no way once would ever be enough.

I worked my way down her collarbone to her breasts and immediately took one in my mouth and the other in my hand. I sucked, nibbled, and twirled my tongue around the bud until her back was arching off the bed in ecstasy.

“David . . .” Her moan was louder than acceptable, considering there were kids in the house. I pulled my mouth off of her tit with a pop and looked her in her lust-filled eyes.

“You need to stay quiet or this ends.”

Her response to that was to grab a throw pillow and shove it in her face. Chuckling, I went back to making her body sing for me. I learned rather quickly that she was responsive as hell to everything I did.

If I sucked on a spot, shivers erupted. When I used my teeth, she moaned. And when I put my tongue to good use, I could feel her whole body come alive. Cassandra's body was made for loving.

I swirled my tongue around her navel and dipped it just below her yoga pants line and I thought for sure she was going to fly through the roof her body jumped so much.

“Holy shit, I didn't think that could feel so good.”

I smiled and rubbed my lips across her belly. “You ain't seen nothing yet. I think it's time we get rid of these.”

Her yoga pants and panties were flying across the room before I finished my statement. Cassandra had the perfect little landing strip pointing right to the promised land. I didn't need the direction to know exactly where I wanted to go but I appreciated the effort.

“Why am I the only one naked?” Cassandra asked on a heavy exhale.

I sat up on my knees and shucked my shirt without a second thought. If she wanted me naked, I would happily oblige.

“Better?”

“I mean, naked would be best but that's a good start, and holy shit. When do you find time to work out?”

I tossed my head back with a laugh. I was used to people commenting on my body especially when they were used to seeing me in a suit, but somehow Cassandra's question just hit harder.

“For a reaction like that, I will always make the time.”

I slid off the bed and stood up, popping the button on my jeans and watching as her eyes followed the movements of my hands. I would be lying if I said I didn't add a little extra flair simply because she was watching me. Especially when my dick jumped out of my boxers as I shoved them down my legs.

“Ummm . . . you're a lot more endowed than my dildo.”

I was torn between laughing some more and proving to her how much better I was than any toy she had.

“Don't worry. I'll make sure you're nice and wet to take all of me,” I told her as I crawled back up her body.

I could already see her glistening. There was no doubt in my mind she was ready, but I would take it a step or two further.

I started back at her nipples and kissed my way down her stomach until I was exactly where I wanted to be.

The heaven located at the junction of her legs.

“Spread 'em for me,” I instructed, assisting her with my shoulders.

The first swipe was proof that I had died and gone to heaven. “So fucking sweet.” One taste wouldn't be enough. I could spend hours worshipping her pussy and lapping up the juices she was gifting me.

Sucking, spearing, nibbling. There was nothing I didn't do to lay claim to the lips in front of me. I wasn't happy until I was coated in her essence and she was flying off

the cliff and joining me in this heavenly death.

Thank God for the throw pillow. I was sure Cassandra would've screamed down the house if given the chance.

I worked my way back up her body until my forearms framed her head and I yanked the pillow away.

"How you doing up here?"

"I think I died. I'm dead. That's the only way to describe the fact that my entire body feels like Jell-O right now."

"I mean, I would like to think I could take some of that credit," I chuckled.

"Oh, God." She tried to cover her face but my arms were in the way, so she was left with closing her eyes. "I didn't mean it like that."

"I know you didn't." I couldn't have her blissful state slip away, so I notched my cock at her entrance. "I would really like to take you bare, but if you prefer, I can go grab a condom."

It would kill me to leave her right now but I would do it. For her, I would do anything.

When her small hands grabbed my ass cheeks and pulled, I knew we were on the same page but she still gifted me the words. "I want that too."

I wasted no time entering her, but pausing before I became a two-pump chump for the first time in my life. "You fit me like a glove ..."

“I didn’t know sex could feel like this.”

I started slow. A sensual in and out to get her accustomed to my size. “Like what?”

“Perfect . . . just perfect.”

For our first time together, I took it slow. I showed her what it was like to make love. I poured every feeling I had into my movements so there was no doubt how I felt about her.

I built us both back up until we were flying off the edge together. I never understood why authors wrote about coming in sync with their partner until now. There was something extra special knowing Cassandra and I finished together.

It was still dark but I knew even without looking at a clock that it was time I snuck out.

I hated to do it. We had sex two more times before finally falling asleep together just two hours ago. My body didn’t know the meaning of “sleeping in,” so like clockwork I was ready to go.

Kassandra didn’t move a muscle when I slid out of the bed and brushed my lips across her hair. She looked like a sated angel sleeping there and I wanted nothing more than to crawl back into the bed with her, but not today. We had yet to discuss how she would tell her boys; I figured them seeing us in bed wasn’t how it should go.

Instead, I collected my clothes and got dressed silently before slipping out of her room.

This morning called for an extra special breakfast and I knew exactly what I planned to make.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Kassandra

How was one supposed to act the morning after having the best sex of their life?

I wasn't asking for a friend. I needed to know because right now, I was freaking out.

Sex with David wasn't just good.

It wasn't just great.

It wasn't even fantastic.

It was out of this world, and I wanted more of it. Lots more. Like every day for the rest of my life, and not because my heart was involved, even though it was, but because it was that damn good . I wanted copious amounts of sex to make up for the years I had been missing out.

And now I sounded like a damn hussy. I threw my blankets aside. It was time to get my ass moving or I would be late.

I felt it the first step I took. The delicious soreness between my legs that reminded me exactly what I put my body through the night before. Not that my mind could forget, but it was nice to have the extra hint throughout the day.

My morning routine was rushed. I didn't have time to blow-dry my hair, so instead, it

went into a bun at the nape of my neck. Precious seconds were spent picking my outfit for the day. I knew David liked me in skirts and dresses, but I was feeling the need for a changeup. I yanked a pair of wide-legged dress pants off their hanger and paired it with a cute blouse.

The outfit still showcased my curves, so I considered it a win. Adding a few accessories, I was finally confident enough to face the music.

Or at least I thought I was.

Until I stepped into the kitchen and found David once again behind the stove cooking breakfast and both Mikey and Nate eating at the table. Suddenly I was back to being unsure of how I was supposed to act.

"Good morning!" My voice was a few octaves too high and drew the attention of everyone in the room.

"You okay, Mom? You look a little red."

Well, if I wasn't failing at this whole keeping-it-cool thing, then I was Santa Claus himself.

"Ah, yup. Just woke up late and had to rush through a scalding shower."

The coffee pot was calling my name, but to get to it, I needed to pass by David and I wasn't sure I could do that. My kids might not have noticed the smirk he wore on his face but I sure as hell did. It wasn't helping matters either.

Finally, the lack of caffeine in my system won out. I managed to walk through the kitchen like nothing was wrong, but stumbled when David whispered, "Good morning, beautiful. How did you sleep?"

"Good." The single word came out as a croak and my hands shook as I tried to pour my first cup of the morning.

"Here, let me help you."

This was going to be torture. My entire body shivered when his fingers grazed across my hand. David didn't look the least bit affected like I was. It was aggravating.

"Hey, Mom? What are your thoughts on going out tonight?" Mikey asked.

Huh? David had me so tied up in knots that my brain was having trouble computing.
"Going out?"

"Yeah, there's this festival in town that Brittany and I want to go to. I thought it would be fun for all of us to go."

I looked at David before answering. After our discussion last night, I didn't want to do anything that would put my family at risk, no matter how much I wanted to get out of the house.

"Yeah, I don't see why not," David answered. "Just let me know where the festival is so I can have a team look over the location first."

"Do you really think we're in danger if we go out?" Nate asked.

"I don't think so," David replied, "since there's been no hint that anyone is following any of you. It'll just be a precaution, but I think a night out would be good for everyone. I know I can't be the only one going a little crazy, being stuck in the house so much." David looked at me when he said it. I hid my smile behind my coffee mug. It was good to know he listened when I spoke.

Mikey and Nate grumbled their agreements before dashing out of the house to get to school. They still gave me a kiss on the cheek and reminded me they loved me, but they seemed a bit too eager to leave David and me alone.

"I've wanted to do this since you walked in the room," David growled as he yanked me in for a kiss.

There was nothing sweet about it as he devoured my lips. The lip gloss I so carefully put on was nibbled away in seconds. David knew how to kiss. He knew how to bring me to my knees. The only thing keeping me upright was his arm looped around my back. Tingles overtook my body in the best way possible, and I was completely lost in the way he made me feel.

I whimpered when he pulled away, but then wanted to scowl when he merely chuckled. "If I don't stop now, there's no way you're getting to work anytime soon."

"Work's overrated," I huffed.

"You say that now because you're kiss drunk, but you'd be singing a different tune later."

That was probably true, but I didn't need to confess that he was right.

"I just want it on the record that a good-morning kiss is much better than coffee to start the day."

David threw his head back and barked out a laugh.

"I'll keep that in mind for the future. But I guessed you weren't ready to tell your sons yet, so I figured waiting until they left was a better idea."

"Shit, no, I'm not ready for them to know yet. Thank you for sneaking out this morning." I pouted at the thought.

I was seriously considering changing my stance on that thought though, even though I knew it was for the best. Mikey might be in favor of me dating but that didn't mean he was ready for us to throw it in his face. I needed to ease my kids into it.

"Like I said, I guessed as much but now you're going to be late because that outfit is doing crazy things to me."

I was late to work but not terribly. Although, enough for Amanda to notice and comment on it. She also noticed the omelet David made me to bring as breakfast. The man truly was a saint.

"Okay, today is definitely the day you got laid. It's written all over your face and I'm pretty sure I noticed you walking funny just now."

I dropped my ass in the chair and let my purse fall to the ground, something I never did. I treated that thing like it was worth thousands and always stored it in my desk.

"I did. And it was fucking amazing. Like I mean, really damn spectacular."

I was still reeling from the second kiss he gave me and the smack on the ass on my way out the door. I wasn't even sure how I got to work. I could've been speeding. I could've run a few red lights for all I know.

"Yes!" Amanda squealed and did a little happy dance in her stilettos before dropping down into my guest chair. "Please tell me it was with the hunk who's been staying with you?"

My hackles rose. "How do you know David is hunky?"

Amanda had yet to meet him and I would say for a good reason, but that would be a lie. I didn't worry that David would check out my assistant like Michael used to. He just wasn't that kind of man.

"Because I know you and you told me what he did for a living. There's no way a man like that lets himself go."

"You're right, he is hunky, and his body is to die for. I have no idea when he finds time to work out but whatever he's doing is working. I wanted to lick whipped cream off his abs last night."

"So why the hell didn't you?"

"Because we didn't have any," I whined and Amanda burst out laughing.

It felt so good to have someone to talk to about this. For years I had to listen to Amanda talk about the men she dated—mostly losers—and her active love life, while I sat there and lived vicariously through her. Now I understood why she liked having sex so much.

"So it was that good, huh?"

"Oh my God, I didn't realize it could be that good. The reason I gave up sex so easily with Michael was because it sucked. He got himself off but didn't care about me. David's nothing like that. I swear he made it his life's mission to wring every orgasm he could out of me until I was a passed-out mess."

"Oh, Kas, that's exactly the kind of sex you should've been having all this time. I hate that you've missed out all these years."

Amanda was the only person who called me by a nickname. I normally hated when

people shortened my name, but coming from Amanda, I liked it. Mostly because Amanda wasn't fake or trying to impress people. Unlike a lot of other people in my life.

"Well, I have it now, and I'm not letting go."

"Good for you. Does this mean the two of you are finally an item?"

I chuckled at her use of the word. I was too old to be using those kinds of words to describe my relationships. "It means we are seeing each other but taking things slow for the sake of my kids. I don't want to throw more at them with everything else going on."

"How are things going with operation 'find out who Michael screwed over'?"

I shook my head. Only Amanda would name my current dilemma.

"Not great. David's frustrated with the lack of progress. I'm frustrated with being stuck inside all the time. Our combined frustration is kinda how we ended up doing what we did."

"I love it. Sex is a great stress reliever, and I must say, getting laid looks good on you."

"Thanks."

"Okay, as much as I could talk sex all day, we need to finish up ordering the furniture for your number one client. You wanted that done by the end of the week and that's today."

Right. Work. I needed to focus on what paid the bills. I could daydream about David

later before sneaking him into my bed again tonight.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

David

Maybe the Japan Festival wasn't the best idea. It featured food, vendors, games, and traditional Japanese activities including local performers, but there were too many damn people around and keeping my hands off Kassandra was proving harder by the minute. I had plenty of excuses to touch her back when guiding her through the crowd but no reason to keep my hand there permanently or to hold her hand. It was frustrating as hell.

I wanted to scream from the rooftops that she was mine. I wanted to tattoo it on my body but I understood her need to wait. We needed to bring Mikey and Nate around to the idea, not throw it at them so soon after their father died. Even if he was an asshole.

"I don't remember the festival being this busy in years past." Brittany was as sweet as Kassandra said she was. I had the pleasure of briefly meeting her when she would come to the house to hang out with Mikey but tonight was the first time I spent any quality time with her.

She was a mini version of Kassandra. No wonder Mikey adored her.

"Even though I'm from here," I responded, "I can honestly say I've never been to this particular festival."

"No?" Brittany sounded shocked. "I swear my parents insist on visiting festivals like

this in every town we've ever visited. I think I have the same obsession," she added sheepishly.

"I think it's cool." Mikey was quick to defend her.

"I agree. Unfortunately, my parents weren't nearly as cool as yours and I forgot all about these kinds of things after I left the Marines. I was busy starting my company and didn't have anyone to go with."

"Well, now you do." Kassandra hooked her arm through mine and that was how we walked for the next thirty minutes until my ringing phone forced me to pull away.

"Sorry, I need to take this." My teams knew I was taking the night "off." I told them to only call if it was an emergency, so the fact that they were reaching out meant something happened.

"Jacob, what happened?"

Jacob was a member of one of my Boston teams, not Cobra since they were still in Pennsylvania helping Gage.

He was assigned to monitoring the house while we were out.

"The house is gone."

I stopped a few feet away from where our group was looking at one of the local vendors. I kept my eyes on Kassandra and hers were on mine, so I knew the moment she sensed something was up.

"What do you mean the house is gone? How could it be gone? It was standing just fine a couple of hours ago."

"One minute everything was fine, and the next, it exploded. I'm talking a huge -ball-of-fire kind of explosion. There's nothing left but the foundation."

My brain was having trouble comprehending what Jacob was saying. It made no sense.

Well, logistically it made sense. I knew better than anyone how to level a house. I just wasn't understanding how it happened to Kassandra's.

"When?"

"About ten minutes ago. I called 911 and waited for the fire department to show up before I called you. I wanted to make sure no one tried to get close."

"Did you see anything out of the ordinary before that?"

"Nope, and I've been here since you left," Jacob was quick to add.

"Okay, stay close until I give you further instructions. We'll probably go back to the house I have in that neighborhood, but I'll let you know for sure. I need to call John and see if anything popped on the cameras."

"Copy that."

Kassandra walked over with concern in her eyes. "Everything okay?"

"No, but I need to make one more call and then I'll explain."

She nodded but didn't move away. I hit John's number and waited for my technical analyst to pick up.

"Hey, David. I thought you were taking the night off?" John was one of the few people at Boston that didn't call me Black.

"I was. I need you to check the cameras for me."

I didn't have to tell him which cameras I was referring to. There was only one thing on my mind these days.

"Sure thing. What exactly am I looking for?"

"Anything suspicious. I would focus on today. Call Jacob and he'll give you the details."

"You got it. I'll hit you back soon."

Something was definitely wrong with the system. I should've been alerted when the house blew up. At the very least I would've received a warning that some of the cameras were no longer connected.

"David, you're freaking me out. What happened? And what cameras are you talking about?"

I forgot that I never told her about the system I had installed. We discussed doing it but I never confirmed when it was done. So much was going on it slipped my mind.

"The cameras I had installed around your house." When it looked like she was about to argue, I rushed on. "They were only on the outside and it was just so I could see if anyone was coming or going while we were away. I needed to know if anyone besides my team was watching your house."

"Okay, so why would there be anything suspicious going on?"

I didn't know how else to tell her other than to rip the Band-Aid off. "Because your house blew up about fifteen minutes ago."

She looked like a fish out of water. Her lips were opening and closing but nothing was coming out. She was in shock. There was no other explanation for it and who could blame her? Her entire life just exploded.

Literally.

"I'm sorry. You're going to have to repeat that. Maybe a little slower this time because there's no way I heard you correctly."

I grabbed her arms and leaned down so that her sole focus was on me. "There's no easy way for me to say this. Your house is gone. Leveled. There's absolutely nothing left." There was probably a million other ways I could've given her the news, but I needed her to understand the severity of what was happening.

"We need to go. Now. I'm sorry. I know this was supposed to be a night out for everyone, but I need to make sure you're safe."

Kassandra nodded her head in agreement but she was back to being in shock. Once again her mouth was open but no words were coming out.

I grabbed the boys and Brittany, using the excuse that something came up and we needed to go. Thankfully no one questioned me until we were back in my SUV.

"What's going on?" Like usual, it was Mikey who took the lead. I was starting to notice that he easily fell into the "man of the house" role. Whether he was like that before his father died or because of the death was still a mystery.

When it was obvious Kassandra wasn't going to answer, I made the decision to be as

honest as possible.

"I had one of the guys on my team watching the house tonight, like I've done every night since you got the note. That was who called before. Your house blew up a little bit ago."

"Blew up as in, it's on fire?"

"No, blew up as in, it's gone. There's nothing left."

The ride back was silent and the longest fifteen minutes of my life. I bounced between watching the road and checking on everyone else in the vehicle. Brittany looked equally concerned and held Mikey the entire time.

The block around where the house used to sit was cordoned off by police cars and fire trucks. We couldn't see the house, not that I expected to considering what Jacob said.

Heavy smoke filled the air as I pulled into the driveway of my house.

"Who lives here?" It was the first time Cassandra spoke since we left the festival.

"I do." I could see the confusion but now wasn't the time to explain. Not out here in the driveway where we were sitting ducks.

I opened the garage door and pulled the SUV inside. No one argued as I ushered them inside.

The place didn't look lived in because it wasn't. I rarely stayed here anymore. My life was in New Mexico these days. I had a cleaning crew come in weekly and I'd stopped in twice this past week to pick up clothes, but that was it.

I could tell the moment Cassandra recognized where she was.

"When did you buy this house?"

I wasn't ready to spill all my secrets, but unfortunately, I no longer had a choice. Whoever blew up her house took it away from me.

"Ten years ago." I scratched the back of my neck as I waited for her to put it together.

"It's you," she said in disbelief. "It's been you this whole time."

I nodded my head. This was the first property I purchased under an LLC that couldn't be traced back to my security company. Over the years, I'd bought dozens of places, including the house in Pennsylvania that Gage was using. And all of them were designed by her.

"How did you know?" she gasped.

I guess now was as good of a time as any to tell her everything. "I've always kept tabs on you. When I found out you were opening your own design company, I wanted to help. I wanted to be your first client, so I bought this place."

For the first time, I couldn't get a read on what she was thinking. Was she pissed, happy, confused? Did she want to kick my ass that I was closer than she realized this whole time? I didn't have the first clue what to think about her silence.

"It all makes so much sense now."

I looked around the house like it had the answer to what she meant. "What does?"

"Why you never gave input. Why I was given full rein to do what I wanted. Why I

dealt with some random secretary and never the owner. Amanda and I came up with a million different scenarios of who the owner was, but never did I think it was you."

I wasn't sure if that was a compliment or not. I had a feeling it wasn't, but right now wasn't the time to go into it. I needed to get them settled so I could find out what happened.

"You already know the place, so make yourself comfortable. I'll have groceries delivered in the morning and I'll send one of my men to get the necessities. We'll have to figure out a time to get your stuff replaced. I promise it will be sooner rather than later."

"I didn't even think about all the stuff we lost . . ."

Oh, shit. I could see where this was headed. Cassandra was one step away from a panic attack.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Kassandra

Oh God.

We lost everything.

Every. Single. Thing. Gone just like that.

All the childhood memories I saved over the years? Poof. Gone.

Every trophy my boys earned? Swept away like they never existed.

We had to start completely over and with what? I had very little in savings. Certainly not enough to start fresh.

My heart was beating frantically. I couldn't get enough air into my lungs.

"Kassandra, you need to breathe." David was the only thing in my line of vision. I kept my focus on him and tried to listen to his words.

When he took my hand and placed it on his chest, I tried to match the rhythm of his breathing.

In for three. Out for three.

In for three. Out for three.

I repeated that several more times until it no longer felt like there was an elephant sitting on my chest.

"I'm okay." I looked around the room for the first time and realized Mikey, Nate, and Brittany were all staring at me, concern written all over their faces. "I'm okay," I reassured them again.

"I love you, Mom. We're going to get through this." Leave it to my oldest to know exactly what I needed to hear in that moment.

"Come here," I said, stretching out my arms to them. Both boys came and wrapped their own arms around me. Considering both of them were almost a head taller than me, it was more them comforting me than the other way around. "I love you guys so much. You're right, we'll get through this."

I had no idea how I was going to make that happen, but for their sakes I would do it.

"How about you show them to their rooms?" David offered. "Brittany, did you want to call your parents and let them know what's happening?"

"I texted them when we left the festival. They'll be picking me up soon."

I waited until Brittany left, and after apologizing profusely to her father for what was going on, I went back into the house and showed Mikey and Nate up to their temporary bedrooms.

When I picked the furniture for this house, I kept both spare bedrooms neutral. At the time I thought it odd that the owner wanted both rooms to be for guests. Most people only ever set up one guest room and used the other as an office or maybe a gym. But

the person I spoke to insisted on bedrooms. It was one of the only requests made and I was grateful for it now.

"Both are queen beds, so take your pick," I told my sons. The rooms were right next to each other on this side of the upstairs. There was also a bathroom that made up the entire right side of the second floor.

Nate didn't bother to look at the bedroom before he chose it. He just walked right in and sat on the bed. Mikey and I followed him inside.

"Talk to me, kiddo."

"We really lost everything?" he asked, looking defeated and small.

"I can't say for sure, but that's my guess. As soon as they let me, I'll go over and look for myself." I took a breath, trying to come up with the right words. All I could manage was, "I'm sorry this is happening."

"This isn't your fault, Mom." Mikey was insistent as he stood next to me with his arms crossed over his chest. "This all goes back to Dad."

"We don't know that for sure." I didn't know if I was trying to convince them or myself because every fiber of my being screamed this was directly related to whatever mess Michael had gotten himself into.

Mikey scoffed. "Don't cover for him anymore. I know you always wanted to protect us but we're way past that at this point. We just lost everything and it's all his fault."

I released a loud exhale. I couldn't keep lying to them, even if it was to protect them from what was happening.

"You're right. It's most likely all his fault. Your father made stupid decisions before he died and left me to pick up the pieces." It felt good to talk to them about this. I was always insistent that talking bad about the other parent was wrong, but sometimes it did more damage to lie. "But we will get through this. I promise you that."

Mikey wrapped his arm around my shoulder. "I know we will, Mom. Together we can do anything."

Nate nodded his head in agreement. My sweet boy was always so quiet and let his big brother take control.

"Are you going to be okay tonight, kiddo?" I met Nate's devastated gaze.

"Yeah. It's just a shock, but I'll be fine. It was nice of David to let us stay here."

"It was very nice of him." Even if I was confused about what this all meant. "Get some sleep. It's been a long night."

"Night, Mom. I love you."

"I love you too."

I followed Mikey into the next bedroom, but unlike his brother, my oldest didn't sit down on the bed. He spun around and faced me head-on. "Do you remember what I told you about dating?"

I gulped and nodded my head.

"I'm not stupid. I see the way David looks at you. He was trying so hard all night to keep his hands to himself. Why?"

I didn't know what to say, so I settled on, "It's complicated."

"Do you like him?"

I bobbed my head up and down.

"Does he like you?"

Again, I nodded.

"Then it's not complicated. I want you to date. Nate would want you to date. David's a great guy. As long as he treats you right, we don't have any issue with it."

"You mean that?"

Mikey let out a very exaggerated sigh. "Yes, Mom."

"Okay."

"Good. Now go see David. I'm going to crash."

It was too early for my son to go to sleep but I recognized the brushoff for what it was. "I love you."

"I love you too." His smile was so much like his father's that I sometimes wondered if I would hate seeing it, but then I remembered he was nothing like the man who contributed to his DNA. The two couldn't be farther on the spectrum if they tried.

I left Mikey's room and headed straight for the master bedroom. David was already there, standing at the edge of the bed, waiting for me.

“Are you okay?” he asked gently, opening his arms to me, ready to let me fall apart. Which I did immediately.

I cried.

I cried for the injustice Michael left me with.

I cried for all the stuff my boys lost.

I cried for all the memories that were now gone.

But mostly I cried because just when things were starting to go right, this had to happen.

“Go ahead, let it all out,” David cooed. A bit of a strange sound to come out of such a strong man but I loved it nonetheless.

“Is everything really gone?” I had to ask.

“It is but I promise I will replace the material things. I know I can’t replace the memories but I will replace everything else.”

I stepped out of his embrace. “I told you before I didn’t want your money and don’t think I forgot about the security system you installed. We need to talk about how I’m paying for that.”

“I must not have made myself clear last night when I made love to you. It’s no longer my stuff. It’s our stuff. I plan to have you in my life forever, so anything that’s mine is now yours.”

I was back to having a panic attack again.

“You can’t mean that so soon.”

I almost missed the part where David was now undressing me.

Almost.

“Ummm . . . what are you doing?”

“Showing you again what I obviously didn’t do a good enough job of last night. Before the morning comes, I’m going to remind you over and over again that you’re mine. I’ll wait until your boys are ready to make it official, but between you and me, I will make it known.”

“Mikey already knows,” I blurted out.

David stopped but only for a second. “Good. That means we just need to tell Nate.”

“I’d like to wait until the shock of losing everything wears off. I think it would be too much for him to absorb right now.”

We were both completely naked now and I missed most of it by rambling. Last night I got to enjoy the show but tonight was different. Tonight was about David offering me comfort, and for once, I was going to be the greedy one and accept it.

“I need you inside me,” I said, giving in. “I need you to make me forget I lost everything.”

David brushed his lips against mine. “I’ll do so much more than that. I’ll give you everything you ever wanted.”

And just like last night, he laid me down on the bed and slipped inside me.

There was no foreplay this time. No slow buildup, although I was plenty wet just from thinking about his naked body.

No, tonight was about being connected as one.

Tonight was about me showing David just how much I loved him. Tomorrow I could give him the words.

And before I fell asleep, I whispered that it was up to him if he wanted to stay through the night.

CHAPTER TWENTY

David

It took all my willpower to slip my arm out from under Kassandra's warm body for the second morning in a row. I didn't want to leave her. I know she left the decision up to me, but it felt right to slip out until we had the opportunity to talk to her boys about it. Especially Nate.

Brushing my lips across her cheek, I snuck out of the bed and tiptoed across the room. Grabbing shorts and a shirt on the way, I yanked them on before exiting, closing the door behind me with a soft click. I turned around to head down the hallway but froze.

Standing just outside his bedroom door was Nate. We were locked in a staredown for several moments before he spoke first.

"Just don't hurt her. She's had enough of that from my father over the years."

Words got caught in my throat. Not that Nate gave me time to answer before he slipped inside his own bedroom and left me alone with a million thoughts racing through my head.

There went every best-laid plan we had to wait until Nate got over the first trauma before telling him.

Guilt ate at me because it wasn't just her kids we were keeping things from. Before I

could think better of it, I yanked my phone out of my gym shorts pocket and placed a call.

"Middle-of-the-night phone calls are never good." Addison's sleepy voice hit me square in the chest.

I swore. "Sorry, I forgot about the time change."

"It's okay." Rustling on the other end of the line hinted to my daughter moving around until she found a more comfortable position. "You wouldn't be calling if it wasn't important. Everything good?"

"Would you be upset if I started dating someone?" I didn't know the first thing about this parenting gig. I was figuring it out as I went, with the help of my adult daughter, but talking to her about dating felt like the right thing to do.

"I'm assuming you're referring to Kassandra?"

"Who told you?"

I didn't tell anyone from the New Mexico office why I was returning to Boston except for Bree. As far as they knew, it was just another trip to check on the main headquarters.

"Do you really think Bree didn't tell me what was going on?"

I laughed. "Of course she did. It would've been too much to hope she was too busy with Gage's situation to keep her mouth shut about my business."

"She's never too busy. I swear she's the only pregnant woman who has excess energy in their first trimester."

We both chuckled but I had to ask again. "You didn't answer my question. Would you be upset?"

Addison sighed. "No one should get a say in your dating life except you, but if you want the truth . . ." I waited on pins and needles as she paused. "I kinda wish it were someone else. Mom talked about Cassandra a lot. I know they were best friends. She mentioned more than once that she knew her friend was in love with you but never did anything about it. I think Mom always knew that, if given the chance, you would've chosen Cassandra over her."

"That's not true," I was quick to reassure my daughter. "In high school I was madly in love with your mother. She was the only woman I ever had eyes for. Cassandra was just my best friend. At one time I was enamored by Madalyn, but it was young love."

"And now?"

I sighed. "Now, I'm older and I can see why people say they fall in love with their best friend."

"I guess it's no better than me falling in love with your best friend."

I groaned and Addison chuckled. "Please don't remind me."

"Oh, I'm going to remind you every day for the rest of your life, Dad."

I loved when she called me that. It wasn't very often she used it, but it was a dopamine hit to my system every time.

"But on a serious note," she continued, "if you're happy, then I'm happy. I don't want you to spend your life alone like Mom did. That's no way for a person to live."

"How did you get so smart?"

My daughter sighed. "Good genetics. Mom might have raised me, but you contributed a lot."

It sucked that I missed so much of her life. It would've been great to watch her grow up, but we were making the best of the time we had together.

"Is Liam taking good care of you?"

I didn't miss the grumble from my best friend on the other end of the line. I couldn't have picked a better person for my daughter.

"Of course he is."

I refused to think about the innuendo that statement came with. Addison was a troublemaker through and through. She kept Liam and the rest of my team on their toes. Paired with Bree, and the only reason I wasn't bailing them out of jail was because they lived in the middle of nowhere.

"I'm sorry I'm not there to spend time with you. I promised you would have my undivided attention and then I went back on my word."

"Dad," she sighed. "I'm not a little girl anymore. I love to spend time with you but I know what your job entails. I can't be okay with Liam leaving for assignments and then get mad at you for doing the same. That's not fair."

"No, but . . ."

"But you still feel guilty about not knowing of my existence until recently," she interrupted me.

"Exactly."

"You need to stop feeling guilty. It wasn't your fault. It was Mom's. She had her reasons, even if they were terrible ones. We're moving forward. No more living in the past."

"You're right." I shook off the melancholy and got back to the reason for my call. "I'm sorry I woke you up early. I just wanted to make sure you would be okay with me dating."

"Did my opinion really matter?"

I wanted to say yes, but I wasn't so sure. Now that I had Cassandra back in my life, I wasn't sure if I could have given her up.

"I would've tried to respect your wishes."

Addison chuckled. "That's such a non-answer if I ever heard one, but I appreciate your honesty. Date, Dad. I want you to be happy. If Cassandra is the one who gives you that, then you have my support."

"Thanks, Addison."

"You're welcome. Love you, Dad."

"I love you too, sweetheart. I'll talk to you soon."

A huge weight had lifted off my chest by the time I hung up the phone. I contemplated making more phone calls, but now that the cat was out of the bag, the need to crawl back into bed with Cassandra was stronger.

I slipped back into the bedroom and repeated my process, but in reverse this time. I tried to avoid waking Kassandra up, but when I pulled her into my arms, she kissed my chest.

"Trying to sneak away?"

My chest rumbled with a soft laugh. "Tried but I was caught on my way out. I think it's safe to say Nate knows and is okay with it."

She nuzzled in. "I knew he would be eventually. They just want to see me smile."

"And do I make you smile?"

"Mmmm," she hummed. "More than you know."

"Do I make you smile when I do this?"

I flipped her on her back.

Unlike last night, I wanted foreplay this morning, so I started by kissing my way down her soft belly. We would get to morning sex but right now I was hungry and only Kassandra's taste could satisfy me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Kassandra

They weren't lying when they said the house was leveled. There wasn't even anything to go through. The house was nothing more than smoldering rubble on top of cracked foundation.

"Do we know what happened?"

David and I stood on the sidewalk and looked out to where the front of my house used to be. I thought it was best for Mikey and Nate to stay at David's house until we knew more. The team he had watching us was back in Boston, and two of the guys from another of his teams sat outside in an SUV.

"I had John pull the camera footage from yesterday. Someone managed to hack in and put all the cameras on a continuous loop. That's why I wasn't notified of the explosion until Jacob called. I have my team backtracking from the hack but it could take some time. Whoever did it is very good."

"I don't get it. They gave me two weeks with no way to contact them. It hasn't even been a week yet. It doesn't make any sense. They can't get their money if I'm dead." I was beyond annoyed at this point.

"I don't think they were trying to kill you. I'm guessing this was another way for them to threaten you."

I threw my hands in the air. "So they destroy my livelihood? Because that makes a lot of sense. Leave me with nothing so I have no money to pay them."

"Exactly, which means you would be indebted to them. That's how loan sharks operate. They want you to keep needing them so they can blackmail you into doing stuff for them. Unfortunately, that's how the world of crime works."

Wonderful.

"Is that who you think Michael stole from? Loan sharks?"

He merely shrugged. "Possibly. It would make sense. I won't know for sure until my team figures out who Michael ripped off."

"Well, it's not happening. I don't want to take the money from you, but I'll do anything to keep my kids out of this. I would rather owe you than criminals."

"I told you already, it's ours."

It wasn't how I wanted to start our relationship but it was better than owing money to people who thought blowing up a house was a good idea. David might be convinced that they weren't trying to kill us, but I wasn't so sure. No one knew we were going to be out of the house except David and his team. David trusted the men who worked for him, and I trusted him.

"We can call the insurance company today and get the ball rolling on that. In the meantime, you can stay at my house."

"Are we going to talk about that?"

David looked at me confused. "Talk about what?"

"About the house you own barely a few blocks from where I've lived since I got married. How come I never knew it was owned by you?"

"Because then I would have had to explain why I bought the house, and I wasn't ready to do that."

"Why did you buy the house, David?"

He pulled me into his arms so that my head was resting just under his chin. "I wanted you to have a place to land in case you ever needed it. It killed me that Michael cut me out of your life. I never thought he was good enough for you, so I created somewhere for you and the boys to go if it ever came to that."

Tears pricked my eyes. Even with us not talking for years, he was always in the background taking care of me.

"You know, Michael didn't support my decision to start my own business. He wanted me to be a trophy wife that depended solely on him. I'm glad I didn't give in to what he wanted. It required me to take out a huge loan, but it was worth it in the end. "

"I figured as much. I had your name flagged over the years just in case. I knew when you applied for a business license and when you applied for the loan. I wanted to give you my support even if you didn't know it was me."

"Wait . . . the projects you provided me were at least a quarter of my business. If it wasn't for you, I would still be paying on the loan I took out. But because of you, I was able to pay it off much faster than I ever planned."

"Not because of me. I just provided you the foundation to start your portfolio and gave you the occasional job over the years. The rest was all you."

He was too damn modest but who was I to argue.

"Decorating your properties have been some of my favorite jobs."

"Because I let you have complete control?" he snickered.

"I'm not going to lie. I put my own personality into every single project."

The smile he bestowed upon me was dazzling. "That was the plan. I wanted a piece of you everywhere I went."

"Why?" I looked at him with a confused expression. "I assumed you spent all this time hung up on Madalyn."

David scoffed. "Not even close. I was mad she left without an explanation. In my eyes that was selfish and not someone I wanted in my life anymore."

"Ohhh." I didn't know what else to say to that.

"You, on the other hand, were my best friend. And even though I didn't recognize the feeling until recently, I think I've always loved you."

My heart was beating so fast I was worried it would pound right out of my chest. "Really?"

"Yes." He cradled my cheek in his palm. "You're not just my best friend. I told you already, you're the person I want to spend the rest of my life with. The woman I want to go to bed with every night and wake up with every morning. I want to be sitting next to you as we cheer on Mikey and help Nate every night with his homework. I want to get to know you all over again while learning everything I can about the boys who own your heart. I love you. And even though it sucks it took this long for us to

figure it out, I look forward to what our future holds."

A single tear ran down my cheek. "I love you too. I always have. I spent years punishing myself for loving my best friend but I wouldn't change a single thing. It brought us to where we are now and there's no place else I would rather be."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

David

Over the past two weeks, we'd settled into a nice routine similar to the one we had before the house blew up. Kassandra was busier than ever now that Dani, Gage's girlfriend, was finally finishing his house. He was one of the first people to grab a house in New Mexico, but from what Kassandra told me, he'd never bothered to decorate it.

Since Kassandra was the one to originally design and pick out the features for the houses, she was excited to help Dani bring it to life. The two of them were constantly video-chatting about ideas and it wasn't just Dani who wanted her help. All of the women were asking for her input on ways to spruce up their homes.

I think it helped that I explained what happened to Dani in Pennsylvania, and why she needed to keep so busy. Kassandra was eager to do her part, and I was pleased to see that even Addison was warming up to her.

Now if only I could figure out what the hell Michael was into before his death, everything would be perfect.

The two-week deadline passed with no one coming to collect the money requested. I had no idea what it meant. It wasn't typical behavior for a loan shark. John wasn't making any progress, so it was time to bring in the big guns.

"Well, hey there, Black. To what do I owe the pleasure of this call?"

Addison was right. Bree was entirely too perky for a pregnant woman. I know I didn't have any personal experience with pregnancy, but I could've sworn people complained that the first and third trimesters were the worst.

"I need your help."

"Of course you do, because I'm the best. Tell Maddox your problems."

I shook my head.

I updated her on Michael and the shit he was into before he took his life, in addition to everything we'd found out so far, or lack thereof. I told her everything that happened since the house blew up.

Bree huffed. "I know this is a Boston problem, but why the heck did you wait so long to call me in? I know John is competent but I'm so much better. I would've noticed a loop in the feed before the house blew to smithereens."

A fact I knew well, considering she had to help me the last time I had a major problem in Boston.

"You were helping Gage and I didn't want to overwork you now that you're pregnant. You were already doing a small task for me."

"David, I would middle name you if I knew it, Black. Women have been working while pregnant for decades. We don't suddenly become helpless just because we are growing another human."

"I didn't say you did," I tried to fix my blunder. "I just didn't want to add more stress to your plate."

"Work is not stressful!" she yelled. "You want to know what is stressful?" I kept my mouth firmly shut. There was no way I was even going to attempt to say anything while she was worked up. "People like you and Chance telling me what I can and can't do now that I'm carrying a baby. Don't you think I know my body and my mind? Don't you think I know what I can handle? I assure you I can ."

"Spitfire, I just want to take care of you," Chance tried to soothe on their end, but the sound of her slapping his hands away came clear as day through the phone.

"You want to take care of me? Then let me work in peace. I'm sure Black can find something for you to do so you can leave me alone."

Shit! I didn't want to be in the middle of their marital spat.

"Uh . . . maybe calling you was a bad idea."

"Nope! Don't you dare hang up on me, David Black! You wanted my help and now you're going to get it."

I never thought I would be afraid of a pixie of a woman, but Bree scared the shit out of me. She took revenge to a whole new level, and with her hormones all over the place, there was no telling what she would do to me the next time I was in New Mexico.

"I appreciate it. Just let me know when you have something. In the meantime, I'll call Daniel and see what I can do about keeping Chance busy."

"Thank you. My pregnant arse appreciates it."

I hung up the phone and immediately texted Daniel that he better find something for Chance to do or else. I didn't know what I meant by the "or else" but I would find

something. There was no way I was unleashing Bree on my Phantom team.

I walked back inside the house and found Cassandra in the kitchen, baking. It was a Saturday afternoon. Mikey was in the living room watching a movie with Brittany and Nate was upstairs in his room with one of his friends. It sucked that they couldn't go anywhere, but I was worried with the lack of information we were able to find. Until I had something concrete to work with, it was better if people came here to hang out.

"Whatcha making?"

She was mixing some kind of batter together in a bowl. From first glance I didn't know if it was cookies or maybe bread. I was ashamed to admit I wouldn't know the difference anyway since baking wasn't one of my specialties. I cooked. That was the extent of what I knew how to do in the kitchen.

"Snickerdoodle cookies."

"Yummy."

"How did your conversation go?"

"I got yelled at."

Kassandra sputtered. "I'm sorry, what? Who yelled at you?"

"My technical analyst from the New Mexico office. In her defense, she's pregnant and I offended her. Not intentionally, but I did nonetheless."

"What did you say to her?"

"She's better at her job than John is. That's not me being mean, but Bree is in a class all of her own. She was busy with another assignment when I came here, so I didn't want to overload her after just finding out she was pregnant."

"Ahhh . . ." Cassandra nodded her head with a small smile. "She laid into you about not being useless just because she was pregnant."

"It was stupid, I know, but I was trying to be considerate."

She chuckled. "As someone who was in her shoes not once but twice, I can tell you with absolute certainty that we just want to be treated like we're normal. Yes, we are carrying a baby but that doesn't mean we're suddenly made of glass."

"Yeah, well, I know that now. I assure you she gave me a proper dressing-down. I won't be making the same mistake twice."

"As long as you learned your lesson, that's all that matters."

"Believe me I did."

I walked around to the other side of the kitchen island and placed my hands on Cassandra's hips. I buried my face in her neck until she squealed with laughter.

"Gross! Keep your filthy hands off my mother." Mikey fake gagged. I lifted my head just in time to see the smirk on his face.

"Don't think I missed you sneaking kisses on the couch with Brittany before I went outside to make my phone call."

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Mikey grabbed two bottles of water from the fridge before leaving us alone again.

"Have I told you how great it is that you get along so well with my kids?"

"They're great boys and they love you. They would've been happy with anyone who showed you the respect you deserved."

I was just happy I was the lucky son of a bitch who snatched her up before anyone else could see how amazing she was.

"Nope, it's all you."

I smiled so hard. It was great she felt that way because I wasn't letting her go. She was stuck with me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Kassandra

"It's been almost a month. There's been no threats and Bree has yet to find anything. I think it's safe to assume we're no longer in danger."

I loved David. I loved spending time with him.

But I needed to do something besides go to work and come home every night of the week. This was my time to live life to the fullest and I'll be damned if Michael ruined that from beyond the grave.

"Just give me a few more days," David begged.

"No, David. The last few months of Mikey's senior year are being stripped away from him by this mess. His prom is tonight. I promised him months ago he could go and I'm not going back on my word. He even agreed to let me chaperone so that one of us would be there."

I saw the moment he caved. "Fine, but one of the guys from Cobra is going with you. He can stay outside for all I care, but I refuse to send you out alone."

Cobra was such a silly name for the team of guys who I had come to care about. But David said he let them pick it themselves, so who was I to disagree?

"I accept your terms."

I would not cry.

I would not cry.

I would not cry.

I was absolutely going to cry as I watched Mikey hand over a small bouquet of flowers to Brittany that matched her prom dress. The two of them looked stunning. Brittany in her gown and Mikey in his tuxedo. Brittany chose a pale green that matched her complexion flawlessly.

"Just one more picture." I hadn't stopped snapping them since Mikey brought Brittany back to the house. Her parents had taken pictures when he picked her up, but David was insistent that they left from here.

"Mom, you've snapped a hundred already."

"I don't care. I'll snap a hundred more if I want to. My firstborn only gets one senior prom and I plan to document the hell out of it after we lost everything else."

I was guilt-tripping him and I knew it, but the pictures on my phone were the only thing I had left from their time growing up, so I was going to document every second.

"Okay. One more," he sighed, but plastered a smile on his face.

"Perfect. Brittany, you look beautiful," I sniffled. "I can't tell you how much I love seeing the two of you together."

"Okay, time to go. I love you, Mom, but you're starting to get emotional."

There was no malice in his tone. Mikey could handle anything except my tears.

"Fine. Go have fun. I'll see you soon. I love you both."

Mikey practically dragged Brittany out the door. It didn't matter how much time she spent with us over the last month, she was still painfully shy. I wondered if that was how I looked to others when I was her age.

"Are you going to be okay?"

David wrapped his arm around my middle and yanked me to him so that I was flush against his side.

"I didn't think it would be this hard watching my baby grow up."

"Mom, Mikey hasn't been a baby in a very long time," Nate interjected.

"I don't care how big you both get, you'll always be my babies."

I smoothed my hand down the long form-fitting dress I chose for the evening. Parents were encouraged to chaperone the prom, and I was excited to be one of the chosen. Michael had insisted the boys attend a private school, so getting picked to help with anything was a surprise. Normally, only those who donated butt loads of money were ever asked.

"There's no need to fidget. You look beautiful," David whispered in my ear.

It was hard to get used to the constant compliments he showered me with on a daily basis. A day didn't go by that he wasn't telling me how beautiful I was or how good I looked. My kids were also slowly getting used to his hands on me all the time. They were seeing how a woman who was cherished should be treated, and I was forever thankful for it.

"I don't want to embarrass Mikey when I get there."

I was spun so fast I crashed into his chest with a squeal. "There's nothing you could do that would embarrass Mikey. He loves you unconditionally."

Damn, he always knew the right thing to say. It was refreshing to feel confident.

"I love you." I rubbed my hand across his chest.

"I love you too. Now you better get going before you're late."

He knew me so well. David walked me out to my new vehicle and opened the door for me. My house, and all the stuff in it, wasn't the only thing we lost when it blew up. Both Mikey and I lost our vehicles. David was quick to help replace them, despite the argument I tried to put up. He assured me once the insurance money came in, we could use it to put money down on the loan I made him take out for it. I don't care how many times he told me the money was ours, I wasn't at that point in our relationship yet to take it freely.

The drive to the hotel, where the prom was being held, wasn't nearly as bad as I expected. Traffic was exceptionally light. I parked the SUV in the parking garage across from the venue and headed inside where I walked through a dark blue tunnel with clear balloons floating around me. The theme was "Under the Sea." Starfish, jellyfish, and every other kind of sea creature was represented throughout the place, from table decorations to the ceiling and every inch in between. There wasn't a single part of the large ballroom that wasn't decorated. The prom committee did an excellent job with the theme, and it almost looked like you were actually walking underwater.

I took one lap around the small ballroom but didn't see Mikey. He should've arrived before me; maybe he was outside in the courtyard? I looked out there next but

couldn't find him among the crowd of teenagers, dressed to the nines. The next fifteen minutes were spent frantically trying to find him. It wasn't like Mikey was a small guy; he stood over six feet tall and could be easily found in a crowded room. I asked friends if they saw him, I asked teachers, but no one had yet seen him or Brittany.

I tried calling his phone but it went straight to voicemail, twice. At that point I wasn't just frantic, I was downright panicking.

My next phone call was to David.

"Hey, beautiful. Miss me already?"

"I can't find Mikey or Brittany. I've looked everywhere but they aren't here. No one has seen them and Mikey's phone is going straight to voicemail."

"Stay where you are. I'll send Rhett inside to get you." Tears were pouring down my cheeks but I didn't care how bad I looked. My baby was missing. "And, Kassandra?"

"Yeah?"

"I'll find him. I promise."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Mikey

I lifted my and Brittany's linked palms and kissed the back of her hand before I laid them back down on the center console.

"I'm glad we were able to come tonight. I know attending prom meant a lot to you."

Brittany smiled back at me. "I know it might seem silly to some, but I've always dreamed about attending my senior prom."

"There's no such thing as silly when it comes to your dreams." I wanted to give Brittany the world, and if right now that meant prom, then nothing was going to stop me. I had told my mother as much when David tried to talk me out of it.

"Oh, pull over for a second. That poor lady has smoke coming out of her car hood."

Glancing through the front windshield, I followed the direction of her finger. Sure enough, pulled off on the side of the road was an elderly woman standing in front of her car as puffs of white smoke poured out of the closed hood.

I did as she asked, even if I laughed at her soft heart. Brittany would go out of her way to help anyone in need. "I swear your heart is as big as Texas."

"We can't just drive right by her."

I pulled off the road and put the vehicle in park.

"I'm sorry about this," Brittany whispered.

I didn't understand what she was talking about, so I turned my head with confusion.
"Sorry about wha?—"

I felt the sharp prick of a needle before I could finish my sentence. Instant darkness started to take over and I realized my mistake.

I had trusted the wrong person.

I woke up with a dry mouth, a pounding head, and no way to move my arms or legs. The first two I attributed to whatever drug Brittany gave me. The last was because of the ropes tying me to a wooden chair. I tried to wrestle my arms free but all I managed to do was give my wrists rope burn. Whoever tied the knots knew what they were doing.

If I couldn't free myself, then I would take in my surroundings and figure out how to get away after Brittany showed her treacherous face. I couldn't believe she'd been fooling me all this time.

I was in what looked to be a basement. Dust covered the floor and a set of wooden stairs led upward. There were boxes piled in one corner and a curtain hanging on the one wall. The soft glow of the setting sun filtered through the one small window, but nothing about what I could see hinted toward where I was being kept.

The musty basement smell wasn't helping my headache or dry throat. I thought conditioning made me thirsty, but right now I could chug an entire gallon of water without a problem.

I wasn't sure how long I sat there by myself trying to loosen the ropes on my wrists and legs. It could've been five minutes or five hours before someone opened the door and walked down the steps.

I recognized Brittany's father immediately.

"I'm sorry it had to come to this, son," Mr. Smith offered. "Your father really screwed with our plans when he took that money and then killed himself."

"Was any of it real?" I'm not sure why that was my first question when there were a million others I should've been asking. But I needed to know how good of an actress Brittany was.

"Oh, I'm sure it was. My daughter fancied herself in love, but family always comes first. This isn't the first con we've run, and it sure won't be the last. It's just the first time I've had to take things so far. Your father and I owe a lot of people money, and I refuse to be the one stuck with the bill."

"My mother was willing to pay the hundred and fifty thousand you asked for."

Well, David was willing. There was no way my mother had that kind of money. Not after my father used to spend it like we had millions at our disposal.

"You really think your father killed himself over a measly hundred and fifty thousand dollars?" Brittany's father laughed in my face. "Try ten times that amount."

One point five million dollars? What the hell could my father have possibly needed with that kind of money, and where did it go? It wasn't like he paid our bills with it. My mother was on the hook for those things most of my life.

"There's no way."

"Oh, I assure you, I don't mess around when it comes to money. He moved the money into a bad investment and now I've lost everything. But I need to pay back our donors."

"Then why did you ask for such a small amount?"

"I needed to know if your mother was involved or not."

I pulled hard on the ropes holding me back as I growled at the man I once looked up to. "Of course she wasn't involved!"

"I know that now, but I wasn't sure."

"Then what do you call this?" I bounced the wooden chair off the concrete floor.

"Why kidnap me if you know we don't have the money?"

"You might not, but I have it on good authority your mother's new boyfriend does. And from what Brittany tells me, he will pay a pretty penny to get you back."

I didn't think it was possible to hate someone as much as I did Brittany, and her father, right this moment. My mother would be freaking out and rightfully so. She was finally happy for the first time and now they had to pull this shit. It wasn't fair.

"David will kill you for this."

"Now, is that any way to speak to your girlfriend's father?" he tsked. "I guess we'll both find out soon enough."

I shot daggers at the man's retreating back. His maniacal laugh on the way up the stairs only further pissed me off. I tried again to break the ropes that were binding my hands but it was no use. I even tried to tip the chair off-balance but the thing was

solid. It wasn't some cheaply made chair that fell apart with a little pressure. If I had to guess, it was antique and made when things actually lasted.

Time slowly passed before I heard the door creak open again. I glanced over at the stairs expecting to find Mr. Smith coming down to torment me, but it was Brittany instead.

"What the hell do you want?" I spat. I couldn't believe she had the nerve to show her face after what she did to me.

"I truly am sorry. I couldn't go against my father."

"Then why are you here now?"

"Because you don't deserve this. I can't release you without my father knowing it was me, but I can give you a head start."

I gave her a stunned expression. I didn't have any idea what she was talking about. When she pulled a small knife from her pocket, I started to thrash around for real this time. Before I had been trying not to hit the ground hard enough that I broke something, but now I didn't care. I would do anything not to have her cut me.

"Please stop. I just want to cut the ropes enough that you can saw them apart on the chair."

I froze. I didn't know if I could believe her or not. When she slipped behind me, and I didn't feel the knife cut into my flesh, I figured she had to be telling the truth.

"There. Now just rub the spot over and over on the corner of the chair and you should be able to get free."

The ropes already felt looser. I took her advice and started to work the area over and over again.

"Where are you going?" Brittany was already halfway up the stairs when I called out to her.

"I can't be here when you get loose. My father won't be back for another hour or two. It should be plenty of time for you to get away."

She didn't stick around and I didn't waste any time. Within minutes I felt the rope give away enough that I could slide one of my hands free. Dropping the rope onto the floor, I was quick to untie my legs.

As soon as I was free of my restraints, I raced up the basement stairs and straight into Brittany's kitchen.

Good, I wasn't that far from my house. I would be back with my family in no time.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

David

"What the hell do you mean they should be at the prom? Kassandra wouldn't be freaking out for no reason!"

"I followed behind them, just like you asked, a few car lengths away. They briefly pulled off the side of the road, but it wasn't for more than a minute or two. Then I watched them pull into a parking garage across from the hotel, and staged myself down the road, like you asked," Jacob assured me.

"But did you actually see them exit the parking garage and head into the hotel?"

"No, boss. But there's a catwalk between the two structures, so I assumed that's what they used."

I cursed my lack of foresight when I assigned Jacob to Mikey's detail. I was so sure that Kassandra would be the target that I placed Cobra on her and left Mikey with one of my other teams.

"I don't pay you to assume . I pay you to be sure."

I hung up before I could say more, or fire his ass for doing what I said, even though I knew Cobra would never have made such a rookie error. My other Boston teams weren't former Special Forces. They were average security guards earning a decent paycheck.

Kassandra rushed through the front door a few minutes later with Rhett hot on her heels.

"Did you find them?"

"Not yet. Jacob watched their car pull into the parking garage across from the hotel. He assumed they entered the prom from the catwalk." I looked over her shoulder at Rhett. "Get Matthew and Graham to check it out. I want to know if their car is still there."

"On it."

"Where could they have gone?"

That wasn't a question I was ready to answer. Not yet anyway, and not without more proof.

"I don't know but we're going to find out. It's only been forty minutes since they were last seen."

That was forty minutes too long, but again, I wasn't about to tell Kassandra that. I needed her not to panic any more than she already was.

"Mom? What's going on? I thought you were chaperoning the prom tonight."

She left my arms and went straight to her son. "Your brother and Brittany are missing."

"What do you mean missing? What happened to them?"

I walked over to them and answered so Kassandra didn't have to. "I'm not sure but I'm

going to find out."

"Boss?" Rhett pulled my attention away from the people who meant the world to me.

"What?" I snapped at him.

"You're going to want to see this."

I followed him out the front door and watched as someone ran down the road toward us. I recognized the person immediately.

"Kassandra! Come here!" I shouted before I took off in a sprint and met Mikey about a hundred feet from the house. "Mikey, are you okay? What happened to Brittany?"

His wrists were bleeding from what looked like rope burns, but at first glance I couldn't see any other injuries.

"Mikey!" Kassandra plowed into the two of us and was shortly joined by Nate. The four of us hugged in the middle of the sidewalk.

"Let's get him inside."

We moved as one until we were back inside the house and sitting on the couch. Mikey still wore his tuxedo, and besides a few wrinkles, no one would know anything happened to him.

"What happened?"

"It was Brittany." Mikey gulped. "She asked me to pull over to help a stranded woman but then she injected me with something. The next thing I know, I'm tied up in her basement."

I met Cassandra's shocked gaze.

"Her father came down to talk to me. Told me he was working with Dad. Something about a bad investment and one point five million dollars."

I looked at Cassandra but she simply shrugged her shoulder like she had no idea what Mikey was talking about.

"Hang on, I'm going to call Bree."

"Who's Bree?" Nate asked.

"She's one of my technical analysts. If anyone can find out who Brittany and her father are, it's her."

I dialed Bree's number and for once she didn't answer with attitude. "Hey, did you find Mikey?"

"Yeah, he's here with us now. I'm going to turn this into a video chat. I need your expertise."

"Hit me."

Seconds later I could see Bree sitting in her office snacking on a black licorice. "Mikey! It's so good to see you, you had everyone worried."

"Ah, thanks." He sounded shy for the first time since I knew him. Bree tended to have that effect on people.

Bree chuckled. "So what do you have for me?"

"I need you to find everything you can on Mikey's girlfriend, Brittany Smith and her father . . ." I looked at Mikey.

"Benjamin Smith."

"Such ordinary names but I got you. Give me a few seconds."

We watched as Bree did her magic. Both humming to herself and snacking on licorice in the process.

"Dang, Mikey. I didn't realize you were into older chicks."

"Wait, what?" I gasped.

"Well, since Brittany isn't her real name, I'm guessing you didn't know she wasn't seventeen either."

Shit. I never thought to check out Mikey's girlfriend; they'd been together long before I showed up. At least a year, if not more, if I remembered correctly.

"Who is she, Bree?"

"I think the better question is who isn't she? I'm sorry to say, Mikey, but your girlfriend and her father are con artists. Well, and her mother too."

"Ex -girlfriend," Mikey clarified.

"Probably smart."

"What's the connection to Michael? Benjamin mentioned they worked together."

Bree continued to tap away at her keys while the rest of us sat in silence. I was too busy taking it all in to say anything, and I had to assume it was the same for everyone else.

"I can't find any connection. Not a digital footprint. Nothing. If I didn't know any better, I'd think the two of them never met."

"But they did," Mikey told us. "Not often because my dad was never around, but we all had dinner together at least once or twice."

"Mikey's right. They were together long enough that I wanted to meet her parents. They always seemed so nice, but I could only convince Michael to come with us twice. Every other time something would come up and he would have to back out."

"So then, what if the only connection is Brittany?" Bree bit off a large piece of licorice before pointing the rest at us.

"What are you trying to say?" I lifted my brow at Bree. I didn't have time for her mind games.

"I'm saying, what if they went old school. Brittany came over a lot, right?"

Mikey, Cassandra, and Nate all nodded their heads yes.

"So what if their only way of communicating was through her. She would pass notes or information back and forth. Whatever they needed."

"I always thought it was weird she would bring a backpack over, but leave it in the entryway even when the two of you were working on homework," Cassandra said to Mikey.

"I just figured it was kinda how you carried a purse everywhere you went. I never thought about it," Mikey told her.

"What if the backpack was actually the carrier pigeon? Or would it be Brittany was the pigeon and the backpack was the little sack the pigeon used to carry around? Was it even a sack or was it just a ribbon?" Bree was off on one of her tangents, so I let her go for a few minutes. Eventually she would come back around to the discussion at hand. "It doesn't matter either way. It makes sense if Brittany was placed there to pass information so that no one would suspect the two were working together."

"Okay, but what about the one point five million dollars Brittany's father was questioning Mikey about?"

"Ah, that one I have a definitive answer to." Bree smiled at us through the screen as she read another screen out of view. "Benjamin did in fact get one point five million dollars from a hedge fund to invest, but since he's a con man, I'm going to assume he planned to set up Michael. Instead, Michael attempted to con the con man, but made a bad investment that lost him all the money, so before both Benjamin and the hedge fund guy could get him, he killed himself."

I think I followed her line of thinking but I had to admit it sounded a bit crazy. "What are the odds this hedge fund is someone we can pay off, or eliminate, easily?"

"No can do, boss man. Benjamin apparently had to find himself one with criminal ties. I'm not saying you can't handle it, but it's going to take some serious manpower."

It was a good thing I had that kind of manpower available at my disposal.

"Round up Phantom. I want them on their way here tomorrow. We are going to finish this."

I was going to do everything I could to protect my newfound family.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

David

Matthew and the rest of Cobra were with me, to assist with Benjamin Smith. Phantom was going to move in on the hedge fund guy Bree found. Although based on her assessment, she had a feeling it was more of a corporation than one individual.

Either way, Phantom would find out for sure while I took out one Benjamin Smith for his part in ruining Cassandra's life.

"So what's the plan?" Matthew asked from where we were stationed in the SUV just down the block from my house and two blocks from the Smith residence.

"We end the con man and his family. But not until after we find out what their original plan was."

Matthew nodded. "I figured as much but the actual plan. You don't normally get your hands dirty but tonight you're not in your usual suit either."

I looked down at my tactical pants. Matthew was right. This wasn't my normal Boston attire but it wasn't out of the norm for me either. "That's because you don't see me in New Mexico."

He huffed. "Oh sure. They get the relaxed you."

Several of the guys in the vehicle with us snickered. The rest were in the SUV behind

us.

“Let’s get this show on the road.”

We drove over to Brittany’s house. There was nothing subtle about seven large men walking straight up the sidewalk and knocking on the door. Benjamin tried to slam the door shut after he opened it, but we were quicker.

Stupid man should’ve checked who was there first. He had to know we were after him.

Rhett proved how efficient he was at his job. With a swift, fluid motion, much too graceful for such a broad and brutish man, he instantly had Benjamin’s left arm wrapped behind the man’s back, while Rhett’s muscular right arm wrapped around his throat, much like a boa constrictor around its prey. Rhett not so gently escorted Benjamin to a nearby Queen Anne armchair that looked rather uncomfortable in a living room full of oversized cushioned couches and lounge chairs. Matthew tossed a wad of nylon rope toward Rhett, which he expertly caught, and used to tie Benjamin to the wooden chair.

“Where’s your wife and daughter?”

“I’m right here.” Brittany walked into the room without a care in the world for the seven angry men staring her down. “I knew it wouldn’t take you long to show up.”

“And yet you didn’t hide.” I cocked my head to the side. “Why is that?”

“Because what we did was wrong.” For the first time I noticed the guilt on her face.

“Shut up,” her father hissed.

“Gag him for the moment,” Brittany said.

Rhett looked all too happy as he shoved a dirty handkerchief in Benjamin’s mouth.

“So then, why did you do it?” I wanted to get the information out of Benjamin, but first I needed some closure for Mikey. He deserved it after what this bitch did to him.

“It’s the only life I knew. I was sent to that high school to find us a mark. I didn’t think I would fall in love with Mikey, it was never supposed to last this long.”

Benjamin continued to thrash behind me but I ignored him. “So it was real for you?”

Brittany nodded. “Very much so.” Then she let out a humorless laugh. “Although falling for a man five years younger than me wasn’t the plan. I was lucky enough to look young, but Mikey was no boy. I think that was why it was so easy for me to fall for him.” I considered myself a pretty good lie detector and right now my instincts were screaming that she was telling the truth.

I nodded my head and made a decision. “Graham, take her upstairs. Make sure she stays put until we’re done.”

“You got it, boss.” Graham walked straight over to Brittany and none too gently grabbed her by the arm.

“Are you going to kill my father?”

I didn’t bother to lie. “I am. You have a choice to make. You can use your new freedom to change who you are, or you can fight me about it and end up with the same fate as him.”

I hoped like hell she chose the first option. Mikey might be mad at Brittany now but

eventually he would be upset that I killed the woman he was in love with. I didn't want to do that to him, but I would if it meant it kept my family safe.

"I want a new life," she replied simply.

She allowed Graham to lead her away without another word. She didn't look at her father, or look back.

"Now, it's your turn. Unfortunately, you don't get the same options as your daughter."

I ripped the dirty piece of cloth from Benjamin's mouth and listened as he cursed his daughter. Not wanting the saliva-filled handkerchief in my hand, I tossed it on the laminate floor.

"Ungrateful bitches. Both of them," he grumbled.

"I take it that means your wife isn't here."

"The stupid cunt ran off with my investor. She was pissed we got caught." There was so much venom in Benjamin's eyes and flying out of his mouth that it was hard to consider he was telling anything but the truth.

"That sucks for you. How about you tell me a little bit more about this investor you speak of?"

Benjamin spit at my boots but it was more a dribble than anything. The asshole used all his excess saliva on the cloth that had been stuffed in his mouth.

"Why should I tell you anything? You're just going to kill me anyway."

I thought about it for a second, letting him stew. I wanted to watch Benjamin sweat as I responded. It was the least I could do for all the pain he put my family through.

“You’re right. I’m going to kill you either way, but you can die knowing I will track your traitorous wife down and her new toy and end their miserable lives as well.”

Benjamin couldn’t save himself, but he could bring others down with him. And that, to a coward like Benjamin, would be music to his ears.

Which was evident seconds later when he sang like the damn canary. Not missing a single detail or requiring me to torture the information out of him.

Coward.

“The corporation we borrowed money from is actually owned by a Russian businessman. Well, business is a loose term. He belongs to the Bratva. A nasty man who didn’t appreciate the money Michael lost. If he hadn’t hanged himself, I assure you Boris would’ve found a more creative way to end his life.”

“Does this Boris have a last name?”

“Ivanov.”

Of course. Nothing like a common name to go with a common problem. I would give Bree the information and see what she could do with it.

I walked behind Benjamin and grabbed his hair. “I appreciate your assistance. Say hi to Michael in hell for me.”

I wasted no time slicing his throat open. Blood spurted across the room and left a nasty splatter that would suck to clean up. With any luck, Mrs. Smith would find the

body and deliver the message.

However, I had no doubt she was long gone. A con woman would have several backup plans. Which led me to believe she was the mastermind instead of the idiot whose neck hung open in front of me.

“Go upstairs and let Graham know that he has to escort Brittany out of the state. I don’t care where she goes but as far away from my family is preferred,” I told Matthew.

“Do you plan on tracking her?”

I nodded. “I’ll put Maddox on it.”

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and gave a brief update to my technical analyst. She would have eyes on Brittany from the moment she stepped foot out of the house.

That was one problem down. Now I just needed to go back to my family and make sure they were okay. But first I needed to check on Phantom.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Kassandra

There was nothing more stressful than sitting around while I waited for news on the outcome of the raids.

David assured me things would be fine. Brittany's father was no match for his team, but the people they tried to con weren't going to be as easy. David tried to explain the entire network to me but I was ashamed to admit most of it went over my head. All I cared about was that my family would be safe after this.

"You need to stop pacing around the room and sit down. Grab a glass of wine and chill out." Addison's sarcastic voice filtered through the room from where I had her on speaker on my phone.

"How do you know I'm pacing and not sitting on my couch?"

"I can hear your feet moving across the hardwood floor."

I glanced down at my sock-covered feet. There was no way she should be able to hear me moving.

"No you can't."

Addison chuckled. "Okay, not really, but I figured that's what you were doing, so I called your bluff."

I rolled my eyes at the phone even though Addison couldn't see me. "How do you deal with this?"

"Practice and a good girls' night. I'm fortunate to have a great group of ladies to keep me busy when the guys go out on an assignment. You need to get yourself a girl gang like that."

I thought about the women Addison got to call friends. I had gotten to know most of them over the past few weeks by helping them with their designs. They were a great group and I could see why Addison liked them so much.

"I'll work on that."

"It'll get easier. This one is stressful because your family's involved."

"I just want them to be safe already. I hate that Michael left us a mess that couldn't be easily cleaned up."

"I can't believe he was using such archaic ways of communication. Who in this day and age doesn't communicate via text?"

It was my turn to chuckle. "That's because kids these days don't know the meaning of old-fashioned letters. I used to mail your father one letter, every other day, when he first deployed."

"Did he write you back?"

"Religiously. I always looked forward to hearing how he was doing. It nearly killed me when Michael forced me to stop. Those were the highlight of my day."

"Do you regret it?"

"I don't regret having my boys but I regret having to push your father away so I could have them. I know I couldn't have one without giving up the other, but I still wished we didn't have to go so long without talking."

"I'm glad my father found you. Did he tell you my mother used to talk about you?"

I grabbed the phone off the table and hit the button so the conversation would no longer fill the room before putting it to my ear.

"He mentioned that she knew I had feelings for him," I answered. "I want you to know nothing ever happened back then. I respected your mother too much."

"I know you did. My mother knew it as well. I think the fact that my father's family forced her to leave made her resentful."

"He still refuses to speak to them. I'm not sure he'll ever be ready to talk to them again."

"Good riddance," Addison spat. "Anyone who does that to a person doesn't deserve a second chance."

Normally I would disagree but I knew David's parents well. They never did anything that wasn't good for them or their reputation.

Addison stayed on the phone with me the whole time David and his teams were gone. It was well into the night before he walked back into the house.

"He's here. I gotta go. Thank you for keeping me company."

"Anytime. Give him my best, and tell him I'll call him tomorrow."

I quickly agreed and then tossed the phone down on the couch before racing into David's arms.

"Is it done?"

"Benjamin is gone. I'm sending Cobra to deal with the rest. You will never need to worry about Michael's problems coming back to you again. I'll make sure of it."

Tears of joy filled my eyes.

"Where are the boys?" he asked.

"I made them go to bed. I told them we would wake them when it was all over."

"What did you do to keep yourself occupied all night? I figured you would've hung out with them."

I chuckled at the thought. Mikey and Nate never would've been able to distract me like Addison managed to.

"I called Addison and she helped me through it."

"I'm glad you had each other. Addison has a great group of friends in New Mexico but it never hurts to have more."

"She's a great girl. Madalyn did a fantastic job."

I wish I had known about Addison before this. I would've helped Madalyn through the difficult time and convinced her she didn't need to keep her baby a secret from David. There're so many things I wish I had done differently, but I guess in the end, this was how our life was meant to be.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

David

Hours earlier

“So there was nothing there?”

I already knew there wouldn’t be, but I needed to be sure.

“Nothing,” Daniel repeated. “The place is empty except for a lot of Russian vodka.”

At least I could assume what Benjamin said was correct.

“Alright. Head back to New Mexico. I appreciate you flying out tonight to help.”

I didn’t like pulling the team but it felt wrong to split the guys up when I didn’t know what we would be walking into. Dani had trouble being alone, but thankfully the women, including my daughter, were there to help her. I would avoid sending Phantom out for a bit longer if possible.

Daniel didn’t bother with a goodbye. I slipped my phone back in my pocket and turned back around to Cobra who waited for further instructions.

“You got your wish. You’re headed back out of the country. Russia this time. Maddox believes that’s where you can find Boris Ivanov based on the information she could find on the corporation.”

Rhett looked relieved. Graham looked visibly upset. As he should. Next weekend was his weekend to have his son. The rest of the team looked eager to be doing anything other than babysitting my family.

“Graham, hang back a second. I want to talk to you.”

The rest of the team filed out of my office. We came straight back to headquarters after leaving the Smith residence while I waited on information from Phantom.

“Yes?”

“Fly out with the team but make sure to book an international flight back on Friday. You aren’t going to miss any time with your son.”

Graham looked relieved. “Thank you. I figured you would let me do it, but we don’t usually get sent on a new assignment so close to visitation.”

I avoided it as much as possible for this reason alone.

“I know, and this time can’t be helped. We needed this problem eliminated and only Cobra can be delicate enough to keep the Bratva off our backs.”

There was no way I wanted to start a war with them. It wasn’t one I would win, not with only the two Special Forces teams I had. I would need to call in some reinforcements and I wasn’t sure I wanted to do that.

I let Graham go and spent the next few hours paving the way for them. I couldn’t return home to Kassandra until I was sure I had everything sorted. But I could put her mind at ease with a simple text message.

EPILOGUE 1

David

One Month Later

I sat next to a crying Kassandra and a proud Nate as we watched Mikey walk across the stage to get his high school diploma.

Kassandra wasn't the only one with tears in her eyes. It didn't matter that I didn't know these young men until two months ago. I was so damn proud of the things they overcame in such a short period of time.

Mikey could've shut down after what happened between him and Brittany, just like I'd done after Madalyn left me. Instead, he flourished. He put in extra time on the ice. He proved how he earned a full ride to his top-pick university. He excelled in school. He was there for his mother every step of the way and he made sure to support his brother any time he needed it.

I was proud to call him my son. With Mikey and Nate's permission—and help picking out the ring—I proposed to Kassandra last night while sitting at the house I'd picked out for her ten years ago.

She said yes, and made me the happiest man on the planet.

She had one condition though.

We had to get married before Mikey left for college in two weeks. So it looked like a date with the courthouse was on the list.

That was okay. I would marry her in a heartbeat as long as I got to call her mine. But I had to give Addison and Liam time to fly in, or else.

Kassandra's words, not mine.

I wrapped my arm around Kassandra's shoulder and thanked Michael once again for his shitty decisions that led me to where I was today.

Graham

Flying commercial wasn't fun but there was no way I was leaving my team down two men by having Oxford fly me home to visit my son.

"Excuse me." A soft voice that didn't match the nearly six-foot woman standing in the aisle pulled me from my thoughts. "That's my seat next to the window."

I stood up from my first-class seat and stepped into the aisle to allow her plenty of room to pass that would ensure we didn't come in any form of contact.

Nothing against the pretty woman whose left side of her face was covered in shadow by her long auburn hair, but it had been months since I touched a woman who wasn't part of my job. and I preferred to keep it that way.

The only woman in my life—my son's mother—gave me enough problems to last me a lifetime. I was in no hurry to add any others to my plate and that included talking to random strangers on this long-ass flight. If it weren't for a full flight, I would've purchased the seat next to me just to ensure no one sat next to me. I had done it plenty of times before, but it was unavoidable.

I made a big production of putting my wireless earbuds in my ears and made it look like I planned to listen to music or maybe even a movie. It worked because the beautiful woman next to me didn't say a word. She just pulled a book from her bag and started to read.

I had no intention of actually listening to anything. I never did on flights. I preferred

to pay attention to my surroundings while others thought I was lost in my own world.

I listened as the flight attendants gave their safety demonstration. I declined a beverage and snack despite the long flight I had ahead of me. It was an international flight through a Canadian airline. The first of its kind for me considering I normally visited my son in the States but my son's mother thought she could pull a fast one and take him on vacation to avoid having me see him. Little did she realize I would travel anywhere to get my time with my son.

We were halfway across the Atlantic when I felt the sudden shift. There was no mistaking that the nose of the plane was no longer going the direction it was supposed to. My assumption was confirmed when the pilot's nervous voice filtered through the cabin.

"Rapid descent, rapid descent, rapid descent."

"What's happening?" I glanced to my right and met the scared gaze of the woman sitting next to me. Except this time her hair was no longer shadowing her face and I could see the long, jagged scar running down her cheek. It was strange to think it mirrored the one I wore.

Face masks dropped from the ceiling as the cabin pressure plummeted along with the plane and screaming erupted throughout the aircraft.

"I think we're crashing." Surprisingly I kept the terror out of my voice, but it didn't stop the emotion from swirling in my belly.

This couldn't be how it ended. I had so much more I wanted to do in my life. I wanted to see my son graduate high school. Go to college. Get married and have children.

I didn't want him to be raised by himself with a mother who cared more about using

him as a weapon against me than loving him unconditionally.

The woman in the seat next to me whose name I didn't know because I hadn't wanted her to speak to me now clutched my hand like I would be the one to save her from our fate as the captain's voice once again echoed throughout the cabin. "Brace, brace, brace."

It didn't take a genius to figure out we were close to crashing as the flight attendants repeatedly hollered, "Emergency, bend down, stay down."

Maybe for the final time, my life flashed before my eyes and all the things I missed out on.

Read Graham's story in *Scarred by Love*.