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USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR



**Don't Trust Her**

# Stacy Claflin



## **DON'T TRUST HER**

by Stacy Claflin

<http://www.stacyclaflin.com>

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# Part One

# Chapter One

The smell of bleach nearly knocks me over as I walk through the school's main door. I let it slam behind me, too busy covering my mouth as I cough. My nose burns and my eyes water. Someone must've emptied an entire bottle right here.

"Sorry!" Emily waves at me from behind the counter as she tucks some braided hair behind her ear. "Our new hire accidentally spilled bleach a few minutes ago."

I clear my throat and blink away the tears. "It isn't that bad."

She glances at her computer screen. "Did you forget something, Angelina?"

"Forget something? I'm here to pick up my kids."

Emily stares at me. "You already got Sophie and Owen."

The fumes must be getting to her head. Clearly I haven't picked up my children, or they'd be with me. I haven't seen them since I dropped them off this morning. "Maybe your new hire accidentally marked them as signed out. I assure you, I didn't get them."

"There was no mistake. I checked them out personally."

My lungs deflate. I can't find my voice.

This can't be happening.

"Are you okay, Mrs. London?"



I lean against the counter for support. Manage to force words past a lump in my throat. “Are you saying Owen and Sophie aren’t here?”

Her eyes widen, and she looks at me like she’s worried I might flip my lid.

She isn’t wrong—if she allowed someone to leave with my babies.

“Well?” I stare her down.

Emily swallows. “I’m not sure what’s going on, but you were here twenty minutes ago and took them with you.”

I take a deep breath and struggle to remain calm. “If that happened, don’t you think I’d remember? I’m going to get them myself.”

Emily leaps from her chair. “I should get Jennifer.”

“Do you think the manager knows where my children are? Because if she does, please get her. I’d love nothing more than to speak with her.”

“Stay right there. Don’t move.” She stares at me, obviously waiting for me to agree. Does she think I’m going to set the building on fire?

“Okay.”

She gives me a side-eye glance before scurrying around the corner and into the office behind the reception desk. The blinds aren’t properly closed, so I can see her and the manager talking. Emily points in my direction.

Jennifer glances at me then picks up the phone.

What’s going on? Is she calling security on me? Has the receptionist convinced her I’ve lost my mind?

They’re going to lose their license if they sent my children home with the wrong person. How could Emily think I picked them up? The woman has clearly lost her marbles.

Based on the way they keep looking at me, they think *I* have.

Jennifer starts speaking into the receiver.

This is too much. I can't stand around waiting another moment. I need to see Owen and Sophie's classrooms for myself. For all I know, they're still in there.

I want nothing more than to wrap my arms around them and tell them how much I love them.

Jennifer glances my way one more time.

That's it. I've had enough.

I bolt down the hall to my son's pre-kindergarten classroom, press my nose against the window, peer through the glass. The room is bustling, full of kids who are reading, drawing, playing. One little girl works on a puzzle at a table. A boy sits in the corner, building a tower with blocks.

Owen isn't in there. I double-check. Triple-check.

My baby isn't in his class.

Acid churns in my stomach. I wish I hadn't had that shrimp sandwich for lunch. More than that, I wish I really *had* picked up my kids twenty minutes ago.

I need to check Sophie's classroom, not that she's likely to be there. If Owen's gone, then she must be, too.

My heart pounds so loudly, I can't hear anything else.

Whoever took them will pay. I'll see to that personally.

Jennifer and Emily cut off my path. I'm determined to get past them. The classroom for the three-year-olds is on the other side of the reception desk. Must get there.

"Please calm down." Jennifer holds up a hand.

"I need to see Sophie's class."

"She isn't there. You picked her up."

"No, I did not." I narrow my eyes. "Move out of my way."

Jennifer doesn't budge. "I can't do that, I'm sorry. Would you like to come into my office so we can try to figure out what happened?"

I know exactly what happened. These people let a stranger walk out of here with my children, and now we're wasting valuable time.

We should be looking for them!

# Chapter Two

## *One week earlier.*

“Angelina...” Peter’s voice sounds far away, like he’s floating somewhere. He shakes my shoulder and presses a kiss next to my ear. “Your alarm’s going off.”

I bolt upright, gasping for air, untangling the covers. Finally, I hear my alarm. The quiet, soothing sound of crickets usually eases me from whatever sleep state I’m in when it goes off. Not today. Last night, I was up with Sophie for an hour and a half after she had a nightmare. I’ve never seen the girl so inconsolable.

Maybe I can catch a nap while the littles are at preschool. That’s one of the benefits of being married to an anesthesiologist. I don’t have to work a grueling nine-to-five like I used to. Growing up, I hated the idea of being a stay-at-home mom. It seemed oppressive and sexist to me. Now I love the luxury, especially after nights like last night. Because I can nap later, I don’t have any reason to hold a grudge against Peter for not getting up.

Bryant, my jerk ex, didn’t work and refused to get up with Nadia in the middle of the night when she was little. After being married to a complete narcissist, I can now appreciate Peter all the more.

By the time I get out of the shower, our bed is made and the smell of bacon wafts up from downstairs. Even though we’ve been married seven years, I still can’t believe how great he is.

I knock on the two closed bedroom doors before going downstairs. “Hurry up so you can eat breakfast before the bus gets here!”

My daughter and stepdaughter are both fourteen, and neither have any desire to get up in the mornings. Because of that, Peter and I decided to allow them the privilege of coffee

—but only if they drink it with breakfast. They love it, and it makes my life so much easier now.

Bryant complains Nadia is too young for coffee, but considering he only picks her up a few days a month and is always several months behind on child support, he doesn't get a say in our morning routine. And it isn't like our daughter is addicted. She puts so much milk and sugar in her mug, she's actually drinking coffee-flavored milk.

The littles are already at the table eating, still in their pajamas. I give them both a big hug and press my lips to their rosy cheeks.

I greet Peter with a lingering kiss as he sets a plate of bacon on the table. "Anything I can help with?"

He wraps an arm around my waist. "Did you tell Dakota and Nadia to get down here for breakfast?"

As if to answer his question, their footsteps thunder down the stairs. They're arguing about something. Typical. When Peter and I married, they were seven and became fast friends. Now, not so much. Last week, they were competing against each other to get some boy's attention. Who knows what the drama is this time. Whatever it is, they're sure to have forgotten about it by the weekend.

Dakota gives me a once-over. "I can't believe you'd wear that."

I glance down at my clothes. They're casual but acceptable. Not like the yoga pants and pajama bottoms a lot of moms wear to drop their kids off at the school.

Peter gives his daughter a sharp look. "Be nice."

"What? That outfit is so last year."

Dakota's mom is a big-shot at an expensive department store, so fashion is her life. Clearly the passion rubs off on her daughter.

"If Angelina is happy with it, that's all that matters. Besides, she looks amazing in it." He kisses my cheek.

"Ew," Nadia and Dakota say in unison.

At least they agree about something.

We all sit to eat a quick meal and discuss the day's events. Dakota has cheer practice after school, and Nadia needs me to drive her to an extra Tae Kwon Do class because she has a competition coming up. The littles have gymnastics after preschool. Peter may have to cover for another anesthesiologist at the hospital and might be home late.

School bus brakes squeal a few blocks over. That's the daily cue for our eighth graders to grab their bags and get outside. After the whirlwind of them gathering their things, saying goodbye, and slamming the door behind them, Peter picks up their plates.

"I'll get those," I tell him. "You have to get to work."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. You made breakfast, so I'll clean up."

I swear we have the same conversation every morning, and I love it. After three years married to Bryant—which was three years too many, except that I got Nadia out of it—I appreciate a husband who believes in sharing all the chores. His insistence on it is even more commendable considering I don't have a job outside the home.

The man is a saint, I swear. His patients and coworkers all agree. Everyone talks about how personable and kind he is. Even the most anxiety-ridden patients end up smiling before he puts them to sleep. People actually request him.

And I'm married to him. Everyone should be so lucky. Except Bryant. He deserves someone whose personality mirrors his.

Peter gives me another kiss and then tells Owen and Sophie to get dressed for preschool. They wrap their arms around his legs, and he picks them up and tosses them into the air. After patting them on their backs, they race up the stairs, laughing the whole way.

"You sure you don't mind if I'm home late tonight?" Peter grabs his jacket.

“Not at all. Jack has covered countless shifts for you when we’ve been on vacations. The kids and I will be fine.”

“You’re the best.” He squeezes me tightly, and I take in the woody scent of his cologne.

Just as he’s heading out the door, my phone rings. The screen shows it’s my mom.

This can’t be good. She only ever calls if she has bad news.



## Chapter Three

I take a deep breath and down the rest of my coffee before accepting my mom's call. Something must be wrong with either my brother or my dad.

"Are you there?" Her voice blasts through my phone before I have a chance to say hello. "It took you long enough to answer!"

"I'm getting the kids ready for school. Do you need something?"

"Yes!" Judging by her tone, it's up to us to stop World War Three.

"What is it?" I struggle to keep my tone light as I make my way upstairs to check on the littles. Owen is already dressed, but Sophie is twirling around in a princess costume.

Mom continues so loudly I have to hold my phone away from my ear. "Your brother had another incident, so I have to get to the institute and deal with that."

"Okay." I stop Sophie from spinning, point to her school clothes, and give her a serious look.

She nods, and I head back downstairs.

Mom continues. "I need you to come over here and watch your dad while I go deal with your brother."

I hold back a groan. So much for that nap. "Can't Dad's visiting nurse watch him?"

“He doesn’t have one coming today. We can’t afford to have a nurse here every day.”

“And you can’t schedule a nurse for today instead of another day?” I’m the last person she should ask for help. Dad never listens to me. While he’s forgotten everything else, he seems to remember on some level that I’m his daughter because he doesn’t take orders from me.

“No. We’d have to pay it ourselves. If the insurance would cover it, I’d have someone here all the time.”

“Why don’t you look into a nursing home?”

“We don’t have the kind of money that your husband makes, and I don’t hear either of you offering to pay for Dad’s care.”

Gotta love the mom-jabs. I’m never going to do that to my kids.

“I can stop by after dropping off Owen and Sophie at preschool.”

“Hurry!”

“Don’t worry, I will. Bye, Mom.” I end the call before she makes more demands or tries to guilt me. She seems to think we have an Olympic-sized pool full of money that we swim in every morning, but the cost of the round-the-clock, in-home care that she wants for Dad is beyond even Peter’s income. We’ve offered to help pay for a nursing facility, even though it would strain our monthly budget, but she doesn’t seem to appreciate—or even remember us making—the offer.

She wants everything her way. Nothing else will do, even if it’s a gift.

It’s no wonder I ended up married to Bryant right out of college. That kind of selfish attitude and ungrateful treatment was all I often felt. What I didn’t know was my first husband would take those negative traits to a whole new, unimaginable level.

Dwelling on those toxic personalities is unhealthy and unproductive. I set out to finish my morning chores. As I put

the breakfast dishes into the dishwasher, the littles announce they're ready. We head out a little later than usual, and by the time we get to the preschool, there's a line at the reception desk.

When we reach the front, Emily gives me a frazzled smile. She has bags under her eyes, and her hair is unusually dull and lifeless.

“Are you okay?”

She rubs her temples. “Just a little headache. No big deal.”

After she checks in the kids, I give them each big hugs. Teacher aides take them to their classrooms while I go to the coffee shop next door and order the largest mocha they offer. I'm going to need it if I have to somehow keep Dad from hurting himself while Mom's away dealing with my brother.

I don't even want to know what trouble he's gotten himself into now. At least he is in an institution, though the only reason why is that it's court-ordered. Mom tried fighting the judge for the right to keep him home, but that went over as well as expected.

By the time I get to my parents' house, I've already finished my gallon of coffee and chocolate. I'm still not ready to see either one of them. All I want is that nap. Maybe if Mom's visit to my brother is quick, I can still squeeze in some shut-eye before picking up Owen and Sophie.

I'm not going to hold my breath.

Before I even get out of the car, Mom is on the porch waving frantically for me to get inside. I remind myself I love my parents then force myself to open the door. My feet fight me as I make my way inside.

“What took you so long?” Mom closes the door behind me. “I've been waiting!”

“Like I told you, I needed to drop the kids off at school.”

She sniffs my mouth. “You stopped off for coffee.”

“Mom.”

“You should’ve come right over. You knew I was waiting for you.”

I hang my jacket on the coat rack. “I’m here now. You can go.”

She doesn’t take the hint. “Do you want to know what your brother did this time?”

“Not really. Where’s Dad?”

“He broke out of his restraints!”

“You’re restraining Dad now?”

Mom’s nostrils flare. “Michael! He broke out of his restraints, left his room, and—”

“I said I didn’t want to know.”

She folds her arms. “I have to tell someone.”

“Tell Dad.”

“Right, because he’ll know exactly what I’m talking about. Anyway, Michael got ahold of a pair of scissors—”

“Stop.” I cringe. “I *really* don’t want to know what he did. What’s wrong with that facility that he was able to get scissors in the first place?”

“He broke into the nurses’ station. Then he went on a rampage.”

“A rampage?” My mocha threatens to come up.

“Thankfully nobody died.”

“So, he’s improving?”

Mom glowers at me. She also doesn’t deny the truth behind my words. “Someone saw him on a monitor and stopped him in time.”

“In other words, he’s still homicidal?”

She looks away. “That’s what they’d have me believe.”

“Why do you need to go down there?”

“I have to sign some papers. They also want me to talk to him. He does better after seeing family. You should visit him more. It would help.”

“Sure. I’ll take the kids with me to see their sociopathic uncle. It’ll be a grand time. A regular family reunion.”

“Obviously, I’m not suggesting you bring any of the children.” She looks like a deflated balloon.

“Why don’t you head out? I don’t have all day. Where’s Dad?”

“You’re in luck. He’s asleep.”

She finally leaves, which means I’m now alone with my father. Spending time with him used to be one of my favorite ways to pass time. As a little girl, I adored him. He was my hero.

Now he doesn’t remember anything or anyone. I have to admit it’s commendable that Mom wants to keep him home. That’s dedication. But at the same time, he can be a danger to himself. She has to keep all the cabinets locked and watch him every minute.

Like father, like son apparently.

I check the master bedroom, and he’s snoring soundly. If I didn’t know better, I might think things were like they used to be. But it’s been a long time since things were good.

The first time Mom called to tell me he’d wandered off, I was in my second year of college. Then the calls grew more frequent, and soon he was doing a lot more than just getting lost. He began forgetting to show up at work. Missing appointments and important dates. By the time I made it to graduation, he couldn’t remember my name.

That gutted me then. Now it’s normal.

I pour myself a cup of bitter coffee from the pot my parents have had since I was younger than Nadia and Dakota. Then I check my social media feeds and hope that Dad manages to stay asleep until Mom returns.

Otherwise, things could get dangerous fast.

## Chapter Four

Mom and Dad wave from the porch as I pull out of their driveway. Although Dad didn't sleep the entire time like I'd hoped, he'd at least been lucid. Granted, he thought I was his favorite nurse and not his daughter, but it was still a win. I didn't have to stand between him and the front door like last time. He's taller and stronger than me by a significant margin.

I don't have much time before I need to pick up Owen and Sophie from preschool, so a nap is out. I could've taken one while my dad slept, but I couldn't risk being that vulnerable around him in case he woke and I didn't hear him. There's no telling what he'd do, though I'm sure it wouldn't involve scissors. But he isn't living in reality, so anything is possible. I don't know how my mom sleeps at night.

Despite all the caffeine I've guzzled today, I still want more. But I'm drawing the line at this point. Another cup will have me shaking and probably unable to sleep for the next week. Just what I need.

I decide to go to the little strip mall a few blocks away from the preschool to kill some time. It holds a few unique shops, and it's always interesting to see what those stores have in stock. I often find gifts that I stash away for later holidays.

First, I go to a popular clothing boutique. My stepdaughter's comment about my outfit grinds through my mind every time I pass a mirror—and this shop is full of them. I'm not out of style. I choose not to dress like a teenager and shouldn't at my age. Dakota doesn't know what she's talking

about. Her mom always looks like she's trying to be a college student, and that's her prerogative, but looking like an adult is mine.

In the kids' section, I find myself holding up princess dresses. These are even fancier than the one Sophie wore this morning. She would fall over herself if she saw these. I tuck the cutest one under my arm and look for something Owen might like. Not that he's interested in clothes. He wouldn't even look at these superhero outfits. The only thing he cares about is drawing. Even when he's at gymnastics, he's drawing invisible pictures in the air with his finger.

“Angelina?”

I spin toward the familiar voice. It's Chelsea from the PTA at the middle school. She's been leading all the PTA committees for as long as I can remember. Probably since kindergarten. The woman is nothing if not efficient, but every time I see her, she has something she wants from me.

Today I have nothing to give. Not one thing left in me. It'll be a miracle if I stay awake to watch Owen and Sophie in gymnastics.

I force a smile. “Chelsea. It's so good to see you.”

“Always a pleasure.” She gives me a light hug and air kisses.

It would be awkward if I didn't return the gesture, so I do.

She gives me a once-over. “You look gorgeous as usual.”

I can't tell if she means it or is mocking me. After Dakota's comment this morning, I admit to being overly sensitive regarding what I'm wearing. But that's not the issue. I always question Chelsea's sincerity. She's hard to read, and I'm pretty sure she speaks that way on purpose.

“Oh, I could never look as put together as you.”

Chelsea beams. “You're too kind. Are you going to be at the PTA meeting tomorrow night? We have to discuss the big dance. I'm sure your girls are so excited about it.”

This is the first I'm hearing about a dance, but it does explain their spat over a boy last week. "Yes, they're beyond excited."

"Wonderful! I'm so glad you'll be at the meeting tomorrow."

Wait. Did I just agree to that?

She glances at the time. "I'd better get going. It was such a treat running into you. A relief, actually."

"A relief?"

Chelsea hesitates. "After what happened at Runway Nails."

"At the nail salon?"

"Yesterday." She looks at me expectantly.

I must have missed some gossip, because I never go to Runway Nails. Trixie, Bryant's long-term girlfriend, is the owner and can't stand me. Given the lies my ex has undoubtedly told her about me, I can't blame her. But I also won't go near the woman. She's a sweetheart to Nadia—according to Nadia herself—and that's all I care about. The last thing I want is to do anything to make things worse for my girl.

Chelsea's still looking at me like she wants me to say something.

"What happened at the salon?"

"You walked right by me like you didn't even know me. I thought you were mad at me."

"I've never been to Runway Nails."

She tilts her head. "You were there yesterday."

"Sorry, you must've seen someone else."

"It was you."

I don't feel like talking about Bryant or Trixie, so I put my hand on Chelsea's arm and give her the most genuine look I can, going overboard to make my point clear. "I'm really sorry



someone snubbed you, but it wasn't me. I'd *never* do that to you, Chels. Ever."

She stumbles over her words.

"Should I bring my famous lemon bars to the PTA meeting? Those are your favorite, right?"

"Yeah."

"Great. I'll be sure to make them. See you tomorrow!"

Chelsea gives a little wave, looking dazed.

Maybe I should get the number of one of Dad's nurses. She might need to see someone about her memory. There's no way she saw me at the salon. I'd rather get a root canal and colonoscopy at the same time than step foot inside Trixie's place and have to deal with a loudmouth who hates my guts.

## Chapter Five

The tray of lemon bars is still warm, almost to the point of burning my palms as I carry it through the school parking lot. I'm a few minutes late because Sophie started crying as soon as I opened the front door to leave. Even Peter promising to set up a tea party for her didn't stop the tears.

A lump forms in my throat just thinking about my sweet little girl clinging to my legs as I was trying to go. I'll have to plan something special for her tomorrow to make up for this. What makes it worse is that I didn't even want to come to this PTA meeting in the first place.

But here I am. If nothing else, I'll show Chelsea that we're still friends and I'd never snub her. Not when every other parent here jumps at her command. One wrong move from me, and Nadia and Dakota's lives at school could take a drastic turn for the worse.

A chilly breeze picks up. I hold the dessert tray close to keep warm since I didn't bring a jacket. It isn't cold yet, but the fall weather is sure to turn icy before long.

I hurry toward the building. A hum of conversation sounds from the open door.

The tiny hairs on the back of my neck stand on end, and goose bumps form down my spine. This has nothing to do with the breeze.

It feels like someone is watching me.

I glance around. The parking lot is empty. A few stray leaves bounce lightly across the pavement, scraping over it. The quiet sounds seem louder than they should.

I'm just imagining things. This is a safe neighborhood, and I'm going into a PTA meeting. Why would someone be spying on me? I need to stop listening to so many true crime podcasts. My lemon bars are probably the most exciting thing in our small town right now.

Inside, everyone is hovering around the snack table, chatting with paper cups and treats in hand.

Chelsea hurries over to me. "You made it! I was getting worried."

I hold out my tray. "No fear, my lemon bars are here."

She takes them and sets them in an empty space in the middle of the table, as if she was holding the spot for them. "Grab something to eat. We're going to start soon."

I'm still on edge from feeling like someone was watching me outside, so I don't take anything. The meeting starts and, unsurprisingly, drags on. Somehow I end up getting roped into being on the committee for the next school dance. Finally, Chelsea dismisses us.

Now I'm hungry. There are slim pickings, and my lemon bars tray is empty. I have the choice of a few store-bought cookies and the dregs of some fruit punch.

"How are you doing?"

I turn to see Lyra—Peter's ex and Dakota's mom—who's dressed to the nines. Typical for the CEO of a high-end department store. She gives me a friendly smile.

"Eager to get home. Sophie was so upset about my leaving tonight."

"Oh, no. The poor thing. Is she okay?"

"I hope so. Peter promised her a tea party."

"She'll be fine. He's great like that."

“Thank you,” I say, relaxing immediately. It should be strange that my husband’s ex can set me at ease, but she’s always been so level-headed. Nothing at all like my narcissist ex.

Lyra leans closer. “Dakota mentioned you might be in the market for a personal stylist.”

My face flames. She actually told her mother that?

“I just wanted to let you know that if you come in to my location and ask for me, it’ll be on the house.”

It takes me a moment to find my voice. Not only does my husband’s ex think I’m a fashion disaster, she wants to give me charity and give me the help I apparently need so desperately. “That’s really generous of you.”

Does she not realize how humiliating this is? Especially having this conversation now, where other moms could easily overhear.

Lyra gives my shoulder a squeeze. “After everything you’ve done for Dakota? It’s the least I could do. I’ve heard so many horror stories about stepparents, but you’re a dream. We both adore you.”

I’m sure she’s exaggerating, but even so, they clearly think I’m a walking fashion disaster. “I—I’m really grateful for you two, as well.”

She beams. “If you come in on one of my days off, the other stylists know to give you first-class treatment.”

All the stylists know about me? This is even more embarrassing than I first thought.

Chelsea comes over and pulls Lyra away.

Thank God.

As she’s dragged off, Lyra waves. “Don’t be a stranger!”

I wave back, but she’s already deep in conversation. Then I glance down at my clothes. Slacks and a trendy blouse. A popular YouTuber was wearing this same one just last month.

I'm perfectly fine, and it isn't as if I want to look like I'm trying to compete with my daughters.

The room is starting to thin, so I grab my now-cold, empty tray then head out. More colorful leaves whip around the few remaining cars. I hurry to my Escalade.

Just before I reach it, a chill once again runs down my back.

I spin around, scan the parking lot.

Empty again.

Definitely time to ease up on the crime podcasts. Not every parking lot is filled with abductors.

That also doesn't mean I'm wrong about something being off. But I probably am. I have to be. Why would someone be watching me?

I'm just a boring PTA mom with no fashion sense. Nothing to see here.

## Chapter Six

Megan waves to me as she bustles through the doorway at the coffee shop. She rushes to my table then sets her purse on the chair opposite me. “Sorry I’m late. You wouldn’t believe all the roadwork I ran into.”

I give my best friend a hug. “Don’t worry about it. I’m just glad to see you.”

“Uh-oh. Rough week?”

“You could say that.”

“Let me grab my coffee, then you can tell me all about it. I ordered it on the way, so it should be ready.” She races off before I can say anything.

My body relaxes just from seeing her. We’ve been friends forever, and she knows me better than I know myself. Cliché but true. We’re the classic case of friends meeting on the first day of kindergarten, and despite everything life has thrown at both of us, we’re still close to this day. I don’t know what I’d do without her.

She slides into the seat next to me and takes a big gulp of her vanilla chai latte. “Tell me all about it.”

By the time I’m done explaining everything from my brother’s incident to Lyra’s generous offer to make me stylish, both our coffees are empty.

“Why didn’t you call me?” Megan gives me a stern look. “You could’ve unloaded all that sooner.”

“The last thing I want is to bother you this week.” I sigh.

“Girl, just because work is insane doesn’t mean you have to avoid me. Next time you’re stressed, call me. If you don’t, I’ll hunt you down and force it out of you.”

I laugh but also don’t doubt she means every word. “I will.”

“Promise?”

“You have my word.”

“Good. I’m going to treat you to some scones. The ones behind the counter look mouthwatering.” She leaps up and races to the counter with her purse.

I take a deep breath, finally starting to feel better. Even though I’ve already told Peter everything, there’s something different about venting to my bestie.

She returns with a pile of scones.

My eyes nearly bulge out of my head. “You don’t expect us to finish all of those, do you?”

“You can take home whatever we don’t eat.”

I don’t argue. The kids will happily scarf these down.

Just as I’m taking my first bite of the sweet, Megan cranes her neck to look at something behind me.

She frowns. “Don’t look now, but here comes trouble.”

I can’t ask who she’s referring to because my mouth is full of sugary goodness.

Sylvia Lyons marches over to our table.

Trouble indeed. The woman has been giving us grief since the day we all met in kindergarten.

She looks back and forth between the scone in my hand and me. “You must share your secret.”

I swallow. “Secret?”

“Yeah.”

Megan glares at her. “Stop playing coy. You aren’t as clever as you think.”

I snort. If she wasn't already my best friend, Megan would be my new favorite person.

Sylvia straightens her back. "Angelina's keeping something from us."

Megan arches an eyebrow. "Really? Do tell."

"She's got a weight loss secret that I must know."

I choke on a scone, but quickly recover. "Weight loss secret? You must be confusing me with someone else."

"Nope. You've been pigging out all week, yet you don't seem to be gaining an ounce. Did you start a new workout routine? Find a secret essential oil? What is it?"

I drop the scone I'm holding. "I've been 'pigging out'?"

Megan stares her down. "Rude much?"

"I'm only speaking the truth." Sylvia plops down in the empty chair that I should've moved to a different table when I sat down.

"When exactly have you seen me doing that?" I demand.

She glances at the pile of scones. "There's this, then there's those cookies at the PTA meeting."

The woman is insufferable. "I'd hardly say that's going overboard."

"Sounds like you need a hobby," Megan says. "Maybe you should leave and go find one."

"That isn't all." Sylvia narrows her eyes at me. "I haven't gotten to the best part."

I hold back an eye roll. "I can't wait."

Sylvia glances between Megan and me slowly, obviously trying to draw out suspense.

"Spit it out." Megan yawns.

"Wouldn't it be better if you told her?" Sylvia looks at me.

"Sadly, I don't know what you're talking about."



“Are you serious?” She looks at me like I’ve grown another head.

“Just tell us.”

Sylvia shakes her head and makes a tutting noise. “You don’t remember being at the Cake Shack?”

“Doesn’t ring a bell.”

“Wow. Okay.” Sylvia turns to Megan. “Our Angelina gorged on a six pack of cupcakes—with extra frosting—all by herself.”

I stare at her in disbelief.

She turns to me. “You aren’t going to own up to it?”

“No, because it never happened.”

“Liar.” She narrows her eyes.

“You’re the liar!”

Several people from nearby tables turn and stare.

“I saw you.” Sylvia turns to Megan. “Did you realize your BFF is a stone-cold liar?”

“If she says she wasn’t there, I believe her.”

“She. Was. There.”

“Would you shut up?” I snap. “I don’t know what you’re trying to pull, but I haven’t been to the Cake Shack in months, and I certainly haven’t eaten half a dozen cupcakes on my own. I’d end up puking it all up.”

“Oh.” Sylvia’s eyes widen then a slow smile spreads across her face. “So *that’s* your secret. Bulimia.”

I leap from my chair, knocking it into the table behind me. “What do you want?”

“The truth! Admit it. You’re bingeing and purging.”

Now people are really staring.

“Lower your voice.” My voice is practically a growl.

“Have a seat.” She gestures toward my chair.

“No.”

“You’re making a scene.”

Megan starts to say something, no doubt in my defense, but I’m going to stand up for myself. “You’re the one who came over here, making false accusations. What’s your angle?”

“Like I said, I thought maybe you found some weight loss secret. But I want nothing to do with bulimia. That destroys your teeth, you know. All that vomiting.”

“I’ll destroy *your* teeth.” I clench my fists.

Megan nods toward my chair before turning her attention to Sylvia. “If you saw Angelina doing something so crazy, I’m sure you got a picture of that. I’d love to see it.”

Sylvia’s mouth falls open.

“You don’t have one?” Megan tilts her head. “Sounds like it’s your word against hers, and I believe Angelina.”

I love my best friend. Next time I’m buying her a case of scones.

Megan doesn’t pull her attention from Sylvia. “Show us proof or get out of here. We don’t need your bullying.”

“And I don’t need *this*.” She rises, slams her chair against the table, then storms out of the coffee house.

I slink into my seat, my pulse pounding.

“Don’t listen to her.” Megan holds out a scone.

“I don’t want another dessert ever again.”

“She’s just jealous.”

“Of me?”

“That viper said as much. She thinks you look great. Why else would she want to know how you do it?”

“To make a fool of me.”

She certainly succeeded. Most everyone around us is whispering, and several of them are sneaking glances at me.

All these people think I binge on cupcakes and throw them up later. Thanks to Sylvia.

Could she have been the one watching me in the parking lot last night?

If anyone was watching me at all.

## Chapter Seven

**A**s soon as I pull into the street, tears blur my vision. I didn't even realize they were building until now. Megan could tell I was still upset when we left the coffee shop, but I was in denial. Thought I was just angry.

At least Sylvia isn't here to see me crying. That would probably feed her need to make me look bad.

I try to stop the tears, but they have a mind of their own. There's no way I can drive like this, so I pull over to the nearest available parking spot and lean my head against the steering wheel.

Why would Sylvia go to such lengths to make up such a horrible story about me? Like I would ever eat that many cupcakes in one sitting. But even if I did, why would she make such a point to humiliate me over that? Not just in front of Megan, but everyone in the coffee shop.

If I did something to upset her, I wish she'd act like an adult and talk to me about it. There are few things I like less than conflict, so I would quickly try to make amends. However, after the way she just treated me, that ship has sailed. Now that I've seen her true colors, I don't want that woman anywhere near me.

The stupid tears won't stop. At this rate, I'm going to sit here until it's time to pick up the littles from preschool. And I'm going to have to stop by home first because my makeup is ruined.

I put on some upbeat music and manage to calm down enough to drive. One look in the mirror tells me what I need to know. My makeup is smeared all down my face. I wipe as much off as I can with a baby wipe then head for the house.

When I get there, Peter's car is out front. Considering he has a full day and expects to fill in for Jack again, my heart skips a beat. Is he okay? Did he get sick or hurt?

The tires squeal as I pull into the spot next to his. I fumble to get the keys from the ignition and hurry inside, my mind conjuring worse and worse images with each passing moment.

Seriously, I need to ease up on the true crime podcasts. Normal people don't have these gruesome thoughts when their spouse is home in the middle of the day. Then again, my nerves were already shot thanks to Sylvia.

After struggling with the locks, I fling open the door. "Peter! Are you in here?"

"In the kitchen."

My knees turn to rubber with relief. He isn't lying somewhere with a knife sticking out of his back. I close the door and race to him.

He's sitting with a steaming mug and scrolling through the screen of his tablet. Not a care in the world when I was almost to the point of planning his funeral.

Peter glances up, and his eyes fill with concern. "Are you okay?"

"I was going to ask you the same thing. Why aren't you at work?"

He yawns. "Vasquez took over my shift after hearing I've been covering for Jack all on my own. He said I deserved a break."

Unable to deal with my emotions a moment longer, I throw my arms around him and squeeze. Can't let go.

He holds me close. "What's wrong, Ange?"

"I thought you were dead."

“What? Why?”

“Never mind. It’s stupid.”

He steps back and holds my gaze. “Nothing you say is stupid. Tell me what’s going on.”

I don’t know if I can take any more humiliation today.

“Why did you think I was dead?”

“Because I’m already stressed. I assumed the worst when I saw your car in the driveway.”

Peter lifts an eyebrow. “You thought I was dead because the Mercedes was out front?”

“I told you it was stupid.”

“It isn’t.” He squeezes my hand. “Why were you stressed before you got here?”

I’m tempted to run from the room and hide under our bed like Owen does when he gets in trouble. But I’m an adult, and I know my husband is on my side.

He brushes a wisp of my hair behind my ear. “Let’s figure this out together.”

“We’d better sit down.”

“This sounds serious. Let me pour you some coffee.”

Is this man perfect, or have I been so tainted by a bad first marriage that I don’t know what normal gestures of kindness are anymore?

We settle onto the leather sofa with coffee mugs in hand. He has a superhero dad mug the kids got him for his last birthday, and I have a mug he found from the back of the cabinet that I’ve had forever. My dad gave it to me so long ago he still knew who I was then. I don’t want to risk it breaking, which is why I almost never use it anymore.

“Tell me about your day.” Peter looks at me with interest. There isn’t a hint of judgment in his eyes.

It helps me to relax somewhat, as does the warm drink. I take a deep breath, sip the strong coffee, and tell him all about

Sylvia and the terrible scene she caused. “I don’t think I can ever show my face in the coffee shop again.”

He sets down his mug and rubs my shoulders. “I’m sure everyone will have forgotten about it by tomorrow. It’s a small town, and people are hungry for new gossip.”

“You didn’t see the way people were looking at me. She kept saying I’m bulimic!” Hot, angry tears blur my vision. I try to blink them away, but they only fall onto my face.

Peter kisses them away. “Everyone knows she’s a hothead. She’s probably started half the rumors that go around.”

I can’t argue that, but at the same time, I don’t ever want to see anyone in the coffee shop ever again. Except for Megan. She’s the only one who knows better.

Peter looks at his phone. “What time do you need to pick up the kids from preschool?”

“Soon. I was going to wash my face when I got home, but then I got distracted when you were here.”

“I’ll get them. Why don’t you take a bubble bath or a nap? I could pour you a glass of wine.”

I think I really did marry the perfect man.

“That sounds amazing.” I grab a tissue and blow my nose. “But they also have gymnastics this afternoon.”

“Perfect. I’ll take them. How often do I get to pick them up or watch them in the gym? Maybe I can even take them out for ice cream cones—if you don’t think it’ll ruin their dinners.”

I stare at the man I married for a moment, hardly able to believe this is really my life. “If you’re going to do all that, go ahead and ruin their dinners. It’s only one night, and I’m sure they’re going to be thrilled to see you at pickup.”

He leans over and gives me a toe-curling kiss. “Do you think I have time to start a bath for you? If you want one.”

I glance at the time. “You’d better get going so we aren’t charged a late fee by the preschool.”

“Then I’ll at least pour you some wine.” Peter squeezes my hand and goes into the kitchen.

How did I ever get so lucky?



## Chapter Eight

It takes me a few moments to figure out what's going on when I wake from my nap. At first I think I forgot to pick up Owen and Sophie from preschool. But the lingering taste of wine fills in the blanks. Peter picked them up, took them to gymnastics, then treated them to ice cream.

What about Nadia and Dakota? Was I supposed to pick them up? No. Nadia has a study group after Tae Kwon Do, and Dakota's cheering at a football game. Then she's going to spend the next seven days at Lyra's house. At least she has a schedule with her parents—Thursday to Thursday. And if anything comes up where one parent wants to switch a day or two, they work it out.

I wish it was that easy with Bryant. It's literally impossible for me to have a calm discussion with him about Nadia. Or anything, really. He demands his own way, uses name-calling and guilt trips, and gaslights me like it's a fun game. I hate that my girl doesn't see her dad often, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't glad about not having to deal with him more than a few times a month. Even that much is enough to skyrocket my blood pressure for days.

Peter has offered multiple times to deal with Bryant so I don't have to, but the last time he attempted that it almost ended up in a fistfight. Now I talk to my ex when Peter isn't around. He's too protective of me, and Bryant would love nothing more than to see my successful husband punch him. Bryant would file charges, and Peter's solid reputation would be soiled.

I refuse to let that happen. My ex has stolen enough from me, I won't let him do anything to Peter. I protect all my children and my husband from Bryant as much as I can. They don't deserve to deal with his abuses just because I made the mistake of falling for a narcissist when I was young and didn't know better. There isn't much I can do about Nadia going to his house, but at least it isn't often, and she tells me Trixie acts as a buffer when he's in a mood.

My stomach sinks at the thought of Trixie. Chelsea claimed to have seen me at her nail salon.

That's not one, but now two, people seeing me somewhere I wasn't. There's no way I'd ever step foot into Runway Nails, and while I have nothing against anyone at the Cake Shack, I certainly wasn't there gorging myself.

There has to be an explanation. It was easy to brush off Chelsea's fake sighting because that was so obviously not me. But now a second incident in the same week? Something fishy is going on.

Or maybe I'm making too big a deal out of this. It could be something easy to explain.

Someone who looks similar to me might have moved into the area. The people who saw her—if that's what happened—aren't close to me. It's easy to believe they'd mistake me for someone else. It isn't like Peter or Megan saw any of it.

I shove the thoughts from my mind and climb out of bed. For now, I'm going to chalk it up to coincidence. If it happens again, then I'll have reason to look into it. It should be easy enough to figure out if we have a new town resident.

My phone shows a text from Peter saying he's taking the kids to the park with their cones. They're probably over the moon with excitement. I smile at the thought, especially after Sophie was so upset about me going to the PTA meeting the other night.

I open my laptop and check my email. More than twenty new messages, and that doesn't even count the promotions folder. I'm tempted to close the laptop and deal with

everything later, but when will I have the house to myself again anytime soon? I'm so busy during the days when the kids are in school, I'm hardly ever home alone.

Most of the messages are about the kids' schedules. Between the four of them, their schools and extracurricular activities send what feels like dozens of reminders and updates every single day. I quickly skim through them, and make sure my personal calendar matches everything.

I always read messages from senders I recognize before the others, which are usually spam. There's only one of those left after I open all the others. Before clicking on it, I check the subject line. It's enough to make my blood run cold.

*Do you know where your kids are?*

I frantically tap the mouse. The server loads for a moment which stretches into an eternity.

“Just open, already!”

Normally I wouldn't freak out over what's likely a spam message, but my nerves are already shot from my interaction with Sylvia earlier. So much for the wine and bubble bath. Now I'm just as frazzled as before.

The email finally opens. It's short and to the point. And it's also sent anonymously through a free email provider.

*Keep a close watch on your kids. You never know what could happen when you take your eyes off them.*

Everything around me goes blurry as I focus on the words.

Someone is threatening my children. They have no idea who they're dealing with. This troll picked the wrong mother to mess with. I'm going to hunt this person down and make them wish they'd never been born.

But first I need to calm down. Can't get anything done with pure fury pumping through my veins. I take several deep breaths, not that it helps. I walk around the room. More breathing.

This is ridiculous. The troll is only trying to get under my skin. I know where my kids are—Peter has the littles, Nadia is

at her study group, and Dakota is cheering for a football game.

My breathing slowly returns to normal. I pace, trying to figure out what to do. If I respond, I'm only giving the loser what they want. I hover the pointer over the delete button.

No. I can't do that. This could be evidence if things escalate. After dealing with a narcissist husband, I know all too well the importance of documenting everything.

I won't reply, and I won't get rid of it.

What I will do is call Sylvia Lyons and see if she knows anything about this.

## Chapter Nine

**M**y hands shake as I pull up Sylvia's information on my phone. I nearly delete her as a contact instead of calling her. This is insane. If I'm this shaken, I won't be able to have the conversation I want with her. She'll sense my apprehension a mile away.

I need to be on the top of my game, full of confidence.

Luckily, replaying the whole fiasco at the coffee shop is enough to replace my frayed nerves with the anger and determination I need in order to make this call. For whatever reason, she wants to take me down. She didn't get what she was fishing for by accusing me of binging and purging, so she upped her game and sent me a threatening email.

Who else could it be? She's the only person who has any reason for trying to hurt or scare me like that. I haven't had any negative interactions with anyone else recently—not even with Bryant. Which means an argument is likely due any day now. Could he have sent the message? It's possible, but I haven't done anything to upset him.

Unless Trixie also saw the woman who Chelsea mistook for me in the nail salon. Would she have had a negative conversation with that customer? If she did, Trixie would complain to Bryant.

Or would *she* stoop to sending the message?

I plop down on the bed. Ugh. Now I have too many possible suspects. This is starting to get out of hand.

Come to think of it, the threatening email wasn't addressed to me. It didn't have my name or my kids' names anywhere in it.

It's either some sort of scam phishing for a response, or it might even have been sent to the wrong email address. Actually, that makes a lot of sense now that I think about it. There's someone in Ohio with only one letter difference, and sometimes we get each other's emails.

The message could be for her, not me.

Now I'm thinking like a rational person. But I should still call Sylvia, not to blame her but to find out what I can about the woman who looks like me. Maybe she can tell me something useful to help me make sense of things.

Then I can move on with my life and forget any of this ever happened. If there are any more fake sightings of me, I'll be able to set people straight. This is actually good news.

I don't want to talk to Sylvia, but if I can find out what's going on, it'll be worth it. All I want is to forget the entire week ever happened.

Now that I'm finally ready to speak with her, I press the call button with a steady hand. I don't even need to take more deep breaths. I'm simply ready to move on.

Her phone rings several times. She's probably waiting for it to go to voicemail so she doesn't have to hear my voice. The feeling is mutual, but I need to find out more about the woman she saw.

I'm ready to disconnect when the ring cuts off.

"Angelina?" Sylvia's voice is out of breath.

"Yes." Now I'm off guard because I wasn't expecting her to answer. I close my eyes for a moment to regain my focus. "I have a question for you."

"I don't have anything to say to you."

Then why did she answer? As much as I want to ask, I don't want to start an argument, either. "I know you don't believe I wasn't at the cake shop, but I wasn't. I think there

might be someone in town who looks a lot like me. In fact, you aren't the first person who thinks they saw me somewhere I wasn't."

"It was you, and you need help. If you won't seek it for yourself, think of your children. They don't deserve to grow up with a mom who has an eating disorder."

I bite my tongue.

Need to stay calm. Want to defend myself. Don't care what she thinks about me. "Nobody cares more about my children than I do. Can you please tell me about the woman you saw?"

"You mean you?" Her tone drips with sarcasm. "For starters, you were sitting alone with six extra-frosted cupcakes. Then you devoured them all. What else would you like to know?"

"What was I wearing?" If I'm going to get anywhere with her, I'm going to have to play along.

"Does that matter?" she snaps.

"To me, yes."

"I wasn't paying that close of attention. I was more taken by the amount of carbs you were inhaling."

"Anything you remember would really help me out."

She sighs dramatically. "Then you'll let me go?"

"All I want is to figure out what's going on."

"Maybe you're getting early-onset dementia like your dad."

"I'm going to pretend you didn't say that. What was I wearing at the cake place?"

"Give me a minute..." She pauses even longer than my email took to load. "You had that awful purple tank top with some denim shorts."

"Awful tank top?"

"The tacky one with the little flowers that you've been wearing every summer for the last five years."

My mouth falls open. That shirt is *cute*. But she's right about one thing. I've had it since before Owen was born. It was actually from a maternity boutique. In my defense, it's made for the first trimester and I've hung onto it because it's so comfy.

However, I haven't worn it this week. And definitely not while gorging on cupcakes alone.

"Are you still there?" Sylvia's voice interrupts my thoughts.

"I haven't worn that shirt in at least a month."

"Sorry, but you were. I need to get going. If you want help for your memory, let me know. Paul knows a guy—"

"No, but thank you for letting me know what the woman was wearing. I appreciate it." I end the call before she can accuse me of lying again.

What are the chances the lady who looks similar to me would have the same tank top? Maybe she was pregnant the same summer that I was and also finds that shirt to be extremely comfortable. If so, she has good taste.

I should find her and try to make friends. Spending time with someone like her would be better than wasting another thought on Sylvia.

Now that she's mentioned the purple tank, I can't remember the last time I saw it. I need to check my closet. Not that I'm worried she's right. She's clearly wrong.

My summer wear is now in the back of the closet since the days are getting chillier. October is inching closer, and it's definitely sweater weather now. I flip through my short sleeve shirts, starting with the blues and stopping at the purples.

The flowered tank top is gone.

I stare in disbelief before flipping through all the shirts again. It has to be here. I remember hanging it up when I moved my fall wardrobe to the front. I contemplated keeping it out a little longer to wear underneath light cardigans to get the



most use out of it. Although according to Sylvia, I've gotten far more than that from it already.

After checking my summer section three more times, I go through all my clothes. Still don't find it. Then I go through my drawers, even though I know it isn't there. There's no way I would've folded it as I only hang my favorite items.

And I'm right. It isn't there.

Where did it go?

Maybe Nadia or Dakota borrowed it. It is cute. Given Dakota's remark about my wardrobe, and her subsequent comment to Lyra, I doubt she took it.

I check both girls' rooms, anyway. Not surprisingly, it isn't in either one. Although one of them could've taken it to their other home. Both have been with their other parents since I last wore the shirt.

Could Nadia have been at the Cake Shack eating the cupcakes? The girl has eaten an entire pizza on her own before, so it's possible. She never gains an ounce, even after eating a lot. She could probably down a half dozen cupcakes without even blinking.

The problem with that theory is my oldest is the spitting image of her dad. We have that in common—my entire life I've always heard people say I resemble my own father.

Sylvia would have to be blind to mistake Nadia for me. Maybe that's it. The woman needs glasses, and instead of facing the facts she's taking it out on me. That makes the most sense.

Not that it explains where my favorite tank top is.

I don't even care anymore. My stomach is rumbling, and everyone is going to want food soon. Time to make dinner. I can solve the clothing mystery later. But I need out of the silk nightie I slipped into after my bath.

After changing into some yoga pants and a simple t-shirt, I toss my wrinkled nightie into the hamper.

Something purple catches my eye.

It's the exact shade as my beloved tank top.

## Chapter Ten

This can't be happening. My tank top *cannot* be in my hamper. Breath hitching, I reach for it. Pull it out.

How did it get there?

I don't know how I'm holding the shirt Sylvia swears I wore the other day. I remember exactly what I wore all week. I'm careful not to re-wear anything too often because I grew up poor and had to cycle through my clothes far too frequently. With most of my parents' money going toward my brother's care, there was little left over for me.

Aside from that, I distinctly remember putting my summer clothes in the back of the closet. I can even recall what I wore that day—faded skinny jeans and a lightweight blue long-sleeve top. My summer clothes have stayed there. I've had no need for shorts or tanks.

My memory is fine. Better than fine. To prove the point, I grab a pad of paper and write out everything I've worn in the last week. I check the list against the clothes in my hamper.

Everything matches, except the tank top.

I'm going to have to ask Nadia about the shirt, even though the chances of her having worn it are astronomically low. We don't borrow each other's clothes. Not like some mothers and daughters. We just don't have the same style at all. But it's the only thing that makes *any* sense, even though it's unlikely.

She won't be home for a while, and despite all the stress I'm under, I'm still hungry. May as well make dinner and try

to get my mind off everything.

As I cook the food, all I can think about is what could be going on with people seeing me around town. I really doubt anyone borrowed my shirt, so the only alternative is that someone in town looks like me. Not that a newbie explains how my tank top got into the hamper. Unless Peter accidentally knocked it off the hanger? But then why wouldn't he put it back? Why put it in the hamper?

I'm making myself crazy with all these ideas. Aside from Sylvia telling a coffee shop full of people that I'm bulimic, a couple mistaken sightings of me really isn't a big deal. Is it? For all I know, Chelsea and Sylvia are in cahoots. Why they would be trying to convince me I'm losing my mind is beyond me, but it isn't outside the realm of possibility. It's strange, sure, but nothing else fits.

I know I can trust my memory. Not only can I recall everywhere I've been this week, but I have multiple calendars to prove it. The one in the kitchen for the family's schedule has everything, and my calendar app on my phone has even more granular notes.

Even if I didn't have all of that, I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that I would never step foot into Trixie's nail salon and would definitely remember downing half a dozen cupcakes on my own. I'd also remember the doozy of stomachache that would've followed because I'm sensitive to sweets.

By the time dinner's ready, I feel much better. I don't have any answers, but at least I'm sure of my sanity. There have to be reasonable explanations for all of it. I'm not even sure I care what those are. Part of me wants to just put all of this behind me and not think about it again. There are plenty more important things for me to think about.

Somehow I doubt it will be that simple.

Still, I decide to wash the tank top, put it back with all the other summer clothes, and focus on what's important. I don't care what Sylvia or Chelsea think of me.

Now to figure out where my family is, and if they want dinner. I'm hungry enough to eat by myself—I bet Sylvia would love that—but if everyone is almost here, I'll wait for them to arrive.

I text Peter and Nadia. She gets back to me first, saying she's eating chili at her friend's house while they study. I hold back the urge to ask her about my shirt. It doesn't matter. Sylvia is mean, or at the very least, wackadoodle. I don't care which, and I don't want any part of her antics. I've wasted enough time on her already. I'm done.

Peter hasn't answered, so I send him a second text. My stomach rumbles while I stare at the chicken, rice, and asparagus.

After a minute of waiting that feels like an hour, I eat alone. Though the house is quiet, I feel like it's full given how loud my mind is. Despite deciding to stop thinking about the shirt and doppelgänger sightings, my thoughts are rolling over all the scenarios again and again.

I pull out my phone and find a video to watch. I'm so behind on all my podcasts and easily find one to listen to. Instead of choosing true crime, I pick an episode that's all about good news in the world. That's what I need to focus on.

It helps get my mind off everything. I smile at a story of two baby deer rescued from a ditch by a trucker who saw the mom acting strange on the side of the road.

By the time I've eaten my food, Peter still hasn't gotten back to me.

Annoyance runs through me, but on the other hand, if he's busy with the kids at the park I'd rather him focus on them than his phone. I put my plate in the dishwasher and set all the burners to the warm setting in case they want food when they get back.

Of all the evenings to be alone with my thoughts, it had to be tonight. But there are plenty of other things I can focus on. Like laundry. Once I get my purple tank top hung up, I won't

have to think about it again until next summer. Although, after all of this, I can't say I'll ever want to wear it again.

I hurry upstairs and gather some dark clothes from all the bedroom hampers and make my way down to the laundry room. Just as I pass the kitchen, my phone beeps with a text.

My heart skips a beat. I drop the clothes and run to my phone, eager to hear from Peter. He'll be able to help me figure out what's going on.

The screen shows a message from Megan. She's sending her love and asking how I'm doing.

I'm glad she didn't call, because I've never been more disappointed to hear from my best friend. I tap out a quick note letting her know I'm hanging in there. If I try to make it sound like I'm doing better than I am, she'll see right through me. Even in a text thread.

I really should talk with her about my conversation with Sylvia and the mystery of my tank top, but I'm going to wait until I confirm Nadia didn't borrow it.

But if she did, she'd have thrown it in *her* hamper. Not mine.

This is driving me insane! I'm probably giving Sylvia and Chelsea exactly what they want by obsessing over this. It's a *shirt*. I didn't gorge on cupcakes or get my nails done. My chipped polish is proof of that much.

I shove clothes into the washing machine, barely paying attention as I check pockets. Just the typical stuff—candy wrappers, some coins, a plastic dinosaur, and scrap of paper. I toss them onto a shelf and start the load. Then I gather the mix of treasures and trash to put everything in the bucket by the door. I have a rule that if people leave things in their pockets, they need to find it themselves. Pockets are supposed to be emptied before going into the hamper.

The paper unfolds as it lands on top of the dinosaur.

It has a phone number scrawled in loopy handwriting. Underneath the number is the name Jane.

I stare at it in disbelief.

Did that come from Peter's pocket?

## Chapter Eleven

**T**he room spins. I lean against the wall. Struggle to inhale. The paper could belong to anyone. I took clothes from all the bedrooms. But Nadia and Dakota always exchange contact information on their phones. Writing down a number is a foreign concept to them. It's something from Peter's and my generation—not that I can remember the last time I did it.

I take slow, deep breaths. Something I've been doing entirely too much of lately.

Do people still give notes with their information in bars? That was where I usually got numbers when I was single. Doesn't everyone use dating apps these days? Those are probably safer, as they use background checks. Not that I'd know. After Bryant, I hadn't been looking to ever have another relationship until Megan set me up with Peter. He was college roommates with her brother, and she had the insight to see that we were perfect for each other. My best friend knows me better than anyone else.

None of that matters. I need to figure out who Jane is, and why Peter has her number. It doesn't make any sense. It can't be what it looks like. Maybe she gave him her number, and he shoved it in his pocket intending to toss it. Or she might've slid it in there without him noticing. It's possible she gave him the number for a completely innocent reason. Why would he leave it in his pocket if he had something to hide? He isn't dumb.



One of those scenarios must be what happened. He would never leave that in a pocket for me to find. Not that I would suspect him of cheating. Guys who cheat don't give shoulder rubs to or pour glasses of wine and offer to start bubble baths for their stressed wives.

I would know. Bryant treated me like garbage the entire time we were together. Time he spent wooing other women.

My blood boils at the thought. Not that I care what my ex does, but because I refuse to be put in that position again.

What am I going to do? I can't accuse Peter, and even bringing up the scrap of paper could seem like I don't trust him. I mean, I don't even know that it came from his pocket.

I'll have to find out if either Nadia or Dakota have a friend name Jane. Meanwhile, I'll keep an eye on Peter and see if he starts acting suspicious.

Why is everything unraveling? None of this makes any sense. All I want is to live my life in peace. Is that really so much to ask? I don't want people accusing me of having an eating disorder or making me think my husband is stepping out on me.

Maybe what I need is a vacation. We didn't go anywhere this summer other than a few weekend camping trips locally. The holidays will be here before we know it, so maybe I should plan a fun outing. I've heard Disney is a great place around Christmas. I could easily spend the next few months planning something like that. The kids would remember that forever, and it would give Peter and me time away from all the other adults.

It's perfect. I'll start looking into that now.

I return to my phone in the kitchen. Megan sent another text and wants to get together for breakfast. That's the perfect solution. Not only will I have more time with her, but it'll provide the distraction I desperately need.

Before I can reply, the deadbolt clicks unlocked.

Relief washes through me. Peter is finally back.

I check the food before rushing to the door.

Owen and Sophie throw their arms around me, talking a mile a minute about all the fun they had with Daddy.

I wish I could say I had fun. I'm spinning in circles, trying to figure out what's real and what isn't.

Peter wraps me in a warm embrace and kisses me passionately.

"Ew!" The kids giggle and scamper from the room.

That was not the kiss of a man unhappy in his marriage. Peter loves me, and if anything was wrong, he would talk to me like a rational human. We would work out any issue between us. He wouldn't go looking for love somewhere else.

Sophie returns and drags me to the table, begging for food.

Peter laughs. "Looks like you didn't need to worry about ruining their dinner."

"I wasn't worried." I fill plates for the kids as Peter gets his own food.

"Sorry you had to eat alone," he says, when I sit at the table with only a glass of water.

"It's fine. You guys were having fun."

"We sure were." Owen beams. "Daddy took us to the park with the giant climber. I almost made it to the top! Maybe next time I will."

My eyes widen, and I glance at my husband. "The top? Really?"

"Owen's quite the climbing machine. Our boy is growing up."

It makes my stomach knot thinking about him traveling that high, but it's the least of my concerns. The park is designed to be safe for kids, and I have enough other things to worry about.

After the kids finish eating and scramble to the living room, I turn to Peter. "Do you know anyone named Jane?"

He doesn't miss a beat. "No, why? Do you think that's the person who's been impersonating you?"

"Nobody's *impersonating* me. Sylvia's just out to get me."

Peter lifts an eyebrow. "That's quite the accusation."

"It's the only thing that makes sense."

"What makes you say that?"

I tell him about my latest conversation with her, including her claim that I was wearing my purple tank top. I don't tell him I found it in the hamper.

He doesn't mention having put it there.

I don't ask. The last thing I need is for him to think I'm losing my mind. Because I'm not.

Peter threads his fingers through mine. "Did your nap help you relax at all?"

"It did until I spoke with Sylvia."

"Maybe stay away from her."

"Believe me, that's my plan going forward."

He presses his lips against my palm, tickling my skin. "Do you want to know what I think?"

"Tell me."

Peter holds my gaze for a moment before continuing. "I think you're taking too much on. Your mom has been asking a lot of you lately, when what she needs is to find a better solution for your dad. She can't expect you to drop everything whenever she needs to leave the house. You can't do that."

I don't see how that has anything to do with my stress. Sure, I need to set firmer boundaries, but at the same time, she's my mom. My parents raised me, took care of me, put my needs ahead of their own, and all while dealing with my brother.

Michael was already institutionalized by the time I was born, but even so, the hospital called multiple times a week to report something he'd done and usually notify them about

having to physically restrain him or put him in solitary *again*. I swear my brother spent the majority of his teen and preteen years alone in a padded room for his safety as much as everyone else's. It doesn't sound like his adulthood has been much different. Not that I'd know firsthand, because I haven't seen him since I was in high school—the last time my parents could force me to visit him. He glared at me like he wanted to harm me the entire time we were there.

I shudder to think what my life would've been like if the state hadn't locked him away.

“Angelina?” Peter squeezes my hand.

“You might be onto something. What do you think about a family vacation in December?”

“Around Christmas?”

“It's the perfect boundary. If we aren't in town, how can my mom draw me into her drama? Her anxiety always ramps up around the holidays.”

He nods, looking deep in thought. “That's true. Do you have anything in mind?”

I tell him my idea. “But I'm open to anything, really. I think it would be great to get away and go somewhere warm.”

“Let's look into it. I'll put in for vacation time first thing tomorrow morning. Thankfully I have seniority and plenty of unused days off.”

I can't help but smile. “How much time?”

“More than two weeks.”

“That's perfect!” I clap my hands, unable to believe things are finally taking a turn for the better.

Except they're not. My heart sinks, and my smile fades.

Peter tilts his head. “What's wrong?”

“What about Nadia and Dakota? I can't imagine Bryant and Lyra agreeing to us taking the girls away at Christmastime.”

“Lyra can’t argue after she took Dakota to Hawaii for the entire month of July. It was our year to have her on the Fourth.”

“But Independence Day is hardly comparable to Christmas.”

“Don’t worry about Lyra. She’ll agree. When has she ever given us trouble?”

“True, but what about Bryant? He pitched a fit and threatened court the last time we took Nadia on a plane.”

“His own lawyer told him to take a chill pill. Just because Bryant throws a tantrum doesn’t mean he gets what he wants. Most people see right through him.”

But if he doesn’t want me to take Nadia on a trip, he’ll find a way to interfere. It’ll become his life mission.

Peter squeezes my hand again. “Call your attorney tomorrow and see what she says. I’m certain he can’t stop you from taking your daughter on a family vacation. Worst case scenario, Nadia will have to fly back a week early, and she’s plenty old enough to travel alone. If that means she won’t be with us on Christmas Day, we’ll celebrate early. It’ll all work out. Bryant can *try* to ruin our holiday, but he won’t succeed.”

“I wish I had your positive outlook.”

He brushes his lips across mine. “Don’t worry. I have enough optimism for the both of us.”

I hope it really is enough.

## Chapter Twelve

**M**y hands shake as I end the call. I can hardly believe the good news. Peter was right, of course. My attorney just confirmed the parenting plan allows me to take Nadia on vacation. It's even my year for her to be with me on Christmas Day, so we won't have to celebrate early. If we wanted to stay until the new year, she would need to take a solo flight because she's supposed to be with Bryant on New Year's Eve.

Everything is looking so much brighter now than it did last week. I'm not usually a fan of Mondays, but this one is shaping up nicely. There haven't even been any new fake sightings of me.

Sylvia ignored me when we crossed paths at the grocery store, but I can live with that. I was just as glad not to have a conversation with her since the day was off to such a great start. I'm so excited about taking a family vacation for the holidays, I've already started looking into options.

"You look happy today." Megan's voice pulls me from my thoughts.

I set my phone down on the restaurant table and tell her the good news as we look over the lunch menus.

She smiles and squeezes my arm. "Things are starting to go your way now! Take the bull by the horns and make this *your* week."

"I think I will." Excitement radiates from my chest as I sit taller. This really is my week. Everything is going to turn

around, and by Saturday, Peter and I will have a fully planned vacation. We can tell the kids all about it when Dakota returns from her mom's house.

Megan orders my favorite appetizer and two margaritas. "My treat. I'm so thrilled for you. It's been too long since you've had a getaway."

"Not everyone leaves town on a monthly basis," I tease. She's single and childfree by choice, so she makes a point of traveling the world as often as possible. She and her sisters have a timeshare membership, which brings the cost down wherever she goes.

"You're always welcome to come along. I keep telling you. You can even bring the family."

"I'd feel bad."

"Why?"

"Because we're loud. It wouldn't be much of a vacation for you with kids running all over and hogging the bathrooms."

Megan shakes her head. "It would remind me of my family. Remember when you would spend the night at my place?"

She has a point. I was essentially raised as an only child, so going to her house was always a shock to my system with her sisters frequently shrieking and laughing over something, but I had loved it. "My family now is actually a lot like yours when we were kids."

"See? Take me up on the offer. If there's a timeshare near where you want to go, I'd be happy to give you a free place to stay."

"But what if one of your sisters wants to stay somewhere that week?"

"Then they can. We have an extended plan. If you want to stay in one in Egypt and Becca wants to go to Cozumel that same week, it's no big deal."

"If it doesn't put anyone out..."

“That’s what I just told you!” She laughs.

After the appetizer and drinks arrive, I show her some of the websites I was looking at. Since Megan’s so well-traveled, she offers pointers about each place I’m considering and lets me know where she has timeshares. It really would save us money not having to pay for a place to stay for a week or two.

She throws out other ideas for places I never would have considered, and soon my mind is swirling with possibilities. I’m not sure what Peter will think of half of them, but we’re going on vacation. We’ll be able to avoid all family drama with our parents and simply focus on each other and our kids.

The rest of the meal goes by entirely too quickly. Time always flies when I’m with Megan. She has to get back to work, and I need to pick up the littles soon. I’m so excited about the idea of traveling that I want to tell them when I pick them up, but I have to talk with Peter first. Then we’ll tell the kids together.

I’m not sure how I’ll keep quiet about this when I’m bursting at the seams to get away from real life. If only we could leave sooner, but it’ll be fun to plan everything. At least it’ll be a good distraction from thinking about all my worries. Neither Mom nor Bryant will be happy about this vacation, but they’ll get over it. They’ll have to, because I won’t give them another option.

They don’t run my life or my family. It isn’t my fault Mom won’t get the extra help with Dad that she needs, and it definitely isn’t my problem that my ex is a controlling narcissist. His days of having any power over me are long gone.

In my car, I excitedly research online the best ideas Megan gave me. I also jot down a bunch of notes, afraid to forget a single detail. Before I know it, I’m almost late to pick up my kids.

By the time I pull into a parking spot at the preschool, I feel like I could take on the world. Nobody is getting in my way. People can try, but they won’t succeed. If they want my help, they need to be respectful. Period. And nobody has a say



in where or when my family goes on vacation. That's only up to Peter, the kids, and me.

I love the feeling of freedom. Every time I think I've come as far as possible, I end up discovering another layer. And this time, I have my best friend to thank.

As I'm setting the alarm on the Escalade, a guy calls my name from behind me. I whip around to see someone close to my parents' age. Pretty sure I've never seen him before.

"Yes?"

"You're Angelina?"

I hesitate. He seems harmless enough, but I don't know what he wants.

"Chuck's daughter, right?"

He knows my dad.

"Yeah," I say. "How'd you know?"

"I used to work with him. He had your pictures in his office. You've always looked so much like him. I'm Phil, by the way." He extends his hand, and we shake.

"Nice to meet you. What brings you to the preschool?"

"I'm here to pick up my granddaughter Maisie. Her parents are out of town, and I get to take care of her."

"Oh, Maisie. She's in my son's class, and he always has good things to say about her."

"I'm so glad to hear it. It's nice that my granddaughter and Chuck's grandson are in school together. Tell your dad I said hi, will you? I haven't seen him in years."

Sadness washes through me. "I'll certainly tell him, but he has dementia so he likely won't remember you. He doesn't even know me."

Phil's smile fades. "I'm so sorry to hear that. He used to be sharp as a tack."

"That he did." I smile wistfully, remembering how I could never get away with anything growing up.

“Well, I better go get Ava. It was a pleasure to meet you, Angelina.”

“Likewise.”

He heads in, but I stop to read a new text. Megan listed out close to a dozen new ideas for vacation spots, along with links to each place.

I text her back.

*Shouldn't you be working?*

She sends me a string of laughing emojis.

As I think about some of the options she sent, I find myself walking with a spring to my step. But when I open the door, I get a massive whiff of bleach. It's strong enough to burn my nose.

“Sorry!” Emily waves at me from behind the counter as she tucks some braided hair behind her ear. “Our new hire accidentally spilled bleach a few minutes ago.”

I clear my throat and blink away the tears. “It isn't that bad.”

She glances at her computer screen. “Did you forget something, Angelina?”

## Chapter Thirteen

**M**y mind spins out of control as I look around Jennifer's office, my phone in hand. The room is filled with bright colors and cheerful posters, most likely there to calm upset children. They have the opposite effect on me.

I want to rip everything off the walls and demand the manager bring me my children. Instead, I take deep breaths and pretend to be calm. Inside I'm screaming.

It's a surreal experience.

Jennifer is talking. I can see her mouth moving, but can't hear a word she's saying.

More deep breathing. Must calm down. My babies need me, and if I'm freaking out, I can't help them.

"C-can you repeat that?" I lean closer to the desk that separates me from the manager.

"You checked out Owen and Sophie twenty-five minutes ago. Emily and our janitor both saw you."

This cannot be happening. Twenty-five minutes ago I had just left my lunch with Megan and was getting in my car.

Someone was kidnapping my children at that very moment. And the people I pay to protect them let it happen.

"Did *you* see me?" I counter.

"No, I was out to lunch then."

That's convenient.

I square my shoulders. “So, I’m supposed to take the word of two people who are guilty of allowing an unauthorized person leave with my children?”

“You’re the one who picked them up.” Jennifer looks at me with pity in her eyes.

Pity. Like something’s wrong with *me*.

I leap up from the chair. “Show me the footage! You people have cameras all over this place to keep things like this from happening. I want to see proof of this ridiculous story.”

She blinks a few times. “Okay. I’ll need a few minutes to pull that up.”

“You’ll need it to show the police when I have to report a kidnapping, so you may as well find it now.”

“Can you please have a seat? You’re making me nervous.”

“Making *you* nervous? My children have been abducted!”

Jennifer gestures for me to sit, then she turns to her computer and types on the keyboard.

I do as instructed and squeeze the armrest so hard I’m sure I’ll break it. My breath hitches, and I fight back tears. Now isn’t the time to break down. I need to think clearly.

Once the video shows someone other than me checking out my kids, I’m going to call the police. We need to get as many people as possible looking for Owen and Sophie.

We’ll find them, send the kidnapper to jail, and I’ll spend the entire night hugging my children. I may never let them go again.

This is worse than any nightmare I’ve ever had. Sure, like any good parent I’ve feared for my kids’ safety. Imagined the worst. But it never felt like this. The dread is unbearable. My blood runs through my body like ice. I’m not sure I’ll ever warm up again.

Jennifer spins her computer monitor around. “Right here.”

She presses play on a crisp black-and-white image of the front desk. A mom I recognize walks out with her two sons. A

moment later, Emily looks up and speaks with someone.

My heart sinks, and somehow my temperature drops even lower.

Somebody who looks just like me walks up to the reception desk, laughing with Emily. The woman could be me. If I didn't know better, I might think she was me. She has my face. Her hair is the same length, and she has my same build.

That isn't the worst part.

She's wearing my purple flowered tank top.

I struggle to breathe.

How is this possible? It can't be happening. It isn't real. They've faked this video somehow. People can do all kinds of things with technology these days.

I want to ask how they managed this farce, but I have to see the video through.

Emily calls the teachers, who send the assistants to bring out my children.

When they do, the woman who looks just like me leaves with my kids. They don't even flinch when they see her. Both of them hug her and chat excitedly as they leave the view of the camera.

"See?" Jennifer says. "You left with Owen and Sophie."

"That wasn't me! How did you do that?"

She arches an eyebrow. "Do what?"

"Doctor that video to make it look like me!"

"Please calm down, Mrs. London."

Now I'm Mrs. London.

"How. Did. You. Do. That?"

"We didn't do anything. I assure you."

I struggle to breathe normally.

"Perhaps you should consider some counseling. I know you're under a great deal of stress with your parents."

She's using that against me?

If only I could use Megan as a witness, but she'd already left the restaurant when this happened. I was busy looking up vacation ideas in my car, so nobody saw me. It's my word against this video.

"This isn't the last you're going to hear from me about this. I'm going straight to the police!" I grab my purse and leap to my feet. "Email me a copy of that video, and whatever you do, don't delete it. I want the authorities to analyze it."

"I can email it to you." Her tone is condescending, like she's speaking to an imbecile. "And we keep all of our footage for ninety days."

"Good." I hurry from the building without making eye contact with anyone. But everyone is staring at me. I can feel their gazes burning into my back.

When I get to the car, I slink into the leather seat and allow the tears to run free.

What is going on? Did someone at the preschool doctor that video, or is there someone with my face and tank top impersonating me?

I don't know which thought terrifies me more.

Either way, a psychopath has my children, and I don't know where to start looking for them.

## Chapter Fourteen

**D**o I call Peter first, or the cops? My husband deserves to know what's going on, but I can't waste another moment when Owen and Sophie are missing. As far as I know, Peter could be giving someone anesthesia right now.

That settles it. I send him a text and then call 911. Barely answer all the questions. I can hardly think with my kids having been abducted.

In less than a minute, squad cars arrive, sirens blaring and lights flashing.

Little faces peek out from the windows in the building.

I explain everything again to one officer while several others go inside the building. My voice cracks and tears run down my face faster than I can wipe them away.

What a nightmare. And to think I thought this week was off to a good start.

One of the other officers returns from the building and says the video showed me picking up the kids. Nobody believes me about the restaurant, and I can't reach Megan to validate my story.

Peter's Mercedes pulls into the lot. His tires squeal to a stop and he doesn't bother parking in a designated spot. He leaps out, engine still running, and demands to know what's happening.

The officer fills him in, and Peter wraps his arms around me as I soak his shirt with more tears.

“If my wife says she didn’t pick up the children, then she didn’t.”

The police insist we go inside to see the footage. I’ve already seen it, but I want another look.

Emily and Jennifer glare at me, obviously irritated I called the authorities.

What else was I supposed to do when my babies are missing? They had to have seen this coming.

The officers all look back and forth between me and the video. One of them says that’s clearly me.

I hit Jennifer’s desk. “It was doctored! Either they replicated my image, or the date is wrong. I’m not even wearing that outfit. I haven’t worn that tank top since the summer. It’s too cold for it now.”

Peter gives me a funny look.

“Why would we do that?” Jennifer’s face is the color of an overripe tomato.

“To cover up the fact that you gave my kids to a stranger!”

“We would never! It was you picking them up. They ran right up to you. Should I play it again?”

“Enough,” says one of the officers. “We can have our tech team look at it, but from what I can tell, it appears legit.”

Jennifer throws me an I-told-you-so glance before turning her attention back to the officers. “You should be aware that Angelina’s father has had dementia for years and her brother has spent most of his life in a mental facility.”

My mouth falls open. She did not just go there.

Peter pulls me close. “What does that have to do with anything?”

Jennifer’s expression tightens. “They should know the mental state of the woman they’re dealing with.”

“Angelina has never shown one sign of having a mental deficiency.”



“Never?” Jennifer gestures toward the paused video of the woman wearing my tank top and hugging my kids.

One of the officers moves toward the door. “We’ll take all this information and see what we come up with. We’ll be in touch.”

Terror rips through me. “Does this mean you aren’t going to look for my babies? My missing babies?”

“Ma’am, you picked them up.”

“They’re missing! Nobody knows where they are!” More tears threaten.

“Like my partner said, we’ll have our tech team analyze the video. Meanwhile, I suggest you two call anyone who’s likely to have your child. A family member, friend, or neighbor might have them.”

I shake my head. “Whoever took them wouldn’t have given them to a loved one.”

“Make the calls. That’s where you need to start. If nobody you know has them, we’ll go from there.”

The room spins around me. Everyone in here, except my husband, doubts my sanity. Just because my dad and brother have issues doesn’t mean I do. I’m not only my dad’s daughter but my mom’s too, and she’s as solid as they come.

Peter guides me from the room and into the parking lot. “Are you okay?”

“Not even close.”

“I should’ve clarified. Can you drive? Or do you want me to bring you home?”

“I’m not leaving my Escalade here. They’ll probably key it, or worse.”

“It’s you I’m worried about, not the car.”

“Well, I *am* worried about it. And we’re unenrolling the kids from here as soon as we find them.”

He nods. “Whatever you want to do.”

“You would trust them with Owen and Sophie after this? They’re trying to ruin my reputation. Have you ever heard of going to such lengths?”

My husband kisses my temple. “Put them out of your mind for now. We need to focus on finding the kids.”

“Obviously.”

“Who do you think you’d have dropped them off with?”

I stare at him, unable to find my voice.

“Sometimes you drop them off with—”

“You think *I* picked them up?”

He clears his throat. “That was you on the video, honey.”

“Don’t ‘honey’ me.” I back away from him. “We both know that wasn’t me.”

Peter doesn’t say anything.

“You can’t possibly think that was me on there. You of all people should be able to tell the difference.”

“Why did you say in there that you hadn’t worn that purple tank top since the summer?”

“Because I haven’t.”

He studies me, doesn’t respond.

“You wore it just the other day.”

My knees turn to rubber. “You... you’re mistaken. You’re remembering wrong.”

“I’m not. I remember asking if you were cold, but you insisted you were fine.”

Either my husband is in on this, too, or my lookalike is brazen enough to walk right up to him in my shirt.

I need to get to the bottom of this.

## Chapter Fifteen

Peter wraps his arms around me, and I stiffen at his touch. If he notices, he doesn't react. "You start calling your friends and family, and I'll call mine. Maybe we'll figure out where the kids are before we get home. I'm sure once David and Claire hear about this, they'll drop everything to start making calls, too."

He's right, of course. His brother would do anything for us, and they both adore our kids. Their children and our littles are about the same age, and we get them together as often as possible. David and I took them to play at the park just last week.

Peter's story about me having worn the tank top just the other day feels like a betrayal. I can't even look at him.

I wait until his Mercedes disappears from sight, and I start my car. Even seeing his taillights on the way home is too much. In fact, I'm tempted to go somewhere else to make my calls. That sounds like the ideal plan, except we really would be better off—for the kids' sake—working together.

But then we have things to discuss. How can he doubt me? Especially after everything we've been through together. He *knows* my history. My life has never been easy. Not as a child, always playing second fiddle to my brother who has probably been a sociopath since conception. And definitely not in my earlier adulthood, putting up with a narcissistic husband who blamed me for all his problems and never took accountability for any of his many shortcomings. I thought I was doing the right thing for Nadia, keeping our family intact.

I've come so far, but now it's like I'm back in the same hole I've always been in. How can Peter believe that doctored video over me? What I need is to find out who is going to such lengths to hurt me, and why. Going to the nail salon and cupcake place is one thing, but *this* is on its own playing field.

It's criminal. This person abducted my kids and somehow made me look like the crazy one. The police don't even believe Sophie and Owen are missing!

If anything happens to them, I'm suing that police department. I'm going to make such a spectacle. They'll regret not helping those innocent babies. But nobody will regret their loss more than me. I'm the one who carried them in my womb and have spent every breath since their births doing everything for them. Anything I do is always for my four children.

Whoever has them will pay. But first, the most important thing is to find them.

I pull into our driveway and go inside.

First thing Peter says when I step through the door is, "Who have you called?"

"Nobody yet."

"What?"

"I was *driving*, and I could barely do that I'm shaking so badly."

"We'll find them." He puts an arm around me, and I try not to react.

"That wasn't me in the video."

"Okay."

I can't tell whether he believes me. Not that it matters right now.

Owen and Sophie are all that matter. Finding them safe and sound.

Peter guides me to the couch. "I called my parents and two neighbors. Nobody's seen them."

“Because a kidnapper wouldn’t drop them off with someone we trust.” I don’t wait for him to react before I pull out my phone and call Megan. If I’m supposed to contact people who have my back, she’s at the top of the list. Even higher than Peter at this point.

She hasn’t seen them or anyone pretending to be me, but says she’s leaving work right away to come over here and help us with the search.

Peter turns to me. “I just texted with both Dakota and Nadia, and neither of them have seen the kids.”

“You told the girls?” I exclaim. “They won’t be able to think about anything else! How are they going to get through the rest of their school day?”

“I didn’t say anything was wrong.” He throws me a look like I need to give him some credit. “I was casual, and they’re both fine.”

We can only hope.

“Which neighbors did you already call?” I ask.

He tells me, then decides we need a master checklist. We start writing names, and he adds Bryant and my parents.

“We’re supposed to contact people we *trust*, remember?”

This man is seriously getting on my nerves. Although it could be the stress. I just want to focus on finding the kids, and I’m already on edge since the police won’t do anything. None of the people on this list will have any idea where my babies are.

“They might know something,” he says. “It’s worth asking.”

“Great. You call them. I’m calling the babysitters. But be warned, Bryant will use this against me. Maybe not today, but eventually. Mark my words.” I go to my contacts and make my next call.

A half hour later, we’ve gone through the entire list except for my parents and ex-husband.

Peter gives me a sympathetic glance. “I’ll call Bryant if you call your mom.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I know that. I’m offering.”

“Just don’t let him know our kids are missing.”

“Believe me, that’s the last thing I’m going to say to him.” Peter pulls out his phone.

Calling Bryant will be a mistake, I’m sure of it. But on the off chance he knows anything, I’ll take the mind games later.

I stare at my phone for a moment before calling my mom. Even if I did have a memory lapse and pick up my littles from preschool, I would have never taken them over to my parents’ house. Unfortunately, Dad’s particular form of dementia causes him to have violent episodes. That’s why I hate being there alone.

And I never bring any of the kids. When my mom wants to see them, she comes here when one of his nurses is watching him.

She answers before the first ring even finishes. “Thank God.” She sounds out of breath.

“What’s going on?”

“As much as I appreciate you dropping the kids off here after spending time with Dad, it’s too much for me. You’re coming to get them, right?”

My lunch threatens to come up. “Sophie and Owen are with you?”

“Do you think I lost them?” she asks. “Yes, they’re here. They’re both hungry, and they don’t want anything we have here.”

I lean against the nearest wall. “Can I talk to them? I need to hear their voices.”

Peter looks at me with wide eyes. “You found them? Where are they?”

“The last place I’d ever willingly leave them.”

His eyes widen. “With your brother?”

My husband is right, of course. That would be the last place I’d leave them.

But with my dad isn’t much better. I would never leave them there with him.

Ever.

## Chapter Sixteen

Owen and Sophie are still chatting over the phone as Peter pulls into my parents' driveway. I'm still trying to wrap my head around them being there.

Whoever brought them here knew what they were doing—taking them somewhere I would never think to look. That means whoever took them knows me. Knows my family. Knows the decisions I would and wouldn't make. They even know about my favorite summer shirt.

But how did they convince the preschool to let them pick up my kids? It's one thing to doctor a video, but something else entirely to make Emily think *I* showed up and signed them out. I've been one of their patrons for years. Everyone who works there knows me, especially Emily. We talk twice a day—when I drop off and pick up my babies.

Peter cuts the engine, and before I even have time to get out of the car, the front door of the house bursts open. Sophie runs outside, followed by her brother.

My insides turn to rubber. Now that I can see them with my own eyes, I can't get my body to cooperate. I try to open the door, but can't even reach it.

Peter leaps outside and picks up both kids in one swoop, swinging them around in a circle.

Tears fill my eyes, and I finally get my muscles to cooperate. As soon as my husband sets the kids down, I wrap my arms around them and tell them how much I love them.



Mom comes out to the porch. “Do you always greet them with so much enthusiasm?”

“Yes,” I say quickly. The last thing I want is to tell her what happened.

I don’t even know what happened. But the most important thing is that my kids are safe. I can’t see even a scratch on them.

A crash sounds from inside the house.

Mom inches toward the door. “I better see what he’s doing now. I told the kids I’ll visit them at your house soon.”

“Perfect!” I squeeze my precious little children again.

“Grandpa likes to break things,” Sophie says.

“He’s confused.” Peter motions toward the car. “Let’s go home, shall we?”

The kids don’t need to be told twice. Both of them scramble into the back. Owen buckles himself into his car seat while I help Sophie. Owen, as usual, asks about graduating to a booster seat. I think he might be close to legal requirements, but I’m not ready to let him out of the safer option just yet. And after everything we’ve been through today, I’m even more concerned about their safety than before.

I change the subject before Peter pulls back onto the road. “Who picked you two up from school?”

“You, silly.” Sophie giggles and kicks the back of my seat.

“Are you sure about that?” I ask.

“Yeah. You were wearing that purple shirt you always do.”

Everything disappears around me. None of this is possible. It would be one thing to trick the preschool receptionist that I picked them up, but to convince my kids? And to wear my tank top again?

I was with Megan at the restaurant when all of this happened. There’s no way I had a memory lapse. I *remember* being there with her. We talked, laughed, and made plans.

Megan! She was heading to our house, and I didn't tell her we were leaving.

I send her a quick text letting her know we found the kids safe and sound, then I apologize for leaving without telling her.

She replies that she's so happy and relieved to hear they're okay, and that she let herself in and made a casserole from the things she found in the fridge.

Could I have a better best friend?

When we get home, the kids run in and throw their arms around Megan. She hugs and kisses them before getting them a snack.

I collapse onto a kitchen chair. "You really didn't have to do all of that."

"What are friends for?" She glances around the kids to the family room. "Do you want to talk?"

"I don't know what I want." I rub my temples.

"Why don't you go upstairs and lie down? You look like something the dog dragged in."

"We don't have a dog." Sophie giggles.

Megan tousles her hair. "It's just a saying." She turns to me. "Go on up. I'll keep an eye on them so you two can wind down."

"Are you sure?"

"Go." She gives me a knowing look. "You two have had a rough day."

I don't argue.

Upstairs, Peter is on his phone, explaining where we found the kids.

We probably have a lot of calls like that to make after calling nearly everyone we know to ask where our kids are. I'm sure it makes us look like terrible parents. What kind of a parent loses track of their preschool-aged children?

Not that it's our fault, and I don't care to explain it to anyone.

I just want answers. Somebody is impersonating me, and if the video at the preschool wasn't messed with, then she somehow looks just like me.

Why on earth would my doppelgänger find me and try to ruin my life? I could probably drive myself crazy trying to figure it out.

But that won't stop me from trying. Someone has answers, and I intend to find them.

My shirt is soaked with sweat, so I toss it in the hamper.

The purple flowered tank top is crumpled on top of my other clothes.

I'm surprised, but at the same time, not surprised. It proves that I'm not losing my mind. Not that I could show that to the police and make them see the truth. They would think I wore it and put it there.

"Are you okay?" Peter's voice pulls me from my thoughts.

I point to the shirt. "I hung that up last week."

He blinks a few times. "Are you saying someone broke into our house to wear your tank top?"

"And then she returned to put it in the hamper."

His mouth opens, but no words come out.

"Do you believe me?" I ask.

"How would they have gotten in? Past our security system?"

I throw my hands in the air. "How did she manage to pick up the kids and drop them off with my mother, and everyone was certain it was me?"

"Are you sure it wasn't?"

His words are like a slap across my face. "Excuse me?"

"I saw that video. It was you."

My face flames. Anger pulsates through my veins. “Why don’t you believe me?”

“I didn’t mean to offend you.”

“What reaction did you expect?” I snap. “Be my guest. Go ask Megan.”

He looks between me and the doorway.

“If you can’t believe your own wife, then go get the proof you need. I’m not crazy!”

“I never said you were.”

“You also haven’t once said I’m not.”

We stare each other down before he leaves the room and I hear his footsteps on the stairs.

I fall backward onto the bed, close my eyes, and pinch the bridge of my nose.

If my own husband doesn’t believe me, how will I convince anyone else that I’m not losing my mind?

## Chapter Seventeen

When I open my eyes, the sun is lower in the sky and the room is dimming. I have no idea how I managed to fall asleep when my nerves are as shot as they are.

Downstairs, Peter is eating the cooked casserole with Nadia, Owen, and Sophie.

He sets his fork down. "I didn't want to wake you."

"It's fine." I sit in my spot, which has a plate already, and I scoop some food onto it even though I'm not really hungry. My body needs fuel even if I don't feel like it. "What did Megan say?"

"About what?" Peter's brows draw together in confusion.

"Me being with her at the Mexican restaurant this afternoon." I'm careful with my wording, not wanting to upset any of the kids.

"Oh, that. Yeah, it was just like you said."

"Shocker." I stuff a forkful of food in my mouth.

He gives me an annoyed glance.

I don't care. If he doesn't believe me, I don't have to pretend I'm not offended or hurt.

Nadia glances between the two of us. "Everything okay?"

"Fine," we both say in unison.

"Whatever." She finishes her food then leaves the table without another word.

Sophie takes that as her cue and scrambles away. A cartoon blasts from another room.

Owen is oblivious to all the emotional unrest around him, making airplane noises as he feeds himself. To be four again.

Peter makes eye contact with me. “You can’t blame me for being confused.”

“You should have believed me without needing to verify what I told you.”

He frowns. “You have to admit the video is convincing.”

“It isn’t real. Someone doctored it. That’s the only explanation.”

“But that’s a lot of work to go to, and you have to admit it’s strange that not only did the receptionist swear that was you, but the kids *and* your mom. Wouldn’t your own mother know you?”

“You’d think. But so should my kids. Not to mention my husband.”

Peter presses his palms on the table. “I do know—and believe—you, but I’m also trying to make sense of everything. And given what we know about your dad and brother—”

“Do *not* go there.”

“You can’t ignore the facts, Angelina.”

“In other words, I’m a sociopath.”

“That isn’t what I said, and you know it.”

“You didn’t have to.”

He sighs dramatically. “I’m not saying there’s anything wrong with you, but we should be aware that your memory might not be fully reliable.”

“I’ll have you know—even though you should already know this—Michael was found to be mentally deranged long before his tenth birthday. The symptoms showed early, and they were blatantly obvious. The state ordered him to be locked up as a child! I never even went to detention as a kid.

My grades and behavior were impeccable. I'm nothing like him. Not even close!"

"How old was your dad when he started losing his memories?"

We both know he was younger than I am now.

I swear at Peter, slam my chair against the table, then storm upstairs. It would've been better if I'd stayed up there in the first place. He doesn't believe me unless someone else backs up my account.

Why can't he see that I'm also my mother's daughter? I guess it's easier to cast blame than to care or look outside the box.

Fine. I can do this by myself. It wouldn't be the first time. I've spent most of my life watching my own back because people who were supposed to be there for me weren't.

But what's the first thing I should do? Nothing makes sense, so making a plan of action is like shooting in the dark.

I consider my options, and one thing stands out. My own mother should've recognized it wasn't me dropping off the kids. The fact that I showed up with them at all should've been a red flag, but she was probably so thrilled she didn't think about that.

If anyone is going to help me figure out how my doppelgänger is passing herself off as me, I need to speak to the one person who has known me the longest. The woman who carried and gave birth to me.

After the fifth ring, I'm certain she won't answer.

But she does. "What's the special occasion? A visit with the grandkids *and* a phone call in one day?"

Everyone's a critic.

I take a deep breath. "I have a few questions."

"Can we talk in a few minutes? I'm trying to get your dad to sleep."

"No, this is important."

“What do you need to know?”

“Tell me what I was acting like when I dropped off the kids.” If I’m going to get the answers I want, I have to go along with what she thinks.

“Why?”

“Because I need to know. Was I acting odd?”

“I don’t know. It was strange that you brought my grandbabies over, but I wasn’t about to question such a good thing.”

“And I was wearing a purple tank top?”

“Yeah, that one you always wear.”

I’m going to burn that thing. I had no idea everyone noticed how much I love it. “Did I look different?”

“How so?”

“I don’t know! Was my makeup the same as usual? Was I acting weird?”

A few beats pass before she responds. “It was strange how you were paying so much attention to the photos.”

“You mean the framed ones in the living room?”

“Right. But before I could bring it up, you started talking to Dad more than I’ve seen in years. It really warmed my heart. I swear he noticed the difference—he’s been much easier to deal with since you left earlier. So, thanks for that.”

Everything around me becomes fuzzy, and I have to sit down. “You’re sure about that?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“What time was that?”

“About one, I think. I didn’t check the clock.”

That was about when I arrived at the preschool.

Someone who looks just like me is pretending to be me. And she’s convincing enough to make my own mother believe she’s me.



I need to find out who this woman is and put a stop to whatever she's up to.

Now.

## Chapter Eighteen

A quick online search tells me all I need to know about doppelgängers. They're real, and more than likely everyone has one somewhere because the probability is too great given the world's population. What's even more creepy is that a person who looks just like you is more likely to have closer DNA, too.

The woman impersonating me could be a distant relative. That thought sends a cold chill down my spine.

What does she want? And what lengths will she go to in order to get it? Whatever it is, I'm almost willing to hand it over just to get my life back to the way it was before she stepped in. Now that she's checked out my kids from preschool and taken them to my parents' house, there's no doubt she has a motive.

But what? That's what is driving me crazy.

*Knock, knock!*

I pull myself from my thoughts and answer the bedroom door.

Sophie stands there, her eyes wide.

My stomach sinks. "Are you okay?"

She nods. "Mommy, can Owen and I have ice cream? I know it's a weeknight, but Daddy told us you might say yes."

I throw my arms around her. "You can have all the ice cream you want tonight!"

“Really?”

“Of course.” I pull back and study her.

Her eyes are still wide and she seems tense. Usually she’s so relaxed and happy.

A horrible thought strikes me.

“Did something happen this afternoon?” I demand. “After you left preschool?”

“What do you mean?”

“Were you hurt in any way?” I hold out her arm, looking for bruises or scrapes.

Nothing.

She shakes her head slowly. “I didn’t get any owies.”

“What about Owen?”

“Nope.”

Hopefully she’s right. “Did I... do anything?”

“Like what, Mommy?”

I take a deep breath and try to find the right wording for a three-year-old. It’s hard enough for me to figure out what’s going on, although now that I know my lookalike found me, the pieces are starting to fall into place. “Did I say anything that sounded different? Anything that didn’t sound like me?”

“You always sound like you,” she says. “Can I have the ice cream now?”

I don’t know why I expected to get more from her. “Yes. I’ll come with you.”

She smiles and hops to the stairs.

Peter’s already making cones for the kids. Obviously he knew I’d be unable to say no to them after the day we’ve had.

I ask Owen the same questions I just asked Sophie, and his answers aren’t much different. Apparently neither of them even had an inkling the woman who picked them up wasn’t

their mom. But they also both insisted she didn't harm them at all.

After all the ice cream in the house is eaten, I insist the kids get a bath. They assume it's because they're sticky. Tonight, I don't care about that. I want to make sure they don't have any marks under their clothes. Once I see that with my own eyes, I'll feel better.

I toy with the idea of letting the police know about the woman impersonating me, but I'm not sure they'll believe me. And what if they arrest me by mistake? No, it's too big of a risk. I'll need actual proof.

Once the kids are in their beds sleeping, I finally start to relax.

Peter wraps an arm around my waist as I stand in Owen's doorway watching his little chest go up and down. "Want some wine?"

I shake my head. "I feel like it would make me more edgy. I'm already about to jump out of my skin."

He kisses my cheek. "The kids are safe. Nothing happened to them, and now they're with us where they belong."

"Unfortunately, I still don't feel better. Someone managed to take them from school and convince everyone she was me. The woman obviously knows a lot about me, including my schedule."

"And the purple shirt in our hamper?"

"Yes! How did she get in here? Did she get a key? Find the code to the garage?"

"Will you let me pour you some rosé? It's a new brand one of the doctors at the hospital was raving about."

He knows I won't turn down a glass of rosé. I relent, and we go downstairs. While Peter opens the glimmery bottle, I tell him everything I've learned about doppelgängers in the last couple hours.

If he doubts my theory, he doesn't indicate it. At least that's better from his remarks earlier.

He's back on my side.

"What do you think of the wine?" he interrupts me, not even trying to hide his attempt to change the subject.

I give it another sip. While my senses feel dulled tonight, it's still probably the best wine I've had the pleasure of drinking. "Your friend was right."

"I'll have to let her know."

Her? Why do I assume his colleagues are men? And why does it bother me? I'm normally fine with it. But then again, other days he hasn't questioned my sanity. And why was he discussing wine with this woman?

These are all questions I don't have the energy to ask. That's not true. I could get my voice to speak them, but I'm not sure I could handle the answers right now.

He refills our glasses and turns on a comedy. I sip the sweet drink but can't focus on the show. Not when there's someone out there trying to mess with my life. With my kids. She's gone too far, and I'm going to figure out what's going on no matter the cost.

Peter gets a call from the hospital and pauses the show to take it.

While he's out of the room, I pull out my phone and start searching social media for pictures of anyone who looks like me. It's a long shot, but it's all I have at the moment. I start by looking at the neighborhood group. Don't find anyone new. Then I start checking my friends' and family's friend lists. But I only get through a few before Peter returns.

He rests a hand on my shoulder but doesn't sit. "The ER needs another anesthesiologist tonight. I won't say yes if you want me home with you. After everything we've been through today, I want to be here for you if you need me."

I squeeze his hand. "Go. It's best if we get back to our routines and put it all behind us."

"I'm so glad to hear you say that." He gives me a quick peck. "Don't wait up for me—it sounds like it could be a long

night.”

At least that’ll give me the time I need to scour social media for my lookalike. If Peter’s here, he’s going to try to distract me. I can tell by the look in his eyes he thinks I’m obsessing.

In this case, I think being obsessed is a good thing.

I’m not going to find that woman otherwise.

## Chapter Nineteen

**M**y alarm is more grating than normal. I hardly slept, and now it feels like I was hit by a truck. I fumble to find the snooze button. Usually, I get up right away, but that isn't happening this morning.

Not a chance.

Although I also don't fall back asleep. My mind races. I spent half the night trying to figure out what my lookalike wants and how she learned so much about my life.

How she managed to get inside my house.

The tank top could be explained away by her finding the same one, although given how old it is, it wouldn't have been easy. But it wouldn't have been impossible, either. I've seen the same shirt at consignment stores before. In fact, it took a lot of self-control not to buy them in case something happened to mine.

A duplicate shirt didn't explain finding mine in the hamper. Twice.

It blows my mind that she came into the house, took my tank, wore it while impersonating me, then returned it. I'm surprised she didn't wash it to keep me from finding out.

Except she wanted me to know. That's the only explanation for everything that's happened.

Everything except her motive. Did I do something to her to make her want to seek vengeance? Or is this just a sick game?

Maybe she found me online and thought this would be a fun way to pass time.

As unlikely as it sounds, it's the only thing that makes sense. Other people may question my memory—or even my sanity—but I know I can trust my mind. If only I'd still been with Megan at the restaurant when that woman abducted my kids from preschool, I could prove the truth to everyone. At least I know for a fact I was *not* at the cupcake place or the salon. Finding proof is going to be the difficult part.

My alarm blares again, and I force myself out of bed.

Peter is sound asleep next to me and doesn't budge as I climb out of bed. He probably only got home a few hours ago.

I take a quick shower then head downstairs to make breakfast for the kids. I'm so off kilter, it takes me a minute to figure out if Dakota is staying with us today. But the calendar shows she returns Thursday. Right. I remember now.

This morning's meal is a simple oatmeal and toast. It's all I can handle after sleeping so poorly.

Nadia gives me a big hug when she gets downstairs. She isn't usually so affectionate in the mornings, but since I told her about what happened with the littles yesterday, she's been extra sweet. Thankfully, she doesn't complain about the food.

When Sophie and Owen race down the stairs, my stomach knots. They're already dressed for school.

I'm not taking them. Not after what happened yesterday. But I don't know how to tell them.

Sophie talks nonstop about an art project her class is working on. It's supposed to take all week to finish because it's so complicated.

Owen tells us his best friend returns today from an extended weekend with his grandparents.

Guilt slams me hard.

They're going to be so disappointed about not going. I'm not sure what I can do to make it up to them. Maybe nothing.



How can I compete with a best friend and a week-long art project?

Maybe I should just let them go. We've already paid for the rest of the month.

No. That's not happening. Not after the way they treated me yesterday. That was not only rude, but humiliating.

After Nadia rushes off to catch the bus, I sit down with Owen and Sophie. "What do you two think about taking the day off from preschool?"

What kid doesn't want a day off from school?

Sophie's eyes widen, and her mouth falls open.

Owen looks at me like I just broke his favorite toy. "Why?"

"I want to go." Sophie frowns.

"But what do you think of taking the day off? You wouldn't have to do any lessons. Think of it!" I give them my widest smile.

Sophie's eyes fill with tears. "I want to work on my art project."

Owen's face scrunches up. "And Eli is coming back today. He's going to tell me all about his trip."

"We could go somewhere fun."

"No!" Owen glares at me.

Tears run down Sophie's face and she sniffles.

I can't do this. I'm going to need Peter's help figuring out how to break the news to them about finding a new school. They're going to have to go back for now. I've never seen two kids more upset over the idea of *not* going to class.

"You don't have to cry." I reach across the table and squeeze Sophie's little hand. "I was just asking what you two thought. Obviously you want to go, so that's what we'll do. We can plan a fun day off later. How does that sound?"

They both agree.

I help Sophie blow her nose then get the kids ready for school. My stomach churns acid the whole way there, and by the time I park the car, I'm sure I'm going to vomit all over the place. Somehow I manage to keep my breakfast down and give my kids a cheerful goodbye.

Emily looks at me expectantly from behind the reception desk. She clearly wants me to leave. Probably thinks I'm going to make a scene.

The last thing I want to do is become a spectacle again. But I'm not ready to leave yet, either. Instead, I lean on the counter. "I have an unusual request."

She groans. "What?"

"In addition to the normal check-out procedures, I want you to add a password to my children's files. Nobody can take them unless they tell you the secret word. Not even Peter or me."

"Is that all?"

"Yes. Can you do that?"

"That's no problem." Emily turns to her computer monitor and clicks on her keyboard. "What would you like the password to be?"

I thought about it all the way here, but I'm still not entirely sure.

The receptionist looks at me with raised eyebrows.

"Mommy Dearest," I blurt out.

"You want the password to be Mommy Dearest?"

"Yes. And I might decide to change it every day. Will that be a problem?"

"No." She clacks away on the keys, not looking at me.

"Great. And remember, don't even let me pick them up if I can't tell you the password."

She glances at me. "In that case, I suggest you write it down."

“I won’t forget. You swear you won’t let anyone pick them up without saying it?”

“It’s right here on their files. Even if someone else is sitting in this chair, they’ll know.”

“Perfect. I appreciate the effort.”

“No problem.”

We stare at each other for a moment before I spin around. The days of friendly greetings and goodbyes are long gone. We’re only civil for the sake of the kids.

Perhaps that will change after I get proof of my doppelgänger. And I intend to get that today before classes end.

## Chapter Twenty

The sun shines brightly, making it warmer than usual for this time of year. It also lifts my mood, which I definitely need after my interaction with Emily. I hope they follow through with the password. There's no way my doppelgänger can figure that out. I'm not even going to tell Peter about it. He almost never picks them up, so it won't be a problem.

If only Emily, the computer, and I know about it, there's no way anyone else can.

I almost hope that woman tries to get them today. Then everyone would see I'm right and not crazy.

Unless they still think she is me, which would likely convince them even more that I'm either taking after my dad or my brother. The mere thought exhausts me. It almost makes me want to set up an appointment with a therapist just to prove nothing is wrong with me.

But my time and money would both be better spent if I can find the woman and stop her myself.

Without realizing it, I've driven to the Cake Shack. I may as well go in and see what I can find out about my lookalike.

As soon as I open the door, the aromas of sugary sweetness hit me like a brick wall. I'm sure Sophie and Owen would love coming here. Maybe I'll even bring them in for some cupcakes.

"Can I help you?" The girl behind the counter asks, giving me a wide grin. She hardly looks older than Nadia and Dakota,

but if she isn't in school, she must've already graduated. Not that her age matters. I just want answers.

“Yes.” I walk to the counter and smile in return. “I have an unusual question.”

“We make unusual items.” She points to a wall filled with pictures of cakes every shape and size.

“Impressive. But that isn't what I'm here for.”

“You aren't here for a cake?”

“I'm not. A friend of mine thought she saw me here last week, so I'm curious if you've seen anyone in here that looks like me.”

The girl tilts her head. “We get hundreds of people coming in and out every day, and I'm not here all day.”

“That's okay. Do I look familiar?”

She gives me a bewildered expression. “It's hard to say.”

“My friend claims that I downed an entire half-dozen tray of cupcakes.”

Her eyes light up, and she snaps her fingers. “Yes! I remember that now. You sat over there. I remember wondering if you were practicing for a pie-eating contest or something. Were you?”

My face warms. This girl actually thinks I was here pigging out. “You're sure it was me?”

“Yeah. I even remember you had on a purple tank top. It struck me because it seemed cold to be wearing that, especially without a cardigan or something over your arms.”

I swear I'm going to burn that shirt. If I never wear it again, it'll be too soon. In fact, I'm going to be careful about never wearing any clothing item too often moving forward. I might even take up the offer to let Lyra be my personal stylist once I put this doppelgänger madness behind me.

For now, I need to focus. I lean against the counter. “I don't suppose you have video footage of me being in here?”

“Pardon me?”

“Like I said, I know it’s an odd request. But someone has been impersonating me, and given that you also think she was me, I really need to see her with my own eyes.”

The girl blinks a few times. “I guess?”

“You do have cameras, don’t you?” I look around.

“Yeah, but I’m not sure how long the feed is saved. I’ve never dealt with that before. I just sell desserts.”

“Do you have access to it?”

“I can get it, but I can’t promise anything. And it’ll have to be later, when my coworkers come in. Maybe stop by around three or so? I can’t leave the register until someone else is here, and even then I can only try to look when there’s a lull. Do you know what day your friend saw, um, you?”

I think about my conversation with Sylvia, and give the girl the date. “But it could be either a day before or after.”

“I’ll do my best. Sorry you’re dealing with that. It sounds frustrating.”

“You have no idea.” I pull out two twenties and slide them across the counter. “This is for your trouble.”

Her eyes light up. “Wow, thanks.”

“No, thank *you*.” I hurry out of the shop and back to my car.

Even if she doesn’t find anything, just knowing she saw my lookalike is more confirmation that I’m right. It also gives more validity to Sylvia’s story, even though at this point I don’t have any doubts. I’ve already seen the woman on the preschool video. Hopefully another video will give me a better picture of what kind of person my doppelgänger is.

My stomach twists as I think about the next stop I have to make.

Time to go to the nail salon and ask my ex-husband’s girlfriend for help. That’s how desperate I am.

## Chapter Twenty-One

The neon sign for Runway Nails blinks with the N unlit, so it reads Runway ails. I chuckle at the error, but even the brief humorous distraction does nothing for my stomach. If I do lose my breakfast, it will be here while having to explain my situation to Bryant's love interest.

I should turn around. This was a bad idea. No good can possibly come from this.

Just as I start to turn my engine back on, Trixie's face appears in the window.

Crap. Now she's seen me. I can't turn around, because she'll think I'm up to something. She'll accuse me of spying on her and send Bryant to come yell at me. But thanks to the magic of divorce, I don't have to put up with his abuse anymore. I can hang up the phone or slam a door. She's the one living with him, so she has to deal with him now. Why she stays, I don't know. Maybe she's still under his spell and hasn't seen his true colors yet.

Trixie hasn't moved from her spot at the window. At this point, it's definitely going to be weird if I leave.

I need to do this. Even if I don't find out much, I should be able to gauge whether she thinks she saw me here recently. As with the girl at the cake shop, that's useful information.

Taking a deep breath, I grab my keys and get out of the car.

She keeps her post by the window.

My stomach roils as I set my car's alarm and walk toward the door with my head held high. Part of me wouldn't regret puking all over her floor. But the rest of me knows that isn't nice. And besides, Nadia has to live with her some of the time, so whatever happens could return back to my daughter.

An overhead bell dings loudly as I step inside. I'm struck with a strong whiff of nail products. It's almost enough to make my eyes water. How can anyone work in here all day? I'm already eager to leave.

Trixie doesn't budge, leaning against the wall with her arms crossed and her brows furrowed as she looks me over.

I never wanted to come in here, and now I wish I hadn't. I can't think of anything to say all of a sudden. Everything I asked at the cake place falls flat in my mind before hitting my tongue. Any question about a doppelgänger will either make me look crazy or give Bryant fuel for another custody hearing. I'm going to have to play this especially carefully.

"Back again?" Trixie's tone is stoic, not giving any indication of how she feels.

Not that I'm surprised Chelsea's story about seeing me here is valid. Not after everything else.

Did Trixie have a good interaction with my lookalike? What did they talk about?

"Yes," I say. "I'm back."

Silence.

My mind races for something to say, but I'm tongue-tied. Every question could be used against me, against my daughter. Coming here was definitely a bad idea.

Trixie glances at my hands. "Here again for a manicure?"

I hold up my plain nails.

"I told you removing it is part of the service. If you come back, I can take it off for you."

"Oh, right. Well, um, it was chipping so I didn't want to wait."



“Already? My work should last longer than that.”

I shrug. “Must be because I don’t wear gloves when I wash dishes.”

That probably sounds really stupid. And I’m not getting any closer to learning anything about the woman who is messing with my life.

“You should change that immediately if you want a mani to last.”

“Apparently. I’m pretty new at all of this.” At least that isn’t a lie. I could count on one hand how many times I’ve had a professional manicure. It’s never been a priority when I can paint my own nails at home if I feel like it. Since having kids, that’s been a rarity. Nadia never had an interest in having pretty nails, so it wasn’t something we bonded over like some moms and daughters. But ever since Bryant started seeing Trixie, Nadia has had colored nails.

I ignore a stab of jealousy.

“Follow me.” Trixie marches toward a row of chairs.

My heart thunders in my chest. What have I just gotten myself into? Now I’m not only going to be talking to my ex-husband’s girlfriend, but she’s going to be touching my hands. How long does this take? I can’t think of anything to say as it is. If this goes on for a full half hour, I’m doomed. This is going to be disastrous.

Trixie bustles around, gathering a tray of things and bringing it over. “Same color?”

I hesitate. The last thing I need is the same nail polish as my doppelgänger. That will just give people one more reason to think we’re the same person and that I’m losing my mind. “Something bolder this time.”

She gives me a surprised but approving look. “I didn’t see that coming. Same shade, but bolder?”

“Yes,” I say with as much confidence as I can muster. I have no idea what I’m agreeing to, or how long the color is going to stay on my hands.

Trixie returns with a little bottle, and the color could only be described as neon watermelon. “Too much?”

I can’t tell if the question is a challenge. If so, I accept.

“It’s perfect.” I give her my best smile. “I love that shade of pink. And the brightness will help me hang on to the last bit of summer.”

“My thoughts exactly.” She sits and pulls items out from the little tray.

Did we just agree on something? Not that I’m actually sure of the color. If nothing else, it will stand out from whatever my imposter has on.

Trixie moves quickly, making me think she could do a manicure in her sleep. She takes my right hand then rubs something cold and wet on my nails. “How’s Nadia doing? Haven’t seen her in a while.”

“Oh, you know. Busy with school. I rarely see her myself.”

She pulls out clippers and shapes my nails. “Is she still seeing that boy? What was his name, Luke?”

My daughter has a boyfriend? And she told Trixie about him?

“No, it was Liam.” Trixie smiles, and files one of my nails. “They sound so cute together.”

I just smile. What can I say? Absolutely nothing. This woman apparently knows more about my daughter than I do, and she only sees her a few days a month. Unless she’s making it all up to get under my skin. That’s a definite possibility.

“I wondered how long it would last since her stepsister had just broken up with him. It seemed pretty brazen to go after him then, but I guess Nadia knows what she wants. You gotta give props to a girl who doesn’t let anything get in the way of that.”

My daughter not only has a boyfriend I don’t know about, but also essentially snatched him from Dakota?

I quickly pull myself together and manage a little chortle.  
“Girl drama. It never ends at home.”

Trixie rubs cream into my nails. “With two fourteen-year-old girls? I can imagine.”

What is going on in my house? Do I actually know anything happening under my own roof?

## Chapter Twenty-Two

I haven't been able to focus on anything all afternoon after talking with Trixie, who apparently knows more about my own child than I do. By the time my nails, now brighter than the neon sign in the salon's window, dried and I was finally able to leave, it felt like stepping outside into an alternate reality.

Nothing is what I thought it was two weeks ago. Someone who looks just like me is out to get me, my daughter tells her dad's girlfriend more about her life than she tells me, and she and Dakota are living some rivalry over a boy.

At least I kept my head high the entire time and didn't give her the slightest inkling that I had no clue what she was talking about with my daughter's supposed boyfriend.

Unless she was making all that up to see what I'd say. If she thinks it's okay to make fun of people like that, she's probably rolling on the floor at my expense. She can have it, her and Bryant both. They deserve each other, if that's the case.

But if what she said was true, then I really don't know what's been going on in my own house. Could all Nadia's recent study groups actually be time spent with some boy? Luke or Liam? Annoyance runs through me, but then I remember how I kept my middle-school relationships secret from my parents. Not that it was hard. They were always on the phone with whatever mental institution my brother was in at the time. He moved around a lot, proving to be too much even for the professionals. A judge approved him to stay at an

adult facility by the time he was fifteen because Michael had burned bridges at all the juvenile ones in the county.

At least my kids are safe and happy. That's all I can ask for, especially after the littles disappeared yesterday. No harm came to them despite being abducted and then subsequently spending time with my father.

I didn't have any issues getting the kids from preschool. Nobody else tried picking them up, and the password worked as expected. The kids were thrilled to have cupcakes at the Cake Shack while I watched the video of the woman who looks exactly like me. Not that I can do anything with it yet, as people will say it's just another video of me in my purple tank top. But the employee emailed it to me, so I have it in case it ever comes in handy.

Peter's voice pulls me from my thoughts. It takes me a moment to realize I'm in the backyard watching Owen and Sophie.

"You're back already?" I ask.

"I only went in to do paperwork."

I can't remember if he told me that or not.

"Do you have anything planned for dinner?"

Dinner. Right. People have to eat. My stomach has been churning acid all day, so I haven't eaten anything. Unless I had something for breakfast. I can't even remember. "No. Do you have any ideas?"

He glances up to the sky. "I could grill those steaks. Who knows how much longer the weather will stay nice for outdoor cooking?"

"That sounds good. Want some help?"

"You can throw together a salad or roast some veggies if you feel like it." He heads inside.

I tell the kids I'll be back out in a few minutes.

They don't respond, as they're too busy chasing each other around the climber. At least they're home and safe. I hate to

think what might've happened if my doppelgänger had left them somewhere even more dangerous than my parents' house, or done something to hurt them. Or worse.

I shove those thoughts aside and join Peter in the kitchen. He's rubbing something into the meat. I glance around the fridge, trying to decide what side dish to make. We have leftover mashed potatoes I could warm up and some asparagus and broccoli that will go bad soon if I don't make them. I turn on the oven and prepare the veggies with lemon pepper and butter—it's so good that way all four kids will eat it.

"Why are you so quiet?" Peter gives me an inquisitive look.

"I'm trying to make sense of everything."

"But you were feeling so much better earlier."

I freeze mid-chop. This is the first I've seen or spoken with Peter all day. "Was I?"

"Yeah. You were so chatty and hopeful over lunch. It's jarring to see you so tense again."

The knife falls from my hand, landing on the vegetables. "Lunch?"

He nods, like I'm supposed to know what he's talking about.

"I didn't eat lunch today."

"We met at the deli you like so much and ate those shrimp sandwiches you introduced me to when we were dating. It was like old times again."

My body turns to ice. "I didn't... I wasn't there."

We stare at each other. Concern fills his eyes. Then pity.

Peter thinks I'm losing my mind. My husband is actually questioning my sanity. Worst of all, he pities me.

"Angelina..."

"Don't!" I snap. "Don't look at me like that—and don't say whatever it is you're thinking."

He starts to say something, but I cut him off.

“I dropped off the kids at preschool today, then I went to the cake shop to ask if anyone saw me there the other day—”

“Did they?”

“That isn’t the point.”

He gives me a knowing look.

“She saw someone who *looks like* me. It wasn’t me. And then I went to Trixie’s salon.”

“That explains the nails.” Peter glances at my hands.

“These were done today. She also saw someone who looks like me, like Chelsea mentioned last week.”

“So, what you’re saying is that a lot of people are seeing you around town in places you don’t remember being?”

“No. They’re seeing me in places I haven’t been.” I narrow my eyes at him. “There’s a big difference, and you should believe me.”

He takes a deep breath. “You think I don’t know my own wife?”

“The woman is my doppelgänger!”

“Think about it logically. Even if she does resemble you, what are the chances she has your same height and build? The person who had lunch with me today had all of that, plus your laugh. Her voice is the same. If she was some random stranger, then you couldn’t possibly have all of that in common—enough to convince *me* that she was you.”

“I wasn’t there! I was busy all morning, and I can account for every step I took. You were fooled by the woman who has been impersonating me. She knows what she’s doing, to the point of breaking into our house to wear my purple tank top.”

Peter shakes his head.

He really doesn’t believe me.

“She’s dangerous. We need to get our locks and security codes changed. What if she comes in here in the middle of the

night and takes the kids again?”

Stress lines appear around his eyes. “It’s time we make an appointment with a doctor. You need help I can’t provide.”

My mouth falls open. “I’m not losing my mind!”

He trudges over to me and rests a hand on my arm. “If it’s dementia, the doctor might be able to help us put it off. This is clearly the early stages, so we have the best chance of slowing it down. They’re making incredible advances in technology every day.”

“That isn’t what’s happening!”

“It’s for your own good, honey. I don’t want to see you go downhill any faster than you need to. Let’s stop this before it gets any worse.”

The oven beeps, letting me know it’s ready.

I put the veggies in and slam the door shut. “These will be ready in half an hour. You’d better get started on the steaks.”

Then I storm upstairs and lock myself in the bedroom.



## Chapter Twenty-Three

**B**oth Emily and Jennifer gave me the side eye when I dropped off the kids. I'm so ready to pull them out of this school and find another one, but all of the good ones have a waitlist—and this school has the longest of them all. Of course Owen and Sophie love it.

I'm going to have to find a way to prove to everyone there's actually someone impersonating me. Then when they all see I'm right, people will go back to respecting me.

However, finding evidence to support the facts is proving to be harder than expected. I can't even convince my own husband, so how can I get anyone else on board?

I'll have to find a way, no matter what it takes. There is no other option. One problem is I've already spoken with everyone who has interacted with my doppelgänger, and they all believe she was me. Even my own husband, who had lunch with that devil!

The deck is stacked against me. But I'll take whatever odds are in my favor, no matter how small. I have a chance, and I'm going to find it.

After jotting down today's password to pick up the kids, I give Megan a call in my car. After going over all the new details with her, she says she'll think it over and let me know any ideas she comes up with. Unfortunately, she's as stumped as I am about all of this.

I can't wait until she thinks of something. I rack my mind to think of who else might have a good idea.

Claire. My sister-in-law is a ghostwriter. If anyone can come up with something creative, it's her.

Voicemail.

Ugh. I leave a message, pleading with her to get back to me as soon as possible.

I pull out of the parking lot slowly. What I need is a plan for the day.

As I'm lost in thought driving nowhere in particular, I find myself at my parents' house. My subconscious mind had a plan even if I struggled to focus. Mom saw and spoke with the person trying to destroy my life. Maybe she can offer some insight.

Though given all the counterpoints Peter brought up last night before dinner, it does make me wonder how that woman has been able to pull off tricking the people closest to me. Of all people, my own mother and husband should be able to recognize a fake.

Neither did.

If I'm going to question my mom, I need to keep my cards close to my chest. The last thing I need is for her to think I need a medical evaluation, too. I have to make sure she doesn't get on the same page as Peter.

Things went relatively well with Trixie yesterday—she opened up to me and was friendly—so I can hopefully pull off the same with my own flesh and blood.

When Mom answers the door, her eyes widen.

“You can't be *that* shocked by me showing up.”

“Well, you have to admit that two visits in one morning is unusual.”

I blink a few times, trying to register her words. “This is my second visit today?”

She grabs my shoulders. “Don't tell me you've forgotten already! The last thing I want is for you to get Dad's early dementia.”

This isn't starting off well at all.

I shake my head to clear it. "Of course I haven't forgotten. I was just kidding."

"Don't do that!" She glares at me. "It's not something to joke about."

"You're right. It was in poor taste, and I'm sorry."

She takes a deep breath. "Come on in. Did you forget something?"

"No. I just wanted to spend some more time together. Being with Dad the other day made me realize how important it is that I come by more often."

Mom smiles sadly. "That's good news, but it also sounds like you expect him to drop dead at any moment."

"I don't want to waste any more time. That's all."

She closes the door. "I just made some iced tea. Let's have some and chat. I imagine Dad will wake from his nap soon, and then you can spend more time with him."

We each pour ourselves a glass and sit on the back porch. The grass is overgrown and lush from recent rain, and I spot two brown bunnies munching on the blades. They both glance our way but don't seem concerned by our presence. I accidentally scrape my chair on the platform, and a third wild rabbit leaps across the yard, darting under a small gap in the fence.

If only I could escape my problems that easily.

"Are you feeling okay?" Mom asks.

"That's a loaded question. What makes you ask?"

"I've seen you more in the last two days than in the last month."

That's because I have a body double, but I don't need her thinking I'm losing my grip on reality, so I don't say anything.

"Tell me what's on your mind." She gives me a sympathetic glance.

And just like that, I'm back to the girl I used to be whose mom was trying her best to take care of me in an impossibly difficult family. My brother didn't even live with us, but he took up most of their attention. I resented it, but as much as I did, I still couldn't deny that she tried. She was torn between her two children, and I didn't have nearly so many problems as Michael.

She rests her hand on mine. "You can tell me anything. I won't judge you."

But will she feel the same way after she hears about my doppelgänger that nobody else seems to believe in?

My phone rings, saving me from having to explain any of that for now. The screen shows it's the preschool. My heart pounds so hard, it seems to beat in my ears.

A call from them means something is wrong.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

I break every speed limit between my parents' house and the preschool. It's a good thing no police see me, because I wouldn't stop for them.

Not after the call I just got.

Emily from the front desk told me I had been there but couldn't come up with the password.

Because it wasn't me. And she was speaking to me on the phone, so now she has to believe me. This is the proof I need to make them all see the truth.

They won't be able to deny anything when I'm finally there, face to face with my lookalike. Then she can explain to everyone what she's been doing and why. I want to hear the why.

My tires squeal as I turn into the parking lot, and they squeal again as I park, taking up three spots. I don't even care.

I fly out of the car, not even bothering to close the door.

When I get to the reception desk, Emily is alone.

My clone is gone.

"Where is she?" I demand.

"You mean you?" Emily taps on the counter. She almost looks bored.

I could wring her neck. But I won't. I'm not violent.

“The woman who didn’t know the password I gave you this morning.”

“Again, you.” She sighs.

I throw my arms in the air. “You were talking to me on the phone! Now you know that woman and I are not the same person.”

“*She* left and you returned. All you did was change your clothes.”

“You have got to be kidding me.”

Emily looks disgusted. “Why would you go to so much effort to try and prove there’s someone who looks just like you? She sounds and acts like you, too. There are some things even good acting can’t hide, and your acting isn’t even good.”

“I’m not acting! That other woman is trying to steal my kids!”

“As you know, I didn’t let ‘her’ take them.” Emily makes air quotes with her hands when she says *her*.

Now I’m not so sure I can keep myself from wringing her neck, so I keep my distance. “You just saw her, and you just saw me. How can you possibly think we’re the same person?”

She taps a pen on the counter. “All you did was change your clothes.”

“I did not!”

“Are you going to pick up your kids or not?”

“No! I just dropped them off. As long as you don’t let them leave with the other woman, I have nothing to worry about.”

“I’ll only let them go with someone who is on your approved list *and* can provide your password. The fact that I didn’t let you leave with them fifteen minutes ago proves as much.”

“It wasn’t—” I bite my tongue. Anything else I say will only make her think I’m crazy. I’m already frustrated, and she

thinks I'm making all of this up. "Thank you. I'll be back at the normal time. If she shows up before that, please call me."

"If you show up early, call you. Got it."

It's like she's begging for me to harm her.

"Oh, and Angelina?" Her voice is so syrupy sweet, I don't even want to know what she's going to say.

"What?"

"If you don't stop with these games, we're going to have no choice but to unenroll the kids. Your behavior is getting out of control. We love Owen and Sophie and don't want to see them go, so please do everyone a favor and pull yourself together. We can provide some resources if you need help finding any."

She cannot be serious.

Her narrowed eyes tell me she very much is.

I spin around, storm out to the parking lot, and get into my car. At least I remembered to cut the engine and take the keys with me.

Once seated, I take a few deep breaths. Emily is not the enemy—she's been deceived by that demon. I honestly can't say I'd respond any differently if I were in her shoes.

My doppelgänger is the one trying to ruin my life. She is the one I need to deal with, but I have to find her first. Somehow she seems one or two steps ahead of me every time.

I don't know how she does it. However, nobody's perfect. There *is* a way to find her and stop her. And I will figure it out if it's the last thing I do.

In order to do that, I have to go back and talk with my mom some more. She spent yesterday afternoon and this morning with the psychopath. If anyone can tell me about the mystery woman, it's her.

When I get back to her house, she looks even more surprised than last time. "Three times in one day? Something is definitely going on."

“We need to talk.”

“Sure. Your drink is still on the porch, and Dad’s still sleeping. I think one of his new medications is making him more tired than normal.”

“That’s good.”

She gives me a confused look.

“I just mean, I’m glad for the time to talk. This is important.”

We sit back in the same chairs as before, and I spill everything. I’m sure I sound like a raving lunatic at this point, but I don’t care. We’ll see if she really won’t judge me, like she said.

She listens without showing much emotion as I go over every detail from the first sighting of the woman to what just happened at the preschool. I slump back against the chair when I’m done, exhausted from rehashing everything. Now I have to prepare myself for my mom to join the club of people who don’t believe me.

Her expression is blank and she’s staring into space, hardly even blinking.

It’s my turn to ask if she’s okay.

She turns to me, almost as if she’s surprised to see me in front of her.

My breath hitches. “Mom, you’re scaring me.”

Her face drains of color. “There’s something I need to tell you. Something we should’ve told you a long time ago.”



## Chapter Twenty-Five

**T**ime stands still as I wait for my mom to continue. In pure desperation, I try to fill in the blanks. I must have a sister they never told me about. She has to be a sociopath like Michael, and that's why they never mentioned her. Maybe they gave up their rights to her and then had me as one last-ditch effort to see if they could have a normal child.

That's the only thing that makes any sense. It explains why someone who looks and sounds like me is trying to destroy my life. She must have escaped her facility, and now she wants to take me down.

It all makes sense now. That's why Peter and Emily have both said she has too much in common with me to just be a doppelgänger. It's one thing for a complete stranger to resemble me, but to be the same height and build, plus talk like me and have similar mannerisms?

She has to be a sister. There's a ten-year age gap between Michael and me, so it makes sense they would've had her in that time. My parents must've had a kid every five years, stopping after me.

My entire body feels like liquid, and I can't hold myself up. I'm glad for this huge plush outdoor chair my mom picked out.

“What's her name?” I ask.

Mom jolts. “What?”

“My sister.”

“Sister?” She shakes her head, as if to clear it. “I don’t know what to tell you about your lookalike.”

My stomach sinks. I don’t have a sister? That explained *everything*. “Then what do you need to tell me? Spit it out! I can’t take the anticipation.”

“We should’ve told you a long time ago,” she says again.

“Tell me what?”

She holds my gaze. “You were adopted.”

Everything around me disappears. I can’t breathe. Can’t think. Can’t process anything. Did she really just say they adopted me?

“Angelina?”

It takes me a moment to pull myself together, but I manage to sit up straight and take a few breaths. “Let me get this straight. I’m an adult with four kids, and you’re just now telling me that I’m adopted?”

She frowns. “We never meant to keep it a secret from you.”

“I’m forty-three!”

“Dad and I wanted to tell you, but there never seemed to be a right time to bring it up.”

I wring my hands together. “I’m really adopted?”

“Yes. I’m sorry we never told you. We should have.”

“Obviously. Why?”

“After everything we went through with Michael, I couldn’t risk having another child like him. It took me a while to convince your dad to agree. That’s why we didn’t adopt until Michael was ten. Dad wasn’t on board at all, saying he would never raise some other man’s child.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah. It took me years to convince him. A child is a child, regardless of genetics. Clearly, he eventually came around. And you never once doubted his love for you. You may as

well have been his biological daughter. I knew he'd change his mind once he saw you."

I lean back and stare at the cloudless sky. It's a lot to take in. Still, it could explain my lookalike if I have a sister. I turn back to my mom. "What do you know about my birth family?"

She closes her eyes for a few moments before opening them. "Your mom was young and not ready for a family. She wanted you to have the best chance of a good life, and she knew she wouldn't be able to provide that for you."

"How did you and Dad end up adopting me?"

"Your birth mom chose us. She liked our file, and then when she met us, she said she felt an instant connection. She agreed to pick us before talking with the agency, which she wasn't supposed to do, but she was so eager for us to take you that she didn't want to risk us agreeing to another baby first."

"She was pregnant when you met her?"

"About six months along, though I thought she looked ready to pop right then. Waiting those few months for your birth was torture. I was so worried she would change her mind—either she would find out about Michael and pick another couple or fall in love with you when you were born and not give you up. But she didn't."

Her words are like a slap to my face. "She didn't have any love for me?"

"It wasn't like that, honey. She ended up choosing not to see you because she thought it would hurt too much. All she wanted was to give you the best shot at having a nice life."

That makes me feel a little better. "What else do you know about her? What's her name? Did she have any other children?"

Mom leans over and squeezes my hand. "We never exchanged that information. She wanted to pick the parents, but she also wanted a closed adoption. We never contacted her after that initial meeting, and she never reached out to us."

This is so much to take in.

“Do I look like her?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“You *think*?”

“I met her one time over forty years ago. She had long, thick hair about the color of yours and big brown eyes. I really can’t remember the details, I’m sorry.”

My heart sinks.

“Are you okay? I know this is a shock.”

“That’s putting it mildly.”

“I know this can’t be easy, but—”

“Wait! If I was adopted, why do I look so much like Dad? Just the other day, one of his old coworkers commented on the uncanniness of it.”

“It’s a lucky coincidence. Nothing more.”

“A coincidence?”

“It happens. I know of other families where the adopted children look eerily like one of the parents. Remember the Clarks down the street? Their daughter was a spitting image of Leslie, and she was adopted. Nobody ever believed it when they heard that.”

“At least they told her she was adopted.”

She ignores the dig. “Dad and I were always grateful to be one of those couples. I’ll admit that sometimes I was jealous you didn’t look like me instead of him, but that’s the way things go. And since he was so hesitant to adopt, it was probably for the best. I think it helped the two of you to connect.”

A thud sounds from inside.

Mom leaps up. “I better see what he’s getting into. Come with me, and we can keep talking.”

“I need some time to process all of this.”

“If you want to ask more questions, you can call or come over anytime. We can even leave the house later, if you want.”

Dad has a nurse coming over in an hour.”

I take a long, slow breath. “I’ll think about it, but I can’t imagine coming back over here today. I’m going to go home and stare at a wall for a while before I have to pick up Owen and Sophie.”

She gives me a quick hug before running inside to find my dad.

I see myself out, barely able to walk without stumbling over my own two feet.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

I'm not sure if I've been staring blankly for five minutes or an hour. Everything in my life now takes on a new meaning. I can't see any of it the same way anymore.

My parents adopted me and never once mentioned it. What if a medical issue came up? Knowing that information might've been important.

But there is one good thing from this news—a really big good thing.

I'm not related to my dad or brother. I don't have their genes, and I no longer have to worry about early onset dementia or being a sociopath. We're not even part of the same genetic pool.

Now I can explain to everyone that I have no chance of losing my mind. And my theory of having a sister still holds water. My biological mother had other children, and one of them looks a lot like me. It isn't uncommon for siblings to look eerily similar. Take Megan's sisters, for instance. While they have a two-year age gap, most everyone had a hard time telling them apart when we were growing up. They were mistaken for twins many times over the years.

That has to be the case with my doppelgänger. No, my sister.

I have a sister.

Maybe.

No, I do. That's the only explanation for all of this. Unfortunately, we won't be having any sleepovers or gab sessions. The woman is trying to ruin my life. She doesn't care that we're sisters. Unless she didn't know, either. But that seems unlikely. She found me and instead of trying to be part of my life, she's trying to steal it.

How can I prove it when she always manages to avoid me? Unless I can convince my mom to secretly text me the next time my sister goes over there to see them. Then I can race over and confront her.

It's the perfect plan. In fact, I can't wait to let my mom know. She'll be on board, and even if she isn't, she owes me. Waiting until I'm forty-three to tell me I'm adopted is completely unacceptable. All this time spent worrying about sharing genetics with my dad and brother could have been avoided.

Really, learning we aren't related is the best news I could've asked for.

I get up and throw in a load of laundry just to move around, and I don't even flinch when I pull my purple tank top from the hamper. My sister can't mess with my head anymore. I know I can trust my mind now.

After I start the load, a thought strikes me. Something that could answer all my remaining questions—or at least most of them.

Years ago, I sent my spit off to one of those genetic testing sites. It never came up with any close relatives, but back then, the technology was still pretty new and most people weren't sure about it. Plus, I didn't give it a second thought in all these years because both my parents are only children with no living relatives. My dad had dementia, so he had no interest in submitting his DNA. Michael is locked away, so he had no access to the tests. To this day, my mom thinks the government is going to one day use those results against people who send in their saliva.

But now, I could actually find relatives. What if my sister has taken the test? I might be able to figure out who she is. Or

my birth parents. I know next to nothing about my biological mom and absolutely nothing about my biological dad.

I race to my laptop in the bedroom and fire it up. It takes me a minute to find the genetic testing website because I haven't logged in for so long.

My login doesn't work. I know I still have the account because the payment gets taken out every August. And every August I think about how I should login again but never do.

Until today.

If I can get the right password.

After a few more tries, a warning pops up. If I have one more failed attempt, it's going to block my IP address from the site.

That means my next login attempt *has* to be right. If it isn't, I'll have to call the company. That's time I don't want to waste when I need in now.

My pulse thrums in my ears as I try to figure out how I'm going to find the right password. I've tried all the ones I used back when I set up the account—years ago I didn't understand the importance of having different passwords for every site.

I open a new tab and go to my email. No amount of searching brings up anything to do with this genetic testing site.

That isn't possible! It *has* to be there somewhere.

But it isn't. No search term brings anything up.

I pace the room, trying to figure out what to do. Trying to login again is out of the question. Not until I'm sure I have the right password and email address.

That's it! I've been using the wrong email address this whole time. That's why I can't find any emails, and it also explains why I can't get into my account. When I signed up for the testing, I was using an old email address that I had to quit using because Bryant was harassing me. I tried blocking him, but he would just make a new account and send me more messages.



I hope my old email account hasn't been deactivated. It's been years since I logged out for the last time. My hands shake as I attempt to login. At least I should be given multiple tries if I don't get the password right.

The screen loads. It feels like it takes an hour.

A long list of unread emails fills my screen.

I fall back on my bed, unable to believe my eyes. Now that I'm in, I should be able to find everything I need to get into the genetic testing site.

It takes me a minute to muster the courage to sit up and look at the emails. I expect most of them to be from Bryant, but it looks like he hasn't emailed me in a long time. A lot of the subject lines are sales pitches.

But those aren't the only kind of messages that have been piling up.

There are multiple alerts notifying me of found relatives. Mostly distant cousins, but it gives me hope.

Perhaps I can find my birth parents or my sister. Unless they don't want to be found.

But there's only one way to find out, and I'm not going to scroll through years of missed emails. A quick search yields my login information.

Less than a minute later, I'm in.

It worked! I'm not locked out of the site.

Everything is different, not that I should be surprised. It's a fresher look and much easier to navigate than in its rudimentary days. I make my way over to my long list of notifications and scan the top ones.

No parents or siblings.

I use the mouse to scroll down to older alerts.

Then I spy one that makes my heart skip a beat.

I stare, unable to breathe. Hardly able to believe what I'm seeing. But no matter how many times I read it over and over,

it still says the same thing:

“We’ve found a genetic relative! Add your identical twin.”

Identical twin?

Not only do I have a twin, but she’s identical. We look exactly the same.

Why didn’t my birth mom tell my parents about my sister? She must’ve been afraid my mom and dad wouldn’t want both of us, or that they wouldn’t want to separate sisters. The adoption agency might’ve told her that twins were harder to adopt—that sounds like a familiar statistic. Did my mom actually know about both babies but, because of my dad or any other of a dozen reasons, decided only to adopt one? No. My birth mother had to have kept the double pregnancy a secret because when I talked to my mom, she seemed to genuinely believe I was the only baby.

But I wasn’t.

I have a twin. An evil twin.

And she’s trying to destroy my life.

# Part Two

# Chapter Twenty-Seven

## *Jane*

**A**ngelina is really upset. She keeps driving all over town like a bat out of hell this morning. I don't bother holding in my amusement. In fact, I let it out vigorously. I haven't had a good belly laugh in a long time. Years, probably. It feels good.

She started going crazy after I showed up to pick up her brats from daycare again. Only this time it didn't work. Ol' Angie wised up since last time and came up with a password. It took me aback at first, but I'm nothing if not adaptable, so I acted like I knew all about the passwords. At first when I claimed I'd forgotten the one I came up with this morning, I thought I had the chick behind the desk convinced. But then she said she had to call me.

I told her to have fun with that and went to the bathroom while she made the call. That way I wasn't standing right there when she was talking to "me." The whole time, I imagined my spoiled twin freaking out and more than likely having to leave some snooty hair appointment early.

When I returned, I played it off like I was annoyed and I left, telling her how pissed I was and that I'd be back soon to tell her off.

The look on that chick's face was priceless. Too bad I couldn't have been there to see her and Angie going at it. That would've been fun.

Oh, well. I have more important things to do. Like watch my twin burn rubber all over this mind-numbing little town that she seems to think is so exciting. There's no graffiti, no obvious drug sales, no "escort" services. This place is like some Hallmark Channel movie or something. I half expect it to start snowing, everyone to stop what they're doing and break out into song, then some big-city mogul to come into town and fall for the most innocent single girl living here.

I hate those movies. People like me never get happily-ever-afters. I thought they were only the things of fairy tales until the day I found my twin sister. I'd known about the adoption for as long as I can remember—Mom told me about it before drugs took over her life—but it wasn't until I took that spit test that I realized there was someone out there with my face.

At first, I didn't care. Then curiosity got the better of me, and I did some digging. It wasn't easy in the beginning because the site would only tell me that I had an identical twin, but it wouldn't give me any more information unless we connected. I almost clicked the button to connect with her.

Almost.

But I wanted to see if she would click to find out more about me. The company would notify her of the connection.

She never requested the information, and I sure wasn't going to be the one to reach out first. If she didn't want to hear from me, I didn't want to hear from her, either. Forget that. And I'm nothing if not resourceful, so I got to work.

I reached out to a private investigator. Not because I have enough money to be able to afford luxuries like that. That's laughable. My mom didn't leave me two pennies to rub together the day she overdosed. *My* mom left me bills and other debts I refused to pay. Not my problem. There was nothing in the barely standing mobile home that I wanted—I checked—before I left town. One of her druggie boyfriends or pimps could take care of the mess she left behind.

I'm moving forward. It's time I get the life I deserve, the one Angie got instead of me. How fair is it that we share the same DNA but she grew up in the lap of luxury, while I moved from one dilapidated apartment to the next until my mom inherited my grandparents' mobile home, a rustbucket that smelled like dog butt, rotting fish, and cigarettes? Now it also reeks of corpse since nobody noticed my mom hadn't shown up anywhere for an entire week.

Watching my sister makes me sick. Her pampered life should've been mine. It was nothing more than a clerical

decision that led me to a life of taking care of myself from a young age while dear ol' Angie ate from a silver spoon.

It's time for a reckoning.

I thought about killing her and just stepping into her life, but that comes with too many risks. Too many things could go wrong. I decided early on that I would have to be slow and meticulous in my efforts to steal her life. The life that should've belonged to me in the first place.

What makes her think she's so special?

I can hardly believe how different our lives are. She grew up with two parents who adored her. Sure, Angie has a psychopath for a brother that only made her parents appreciate her all the more. Now she has the perfect family and the perfect husband. He's an anesthesiologist! I looked that up, and it's one of the highest paying professions in existence. Our girl knows what she's doing.

It didn't take me long to decide I needed to insert myself into her life. How hard could it be? I look exactly like the overprivileged little princess.

But as I came to find, it wouldn't be a simple switch. Convincing her acquaintances was easy enough, but Peter wasn't so easy—a much bigger challenge.

Angie is nothing like me, so I had to spend an insane amount of time studying her. Scrolling through her social media accounts was enough to make my eyes bleed. Must be nice to have a perfect life and all the money she wants at her disposal—all while not having to work!

How did she get so lucky, when I ended up with nothing? Less than nothing, really.

My mom wasn't always so bad off. She was married for a while, but that didn't last. He found out about her drug addiction and tried to help her, but he soon figured out she was beyond help. He disappeared one night, never to be seen again. I always wished he'd have taken me with him, but Mom fought him for me. She always saw me as hers and hers alone.

I wasn't his biologically, so who could blame him for leaving me behind?

Me. I did. And I made sure he eventually paid.

But in the end, he was just one guy in a line of many. They were all basically the same, though they varied in their degree of acceptance of her drug habits. Eventually my so-called mom stopped trying to hook up with clean guys and went straight for the other druggies. The best I could hope for from those idiots was that they would dismiss me and leave me alone. It was the ones who preferred a young daughter to a used-up mother that showed me just how cruel the world really was.

But soon, I'll experience what the other side is like.

And my twin will find herself facing what the world actually has to offer people without money and entitlement. I've laid all the groundwork. Now it's time I take over her life.



# Chapter Twenty-Eight

## *A couple weeks earlier.*

**I**t was never my intention to steal my sister's life. At least not initially. My plan was only to steal *from* her. It started out simply enough—learn what I could about her to be able to take on her identity somewhere else. With as much money as Peter makes in anesthesiology, they would never even notice the money was gone. I'd just need some documentation, cash, and credit cards, then I would be set to start over fresh in a new state. Nobody would be any wiser, and I would finally have the life I deserved. The one Angie got.

And she got *everything*. She even got a better name. I mean seriously, Angelina? She could've become a star with a name like that. But me? Jane. My name is synonymous with plain and sterile. Mom couldn't even throw in a y to make the spelling a *little* interesting. Jayne has more personality than Jane. But she named me after my grandma, and that was that. She didn't even give me a middle name that I could've gone by instead.

Who wouldn't be jealous? It easily could've been me set into the arms of rich and adoring parents, but instead it was her. Angie got everything handed to her, whereas I had to fight for everything. Something as simple as dinner wasn't guaranteed in my household. I couldn't count on my mom being home every night, or even every week. It depended on how strung out she was and what guy she was seeing.

Some men brought her to their homes and refused to let me come along. She never put up a fuss and left me to fend for myself. Though it was probably for the best. Most of the men she spent time with were the true dregs of society. It got to the point where if she had one staying with us, I'd bail until he left.

I had no choice if I wanted to protect myself. Didn't take me long to learn that when they were done with her, they

wanted younger blood.

I was better off on the street than at home. If I was lucky, I could find a friend to stay with, but more often than not I wasn't lucky. At least I got breakfast and lunch at school. Two cooked meals a day was plenty to live on, and the fact that I'm here today is proof of that.

Now it's time to put those memories behind me. Angelina London didn't grow up that way, and I have to get into *her* mindset. Shouldn't be hard to step into a perfect life of pampering and luxury. I just have to pretend I grew up like a princess in the stories I heard growing up.

I've been watching Angie for weeks now. I'm more than ready to make my move, but I have to be careful. Meticulous. One wrong move and I could lose everything. I'm not about to let that happen.

It's go time.

I glance in the mirror and cringe. In order to pull this off, I had to chop off my hair. I've always kept it long, sometimes to my waist but always past my shoulder blades. Angelina keeps hers shoulder length. I actually shed silent tears as the scissors sliced through my locks. I can still hear the snip of metal on metal.

The sound will haunt my nightmares for years to come.

But it's a small price to pay for being able to live the life I've always deserved. The life that should've been mine to begin with but was denied me.

Hair grows back. Once I become Angelina London, I can grow it out again. Say it's time for a change. Chances are, Peter will love it. What guy doesn't love long locks to run his fingers through? By the time my plan is complete, he'll be a much happier man. He won't even question the changes in his wife because he'll love them so much.

He'll never want to let go of me. I'll make sure of that.

Today, Phase Two of my grand plan begins.

Phase One was all about learning. It was tedious, and I've been itching to act. But I couldn't leave even a the tiniest space for error. If I didn't get the studying and note-taking done right, the rest was sure to fall apart.

I won't let that happen. So, I've spent more time than necessary gathering everything I need. I know more about Angie than she knows about herself. Actually, I need to stop thinking of her as Angie—which I know she would hate—because nobody calls her that. Even when she was a child, she went by her full name.

It grates on my nerves to think of her as Angelina, but knowing that *I* will soon be Angelina is enough to soothe my frayed nerves. She'll either start over, or she can take my identity. I don't care which, but she'd be better off with a fresh start. No one would want to take on the debts left to me.

I tap the steering wheel from across the street of the Londons' enormous house. The garage door should open soon, and she'll pull out her shiny Escalade with her two perfect younger children in the backseat. The two older ones already left on the bus, which was my cue that Angie—I mean, Angelina—will be off soon.

A jogger runs by, and I duck down without thinking. I'm used to driving my old clunker, which would stick out like a sore thumb in this hoity-toity neighborhood. But I'm not in the rusty, scraped up burnt-orange Pinto. I'm in a white soccer-mom minivan that I nabbed before leaving my old life behind. The van was abandoned by a family not unlike the Londons, after someone put a small dent in the back bumper. I'm pretty sure they're now driving an Escalade, too, and don't even miss this van. But even if they do notice, a switch of the plates has so far kept anyone from figuring out this vehicle is actually stolen. I'm ready to leave it behind with a moment's notice if anyone grows suspicious.

After the jogger turns down another street, I sit back up just in time to see the Londons' garage door rise up. That Escalade is so tacky, but I'm sure I can get used to it. It probably has features like heated seats and a push-button start.

This minivan has a lot more features than I'm used to, but that SUV is sure to be even more luxurious.

My pulse races as my twin's car backs onto the street then heads out of the neighborhood.

It's go time.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

**F**ollowing my sister around has been the most boring part of Phase One. The woman seriously does nothing exciting. But that'll change once I take over her life. I'll have to do that subtly, of course, so as not to make anyone suspicious.

I don't understand how she can do so little when she was given so much. If I had all the advantages she was given, I'd be living it up. She doesn't even know what she could've ended up with if our situations were reversed.

It doesn't matter. The scales will tip the right way soon enough. I'll be swimming in money and waking up next to her hot, successful husband every morning. It hardly seems possible, but it's within my grasp. Assuming I play this right—and I will—then everything she takes for granted will be mine. All mine. She isn't grateful and deserves to lose it, all of it. I will have her husband, her kids, her house, her car, her money.

Once she realizes everything she's lost, it'll be too late. I'll be so far dug into her life, she'll never be able to get me out. People won't even believe she's who she says she is. We share the same DNA, after all. I'm her, and she's me.

I now know what I would've been like if I'd been given the family I deserved. Or maybe I'd have appreciated it, unlike her. Made better decisions. I certainly would've reached out to my twin sister after finding out about her. If she would share her wealth with anyone, it should be her own flesh and blood, the person she shared a womb with for the first part of our existence.

But she's too selfish, won't let go of a single penny. She'll find out how well that's going to work out for her when I take it all. The princess can figure out how to fend for herself like I did, having no rich parents or husband to protect her from the harsh realities of life.

I can't wait for that moment when the scales of fairness balance.

Meanwhile, I must wait. It could take me months to worm my way into her life, to convince her friends and family that I'm her. But it will all be worth it. So very worth it.

I park across the street while Angelina drops off her two youngest brats. She seriously got everything. Everything. I had two kids also, but the state took both of them away from me. Wouldn't give them back even after I cleaned up. Sure, I didn't have a place to live or a job, but I got myself off drugs. I was trying to make a life for myself. That should have counted in my favor.

Then I managed to get a seedy place and a crappy job at McDonald's as a janitor. Sure, I needed the help of a guy named Joaquin, but I did it. I had an apartment and a paycheck, plus I had a relationship and the cash he brought in.

But I didn't know he had a prison record. How is that fair that they held that against me?

Since I'm not one to be easily deterred, I kicked him out and was able to save some money for my Pinto, so at least I had a car. I even managed to get car seats for the kids. That wasn't easy—those things are expensive. You'd think if the state cared so much about kids' safety, they'd give those things away. But no. It's all about squeezing more money out of hardworking people.

Not that it mattered. Joaquin left me a present when he moved out. I didn't find the baggie before the case worker did, and so now I have a record, too.

If Joaquin had been worth the trouble, I'd have ruined his life. Not that I'd needed to. He'd been doing a good enough job of that on his own. Besides, it was in my efforts to take

him down that I started looking into my twin. When I found out about her cushy lifestyle, I forgot all about what's-his-face. And my kids are probably better off without me.

Unless I can find a way to get them after becoming Angelina London.

The caseworkers would probably give my kids to her in a heartbeat. She's a blood relative, and the state is all over that type of thing. But six kids under one roof? It's a lot to think about. Then I might have to actually keep this minivan.

Angelina steps outside of the fancy-pants preschool, and I gear myself up. Once I figure out where she's going for the morning, I can finally make my first step. Then the second step, the third, and so on. Soon I'll be on my way to living her life. The one I should've had from the beginning.

I want it so badly I can actually taste it.

Nothing is going to get in my way. Her life *will* be mine.



## Chapter Thirty

Angelina pulls into a coffee shop parking lot and hugs her best friend. They strut into the building, talking and laughing, with no idea they're being watched. If I know one thing about those two, it's that they'll spend the entire morning together.

This is perfect for me. I head for the other end of town and decide what my first move will be. My heart beats erratically with anticipation. I'm going to find somewhere she frequents and pretend to be her. The best way to ease into my new role is to practice with people who don't know her well. If I mess something up, a cashier at a store is less likely to notice than if I start with a closer friend.

I pull into a parking spot at a boutique Angelina frequents. Seriously, who goes into a *boutique* on the regular? What an exciting life.

It's too much to take. I have to hold back a yawn. Nope, can't do it. It's the biggest yawn of my life.

Am I really sure I want to take on her life in this sleepy town? I picture the house and the bank account. Yes, actually, I am. It's her turn to figure out life on her own and my turn to have it easy for a while. Time for me to have things handed to me.

I go inside and nearly cough at the overwhelming fragrance that immediately hits me. I can't tell if it's from a candle or incense, but wow. It's strong. Everything these

women buy must make their homes reek of the store. I mean, *boutique*.

A bored-looking woman with tight curls and a tighter expression welcomes me back and calls me Angelina.

I force a smile and thank her politely. Time to get into character. And it works.

The woman tells me to let her know if I need any help and adds that the shirt I was so interested in last time is still available.

Another polite thank you, then I disappear behind an overly dressed mannequin. I pretend to be interested in some plain necklaces. My pulse is faster than normal, and I need to make it chill out, stat. I'm here to find out what I can about my twin. I can't do that unless I pull myself together.

So far, I'm doing good. A woman who knows my sister by name didn't bat an eye at me. She totally believes I'm her.

I can do this. And I will. My entire future depends on it.

The woman is talking with two other customers. I'm sure if Angie were here she'd be yucking it up with those losers, but I'm not there yet. This is going to take time, and I have to ease myself into this life. It's probably going to take weeks.

Taking over someone's identity won't be easy. I don't expect it to be. But there's no way I can go back to my old life. I went to all the effort to get clean, so this should be a piece of cake—especially with me thinking so clearly these days.

If those women keep gossiping much longer, I'm going to have to come back another time to start talking with one of them. I inch toward them, pretending to be interested in the rows of ugly clothing along the way. Who wears this stuff? It's hideous.

As I near them, more of their conversation becomes clear. They're talking about some PTA thing. It sounds like they're planning some event for the high school. Given their excited tones, I'd have thought they were discussing something big, like the Super Bowl. If women like them even care about

football. They probably only pay attention if their kids are playing or cheering.

Is this entire town a yawn fest? If it is I'll get used to it, if that's what it takes to get the money and life I'm after. If I have to singlehandedly turn this town around, I'll do it. But that'll clearly have to wait until I have cash and credibility. Right now, I can't even have a conversation with the three duller-than-paint-drying women a few feet away. I don't know enough about any of them to risk saying something that will give me away as the fraud that I am.

I duck behind a tall display of sexy panties and bras—finally, something I'd actually wear in this place—and listen to them babble on about some PTA meeting. Something about a handsome new single dad in town.

Maybe these old biddies aren't as dreary as I first gave them credit for. They aren't friendship material, but they could actually be interesting after all. I'd love to hear more about the new guy.

But would Angelina?

My shoulders sag at the realization. No, she wouldn't care. As far as I can tell from all my online stalking, she still has stars in her eyes for that loaded husband of hers. Not that I can blame her. I'd be the same way if I had a sugar daddy buying me whatever I wanted.

I stay behind the overpriced underwear and listen to them drone on about everything from the new vice principal to the petition to keep Walmart out of town. It's all I can do to stay awake, but I do manage to pick up a few details that could be useful later on.

It isn't much, but it's progress. A few more eavesdropping sessions like this, and I'll be able to jump into a conversation and convince my twin's friends that I'm her.

But for the time being, I need to air out my clothes and figure out my next step.

When I return to the van, I change my clothes and stick them in a plastic bag until I can wash them. I don't want my

temporary home reeking of the boutique.

My eyelids grow heavier by the moment, so I decide to get some coffee. I have to be careful with what little funds I do have, but after listening to all that talk about high school dances and football games, I need some caffeine. Stat.

I drive around, looking for a coffee stand. Surely a dreary place like this has one on every other corner to keep people from falling asleep at the wheel. A few blocks later, I'm about to give up when a café catches my attention.

Perfect. I can sit and people-watch. The more I can learn about the locals, the better. I've already spent enough time learning about Angie to make my eyes bleed, but I'm going to need to get to know her friends to come off as genuine when putting on my performances. Plus, caffeine. I'm seriously going to die soon if I don't get any.

I hurry out of the van, fling open the coffee shop door, then freeze in horror. The door swings and hits me, but I barely register the pain.

Peter London is sipping from a white paper cup not twenty feet from me.

He smiles and waves me over.

## Chapter Thirty-One

**M**y heart feels like a jackhammer as I stand in line, waiting to order my coffee. I can feel Peter's gaze burning a hole in my back.

This is bad. Horrifically bad. He probably knows I'm not his wife. The fact that I'm not wearing the same thing she left the house in shouts the truth from the rooftops. How am I supposed to explain that? Give some lame excuse as to why I needed to change clothes? What if he knows she doesn't have this outfit? I literally know nothing about their relationship, aside from the version they share on social media—and it doesn't take a rocket scientist to know those stories are half-truths at best.

I'm going to blow my cover before I've even begun. I can't believe this. How stupid could I be? I should've been more careful. If I'd just looked inside before racing in like an idiot, I could've avoided this whole mess.

Now I'm going back to square one before I've made any progress.

Stop! I'm being ridiculous. Peter *waved* at me. He didn't give any indication of thinking I'm a fraud.

I've got this. I'm smart and savvy. I have more charisma in my pinky than most people in this town have in their whole bodies.

By the time I get to the front of the line, I'm standing tall and offer the cashier a genuine smile when I order my latte

with extra flavored syrup and whipped cream. I don't usually order fancy coffee, but when I do, I go all out.

"Nice." She gives me an approving look. "Stepping out of your norm. Do you want anything else?"

Before I can answer, someone wraps his arms around me and kisses my neck.

It takes every ounce of self-control not to spin around and punch him in the teeth. And it's a good thing I didn't, because it's Peter with his paws all over me. I recover quickly and smile sweetly at him.

He hands the cashier a credit card and asks about her mother.

"She's finally out of the hospital." She lets out a long sigh. "I was beginning to think they would never release her."

"That's worth celebrating." Peter sounds genuine. "Double the normal tip."

"Really? Thank you."

"My pleasure." He taps on the keypad and then holds the credit card out to me.

I stare at it in disbelief.

"Take it. It came in the mail the other day, and I forgot to give it to you after I activated it."

The man is giving me a credit card? This is too good to be true. I'm already reaping the benefits of looking just like Angelina London.

I put the card in my purse and hope he doesn't notice that it's a cheap knockoff brand. Then I thank him. Hopefully that's something his wife would do. I don't know how courteous they are together. I don't know *anything* about how they interact.

I'm in over my head. If he wants to sit with me, he'll figure out the ruse and send me away after taking back the bank card. I'll have to give him an excuse as to why I have to

leave right away. That's the only chance I have to make this work.

"Come sit with me." He rubs my shoulders, and it feels amazing.

"Okay," my mouth says without my permission.

"Great." He leads me to his table and holds a chair for me.

Is this dude for real? Guys don't really do these things in real life. Do they? One thing is for sure, if Peter is always like this, I'm going to do everything I can to make sure I replace his wife. She's outta here. It's my turn at the good life.

He leans back in his chair and takes me in. "There's something different about you."

Crap. I knew this was too good to be true. I've already blown my cover.

"You seem happier." Peter sips from his cup. "I'm glad to see you're not shying away from whipped cream this time. Like I always tell you, you should enjoy life a little more."

I'm glad I'm sitting, because I'm pretty sure my knees just turned to rubber. He notices that I'm different, but he doesn't suspect anything. I force a smile. "It's about time I took your advice, and I'm glad I did."

"Me too. Happiness looks good on you."

"I'm glad you like it." I take a gulp of my latte.

He squeezes my upper thigh.

I choke on the drink. It sprays onto the table, barely missing his laptop case. I'd apologize—that's the polite thing to do, right?—but I can't stop coughing. The hot liquid is still in the wrong pipe, and I can't get it out. My eyes water, and I sound like a sick seal.

People are staring.

This is getting off to a fantastic start.

Peter whacks my back. You'd think someone with a "Dr." before his name would know that doesn't actually do anything.

Even I know that, and I dropped out of high school and spent most of last year in rehab.

Finally, I clear the tube and breathe normally again. A few people are still glancing my way, but most people have stopped.

“Are you okay?” Peter looks at me with genuine concern in his eyes. Nobody’s ever looked at me like that before. Except he thinks he’s looking at Angelina, not me.

“Yeah, fine. I don’t know what happened.” I pick up my drink and take a small sip, ready for anything now.

But he doesn’t touch me. He’s probably going to ask for the credit card back.

He ends the long stretch of silence by patting my hand and saying, “Why don’t you go buy yourself something nice? You deserve it.”

“I do? I mean, thanks.”

“Of course you do. You do so much for all of us.” He brushes his lips across mine. “I have to get to the hospital. Are you going to be all right?”

“I’m fine, seriously.”

He gives me a look like he’s not sure whether to believe me, but he squeezes my shoulder as he gets up then grabs his laptop bag. “I’m glad we accidentally ran into each other. We don’t get much time alone these days.”

“Maybe we could accidentally run into each other at lunch sometime?” There goes my mouth again, but this time I’m glad it’s one step ahead of me.

A slow smile spreads across Peter’s face. “I’d love that. I won’t have time today, but what about tomorrow around noon? At that steak place next to the hospital?”

“It’s a date.”

“Wear something new.”

“You’d better believe I will.” And it won’t be from that ridiculous boutique, either.



He gives me a lingering look before heading out the door.

I release a breath I totally knew I was holding.

Maybe I can actually pull off this charade. One thing is for sure.

I'm going on a shopping spree.

## Chapter Thirty-Two

I tug on the silk dress as I sit at the table overlooking a view of a lake. Several boats are out, but there are no swimmers as it's getting too chilly for that now.

My foot taps on its own. Peter isn't here yet, but they seated me immediately because he'd already reserved this table for us. There are so many things that could go wrong. If he mentioned this date to Angelina, she could be headed here. Best case, Peter simply doesn't show up after figuring out he was taken for a ride. Worst case, they have me arrested for theft and fraud. But to be fair, he *did* give me the card and tell me to buy myself something nice.

I glance down at the short, snug dress clinging to my every curve. There's no way I could've afforded this thing on my own. The only other way I could've gotten it without Peter's credit card would have been if I'd stolen it. And this isn't the only thing I got myself. I also picked out some fun new tops and a couple boring ones that I'll need to wear while pretending to be my yawn fest of a sister to win over her equally dull friends.

When Peter arrives, he takes my breath away. This time, he has a dress coat over his white shirt and tie. Instead of being clean shaven, he has a day-old beard and it's *hot*. I don't know how Angelina keeps her hands off him. Maybe she doesn't.

He slides into his seat next to me and squeezes my thigh—this time I'm ready for it. No choking today. "Sorry I'm late. I needed to take care of an emergency before leaving."

I give his leg a squeeze. “No problem. How could I complain about you saving a life? Lunch can wait.”

Peter kisses my cheek. “Have you ordered already?”

“No, I wanted to wait for you.”

“You know you didn’t have to.”

“Like I said, I *wanted* to.”

The server, whose name tag reads Mandy, arrives and greets us both by name. She asks if we want our usual meals but keeps her attention on Peter the entire time she is speaking. Not that I blame her, but I bet it would annoy the living daylights out of Angelina. That makes a smile tug on my mouth.

Peter says he’ll take his normal meal but with a side of roasted potatoes instead of mashed, and Mandy starts to walk away.

I clear my throat loudly. “I’d like to try something different this time.”

She turns and glances my way, her lip curling up as if annoyed but trying to hide it. “Of course. What would you like?”

My pulse races as I give the menu a quick once over. If I accidentally order Angie’s usual, I’m toast. No matter what I ask for is a risk, but I bet she wouldn’t pick the most expensive item they offer. I can’t pronounce it, so I point to it. “I’d like to try this.”

Mandy makes note of it. “You really are stepping out of your comfort zone, aren’t you?”

“I’ve been feeling risky lately. What can I say?” I turn to Peter and wink.

He winks back and rests his hand on my bare knee.

This is definitely going well.

Peter starts to say something, but a young guy brings over a bowl of bread and sets little bowls of what looks like oil next

to it. This isn't like the places I'm used to eating at. The fanciest appetizers I'm used to are stale chips and salsa.

I wait to eat until Peter takes a piece of bread and swirls it around in the oily substance. Then I copy his actions.

It practically melts in my mouth. My tastebuds sing in joy, and this is just bread and oil.

He lifts a brow. "Now you're trying the vinegar and oil, too? Who are you, and what have you done with my wife?"

My stomach crashes to the floor.

Peter laughs. "Actually, I love that you're trying so many new things lately. What brought that on?"

It takes me a moment to recover. He didn't just figure out that I'm a fraud. "Sometimes routines get boring, and I want to see what the world has to offer." Although Angie will be doing all the normal things at home, and I can't have him thinking that she's doing everything differently. "But sometimes routines are comforting, too."

He nods, looking deep in thought. "I don't know if you noticed, but you inspired me to order a different side dish."

"Roasted potatoes instead of mashed. Living on the edge."

"That might be taking it a bit far." He chuckles.

Mandy returns and pours us some dark red wine. I'm surprised Peter's willing to have any, given his job, but maybe he's one of those people who has to drink a lot before it affects him. I'm not one of those people, and given I can't afford much of anything, I've always appreciated that about myself.

The wine is even better than the bread and oil. I have to restrain myself from hoovering all of it. The main dishes haven't arrived yet, and for all I know, more comes before that.

Peter tells me about his morning, but most of it goes over my head with medical terms and names of doctors I've never heard of. But I nod because I'm sure Angelina probably could follow along easily.

By the time we're done eating, I'm stuffed. I can't remember the last time I ate this much in one sitting. Maybe never. Growing up, I was always scrounging for food in an empty fridge. My adult life hasn't been much better, having spent so many years taking after Mom and wasting most of my money on the next hit. I had a few boyfriends who tried to take care of me, but it never worked—not until I was ready on my own.

Now I'm eager for so much more, and this extravagant meal is just the beginning.

Peter places his fabric napkin on his plate. "Do you have room for dessert?"

I don't think I have room for another crumb, but that doesn't stop me from agreeing to a sweet treat. The delectable truffle pushes me over the edge. I'm pretty sure I'm going to vomit everything up. I shouldn't have gorged the way I did, but I couldn't help myself. At least I won't have to eat for the rest of the day. Maybe not tomorrow, either.

The good news is, I'm starting to feel more at ease around Peter. I love the lingering touches and looks he's been giving me. I'm winning him over, and he trusts me. Doesn't doubt I'm his wife.

Now we're ready for the next phase of my plan, which I'll usher in at our next date.

## Chapter Thirty-Three

Over the last week, I've gotten used to answering to Angelina's name. I've had a lot of practice since I've been talking with more people and learning more about the woman whose life I'm going to step into. Surprisingly, this boring town is starting to grow on me. People are friendly without having an angle. They aren't looking for ways to use me, or at least not in the manner I'm accustomed to. It seems like those snooty PTA ladies are up to something, but I'll let the real Angelina deal with them for the time being.

The only thing I don't like about this place is living in the van. Don't get me wrong, it's a lot nicer than the crappy apartment I was in before, but a person needs a bathroom. I had to get creative with my showering until I figured out the Londons have a membership at a country club—I thought those only existed on TV, but they're real. And they have locker rooms much nicer than any bathroom I've ever used. The best part is, I don't even need Angelina's membership card. Workers see my face and welcome me in.

I've been tempted to eat at the club's restaurant, but I'm being careful with my purchases on the credit card. One wrong move, and I'm caught. I can't lose my twin's life. It would be like losing my own at this point.

It's been over a week since my date with Peter at the steakhouse, and I've only had short encounters with him since then. Just a few quick lunches, mostly in little delis, and I certainly haven't had time to kick Phase Two into gear yet. It's frustrating, but I know my patience will pay off eventually.

Angelina's had him largely to herself. But that's fine. It's given me the chance to get to know other people around town. I've only met a couple people who seemed to doubt me, but I quickly convinced them. It's enough to keep me from getting too comfortable. I can't let my guard down for a moment.

Having Angelina's face does have its benefits. Since nobody knows she has an identical twin, it's easy pretending to be her. People are all too eager to believe it. Questioning it means questioning their senses.

Now I'm waiting for Peter at another restaurant. This time, I'm going to use self-restraint and not stuff myself silly. I could barely move for the rest of the day after our lunch at the steakhouse. Today I need to be on the top of my game.

Phase Two starts as soon as Peter arrives.

And there he is. He has the day-old beard again.

My breath hitches, and I imagine running my palms over his face.

Stop!

One thing at a time. Must take this slowly. Can't get ahead of myself. Not when so much is on the line.

He doesn't smile when he sits.

My muscles tighten. Is he onto me? Did he tell Angelina about me, and they figured out the truth? If he's going to confront me, he's sure to have her around somewhere. They'll both want in on it.

I look around for my sister. Can't see anyone.

"Is everything okay?" I give him a careful smile.

Peter rubs his temples. "It was a rough morning. We almost lost a patient. The anesthesia started to wear off in the middle of the surgery." He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. "It was touch and go, and the surgeon and I kept getting in each other's way as we both worked to save the patient's life."

"But he's okay?"

“She. Yes, barely.”

He doesn't suspect me of anything. I rest my hand on top of his. “It sounds like you're the hero of the day.”

Peter opens his eyes, and this time I notice the red lines in his whites. “She's in critical care, but the prognosis is good, considering. Not out of the woods, not even close.”

This is the perfect opening for me to usher in Phase Two.

I squeeze his hand. “What can I do to help you relax?”

He stares out the window. “Hopefully food will help.”

When the server arrives, he orders for both of us. Given how stressed he is, I let it go. But not before ordering some wine. The man needs it, and I need him relaxed.

Peter sips on the cabernet without saying much.

I pick at my food, doubting myself. It might be better to move on from this phase when he's not out of it. I can't risk anything going wrong, and I'm not sure how Peter will respond to anything in this state of mind.

After he asks for the check, I rest my hand on his knee. “How much longer do you have before going back to work?”

He rubs his eyes. “I'm off for the day. I went in super early today, remember?”

“Right. How could I have forgotten?”

“It's easy to do, given how often my schedule changes on a dime.”

This is the perfect opportunity for me now that he doesn't have to be back to his job. “I have an idea.” It takes all of my self-control to keep the giddiness out of my tone.

Peter turns to me. “What's that?”

I scoot closer to him. “Let's get a hotel room. I can give you a massage to help you relax. We can order room service and take advantage of whatever else they offer.”

His expression brightens. “That sounds nice.”



“Of course it does. Let me take care of you after the day you’ve had.”

“That’s really thoughtful of you. Wait. What about the kids?”

“Taken care of. Don’t worry about them.”

“Really?”

“Yes.” I lean over and press a kiss on his lips. My heart nearly explodes out of my chest. I’m sure he can hear it pounding.

He smiles, and I can feel him relax. After he pays the bill, we go to his Mercedes and he pulls into the parking garage of the fanciest hotel I’ve ever laid eyes on.

This is really happening.

## Chapter Thirty-Four

The inside of the hotel room is like a castle. I'm almost afraid to touch anything. It seems too perfect—like everything else. Peter seems to have relaxed since we got here. He's in the bathroom. Said he'd feel better if he could wash his face.

I step onto the balcony, which provides a breathtaking view of a lake. The steakhouse from our first date is on the other side. I can almost make out the very table where we sat.

Footsteps sound behind me.

I turn around to see Peter. He's removed his jacket and tie and has unbuttoned the top two buttons on his shirt.

This is playing out just as I'd imagined. I give him my best smile and gesture toward the bed. "Lie down. I'll give you that massage I was talking about."

"Can't turn down an offer like that." He removes his shirt, climbs onto the bed, and lays flat on his stomach.

It takes me a moment to accept that all of this is real. I'd thought a week of living away from everything I've always known would be long enough, but apparently not. It must take longer than that to wipe out a lifetime of unwanted memories.

Peter mumbles something, but I can't make it out since his face is pressed against the bed coverings. No doubt he's eager for what I promised him. And maybe more, if I'm reading his signals right.

I climb onto the bed next to him then dig my fingers into his shoulders. He's muscular. And tight. I hardly have any experience as a masseuse, but it isn't exactly rocket science. I dig deeper where he's holding tension and let up where he isn't.

His moans of appreciation let me know I'm on the right track. This is surprisingly relaxing for me, too. I'm glad I didn't overeat today. There's no way I could have pulled this off after gorging at the steakhouse.

Somehow a full hour passes before I realize it.

Peter rolls over and releases a long breath. "That was amazing."

"Glad I could help."

"Want me to return the favor?"

"You don't have to ask twice." I flop on the bed.

His hands are like magic. I don't know how I've managed to live my entire life without this. If I'd had it, I wouldn't have felt the need to turn to drugs. But there's no need to regret the past.

Not when my future is so bright. I can't wait for the day I send Angelina packing. When our roles will finally be reversed, and she can experience what I've had to suffer through my whole life. She thinks she deserves all of this, but she doesn't. Especially not at my expense.

But things will be set right. Sooner rather than later at this rate.

Peter stops my treatment almost as soon as he started. Apparently he doesn't have the stamina I do. No worries. I can train him. Guys actually aren't any different from dogs in that way. Or in any other way, really. They're equally easy to mold into what you want. Just less hairy. Let them think they're in charge then the rest is easy-peasy lemon-squeezy.

I roll over and check the time. Another hour passed? That flew even faster than the massage I gave him.

“How was that?” He gives me a crooked smile. Just when I thought he couldn’t be any hotter, he proves me wrong again.

“Amazing.”

“Good. That’s what I like to hear. I—”

I bolt upright, grab his shirt by the collar, and force my lips on his. He still tastes of the wine we drank at the restaurant. I fumble with his top button.

*Beep, beep, beep!*

I ignore the sound. The building could be on fire for all I care. Nothing is getting in my way now.

Peter pulls away.

“What’s wrong?” I try to keep my disappointment from showing. Then I grab his shirt again, not about to give him a chance to answer the question.

He practically shoves me away. “That’s my phone.”

“Ignore it.”

“I can’t.”

“Sure you can. Put it on silent.”

“I’m on call.”

Anesthesiologists can be on call?

He leaps up from the bed and strides across the massive room. Looks at his phone. “Unfortunately, it’s the hospital. I have to go.”

“But you said you didn’t have to go back in today.”

“Now I do.”

“Right away?” I hate the whine in my voice, but I imagine Angelina uses that tone a lot given how spoiled she is, so I go with it.

“You know how it is when I’m on call.” He spins around and fixes his shirt and hair in the large vanity mirror.

No, I don’t know how it is when he’s on call, but that’s beside the point. I have to pretend to, as apparently Angelina’s

used to this insanity.

What a time for an interruption.

He turns around and looks at me. “You know I’d stay if I could.”

“Yeah, I do.” Hopefully I sound more convincing than I feel.

“We’ll finish this tonight.” He gives me peck on the cheek then leaves the room before I have a chance to respond.

Great. Now he’s excited to get home to his wife.

One day soon, that’ll be me.

In the meantime, I have this hotel to stay in. It’s a million times better than the van, so there’s that. And I can probably stay as long as I want, given he already put his credit card on the room and the key is sitting on the table next to my purse. By the time he figures out what’s going on, I’ll have already replaced my twin sister in his house.

While this date clearly didn’t go as planned, it worked to my advantage. Now I won’t have to shower in the country club. This luxurious room is bigger than my last apartment.

I’m already living the good life.

But I’m also bored. I could turn on the TV, but I’d rather explore the building and see what else it has to offer. I’ve heard places like this have spas, gambling, movie theaters, and more. And I still have Peter’s credit card.

I slip into my shoes then step into the hallway with my head held high. Who knows what fun activities I’ll find around here?

As I round the corner, I slow. The tiny hairs on the back of my neck are standing on end, and my skin is crawling. It feels like someone is watching me. This is something I’d expect in a dark alley near Mom’s double-wide, not here in this brightly lit hall. I look around, but I’m alone.

Is there somewhere for a person to hide? There are statues and large potted plants. Not ideal, but also not out of the

question.

I march back in the direction I came. I stop at a potted plant just past my room. It stands where two halls meet. The leaves are shaking. Someone must have bumped it.

Somebody was just here. They had to have darted down the adjoining hall.

They're out of sight now, but I still feel their eyes on me.

## Chapter Thirty-Five

This last week has been equal parts frustrating and amusing. I've been having fun messing with Angelina. I swear those biddies at the glorified daycare center are going to kick her out. They fully believe I'm her and think she's either losing her mind or messing with them. This has been the best part of my vacation—I mean, mission. Since I'm still staying at the hotel, it feels more like a getaway than ever before. I'm already living my dream, and I haven't even taken over my sister's life yet.

But on the other hand, I haven't spent much time with Peter. I've managed a little time with him most every day. The man loves his routines. Coffee before going into the hospital, for instance. I don't know what he'd do if he couldn't have that luxury, so meeting up with him has become our thing for the most part. Sometimes his schedule changes due to being on call. It's no wonder they pay doctors so much. What an annoying thing to have to put up with.

That hasn't been the only less than ideal thing I've had to face. I've been trying to ignore the fact that I feel like I'm being watched. It doesn't happen just in the hotel, but around town, too. Not a day goes by when those tiny hairs don't stand on end. But I can never spot who's following me.

I'd think it was my guilty conscience, but I have zero regrets about what I'm doing.

Angelina's been in her house an unusually long time. If she doesn't leave soon, she's going to risk being late to pick up her kids. That gives me the perfect opportunity to try and pick

them up again. I think I could even talk that mousy girl behind the register into letting them go without the password. I very nearly did yesterday morning, but she called Angelina. She felt like an idiot about it. It was written all over her face.

But then my sister told her not to let the kids go. It was kind of fun to watch the whole ordeal, especially after I returned to the van and watched Angie peel into the parking lot and dash into the school like a madwoman. She left equally frustrated.

I was tempted to go back inside just to mess with everyone some more, but in the end decided not to risk it. If I send the daycare workers over the edge, they could call the cops. I'd totally pretend to be my sister, but that would also blow my cover.

I need to forget the school and come up with a bigger plan. Something to send my twin running from her life, never to look back again. I have to convince her she's completely lost her mind so that she'll either leave or check herself into a facility. By the time she returns, if ever, I'll have taken over her life and will be able to convince everyone else she's the fake.

It's perfect, but I need details. I can't run in screaming without preparing. Angelina already knows something is going down, but she doesn't know about me. She's never once tried to connect through that genetic site. At first, when I was naïve, I eagerly awaited her request. But days turned into weeks then months, and it became clear she wanted nothing to do with me.

Anger roils in my gut at the thought. She had to have found out that I come from trash, so she never contacted me. Her own sister. How could she think she is better than me, when our circumstances were nothing more than chance? It could've easily been me given to her parents and her given to my loser mother. Some random person at the adoption agency made the choice.

Lucky for Angelina. Until now. I'm going to take her down, and I'm done playing the waiting game. If it wasn't the middle of the afternoon in a neighborhood sure to have



doorbell cameras at every house, I'd jump her the moment she stepped out of the house.

Imagine how nice that would be. I'd be done with it and could step right into her life. The only problem would be what to do with the body. It isn't like I haven't faced that dilemma before. They aren't *that* hard to hide. If they were, there wouldn't be so many podcasts and shows dedicated to finding missing people. Bodies disappear never to be seen again all the time. Every day.

I should know.

My heart races at the thought of not just making Angelina think she's crazy and sending her to the loony bin, but actually getting rid of her for good. The evil twin who thinks she's better because she won the baby lottery all those years ago.

Bye, bye, Angie. It's been fun.

Finally, the front door opens.

I lower myself, not that she has ever once looked toward my van. And she doesn't this time, either. She locks up, hurries to her Escalade, then leaves.

After a few minutes, I drive away. When I find a block within walking distance with homes unlikely to have doorbell cams, I park. Fences block off back yards, and trees offer privacy to the residents.

And to me as I walk along.

I hurry toward the London house, careful to walk like Angelina. I've got the whole thing down perfectly at this point—every move I make is all her. Prissy, stuck-up, and pampered. It's hardly difficult. I just have to act like I think I'm better than everyone else.

Once I get to the house, I punch in the code for the garage door. Would you believe that Peter stores all of that stuff in his wallet? For someone so smart and successful, he sure is an idiot. But soon he'll be *my* wealthy idiot.

Nothing happens.

I type it in again.

The garage door doesn't budge.

Something's wrong.

I know I got the numbers right. This is how I got in the other times.

The keypad blinks rapidly.

My mouth dries. I look around. Several cameras are probably recording every moment of this.

Taking a deep breath, I punch in the code.

An alarm wails.

I run.

## Chapter Thirty-Six

**M**y breathing is still erratic, and I can't stop shaking. The house alarm sounded nearly an hour ago, and I'm still flustered. They must be on to me. There's no other reason for them to change the code. Maybe I went too far with something. Wore that ugly tank top one too many times? Said something to Peter that clued him into the fact that I'm not his annoying wife? Maybe it was too much change. She's such a stick in the mud, she might have more rigid routines than he does.

Or maybe the new code has nothing to do with me. They might change it regularly just because. Could be why Peter keeps a record in his wallet. How would I know how often rich people change their expensive alarm codes? People in the mobile home park definitely don't have cameras and security systems. At least, not in the one I've always lived in. Not one person has that kind of luxury, and even if they did, all the people involved in criminal activity would pressure them into getting rid of it. That's the kind of neighborhood I know. The Dr. Peter Londons of the world are a mystery to me.

After parking on the street near the hotel—I don't want the van on camera there, either—I close my eyes and try to calm down. If anyone finds me running on their video footage, they'll think I'm Angelina. They won't know to come after me. If anything, it'll give Angie another reason to question her sanity.

This is actually a good thing. Sure, I can't get into their house anymore, but it can work out for the best. My twin is

already teetering, questioning her mind. This might work in my favor.

My pulse slows and almost reaches normal. Now I can head inside, walking with square shoulders and a confident gait. Everything is good. Better than good. And I'll be able to get back into the Londons' house easily enough. Just need to get my hands on Peter's wallet again. Easy-peasy lemon-squeezy.

I take a few deep breaths and try to get into the Angelina mindset. Once I'm feeling like a snooty housewife, I fling open the van door then waltz into the hotel lobby, smiling at the doorman and other employees I meet along the way. I can't even feel anyone watching me as I make my way to the room.

All I need to do is order some food, get a nap, and maybe have another bubble bath in the jet tub. Then I'll be ready to mark out my plan. I already know the first step is meeting Peter for coffee in the morning so I can get my hands on his wallet. I need the garage code so I can jump Angelina in the house. Anywhere else is too dangerous. Someone could see me.

If I can't get the wallet without him noticing, I might need to come up with a backup plan. I'm not sure what that would involve. It'll be far riskier. That much is certain. But it isn't anything I can't handle. I'm up for any challenge those two throw my way.

I unlock the room and pause. Now it's unsettling that I *can't* sense anyone watching me. After setting off the alarm, I should be on someone's radar. Maybe I got away with it. By all accounts, it was Angelina running away from her own house. The woman who has been slowly unraveling for the last couple of weeks.

Inside, I kick off my shoes. My feet ache from running, and I can't wait to climb into the tub.

Someone is sitting on the middle of the bed.

Peter.

My heart leaps into my throat and I let out a scream. Release a long string of profanities, half of which the goody-two-shoes in front of me probably has never heard before.

“Surprised to see me?” He cocks an eyebrow.

I cover my heart with both hands and struggle to find my voice.

“Didn’t think I knew about you staying here and ordering all your meals, did you?”

Does he think I’m Angelina? Or has he figured out who I really am?

“Cat got your tongue, Jane?” He smirks, with an evil glint in his eyes that I never guessed him capable of. Maybe I underestimated the anesthesiologist.

“How did you know?”

He straightens his back. “I watch my credit cards daily. You wouldn’t believe the things my wife buys behind my back. But *you* take the cake.”

I clear my throat. “I mean, how did you know my name?”

“I always know what’s going on around me. It took me almost no time at all to figure you out. I knew something was up the first time we met. Although, I have to admit, it took me a little while to figure out what was going on.”

“How?” I inch backward toward the door.

Peter shakes his head. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you. Sit at the table.”

I hesitate.

He whips out a gun from behind him.

“What the—”

“Sit!” He waves the weapon toward the table.

I do as he says. At least I’m still closer to the door than he is.

Not that I can outrun a bullet.

But I can dodge one. I've done it before, and I'll do it again.

## Chapter Thirty-Seven

Peter keeps the gun's barrel aimed at my face. He hasn't said anything for what feels like hours, though it's probably been less than a minute. Time moves slower when your life is on the line.

I keep my palms out toward him, and my mind races to think of something I can say to diffuse the situation. Either I need to get out of the room, or I need to get that weapon from him. I'd prefer the latter but will take the former. Just need to get control over him.

He swings the gun back and forth, beads of sweat forming around his hairline. His nostrils flare as his face reddens.

I need to figure out something to say to calm him down, but given everything I've done over the past weeks, that's unlikely. He's undoubtedly pissed about the bill I've raked up by staying here and ordering so much room service. But that's nothing compared to what I've put his wife through. That's where I need to start.

"I'm sorry for tricking Angelina. She—"

"You think I care about that?" He nudges the gun closer to me.

"You don't?"

Peter scoots closer to the side of the bed nearest to me, keeping the weapon pointed at my head. "You've gotten in the way of *everything*. And you don't even have any idea the damage you've caused!"

“What do you mean?”

“Exactly!”

He’s making no sense, but I have to go with it. “What can I do?”

“You can go back to where you came from and leave us alone!”

“Um, actually I can’t.”

“You have to!” He waves the gun around wildly. It’s obvious he isn’t comfortable here. Threatening people isn’t his usual MO.

I can use that to my advantage. “Can you tell me what’s going on? I’m a little confused.”

“About what? You’ve got my wife wound tighter than a spool of thread! I had everything under control until you came along.”

“You had her under control?”

“My plot!”

I blink a few times. “I don’t follow.”

Peter rakes his fingers through his hair. “I’m going to kill Angelina. She—”

“What?” This doesn’t make any sense. “Why would you act so sweet toward me when you thought I was her?”

“It was easy. I’ve been faking a renewed interest in her, so extending that to you was just as easy. You’re both easy to play.”

I ignore the insult because he has a gun in my face.

He leaps to the floor and starts pacing. At least the weapon is finally pointing away from me. For now.

“Why do you want to kill Angelina?”

Peter turns to me. Doesn’t speak, doesn’t blink. Pinches the bridge of his nose before turning his attention back to me. “She cheated on me.”



“And you think she deserves to *die* for that?”

“It was with my own brother!”

“Maybe you should kill him instead. Siblings are supposed to be there for you. Spouses? Not so much.”

His eyebrows furrow, and he aims the gun at me again.

Clearly that was the wrong thing to say.

I take a deep breath. “Look, we both want Angelina out of the picture. Why don’t we work together?”

“You’re no more trustworthy than her!”

“But you and I both want the same thing.”

He shakes his head as he steps closer to me, keeping the barrel in my direction.

“Think about it.” I hold my hands up again. “If we kill her, I could step into her life. Nobody would even realize she was gone. The police would never put you on a suspect list—and face the facts. You’d be at the top of their list as the husband. The fact that she cheated would make you even more so.”

He narrows his eyes. “What do you get out of the deal?”

“The life I’ve always wanted. The one I deserve. How is it fair that Angelina got to have such a good life when I was given such a crappy one? As her twin, I deserve everything she has. And I can easily step in as your wife and your children’s mother. Nobody would notice! You’re the only one who figured anything out, and that makes sense. You know her better than anyone.”

“You messed up, making me realize you weren’t her. Who’s to say you wouldn’t do the same later with her friends? She’s known Megan longer than me. Those two know each other inside and out. You would never be able to pull the wool over her eyes.”

“No?”

“Trust me.”

“I had a lovely conversation with Megan just yesterday. She didn’t suspect a thing.”

He jolts. “You’re lying.”

I am, but I’m not going to admit that to him. “We had a nice long talk at that coffee shop. I just followed her lead, and she bought everything I said.”

Peter tilts his head, studying me.

“Think about it,” I say slowly. “Nobody could suspect you of killing her if she’s still walking around, living her life. It’s the perfect solution. And you’d still have someone to take care of the house and kids.”

“You think I could stand looking at you every day?” Spittle flies from his mouth. “You have her face! The face of the woman who betrayed me. I can’t do it. I won’t.”

“I could live in a different part of the house. We could work our schedules so we never have to run into each other.”

“You don’t think the kids would notice that?”

“I’m sure we would be able to come up with a believable story between now and then.”

He shakes his head vehemently. “Just looking at you now makes me want to take your life because of what she did. Killing her would be pointless if I still had to see her face every day in my own house. It isn’t happening. You need to leave town. Now.”

This man really is a tough nut to crack. But there has to be something he will agree to. Something that will benefit both of us, an idea that will allow me to walk out of this room alive.

Then it hits me. The perfect ploy to get rid of my sister that will benefit both Peter and me.

He won’t be able to say no.

## Chapter Thirty-Eight

**H**e shoves the gun against my temple and grabs my chin. “You really expect me to agree to that insane plan? I’m not splitting the life insurance money with you!”

“It benefits *both* of us.”

“How?” he sneers. “I could off Angelina on my own *and* keep the insurance money. With your suggestion, you run off and I don’t get anything!”

I shove the barrel away from my head, jump to my feet, and stare him down. “Have you ever gotten rid of a body before? Hidden it so well it could never be found, or destroyed one so badly it could never hold any evidence of who did the killing?”

His only response is to glare at me.

“Have you?” I demand.

“No, but it can’t be that hard.”

I snort. “Tell me, how are you going to remove the evidence? It won’t take long for someone to realize she’s missing and report it to the cops. Then they’re going to be all over *you*, your house, and your car. Your wife will be missing, and you’re the only one with motive and means.”

Peter’s arms fall to his sides. “You’ve really thought about this, haven’t you?”

“You think I’d come to town without having done my homework?”

He sneers at me. “You seemed pretty shocked about her affair.”

“That has nothing to do with why I came.”

“If you’re trying to step into her life, I think that’d be a pretty important piece.”

I stare at him, keeping watch on the gun at his side in the periphery of my vision. He seems to have forgotten about it for the time being. I intend to keep it that way. “Look, if the affair is even still going on, it wouldn’t change my plans. If I were to step into her life, *I* wouldn’t cheat on you. It’s a moot point.”

“Until my brother comes calling.”

“I’d end it. Not a problem.”

“You don’t know my brother.”

“Clearly, but I could handle him. Not that it matters since our new cooperative plan wouldn’t involve me staying with you.”

Peter’s only response is to glower at me.

“Are you game?”

He sits on the chair where he held me at gunpoint only minutes ago. “You’ve really gotten rid of a body before?”

I nod.

“And nobody ever found it?”

“Not even close.”

He wipes sweat from his forehead. “How?”

“You think I’m going to tell you when you’ve made it clear you don’t want to work with me? You’d rather walk away with her insurance money.”

“Can you blame me?” His eyes are wild. “With my plan, I walk away with hundreds of thousands. Your plan leaves me with a divorce settlement. I *lose* money instead of gaining it.”

“How much would it cost you to hire a hit man?” I counter. “Or prison. That’s even more expensive than a divorce. You

lose your freedom. What happens to your kids? Your house? Your precious money? And you'd get more in the long run with her gone and not spending your hard-earned money."

Peter looks at the ground and tugs on his hair before making eye contact with me again. "Who did you kill?"

"Nobody worth mentioning."

"If you want me to consider your plan, you'd better start talking. I'd just as soon kill you both to get Angelina's life insurance money."

"You hardly seem the type to kill one person, much less two."

His eyes narrow. "Then you underestimate me."

I shrug. "Maybe. Which one do you want to know about?"

He gives me a double-take. "You've killed more than once?"

"I grew up in a very different environment than Angelina. For twins, we sure got polar opposite families."

"Her life wasn't so perfect, but you'd know that if you'd done as much homework on her as you make it sound like."

"Trust me, her problems and mine aren't even on the same playing field. In her case, maybe Daddy didn't love her enough, but I had to deal with my mom's boyfriends, who loved me too much. From a young age, I needed to do a lot of terrible things just to survive—and I have made men pay for traumatizing me. You don't want to underestimate *me*."

"Those are the people you killed? The ones who hurt you?"

"They did a lot more than just hurt me."

"I'm sorry. Nobody deserves that." He seems genuine.

Not that it matters. I straighten my back. "The only thing I care about is settling the score. It isn't fair that my twin got a much better life than me. I want what I deserve, what should've been mine to begin with, and I need to know if

we're working together or against each other in regard to your cheating wife."

His glance darts around the room, and he rubs the side of the gun. "You really know what you're doing? If we do this, nobody will ever find the body?"

"I guarantee it."

"And you'll walk away from me and the kids? You won't try to get more from me?"

"Give me enough to start a new life, and you'll never hear from me again. Think of it as a payment to get rid of your problem. I promise I'm a helluva lot cheaper than a hit man. Go ahead and look into it. I'll wait. I have nowhere else to go." I sprawl out across the bed, letting him know I'll continue to stay here on his dime as long as I need to.

"What exactly do you want? We need to talk details now, not later."

I sit upright. "Are we going to work together?"

"It looks like we need each other to get what we both want."

"Are you sure you want her dead?" I stare him down. "Once we agree to work together, there's no turning back. I don't want you deciding down the road that you can't do this because she's the mother of your children or some other BS like that. That isn't going to fly. As soon as we're in, we're in. I want to make Angelina pay for everything I've been through, and nobody is getting in the way of that."

He doesn't respond.

My heart skips a beat. If he's having second thoughts, I'm not in an ideal situation. The man has a gun, and he's closer to the door than me. But it's clear he isn't as familiar with the weapon as other people I've dealt with. I can get away if things go south, though it might get a little messy.

Peter looks me directly in the eyes. "I'm in. Let's figure this out now. The sooner we get this over with, the better."

Relief floods me, and I can't help grinning like a fool.  
"Perfect! Let's start with logistics."

He nods, an eagerness in his expression.

We're actually going to do this. This is better than I'd hoped for when I came to town.

Angelina's own husband is going to help me accomplish this. And when we're done, I'm never going to have to worry about money again.

# Part Three



# Chapter Thirty-Nine

## *Angelina*

**M**y heart rate hasn't returned to normal since finding out about my twin sister. The alert was months ago, so she's known about me that long. And for some reason, she has it in for me.

Why wouldn't she just reach out to me? Why go to all the trouble of trying to ruin my life?

Although I have to admit this sister news does bring some relief—I'm not going crazy, and having a twin explains how a doppelgänger could be the same height as me and sound just like me. We probably even have similar mannerisms.

"Are we getting out?" Owen's voice in the back seat brings me back to the present.

"Yeah," Sophie agrees. "I'm bored."

"We're just waiting for Uncle David to get home."

"Can't we go inside?" Owen asks.

"I don't have a key."

"How much longer?" Sophie kicks the back of my seat.

I ignore the annoyance. "I'm sure it'll be any minute."

"Can we go to Nana and Papa's instead?" Owen asks. "Then you can come get us later."

The last people I'm going to leave my children with are my parents. Not only is my dad dangerous, but they've been lying to me my whole life. Mom thought she hardly saw the kids before? Now she's going to see them even less. I'm not sure I ever want to go back there again.

My phone rings.

Speak of the devil. I decline her call.

"Is that Uncle David?" Owen asks.

“No.”

“Can we at least play in the backyard?” Sophie’s tone holds a whine.

I’m about to agree just to stop their complaints when David’s red pickup truck pulls into the driveway next to us.

The kids both cheer and clamber out of their car seats.

Some of my tension melts away. David will know what to do. He always does.

His kids scramble out of the pickup then race toward us, eager to see Owen and Sophie. The cousins talk over each other, and they all dart to the backyard as soon as David unlocks the front door.

He turns to me. “Your text said you figured out who has been impersonating you?”

“Right. You’re going to want to sit down for this.”

“Sure.” He locks the door behind us, grabs two beers from the fridge and hands me one. “Want anything to eat?”

I shake my head, not really wanting the drink even though it could help relax me.

“Who’s your doppelgänger?” He sits and takes a long swig from his bottle.

“It turns out I have an identical twin.”

David chokes but quickly recovers. “Come again?”

“I’m adopted. My parents never thought to tell me before today. Wasn’t that thoughtful?”

“You’re serious?”

“As a heart attack.”

He sets down his bottle and wipes his mouth. “You’re sure about the identical twin?”

“That DNA site confirmed it.”

“I don’t even know what to say. I mean, it makes sense now. How she could convince so many people she was you.”

“Including your brother.”

David nods knowingly.

“He didn’t only see her, he ate meals with her. It blows my mind that he couldn’t tell the difference between us.”

“There have been stories in the news about reunited twins who discovered they had a lot in common even though they’d never met and had been raised completely differently. That explains why she’s been able to fool so many people.”

“But that doesn’t give my *husband* a pass.”

“He would have no reason to think she *wasn’t* you since nobody knew about your twin.”

“Except he knew about my doppelgänger theory and chose to ignore it.”

“Do you want me to talk to him?”

I shake my head. “What good would that do? Everyone, including him, already thinks I’m either having early-onset dementia like my dad or I’m losing my mind like Michael.”

“But you aren’t even related to them.”

“Right. But no one knows that. I just found out. How easy is it going to be to convince anyone?”

“You have the DNA proof.”

I close my eyes and rub my temples. “I’m getting really tired of this fight. Why should I have to prove myself to people I’ve known for so long?”

“Because they don’t know the truth. The adoption changes everything.”

It does, but I’m exhausted. Nobody believed me before, why would this change anything?

David rests a hand on my arm. “Don’t give up.”

I grunt. It’s the only response I can manage.

“Have you tried confronting your twin?”

“I haven’t even been able to find her, even though she’s all over town wearing my formerly favorite shirt.”

“We need to fix that.”

“I’m already planning on getting rid of the tank top. I never want to wear it again.”

“I mean fixing the situation with your twin.”

“How?”

He scratches his chin, looking deep in thought. “I could try to lure her in. Then when she comes to talk to me, I’ll lead her to you. She won’t be able to get away because we’ll both be there, and you can tell her anything you want.”

My pulse drums in my ears at the thought. I actively avoid conflict, and now I’m supposed to face off with someone I’ve never met? A person who has my own face? A woman who’s been trying to ruin my life?

It’s insanity.

But David is right. I don’t have another choice. She needs to be stopped, and I’m the only one who can do that. It’s *my* life at stake. I’m going to have to do this whether I want to or not. Otherwise, she’s going to think she can keep pushing me around.

“What are you going to say to her?” David’s voice pulls me from my thoughts.

“Whatever it takes to get her to leave.” My stomach churns acid at the thought of this confrontation. “I know nothing about this woman. How can I send her running if I don’t know what will get through to her?”

“Who cares about her weaknesses? Stand up for yourself and your family. Send her running because she’s too intimidated to continue with her charade.”

He’s right. I have to focus on that.

It’s my only choice. I have to fight for what’s mine. I’ve been more confrontational since all of this began, proving I have what it takes to put my sister in her place.

After she flees from town, it'll all be worth it. Everything will be back to the way it should be.

## Chapter Forty

Owen and Sophie are finally asleep, and the older two are at a school football game that's supposed to have a party afterward. Peter has his shift at the ER tonight and isn't likely to be home for hours.

That means I have the house to myself, and I need to make the most of the time. So far, I haven't been able to find anything online about my twin. She was able to find me somehow, so I should be able to do the same. Though it's as if she doesn't want to be found.

Maybe she doesn't.

This isn't easy. I don't have a name or location. What little I know about her doesn't help with my amateur sleuthing. We have the same birthday and face, plus probably the same height and weight.

It isn't much to go on. I try some reverse searching using my picture, hoping to hit on something of hers, but don't come up with anything.

I might need to hire a private investigator, but I suspect I don't have time for that. She's on the prowl. But she's also here in town. There's no reason I shouldn't be able to run into her if I try hard enough. The woman can't possibly watch me every moment.

With any luck, David and I can draw her out.

But I don't want to wait that long. I want to confront her now. My, how far I've come in the last few hours since talking with my brother-in-law.

I toss my phone on the bed and pace my bedroom. Why couldn't my sister have reached out to me instead of trying to destroy me? What is it about her that makes her want to ruin my life instead of getting to know me? We could've become friends, the best of friends. That's the beauty of sisterhood. When I was a girl, I used to daydream about having a sibling at home who I could be close to. Instead, I had a murderous brother locked away since before I was born.

Not that it matters. Both of my siblings are unhinged, and I have to deal with one of them. First, I need to give my brain a break. If I keep thinking about this, I'm going to go as crazy as the two of them.

I head downstairs but freeze as soon as I step out of my room. My skin crawls, giving me the distinct feeling something isn't right.

Breath hitching, I creep to the other bedrooms. Owen and Sophie are still sound asleep. Nadia and Dakota's rooms are empty.

My nerves are fried. That has to be why I feel like something is off. After I send my lookalike running, all will be right in the world again. I just have to wait until that happens. Hopefully tomorrow. David is going to take some time off work in the morning, and we're going to meet for coffee. We'll sit close enough to give people something to question. Word will spread, and my evil twin will hear about it.

David will be ready for her. He'll text me a secret code word, then I'll jump into action.

My heart races at the thought. I'm equally excited and terrified about meeting her. If I'd had my way, our meeting would have been a sweet reunion.

She made sure that will never happen.

I head back to the stairs. I'm starving now. During dinner with the littles, I could barely stuff down two bites of food. Now I'm paying for it, and I'm quickly getting lightheaded. Skipping meals isn't something I can afford.

After taking a few steps down, a noise sounds behind me.



I whip around, breath caught in my throat.

Nobody's there. I don't know what I expected. A knife-bearing killer? My twin?

It's all ridiculous. Peter and I changed the locks and the security codes. The one to the garage door is different from the one for the security system. Nobody outside the family can get in. If anybody else managed to get inside, the alarm would wail and alert the police.

I'm fine. My kids are fine.

It's only my overactive imagination. Still, I grip the railing so tightly my knuckles turn white. I take slow steps, pausing to listen for anything out of the ordinary.

*Creak!*

That wasn't me. And the house is too new to be settling. It never has before, and it shouldn't be now. Which can only mean one thing.

Someone else is in the house. That should be impossible, but nothing else explains the noise.

Unless one of the kids woke up. Maybe they're thirsty or have to use the bathroom. That has to be it.

I hope.

All of my senses are on high alert as I make my way back to their bedrooms. Owen is still sleeping. So is Sophie.

That means somebody is in the house with us. I quickly check their closets and anywhere else a person could hide before closing the doors. Not that it will keep an intruder out, but it's a small barrier. It gives me a little peace of mind.

I check Dakota's and Nadia's rooms again, still not finding anyone. Nobody is in the main bathroom or the master bedroom.

Whoever's here must be downstairs. I look around for anything I could use for self-defense. As a rule, we don't keep any actual weapons in the house. Not with four kids. The

likelihood of one of the kids hurting themselves is higher than a burglar breaking in.

Now the odds have worked against us.

I grab a bat from Nadia's room. Thank goodness she went through a softball phase. It might just save my life and that of the littles. I hold it close as I make my way down the stairs.

*Crunch.*

That sounded like it came from the back of the house. Near the kitchen or family room.

I'm ready to swing the bat at anyone I come across. No intruder stands a chance against me trying to protect my family. Unless of course they have a knife or a gun. But even then, I'll stop at nothing to keep my kids safe.

*Creak.*

That's from the same direction as before.

Someone is definitely over there.

If only I could call the police for help, but I don't dare. Not until I know someone is actually inside. The last thing I need is to give them another reason for thinking I'm crazy.

That said, I can't believe I'm about to face off with someone inside my own home. This stuff only happens on TV and in high crime areas. Not here. The worst crime I heard about was some teens jaywalking over the summer.

*Crunch!*

That was close. I freeze in place and mentally prepare myself for a fight. If I have to break a person's arms and legs, that's what I'll do. I don't want to think about having to do worse, but I'll do that if needed, too.

Whatever it takes to keep my family safe and together.

Grasping the bat so hard my fingers ache, I step into the kitchen.

## Chapter Forty-One

**T**he scream pierces my eardrums, momentarily stopping me from swinging the bat like a wild woman.

“Mom! What are you doing?”

It takes me a second to register my daughter standing in front of me.

Nadia looks at me like I’ve lost my mind. Can’t say that I blame her. “What are you doing with my bat?”

I struggle to find my voice, to stand upright. “I heard an intruder.”

“You mean me?”

“Apparently.” I look around, not seeing anyone else. “Why didn’t you tell me you were home?”

“I didn’t know you were in freak-out mode. What’s going on?”

I drop the bat to my side. “I heard someone in the house.”

“Again, that was me.”

“I didn’t know that.”

She takes the weapon from me. “You should’ve known with all the new security codes you’ve made me and Dakota memorize. This place is like a fortress.”

“I wish it was. We should add a few more measures, now that I think about it.”

“Totally unnecessary.”

Nadia doesn't know the half of it, and I don't want to tell her. She deserves the childhood innocence of thinking everything is okay. Besides, it isn't like my evil twin is trying to harm my kids. If she wanted to do that, she'd have hurt Sophie and Owen when she abducted them that one afternoon.

"Do you want me to pour you some wine?" Nadia asks.

"What?"

"Wine. You know." She pretends to drink from an imaginary wine glass. "Like Peter always gives you when you're stressed."

The last thing I need is my teenage daughter pouring me alcohol. What kind of a mother would that make me? I shake my head. "No. Stay here while I check the rest of the house."

"There isn't anyone here."

"Have you checked everywhere? Behind the washer and dryer?"

"Nobody could fit back there."

"You'd be surprised. Stay here." I take the bat from her, hurry from the room, then check every inch of the downstairs.

We're safe.

I rest the bat against the stove before pouring my own wine.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Nadia asks.

"We're all fine."

"Obviously. As long as you don't hit anyone with my softball bat."

"Only an intruder." Or a woman with the same face as me. "Do you need something to eat?"

"I ate at Lucy's."

"Wasn't there a party you were supposed to go to?"

Nadia shakes her head no. "We bailed and went to her place."

“You’d rather go to her house than a party?”

“It’s a party put on by the school. Those are always lame. Lucy’s brother had a birthday party while we were at the football game, and his leftovers were the perfect snack while we streamed that new rom-com about the klutzy yoga instructor.”

“Next time let me know when your plans change, okay?” I take a deep breath. My heart rate still hasn’t returned to normal.

“I didn’t think it was a big deal.”

“It isn’t, but I want to know where you are in case I need to reach you.”

She holds up her cell phone. “This was on the entire time.”

“Please just humor me. It only takes a moment to send a text.”

“Okay, fine.” Her tone sounds completely put out, like I’m asking her to climb Mount Everest. “Oh, that reminds me. Trixie said you probably need your nails repainted, and that she has a discount code for you.”

I have no idea why any of that made her think of Bryant’s girlfriend, but I don’t ask. Maybe she noticed my chipped nails. I thank her and head toward the stairs.

“Are you going to put my bat away?” Nadia calls.

I turn back around, grab it, then trudge up the stairs. At least the house is secure. We can all sleep well tonight. My eyelids grow heavy as I make my way to return the bat. By the time I get to my room, I’m ready to fall asleep without changing out of my clothes. In fact, I don’t even need to pull back the covers. I could fall onto the bed and sleep as I am until morning.

But if I don’t wash my face, my skin will break out. The teenagers aren’t the only ones in the house with skin problems. At this age, my hormones are just as out of whack as theirs.

I wonder if that’s what spurred my sister to go after me. Hormones are a wild ride, and who knows what her life is

like? I try to imagine different scenarios as I get ready for bed. Since we were both adopted, we could've ended up in wildly different families. Given she's trying to destroy my life, I'd say that's a likely possibility. I can't even imagine what it would take for someone to lash out at their identical twin in such a manner.

It makes me feel bad for her. Her life has probably been harder than mine—not that mine's been a cakewalk. Not with a brother who's a sociopath, a dad with really early dementia, and a first husband who's a narcissist. And to top it all off, finding out in my *forties* that I was adopted.

Yeah, my life definitely isn't a dream.

We probably have more in common than either of us realize. I just wish she'd have given us the chance to talk and find all of that out. But for whatever reason, she didn't want to go that route.

Maybe I should try to reach out to her instead of trying to lure her to David. What the poor lady needs is sympathy and probably a bunch of hugs to make up for the ones she obviously lacked as a child.

I like that idea. Once she sees me as an ally, we can try to make up for lost time.

It's perfect. I pat my face dry and change into my pajamas. As I'm putting my clothes into the hamper, something catches my eye.

My purple flowered tank top. I'm not even surprised at this point.

But to think I was going to give grace to my twin sister. I shake my head. That ship has now sailed.

The woman is going down.

## Chapter Forty-Two

Sitting this close to David is supremely awkward. Spikes of guilt run through my body. I would *never* do anything to hurt Peter, especially not something like this. He and David have been close their entire lives. In fact, their closeness is why David is so eager to help me in my fight against my twin sister. I'd do anything for him, as well.

David nudges me. "You need to relax. Nobody's going to buy this ruse with you so stiff."

I didn't even realize I was stiff, but he's right.

"Pretend I'm Peter." He wraps an arm around me. "That'll make it more believable."

"I'll try." I take a long sip of my black coffee and stare into the nearly-full mug. Normally, I'd have it almost emptied by now, but I hate this. We should've come up with another way to lure the woman trying to ruin my life.

"How can you drink your coffee black?" David's face is so close to mine that I can feel his breath on my cheek.

Everything in me screams to run. Instead, I set the mug down and manage to smile at my brother-in-law. "I learned to like it when I was doing intermittent fasting. If you drink coffee without anything in it, it won't break a fast. Now I can't drink it any other way. I can't take the sweetness anymore."

"You don't need to lose any weight."

I snort. Clearly he doesn't pay close enough attention to me or the fifteen pounds that have been dogging me since I

had Sophie.

He tucks a strand of my hair behind my ear and moves so close to me, our noses almost touch.

I definitely stiffen now.

David lifts a brow, silently telling me again to relax.

“I’m not sure I can keep going with this ploy.”

He glances to the left without moving his head. “See that couple over to the left?”

“Yeah.”

“They’re whispering about us. Claire always complains about her, says she’s the biggest gossip in town. We just need to convince her, and the rumors will fly. Your twin will hear about this for sure. If she’s as eager to get in the middle of your life as she seems to be, she won’t be able to turn this down. She’ll come to me. Then that’ll be the end of her messing with you.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’ll play it by ear.”

My heart skips a beat. “You need a plan, even if you don’t end up going by it.”

He shrugs then wraps some of my hair around his finger.

I hate this. I feel like I’m really cheating on Peter. My husband is the only man I ever want to be this close to. All the more reason to get rid of my sister.

David glances to the side again. “I think they’re leaving. I wonder who she’ll blab to first.”

The thought of it makes my stomach lurch.

He rests a hand on my knee.

I leap up from my chair, nearly spilling my coffee in the process.

David jumps up, too. Then he smacks the table really hard.

Everyone is staring at us.



“What are you—”

“Got the spider!” He grins widely. “It won’t bother you again. Don’t worry.”

My mouth gapes. I can’t find words.

He leans in close, brushing his cheek against mine. “Play it cool. That’s the only way this will work.”

“Okay,” I whisper.

“I’m going to wash the spider guts off my hands. I’d do anything to keep you safe.”

“Wow, I can’t believe you smashed that spider with your bare hands!”

I sit. He retreats to the bathroom after wiping the table clean with a napkin.

People are still staring.

My face flushes, and I resist the urge to tell them all this isn’t what it looks like.

David returns then wraps an arm around me. “At least nobody will forget that.”

“The entire town is going to think we’re both cheaters before the end of the day.”

“Good. I’ll be ready for your lookalike when she approaches me. She won’t be able to hold back now.”

“You really don’t know what you’re going to say to her?”

“It’s going to depend on how she reaches out to me. I have some ideas, but it has to be natural. If it sounds scripted, she’ll sense it and go running. All of this will have been for nothing.”

“But everyone we know will think we’re cheating on Peter and Claire. How are we ever going to fix our reputations?”

He puts his hand on top of mine and looks into my eyes. “The most important thing is to keep you and the kids safe.”

It’s hard to argue with that logic, but I can’t help feeling like Peter and I are going to have to start over fresh

somewhere else after all of this. I can't stand the thought of everyone we know thinking of me like that. I love my husband, and I'd never do anything to hurt him. He's the best thing to happen to me, and after dealing with Bryant, I know just how much to appreciate the kind and generous man he is, one who always puts his family above himself.

Beyond that, I wouldn't do anything to hurt my kids. I want them to grow up in a happy home. That's what they have now. We may be a blended family, but we're a family. We have each other's backs. We love one another, even if it looks different from other households. All four of my kids are content and secure, and they love being part of a big, unique family.

Will they still have all that when this is over?

## Chapter Forty-Three

**M**y stomach knots tighter with every moment that passes. I haven't heard anything from David, which means my twin hasn't reached out to him. Or it means she has, and he's busy trying to convince her he thinks she's me.

He's fake cheating with two different women all to help me. It makes me want to scream. My evil sister is ruining so many lives.

I don't know why we thought this was a good idea. Everyone is talking about our rendezvous at the coffee shop this morning. I can tell by the way people glare at me. And who could blame them? Peter and Claire are kind and wonderful people who don't deserve to be cheated on by their spouses. Peter is a respected and loved doctor whom many patients request. Claire is a beloved first-grade teacher who has taught half the kids in town.

I deserve the murderous glares. Who wouldn't hate me?

With any luck, everything will come to light. People will find out about my secret lookalike and understand it was her causing all these problems. Not me.

But there are no guarantees. I have to accept that everyone I know might always see me as a homewrecker after this. Not that it matters now.

David and I need to stop my twin. The fact that I found the purple shirt in my hamper again tells me that much. How could she have gotten in the house since we rekeyed the doors

and changed the codes? Only Peter, the kids, and I know any of that.

She had to have been staking out the house with binoculars. That's the only thing that makes any sense. There would be no other way for her to get the codes. If she could get inside our house, it stands to reason she could've called him from either the landline or even my cell phone. I know it's crazy that we have a landline in this day and age, but Peter insists on it. As a doctor, he says it could save a life. It hasn't yet, but who knows? Maybe some day it will.

It's a good thing I didn't use it last night when I heard Nadia, who I wasn't expecting to be home. The police already think I'm losing my mind. That wouldn't have helped prove my point in the slightest.

"Mom! Watch!" Sophie's voice yanks me from my thoughts.

I wave to her, letting her know she has my full attention.

"Look what I can do!" She swings her legs to the top of the monkey bars and hangs upside down.

She's never done that before, so I jump up, clap, and whistle. "That's amazing!"

My heart isn't in it like it normally would be, but she doesn't notice.

A wide smile spreads across her face as she swings back and forth between before getting herself down. She runs over. "I finally did it!"

I ruffle her hair. "I think we have a real gymnast in our family. I don't think I've ever seen anyone so young do that before."

Sophie beams. "I'm going to do it again!"

As soon as her back is turned, I check my phone. Nothing from David. Something had to have gone wrong. Did he mistake my twin for me? What if—?

"Hey, babe."

I spin around toward the booming voice behind me.

David smiles and winks. After sitting, he slings his arm around me. “How’s it going?”

“I hope that’s code for ‘the evil one approached you.’”

“Unfortunately not.” He moves even closer to me so our sides are pressed against each other.

I glance over at the kids, hoping they don’t see our public display of affection. Luckily, they’re distracted by their cousins’ arrival. “She didn’t hear about what happened this morning?”

“Guess not.” David plays with a strand of my hair.

My skin crawls. Not because there’s anything wrong with him. My brother-in-law is a handsome guy, but he isn’t Peter.

Speaking of Peter, someone who looks remarkably like him steps out of a Mercedes on the other side of the park. He looks around, his gaze stopping on us.

I clear my throat. “I, uh, think we have trouble.”

That’s the code phrase. Not that it’s especially subtle.

David’s attention snaps toward his brother. But his arm doesn’t move from around me.

My heart thunders in my chest.

Peter marches over. “What do you think you’re doing?”

David straightens his back. “Hey, bro.”

I’m all too aware of his arm still around me. I swallow.

“What’s going on?” Peter furrows his brows.

I should move, but I don’t. A lump forms in my throat, and I blink back tears.

“We’re just watching the kids,” David says.

“That isn’t what I mean.” Peter stares at his brother’s arm around me.

I’m going to puke. I really am.

“This?” David moves his arm and looks at it like he’s never seen it before. “Oh, you know. Just being friendly. Brotherly, if you will. She looked cold.”

“Stand up.” Peter’s tone sends a chill down my back.

It doesn’t seem to bother David, who rises with ease. “What’s up?”

My husband balls a fist.

I can’t look.

But I hear the impact.

David stumbles to the side. “What was that for?”

“I’m not stupid! I know what’s going on.” Peter storms back to his car. “Leave my wife alone before I really hurt you.”

I bury my face in my hands. This better get the attention of my evil twin, or I don’t know what I’ll do. Either way, I’m going to have to come up with an explanation for my kids as to why their dad punched their favorite uncle.

All I want is to get rid of my sister, so everything can return to normal.

If any of this mess is salvageable.

## Chapter Forty-Four

I've never felt more exposed, but I'm at the end of my rope and have no other options. My twin hasn't so much as looked David's way. All that effort—including a black eye—and it was for nothing.

Now I'm doing the one thing I can think of to draw her to me. The town is having its annual fall festival, and Peter is at the parade with the kids along with most everyone else. I don't know where David is, or if Claire is with him. I haven't asked, and he hasn't offered.

It's just as well that I'm sitting at a bench alone scrolling through social media on my phone. I don't feel like talking with anyone or even looking at anybody I know. I'm the local pariah, and people now cross the street to avoid me.

All because my twin wouldn't reach out to me like a normal person. She thought ruining my life would be so much more fun. I hope she's enjoying it because someone should. I'm completely miserable and have no idea what my future holds. It doesn't look good at this point.

I push my ice cream scoop around with the plastic spoon. It's almost melted now. I wouldn't have bought it, but Sophie insisted, and I couldn't say no to her.

“There you are,” says a familiar voice behind me.

The same voice as mine. But I didn't say anything.

That can only mean one thing.

I whip around, breaking into a cold sweat.

The sight of her takes me aback. Not only does she have my face, but her hair is exactly the same. So is her makeup. No wonder people think she's me. If I wasn't in my own body, I might think so, too. At least she isn't wearing my tank top.

"Cat got your tongue?" She flips her hair back just like I do. Either she's been watching me, or it's genetics. I don't know which option creeps me out more.

"What do you want?"

"No hello? Or warm welcome?" She frowns.

"You're kidding, right?"

"Obviously." She sits across from me.

"What's your name?" I demand. All this time, I've been thinking of her as my twin or doppelgänger or lookalike, or even just 'she.' I've yet to have a name as a reference.

"Let's go with Angelina."

I narrow my eyes. "Let's *not*."

She shrugs.

"You've been destroying my life. The least you can do is tell me your name."

"Does it matter?"

"Yes!" I hate that she so easily pushes my buttons.

"Fine." She taps her fingers, holding the silence for what feels like an eternity, then extends a hand across the table. "I'm Jane. It's nice to meet you, Angelina."

I don't shake her hand. "Your number was in Peter's pocket."

A slow smile spreads across her face. "He didn't even know. It was there for you to see, dear sister. I'm glad you found it. I mean, I figured you would since his pants were already in the laundry when I stuffed the number in them."

I rub my temples. "He thought you were me the whole time."

"He did."



“Why are you trying to ruin everything I hold dear?”

“I’m not the one cheating on my husband with his brother.”

She *does* know about that. Why hasn’t she tried to spend any time with David?

“What do you want?” I stare her down.

Her haughtiness melts off her face. “Let me level with you.”

“Please do, Jane.” It’s so good to finally know her name.

She jolts slightly. “My whole life I was curious about my mysterious sister. I dreamed about what it would’ve been like if we had grown up together. I thought of the nightly slumber parties and giggling over shared secrets.”

“I fail to see how that led to you hating me.”

Jane glares at me with an intensity that takes my breath away. It’s eerie seeing such negativity on what looks like my face. “If you’d be a little patient, I’ll get to that.”

“I can’t wait.”

If she picks up on my dripping sarcasm, she doesn’t show it. “Now where was I?”

“Dreaming about slumber parties. Something I never had the chance to ponder.”

She cocks an eyebrow. “You didn’t think that would be fun?”

“I didn’t even know I had a sister! While your parents were open about your adoption, I wasn’t so fortunate. I only found out about mine since you came to town.”

“Interesting.”

“That’s one word for it,” I mutter. “Carry on with your story.”

Jane tucks some hair behind her ear, a gesture which annoys me to no end even though it probably shouldn’t.

Am I as irritating as her?

“You really didn’t know about the adoption?” she asks.

“I look a lot like my dad, so I never questioned my genetics.”

“And your parents never told you?”

“Nope. Can we get back to why you hate me so much?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

“I wish it were.”

She pulls her hair back into a ponytail. “While you were lucky enough to get a rich and happy family, I was not. Everything has been a struggle for me since the day I was born. You got everything good, and I got the scraps. Worse than scraps, actually.”

“If you’d have reached out to me, I’d have been more than happy to help you out.”

“I didn’t want charity.”

“You’d rather ruin my life?” I snap. “Is that it? Make me pay for something that wasn’t my fault? I had no say in what family I ended up with—no more than you did.”

She rolls her eyes. “You don’t get it.”

“Then explain it to me!”

“You’re so self-absorbed, you think this is about you. It isn’t. I’m not trying to ruin your life.”

“What, then?”

“I *want* your life.”

It takes me a moment to process her words. “You’re attempting to step into my life? Is that what you’re saying?”

She nods. “That was the plan.”

“How dare you! What’s wrong with you, anyway? Get out of my face, leave this town, and never return!”

“I can’t do that.”

“Sure you can. I’ll even buy you a ticket if you can’t afford one. That’s as much as you’ll get after everything you’ve

pulled. I'd have given you anything if you'd have come to me like a normal person, but you lost that option."

Jane stares at me. "Things have changed. I have to tell you something important."

"This ought to be good. What is it?"

"Your husband is planning on killing you."

Just the thought of my husband wanting my death is excruciating. "What?"

"He knows about your affair with his brother."

I can only blink. No words come.

"Peter told me when he still thought I was you. He was going to kill me."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because an affair is no reason to *kill* someone. I mean, talk about going overboard. He's lost his mind! In order to save my life, I told him I'd work with him. But I can't take part in your murder. As much as I resent you getting the good family, you're still my sister."

"Gee, thanks."

"I'm serious." She leans over the table, speaking quieter. "You need to leave town. Now. He wants to take you out tonight."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"This has nothing to do with me."

"No?" I counter. "You wouldn't slide into my life? Get what you've always wanted?"

"How would that benefit me? The man wants you *dead*. If I become you, he'll want me dead. We both need to get out of town."

"That's so sweet."

She rolls her eyes.

I study her, but it's weird since she looks exactly like me. "Something about this seems off. Why are you warning me away?"

"So you can live!"

"But you came here to get rid of me. What's the difference if I live or die?"

"I never wanted to kill you." She looks down at her hands. "I only wanted the good things you've always had."

I laugh bitterly. "You're delusional if you think I've had an easy life."

"You're married to an anesthesiologist! It doesn't get much better than that."

"Do you know *anything* about my life prior to meeting Peter? Have you looked into Bryant, the narcissist who actually managed to shatter me? It took me years to overcome the damage he did to me. And in case you missed the part about my parents lying to me my entire life—there was nothing good about that. I have a sociopathic brother who took all of their time and attention, even though he didn't live with us."

"Yeah, I've met him."

"And they—wait. What?"

She plays with an earring.

Do I do that? It's beyond annoying.

"You saw my brother?"

"Our brother, isn't he?"

"No!" It takes all of my self-control not to reach across the table and slap her. "Why did you visit him?"

"I wanted to talk with him."

"He won't be able to tell you anything about me. I haven't been to see him since I was a teenager! Ever since I've been able to make my own decisions, I've stayed far away from him. He's a killer, you know."

“Oh, I know.”

My stomach drops and splatters on the ground. “Why did you want to talk with him?”

Please don’t say because you wanted tips from a sociopath.

“It isn’t important.”

“Then why mention it?”

“I was curious, and as it turns out, you’re still on the list of approved visitors even after all these years of ignoring him.”

“You make it sound like I’m a neglectful sister.”

She shrugs.

“He’s been murdering people since he was a kid! Did you know he pushed another boy off a platform at a park? The kid *died*. And Michael didn’t even care!”

Jane leans closer to me. “Look, the only reason I’m here talking with you is because I want to see you live. Do you want to work with me or not?”

That’s the last thing I want, but I need to find out everything she knows. What did my brother tell her, and how does she think she can save my life?

Especially since she came here to devastate it.

## Chapter Forty-Five

Jane stares at me expectantly, waiting for an answer.

“I’ll hear what you have to say, but I’m not going anywhere alone with you.”

Her nostrils flare. “We’re discussing a delicate matter. Anyone could overhear us.”

I lean on the picnic table. “You must understand why I won’t be alone with you.”

She sighs dramatically. “I realize you’re nervous because I agreed to help your husband kill you and hide your body. But —”

“Nervous?” I laugh too loud, but the noise of the parade a few blocks away is noisy enough that nobody else notices. “I’m more than just nervous.”

“Fine, but we can’t talk *here*.”

I don’t budge. “It’s now or never.”

“I’m trying to save your life!”

“Or you’re trying to lure me somewhere quiet to kill me.”

“Why would I admit to trying to kill you if that was actually my plan? We’re blood—I don’t want to see you die.”

“You have a funny way of showing it.”

She throws her hands in the air. “Wanting to step into your life isn’t the same thing as wanting to kill you! And you’re right about one thing. I should’ve gotten to know you first.

You actually aren't that bad. Nowhere near as snooty or pretentious as I first thought."

"Wow, thanks. Can I use you as a recommendation the next time I apply for a job?"

Jane clenches her jaw. "What I'm trying to say is, I want to help you get away. Go enjoy your life to the fullest while your murderous husband thinks you're dead. You get to live and so do I. It's perfect."

"Why do I care that you get to live?"

"Ouch. I'm trying to help."

"What's in it for you?" I square my shoulders.

She slouches. "Fine. I'm partly in this for myself—"

"Partly?"

"If you take off, I can convince him that I killed you and hid the body. He'll be happy, then I can leave. If you want, I'll find you and we can start our new lives together."

I laugh bitterly. "And I should want that why?"

"We can finally get to know each other. It wasn't fair that we were separated at birth. What heartless fool separates identical twins?"

"I agree we should've been able to grow up together, but it's too late for that. You made a big mistake trying to wreck my life."

Jane hangs her head. "You're right, and that's why I'm trying to make it up to you."

"By making me leave my life? My *children*?"

She's quiet for a moment before answering. "I could help you get them."

"I don't want anything from you. Go away and never contact me again. You've already caused more than enough trouble."

"I'm on your side now."

"Now." I squeeze the table. "It's a little late for that."

“Please let me help you.”

“The only thing you can give me is your departure. Leave this town and never come back!”

“I understand.” She gets up slowly, not looking at me. “I can’t blame you for the way you feel after what I did.”

“Bye.”

Jane starts to walk away.

Finally. I’m free of my evil twin.

She stops, turns toward me.

I should’ve known it wouldn’t be that easy.

“The edge of town is that way.” I point past her.

“I have an idea.”

“Of course you do.”

“I’m serious. Hear me out.”

“This ought to be good,” I say. “Hurry up, because I can’t wait to never see you again.”

“We should trap him.”

“Peter?”

Jane nods. “Yeah. He wants you dead, and he wants me to do the dirty work. If we corner him, we can talk him out of it. He can’t fight off the two of us.”

“Again, what do you get out of it?”

“We can both take him to the cleaners. We’ll demand money, and lots of it. You get to keep the house and kids. I’ll disappear and never return, if that’s what you still want.”

“Or you can leave now, and I can try to save what’s left of my marriage.”

“The man wants you dead.” She looks at me like I’m an idiot. “How do you expect to come back from that?”

“Easy. I’ll blame everything on you. Everything was great before you started meddling.”



She sits again.

Awesome.

“I didn’t want to tell you this, but it looks like I’m going to have to.”

“What?”

“Peter’s willing to kill you himself if I don’t do it. He has a gun.”

“Liar! We don’t believe in keeping weapons around the children.” That’s why I was creeping around the house with a baseball bat not long ago, instead of something more dangerous.

“He aimed it right at me.”

“It must belong to someone else.”

She shrugs. “No idea. We need to work together against him.”

“He’s my *husband*.”

“You know what? If you want to die, that’s on you. I’ve been trying to help you, but since you don’t want to listen to me, your fate is on you.” She rises.

“Can you blame me for not trusting you? You’ve given me exactly no reason to believe anything you say.”

“I’m telling you, the man will kill both of us if given the chance. You have two choices—run or take him out first.”

I shake my head. “Neither of those is an option.”

“It’s your funeral. Literally.” She starts to walk away.

“Wait.”

Jane turns around and looks at me with a hint of a smile.

I can’t believe I stopped her.

“Yes?”

I hate myself for what I’m about to say, but what other choice do I have? “There might be a third option.”

“I’m listening.”

I gesture for her to sit. When she finally does, I continue.  
“What if we confront him somewhere he can’t get away?  
Someplace he feels safe and won’t have a weapon on him.”

“You’re suggesting your home.”

“Or his work.”

“No, the hospital’s no good. Too many other people.”

“You’re right. My home, then.”

She leans forward. “Let’s discuss the details.”

## Chapter Forty-Six

The house is too quiet. I made sure all the kids were at sleepovers tonight—it was hardly a challenge to get any of them to agree. Now it's just Peter and me here.

Soon Jane will be here, too. I'm almost ready to send her a text and put our plan in motion, but I can't bring myself to pick up the phone just yet.

Knowing her, she's already outside the door. The woman has become an expert at spying on me. She must know the kids are all gone and it's just Peter and me here.

Time for us to confront him.

My heart hammers at the thought. Everything is going to change after this. I can't predict how anything will play out. Obviously, I know what I want, but there are too many variables. So many things can go sideways.

Part of me wants to back out of this crazy plan, but there's no turning back. Not now that I know about my twin sister. I'm not even sure what Peter's thinking. He's been so distracted and quiet lately.

He isn't himself. But then, neither am I. Not after everything I've been through—learning about my adoption and a twin who wanted to replace me until Peter turned a gun on her.

I don't think I can trust her, but that's why she's coming over so we can *talk* to Peter. If we're all able to express our thoughts, we might be able to work this all out. I won't have to leave town. Nobody has to die. It'll be perfect.

Well, maybe not perfect. I'm not sure where all of this will leave Jane. It could be possible for both of us to stay in town if she agrees to play nice. But I don't know if I'll ever be able to trust her after what she did.

I'll certainly never be able to forget. She single-handedly turned most of the town against me. The people at the preschool and the police all still think I've lost my mind. Even if I introduce them to my identical twin, they'll always wonder.

While most of this is her fault, I can't entirely blame her. If what she said is true, she grew up with a druggie mom who never once put her before her next hit. Jane went through a lot of hardship I can't even imagine—begging neighbors for meals, fighting off her mom's boyfriends, and having to worry about stepping on used needles in her own home.

A kinder person would probably feel sorry for her. I'm having trouble. But if things go well when we talk with Peter, maybe we can find a way to help her out. All the better if that help takes place in another state. Jane and I will never have an idyllic sisterly bond.

She made sure of that.

Whatever ends up happening, I need to get Jane over here. Thinking isn't getting anything done.

I can't wait to put all of this behind me.

It takes me a minute, but I finally reach for my phone. Find her contact information. Text her.

She must have been waiting across the street because it takes her all of thirty seconds to respond that she's here.

I hurry downstairs to the side door where we don't have a doorbell camera. Something tells me I shouldn't let her in. I ignore the little voice and reluctantly welcome in my lookalike.

"Great minds, huh?" She gestures to her clothes and then mine.

While our outfits aren't exactly the same, we both have on turquoise shirts and dark jeans. She even has a black coat, and I'm wearing a black cardigan. As much as it annoys me, I let it go. We have far more important matters at hand. "Follow me."

I take her to the laundry room. It's the one place in the house I'm certain Peter won't come into willingly.

She leans against the closed door. "Did you find out anything else about what he's planning?"

"No, he's hardly said two words to me."

"Makes perfect sense—considering he intends to kill you." She gives me an I-told-you-so look.

"I thought he was waiting for *you* to do the dirty work."

"Poh-tay-toh, poh-tah-toh."

"Right now, he's watching the evening news. It'll be the perfect time to catch him by surprise."

"I brought this just in case." She reaches into the inside of her jacket. Pulls out a butcher knife.

"Are you crazy?" I exclaim.

"No. I'm walking into a dangerous situation with a man who pointed a gun in my face recently. If anything, I'm underprepared."

I rack my mind, thinking of everything in my house that could be used as a weapon. If Jane has a blade, then I'm woefully unprepared. I'll have to grab one of my own from the kitchen. There's no way I'll be able to get near Nadia's bat upstairs.

Not with Peter just a couple rooms over. I can hear the news through the wall.

"Are you ready?" Jane looks at me, her eyes filled with determination.

"I was born ready."

Hopefully that's true. If this doesn't go down the way I hope, I could end up dead. I have no reason to believe Jane

won't use that knife on me.

“Wait.” She holds up a finger.

“What?”

“He's coming.”

I press my ear against the door.

Heavy footsteps echo on the hardwood floor on the other side.

## Chapter Forty-Seven

Jane has one hand on the doorknob and the other hidden inside her jacket. Probably already has the knife in her grip.

The footsteps continue on the other side of the door, but so far Peter hasn't come near us. That isn't to say he won't.

"What's he doing?" Jane whispers.

I shrug.

"He isn't going to do laundry, is he?"

"Fat chance."

She relaxes a little.

We wait.

He must be pacing. The footsteps continue, but he doesn't seem to be going anywhere.

Jane's gaze darts around the room. "He must know we're in here."

"He doesn't even know you're in the house."

"Then he knows *you're* in here."

I motion for her to be quiet and press my ear to the door again. Now Peter's muttering to himself, but I can't make out what he's saying.

Jane lifts a brow. Presses her head against the door. Her eyes widen, then she fumbles with the knob.

I grab her hand. “It doesn’t lock! Plus, he’s going to hear you.”

The pacing stopped.

He knows we’re in here.

Jane points to her coat.

Not that it reassures me. She’s just as likely to use the knife on me as she is to use it on him.

The thought of her plunging the blade into him make my blood turn to ice. He’s my husband. Father of my two youngest. He treats Nadia like his own. He’s a good man who saves lives every day.

I need to put a stop to this. To my sister. Can’t let her harm Peter.

This whole thing was a bad idea. I should’ve put a stop to it the moment she approached me. Should have sent her back to where she came from.

But I didn’t, and here we are. The woman is unhinged, and she has a butcher’s knife.

What was I thinking? At least I had the forethought to get the kids out of the house.

A chirping noise sounds. An outside door has opened.

No! That can only mean one thing—one of the teens came back. Peter’s on the other side of *this* door. He couldn’t have opened one of the other doors.

I haven’t made a single good decision since I found out about Jane coming to town and impersonating me.

This is all her fault. If she hadn’t come here to ruin my life, none of this would be happening. I must do something to get rid of her. Now.

Peter’s footsteps sound again, then they fade away. He’s going to the door. Hopefully he’ll help Nadia or Dakota find what she needs and send her back to her sleepover.

Jane whips out her knife.



“Put that away!”

“He could come back at any moment!” She holds the blade closer to herself.

“One of the girls is here. Put it back or give it to me.”

“I’m not letting go of this.”

Clearly, she doesn’t trust me any more than I trust her. That would make me feel better if she cared at all about the lives of me or my family. She only cares about herself.

I need to tread carefully.

“Put it away, Jane.”

We stare each other down, but she does finally stick it back into her jacket.

“Promise you won’t use that on any of the kids.”

“What kind of a monster do you think I am?”

I don’t answer that. Instead, I kneel down and peek under the door. The crack isn’t big enough for me to see anything, but I can hear a little better down on the floor.

Voices drift from another room, but I can’t make out any of the words. I also can’t tell who Peter’s talking to. It could be either Nadia or Dakota.

There’s a third voice. Another girl. It doesn’t belong to anyone in the family.

My blood runs cold.

Someone else’s kid is here.

I want to scream for both girls to leave, but I can’t. The only way to keep them safe is to keep Jane and her knife in the laundry room.

She wiggles the knob.

“What are you doing?” I leap to my feet and shove her away from the door.

“We can’t stay in here forever!”

“Did you hear me? There are *kids* out there.”

“So?”

She makes me want to pull out my hair. I press myself against the door. “We aren’t going anywhere.”

“The kids will take off once they see the danger. They aren’t stupid. Trust me—I know all too well how much adults underestimate children. The ones who did that to me paid the ultimate price.”

A shiver runs down my spine. What was I thinking, letting this nut job into my home? I, too, underestimated her.

I need to think of a way to keep everyone safe from her.

Fast.

“Move.” She reaches around me for the doorknob.

“I have an idea.”

“What?” Her fingers dig deep into my back.

I gasp and push her away. At least the weapon is still in her pocket.

She glares at me. “This better be good.”

“Let me get rid of the girls, then we’ll confront Peter.” Plus, it will give me the added benefit of being able to snag a knife of my own.

Jane narrows her eyes. “What are you going to tell him?”

“That the girls need to leave.”

“I mean about me.”

“Obviously, I’m not going to mention you. He doesn’t know you’re here, and he doesn’t need to. We need that element of surprise for later.”

Jane frowns. “I guess you have a point.”

Good. She’s going along with my plan.

“Although I could go out there instead of you.”

“What?”

“It isn’t like any of them will be able to tell the difference. They’ll all think I’m you.”

“That won’t work.”

“Why not?”

I try to think quickly. “We aren’t wearing the same clothes. Peter will notice.”

“Seriously? We have on the same colors. You really think he pays close attention to what you’re wearing?”

“That’s rude.”

“It isn’t personal. No straight guy notices things like that.”

“Whatever. I’m going to do this myself. He’s my husband, and one of those girls is my daughter. Too many things could go wrong if you pretend to be me.”

She smirks. “I’ve been doing a pretty good job of making people think I’m you. Wouldn’t you say?”

I get in her face. “Let me do this.”

“If it means that much to you, have at it.” Jane steps back.

“Thank you. Stay right here. I’ll be quick.”

I hold my breath as I turn the knob. Just before stepping out, I grab a basket of clothes.

“What are you doing?” Jane glares at me.

“Trying to be convincing. Peter’s going to realize I’ve been in here for a long time.”

She pats her jacket. “Hurry.”

## Chapter Forty-Eight

Every inch of my body shakes as I make my way to the kitchen, carrying the clothes.

Peter, Dakota, and a girl from her cheer team are all leaning against the counter laughing together. Leah? Lily? Lydia? I think that's it. Lydia. They're snacking on cheese and crackers like nothing's wrong.

Because they don't know anything is.

Peter turns to me, a quizzical expression on his face. "I didn't realize you were downstairs."

I hold up the basket, shaking in my hands. "Laundry never ends."

Dakota pops a slice of cheese in her mouth. "Did you wash my denim skirt?"

"Not yet." My voice is too wobbly. "I can get to it by tomorrow."

"Thanks." She flashes me an easy smile.

I try to return the gesture, but it comes off awkward instead. "Hey, what are you doing back here? I thought you were going to be busy all night."

She grabs a cracker. "I forgot my flat iron. Can't live without that."

"Nope. What are you doing after you leave? You should probably get going."

Peter shoots a questioning glance my way.

I need to abort this mission now.

The girls are laughing again, oblivious to the very real, very near threat. If I don't return to the laundry room soon, Jane is going to come out here brandishing the knife.

"Planning something fun?" I ask Dakota and her friend.

"Why?" My stepdaughter glances my way. "Want to come along?"

She and Lydia burst into another fit of giggles.

"I just didn't think you'd want to hang out with us old people."

"Who's old?" Peter asks.

The girls laugh, exchanging looks.

I reach for the snacks. "I'll even wrap these up for you to eat on the go."

Dakota puts her hands on her hips. "What's going on? Why are you trying to get rid of us?"

"It isn't like that." Beads of sweat are starting to form on my forehead. "I can explain everything later."

"I'd be interested to hear that," Peter mumbles.

Lydia nudges Dakota. "Maybe they want to get it on, and we're interrupting that."

"Ew!" Dakota grimaces. "Just ew. Those are my parents, you know."

Lydia giggles.

Footsteps sound in the direction of the laundry room.

"Go!" I wave frantically toward the door.

Dakota's eyes widen, and Lydia whips her head toward the footsteps.

Jane steps into the kitchen. She glances my way. "Sorry, I couldn't wait any longer."

I turn to Peter. "I, uh, think we have trouble."

“What the...?” Dakota’s eyes widen as she looks back and forth between Jane and me.

“Are you two twins?” Lydia asks.

I step closer to Jane, but my gaze is on the girls. “You two need to leave. Now.”

“Why?” Jane asks. “This could be fun.”

Dakota looks at me. “What’s going on?”

My heart hammers, overriding all other noise for a moment. The girls weren’t supposed to be here, and they aren’t leaving. Why won’t they go?

I study Peter and Jane carefully. Neither have readable expressions. I should’ve grabbed a knife while I had the chance. Now I can’t do that without anyone noticing.

“Who’s the real Angelina?” Dakota asks.

“You need to go.” I plead with my eyes. “I’ll explain everything later. I promise.”

My stepdaughter doesn’t budge.

Jane pulls out her enormous blade. “I think you should listen to her.”

“Go!” Peter leaps in front of her.

Lydia screams.

I turn to Dakota. “Will you leave *now*?”

Her eyes widen, and they look like they’re about to pop out of her sockets.

Lydia grabs Dakota’s arm and tugs her.

Peter whips out a gun. He aims it at Jane, then at me.

“Peter!” I yell. “It’s *me*! Your wife.”

He narrows his eyes, and his gaze darts back and forth between us. “You two look exactly the same! How did she get in here? We changed the codes.”

My last meal threatens to come up.

“I let her in.” Jane points at me.

“No!” I reach for a knife from the block.

Peter shoves my hand out of the way. “Not so fast, Jane.”

“I’m Angelina!”

“Sure you are.” He gives me a dismissive wave with his free hand.

I turn to the girls. “Go! Now!”

They finally listen.

But I don’t hear the front door open or close. No chirping sounds, either.

They’re still in the house.

I try to reach for a knife, but Peter won’t move out of my way.

“What’s going on here?” he asks.

“Isn’t it obvious?” I glare at my sister, who is obviously not on my side after all. “She’s trying to take over my life. It’s been going on for weeks. She even tricked *you*. Your lunch dates? Not with me!”

Jane glowers at me. “That’s because you’re the fraud.”

“I’m Angelina, and you know it, Jane.”

She snickers, and turns to Peter. “Isn’t it cute how she thinks she can trick us, honey?”

Peter shoves me from the counter. “You need to leave.”

“This is my house! *Our* house.” I look into his eyes. “You have to be able to tell that I’m me.”

“Prove it,” Jane says.

I glare at her. “How about you prove it, imposter?”

Jane rolls her eyes before playing with Peter’s hair. “Can you believe her? Trying to worm her way into our lives and act like she’s me? It’s pretty pathetic.”

“I’m the real Angelina!” I cup Peter’s chin and turn his head so he’s looking at me. “Remember when we got married? Our daughters made the most adorable flower girls.”

Jane rolls her eyes. “You think that proves anything? I remember when Nadia burst into tears halfway through the ceremony because one of the stained glass windows scared her. My poor baby. I’ll never be able to forget that.”

My mouth falls open. “How did you know about that?”

“Because I was there. I’m not the imposter!”

Peter stands next to my evil twin and wraps his arm around her.

I cannot let her get away with this. Over my dead body. I reach for a knife. Pull out one of those enormous fork things. I throw that on the floor and grab another knife. It’s smaller than Jane’s, but it’s better than nothing.

Everything goes dark. Even the clock on the microwave is off.

The power is out.

I glance out the window. Our next door neighbors have lights shining from their windows.

It’s just us.

Footsteps scramble around the kitchen.

A hand grabs my arm. Squeezes. Pulls me.

I scream. Kick and hit with my free hand. Can’t use the knife. The hand presses that arm against my side so that it’s useless.

“Jane, you need to give up your ruse,” comes my sister’s voice. Now she’s on the other side of the room.

“You’re the imposter!”

“Can you believe her, Peter? The only way to recover our lives is to get rid of her. Nobody will miss her. I certainly won’t.”



I manage to free myself from the grip on my arm. My eyes haven't adjusted to the darkness yet. I'm walking around blind with this knife.

I feel my way around the counter, not bumping into anyone. My best bet might be to get outside and deal with them later. I'll find a way to prove that I'm me, and that my sister is the fake.

A bright light shines.

Peter has a flashlight. It flickers before going out.

But now I know where both he and Jane are.

Blue and red lights shine outside, lighting up the kitchen walls. The police are here.

I run toward Jane, grasping my knife with the blade aimed her way.

A gunshot rings out.

For a moment, I think my eardrums have shattered. Then ringing sounds, making it impossible to hear anything else.

The front door bursts open. Footsteps thunder inside.

Peter grabs the knife from my hand.

I fall to my knees.

"Police! Drop your weapons!"

Bright flashlights shine on our faces and around the room.

"Hands in the air!"

Jane is on the floor, surrounded by a pool of blood.

## Chapter Forty-Nine

**C**haos ensues all around me, and I'm still trying to comprehend that my twin sister is dead. There's no way she survived with so much blood loss.

Will anyone believe I'm me?

I don't know where Peter put the knife he took from me. The police now have us separated and they've already asked me a million questions. I keep telling them the same thing over and over, but these are the same people who thought I was losing my mind because of everything that happened at the preschool.

None of this looks good for me. The woman I've been claiming is taking over my life is now dead in the kitchen. I'm going to be the easiest person to pin the killing on.

I can only hope Peter figured out that I'm me. In all the confusion, I don't know what he's thinking.

The only good thing in all of this is that the kids are okay. Dakota and Lydia were hiding in another part of the house. From the sounds of it, she used the security system to call for the police. The other kids are all at sleepovers with their friends, where they're supposed to be.

"Ma'am?" An officer's voice pulls me from my thoughts.

"What?"

"You were telling us about how you discovered you have a twin sister?"

I let out a deep breath and continue telling them about finding the results on the genetic testing site after hearing from my mom that I was actually adopted. She'll back up my story. She's my mom.

Unless people think I'm lying dead in the next room. My sister and I have—had—the same DNA.

The questioning seems to go on forever. I expect to see the sun rising, but it's still dark outside. And inside. Whatever caused the power to go out still hasn't been fixed. Not that it's a priority with a dead body in the kitchen.

My stomach lurches at the thought. I hate how this ended. If Jane had made different choices, we could have been friends and she'd still be alive. But she didn't, and here we are.

Another cop comes into the room and motions for the one questioning me.

She turns to me. "Don't move."

Where would I go?

The officer goes and whispers to the other one. They both look my way.

This can't be good. I'm probably going to jail. In front of all my neighbors. I'm sure they're all gathered outside. Why wouldn't they be when there have to be multiple police cars outside, all with their lights still flashing, coloring the walls inside.

After what feels like forever, the officer returns to me. "Your husband claims that your twin attacked the two of you, and that he killed her to protect you. Is that true?"

Her words suck the breath from my lungs. Peter's taking responsibility, and he's saying that I'm me.

He didn't doubt me.

"Mrs. London?"

I clear my throat. Hopefully this isn't a trick on their part. "Yes, that's what happened."

"Why didn't you say that from the beginning?"

Good question. I struggle again to find my voice. “Everything happened so fast. I’m still in shock about being adopted and having a twin. Now she’s dead.” My voice cracks. “She tried to kill me. My own flesh and blood.”

“We’ll need to go over your statement. Can you do that here, or would it be easier to come down to the station?”

“Why would that be easier?”

“Because there’s no power.”

Right. “I’d like to be here at home, if it’s all the same to you.”

“Sure.” She sets a recorder on the coffee table and motions for me to sit on the couch.

The sooner I get done with this, the sooner they can leave.

Except there’s a dead body in the kitchen. They might not let us stay here. Peter confessed, and the police believe him that it was because Jane would’ve killed me.

My own sister wanted me dead.

That realization is harder to swallow than my parents lying about my adoption for over forty years.

But now I’m safe. My family is safe. Jane won’t be impersonating me or tricking me anymore.

At some point while I’m filling out the paperwork, the lights come back on. I almost don’t recognize my own house. After everything that went down tonight, I’m not sure this house will ever feel the same again.

Someone I let in tried to kill me.

Peter comes over to me and wraps his arms around me. “Are you okay?”

“I’m not sure.”

“It’s all over.”

“Somehow it doesn’t feel that way.”

He kisses my cheek. “We’re together, and that’s all that matters.”

“I really thought you had us confused back there.”

“Never. You said the code phrase David and I have always used. Besides, I haven’t believed her since the moment I figured out she wasn’t you.”

A terrifying thought hits me. If I hadn’t said “I, uh, think we have trouble,” could it be me lying on the kitchen floor instead of Jane? But I shake my head to push that thought away. I’m still here. That’s all that matters.

“Is she really dead?” I ask.

“As a doornail.”

I breathe a sigh of relief. It really is over.

## Chapter Fifty

**P**eter holds up his wine glass. “To Angelina!”

My face warms. “It isn’t all about me. To all of us. To family!”

“To family!” the others repeat, and we clink our glasses together and drink. Peter, David, Claire, and I all have wine glasses, and the kids all have sparkling cider.

We’re all outside in David and Claire’s backyard. It’s the last warm day of the season, as the weather is supposed to take a drastic change for the worse tomorrow morning. We have a lot to celebrate.

I adjust my new sweater, tugging on the neck. I’m still not used to wearing such stylish clothes, but I gave into Lyra’s offer to be my personal stylist. She did a great job and picked out items that aren’t too young for me but also don’t make me look like a schoolmarm. In fact, Peter’s eyes light up every time he sees me in a new outfit.

He definitely didn’t need to know his ex picked out most of my wardrobe.

I also burned that purple tank top. We had a storm last week and Peter made a fire in the fireplace. That was when I said goodbye to the shirt everyone hates but didn’t have the heart to tell me. It didn’t burn like I’d hoped, but the flames did a good enough job. And I enjoyed watching the purple material smoke and disintegrate.

Claire comes over and gives my shoulder a gentle squeeze. “I’m so glad you’re safe. I can’t believe your twin wanted you

dead.”

I set my glass down and give her a big hug. “I can’t thank you enough for letting David and me pretend to have an affair.”

“It really was the only way to draw her in. I figured if Peter thought up the idea, the least I could do was go along with it.”

“Still, people were talking.”

She rolls her eyes. “People around here are always gossiping about something. With all the drama around Jane’s death and her plot to kill you and step into your life, everyone has completely forgotten about you and David spending a little time together.”

“But if they hadn’t, I’d have felt so bad.”

“Your life is more important than some silly rumors.” She glances around me. “Trevor! Don’t push your sister!” She turns to me. “Excuse me.”

“Of course.”

Peter and his brother are deep in conversation. He glances over at me and gives me a big smile.

I can’t take my eyes off him. Even though it’s been a few weeks and everything has pretty much returned back to normal, I still have a hard time believing what he did for me. I always knew he was a good man, but what he did was above and beyond the call of a husband.

He didn’t have to do what he did. Yet he made that choice. He could’ve gone to jail, but he didn’t give it a second thought.

My husband risked everything for me. How could I ever have doubted him?

Peter comes over and pours more wine into my glass. “How are you feeling?”

“Never better.”

“Do you need anything else?”

He's been especially doting since that night—that's what we call it now. *That night*. Not the night my twin died. Not the night she tried to murder me.

"I don't need anything other than you." I ruffle his hair.

He gives me a wide smile and loops an arm around my waist. We lean over the balcony and watch the kids playing. Sophie and Owen are running around with their cousins while Nadia and Dakota laugh at something on one of their phones.

"Burgers are almost ready!" David calls. "Who wants the first one?"

Peter raises his hand. "Angelina does. I'll get it."

He gives me a kiss then hurries over to his brother. After loading a hamburger with condiments, he brings it to me. As he tops off my wine glass, he says, "Mind if I get a burger for myself?"

"Of course not."

Ever since *that night*, Peter has been giving me the royal treatment. I keep waiting for things to return to normal, but so far they haven't. It probably takes a lot of time for some people to move past killing someone in defense of a loved one.

Maybe it's easier on me because I know that if it wasn't her, it would've been me. I'm alive, and my twin didn't take over my life. I can't believe she tried to come between Peter and me and actually thought she would get away with it.

The man is clearly devoted to me.

He smiles at me from behind the barbecue as if to prove the point.

I give him a little wave and dig into my burger. Just the way I like it. Peter knows me better than I know myself, which is why he was eventually able to see through my twin.

Once he figured out who she was, he wanted to find out why she was playing her games. He played along. Pretended to think she was me. Strung her along as much as she tried stringing him.



The druggie should've known a doctor would be far smarter than she could ever hope to be. But she was such a narcissist, she thought she had the upper hand. Even that worked in our favor.

After he lied about wanting to kill me, Peter thought she might not have believed him. She'd have been smart not to, because Peter would never do anything to hurt me. But she didn't know that. That was when he told me what was going on.

Everything changed after I found out about having a twin. I told him immediately, and we pieced everything together. At first, I was furious that he'd spent time with her. Couldn't he have figured out the difference between me and another woman? We might have been able to figure out what was going on sooner. But he convinced me to focus on the future instead of the past.

He invited David and his family over, and that was when we came up with the idea of my fake affair with David. I didn't like the idea, but Peter convinced us it was the only way we could trap Jane.

Peter was right, of course. And it worked out perfectly.

He didn't kill my sister. Peter shot the floor to distract Jane. He didn't shoot a wall or ceiling because he didn't know where Dakota and Lydia were. We have no basement, so the floor was the only safe option.

And the distraction worked perfectly.

I was worried for a moment since my ears rang so hard they hurt, but it wasn't enough to keep me from lunging at my lookalike. The blade went into her chest with surprising ease. She went down quickly, grabbing at my clothes but unable to hold on. If she said anything, I didn't hear it. Not with the raging ringing that threatened to collapse my ear drums.

Peter took the bloody knife from my hands. I then knelt and splattered her blood on myself. He covered the handle in his fingerprints and took the fall, not knowing if the police would believe his story of trying to protect me.

But they did. It pays to be a paragon of virtue like my husband.

Now our family is still together. Peter goes into work every day like always. I stay home and make sure the kids get where they need to, keeping the house clean and hot meals ready every morning and evening.

Everything is ideal, except for the glimmer of doubt in my husband's eyes. Behind every doting action, I can see the doubt in his expression. Maybe he wonders what else I'm capable of. If he turns on me, will he end up like my sister?

For now, all is well. Why would I want anything to ruin the dream life we have? Besides, it isn't like we have to worry that I'm losing my mind. I'm not even biologically related to my dad or brother.

There's no reason we won't have this beautiful existence for the rest of our lives.

Unless, of course, Peter ever tries to kill me.

# Chapter Fifty-One

## *Chuck*

### *Many years ago.*

**M**y heart nearly explodes with joy when the nurse brings in the tiny baby girl wrapped in a hospital blanket.

Next to me, Laverne lets out a gasp and squeezes my hand so hard she nearly breaks it. “She didn’t change her mind?”

The nurse shakes her head and smiles widely as she sets the bundle in my wife’s arms. “Congratulations! It’s a girl. What are you going to name her?”

“Angelina,” Laverne says quickly and turns to me. “I can’t believe we have a daughter. Isn’t she beautiful?”

I glance down at the baby. “She sure is.”

Another nurse comes in with a small bottle. “The baby is going to need to eat before you leave. Who wants to feed her?”

Laverne glances at me. “Do you want to?”

She’s nervous because initially I was against adoption. Probably thinks I might change my mind at any moment.

What she doesn’t know is that she has nothing to worry about. I’ll never give up this baby.

“I’d love to.”

Relief floods my wife’s face. We sit in the nearest chairs, and she hands Angelina to me.

I get comfortable, then once I have the bottle, I nudge it against the baby’s precious little lips. They have the same shape as my mother’s.

Hopefully Laverne won’t notice.

Angelina makes a noise, and her eyes flutter open. She has my eyes. Also my nose.

My heart skips a beat. Laverne will surely notice *that*. If not now, then at some point. We're going to have her until she goes to college, though that feels like a lifetime away.

So far, at least, nobody else sees the strong resemblance between my daughter and me.

Both Laverne and I desperately wanted another child, especially after things went so poorly with Michael. I tried telling that kid he needed to keep his urges under control, but he never did. Now he has to spend the rest of his life locked up. He has no chance of ever getting out.

Like my brother. I never told my wife about him. Never will. She doesn't need to know. Just like she doesn't need to know about Angelina.

We fought for more than a year about the adoption issue. I kept telling her I had no desire to raise another man's child.

I still don't.

Now I won't have to. I found a high school dropout who was desperate for money. Luckily, I had several offshore accounts that Laverne knew nothing about. And the price I offered to the girl wasn't anything she could turn down. I took care of her during the pregnancy, and she managed to stay clean the entire time.

Imagine our surprise when we found out she was having twins.

Then imagine my surprise when she demanded double the payment.

I made it clear in no uncertain terms that we agreed to one baby, and the amount of money would not change. She threatened to come clean to my wife, so I was forced to give her a little extra. But no way was I going to take both babies.

That wasn't part of the deal.

Everything worked out as it should have. As soon as we get home with Angelina, I'll leave under the premise of

needing to go to the grocery store. I'll get the cash and pay off my debt.

I'll never have to see that dreadful woman again.

Then I'll return home to my wife and daughter.

\* \* \*

**If you enjoyed this book, you're sure to love *The Perfect Death*:** In a neighborhood full of deadly secrets, no one can be trusted—not even family. When a successful lawyer is found dead in an apparent suicide, her sister Kenzi will stop at nothing to expose the truth. Will unveiling the neighborhood's dark legacy lead them to the killer, or put Kenzi in the crosshairs next?

[Read it today!](#)

# Other Books by Stacy Claflin

For a printable checklist of the books:

<https://stacyclaflin.com/reading-list/>

## PSYCHOLOGICAL THRILLERS

### *Ariana Jones*

Watch Your Back

Don't Look Now

Without a Trace

Never Letting Go

Lie in Wait

### *Brannon House*

The Perfect Death

Family Secrets

The Darkest Garden

Shattered Pieces

Grave Memories

### *Alex Mercer Thrillers*

Girl in Trouble

Turn Back Time

Little Lies

Against All Odds

Don't Forget Me

Tainted Love

Take On Me

Danger Zone

Lady in Red

White Wedding

Careless Whisper

Never Surrender

### *The Gone Saga*

The Gone Trilogy: Gone, Held, Over

Dean's List

No Return

### *Recluse Island*

The Hotel's Secret

The Father's Secret

The Corpse's Secret

*Thriller Standalones*

Lies Never Sleep

Lost and Found

**EMOTIONAL ROMANCE**

*Flawed Souls*

When Tomorrow Starts Without Me

The Only Things You Can Take

When You Start to Miss Me

**FAMILY SAGA ROMANCE**

*The Hunters*

Seaside Surprises

Seaside Heartbeats

Seaside Dances

Seaside Kisses

Seaside Christmas

Bayside Wishes

Bayside Evenings

Bayside Promises

Bayside Destinies

Bayside Opposites

Bayside Mistletoe

Bayside Dreams

**PARANORMAL ROMANCE**

*Dark Sea Academy*

Mermaid's Song

Mermaid's Heart

Mermaid's Wish

*Curse of the Moon*

Lost Wolf

Chosen Wolf

Hunted Wolf

Broken Wolf

Cursed Wolf

Secret Jaguar

*Valhalla's Curse*

Renegade Valkyrie



Pursued Valkyrie  
Silenced Valkyrie  
Vengeful Valkyrie  
Unleashed Valkyrie

*The Transformed Series*

Deception  
Betrayal  
Forgotten  
Ascension  
Duplicity  
Sacrifice  
Destroyed  
Transcend  
Entangled  
Dauntless  
Obscured  
Partition

*Side Stories:*

Fallen  
Silent Bite  
Hidden Intentions  
Saved by a Vampire  
Sweet Desire

*Paranormal Standalones*

Dex  
Beauty  
Haunted

**SHARED WORLD ROMANCES**

*Indigo Bay Romances*

Sweet Dreams  
Sweet Reunion  
Sweet Complications

*Fall into Romance*

Lost in Romance

**ROMANTIC COMEDIES**

(Writing under the pen name Eden Bloom)

*Misty Falls Romantic Comedies*

Yoga One For Me

All I Want For Christmas is Ewe

Must Love Cats

Happily Ever Laughter

**SHORT STORIES**

*Tiny Bites Collection*

**COWRITTEN BOOKS**

*Dead for Good series*

Dead for Good

Left for Dead

Dead of Night

Wake the Dead

Dead for Life

# Free Books

At any given time, I have multiple free books for readers to try. Since I write in multiple genres, it's a risk-free way to see if some of my other works may be for you.

Check them out here: <https://stacyclaflin.com/promo/>

# Find Me

*I'd love to connect with you!*

Find me on any or all of the following sites. I'm not equally active everywhere, but I'd love to meet you where you love to hang out.

**Email:** <https://stacyclaflin.com/newsletter>

I send my newsletter once a week or every other week, and include book updates, new release alerts, freebie notifications, and more. Sometimes I send cat pictures and share interesting facts about my books.

**Website:** <https://stacyclaflin.com/>

Find out more about my books on my website. I've written over 80 novels, so chances are, you'll find some books you didn't know about before.

**Bookbub:** <https://www.bookbub.com/authors/stacy-claflin>

Bookbub is where I share, rate, and review books that I've read. You can also get new release and pre-order alerts if you follow me there.

**Facebook:** <https://www.facebook.com/stacy.claflin.author/>

Facebook is a huge time suck for me, so I try not to spend too much time there. (I get a lot more writing done that way!) But you can follow me for book updates. I also have a street team you can join: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/StacyClaflinStreetTeam/>

**TikTok:** <https://www.tiktok.com/@stacyclaflin>

TikTok is where I embarrass myself on camera and make videos about my books. I have a lot of fun and share some humorous tips and interesting book/authoring facts.

**Pinterest:** [https://www.pinterest.com/growwithstacy/\\_saved/](https://www.pinterest.com/growwithstacy/_saved/)

I used to be really active on Pinterest, so there are a lot of fun boards, but I don't update them often. If you like Pinterest, you might enjoy browsing my profile. Just don't expect many updates!

**Twitter:** <https://twitter.com/growwithstacy>

Twitter is where I post about book stuff, but I don't interact much.

**Instagram:** <https://www.instagram.com/stacy.clafin/>

I'm not super active on Instagram, but I do try to put book updates and pretty pictures when I think about it.

## Author's Note

Thank you for reading *Don't Trust Her*. I hope you enjoyed the twists and turns as much as I did. It was a lot of fun writing this book and learning about the characters! Did you see any of the twists coming?

If you enjoyed this book, please consider leaving a review wherever you purchased it. Not only will your review help me to better understand what you like—so I can give you more of it!—but it will also help other readers find my work. Reviews can be short—just share your honest thoughts. That's it. And they really help—it's like sending chocolate to an author. Seriously!

Want to know when I have a new release? Sign up for new release updates: <http://stacyclaflin.com/newsletter/>

I've spent many hours writing, re-writing, and editing this work. I even put together a team who helped with the editing process. As it is impossible to find every single error, if you find any, please contact me through my website and let me know. Then I can fix them for future editions.

Thank you for your support!

~Stacy

# About Stacy Claflin

Stacy Claflin is a *USA Today* bestselling thriller author who has published more than 95 novels, including *Girl in Trouble* and *The Perfect Death*. She has always been curious about the human mind, and in her quest to learn more, she earned a degree in Psychology. Her favorite course was Abnormal Behavior, which has been useful in writing fiction.

Her love for thrillers goes back to her early childhood when she fell in love with *Unsolved Mysteries* and *America's Most Wanted*. When Stacy was five, she got mad at a babysitter who wouldn't let her watch the evening news. These days, she spends her free time listening to true crime podcasts or watching documentaries on the subject.

She has been telling stories for as long as she can remember, and as child would often get into trouble for trying to convince friends her wild tales were true. Now she puts her creativity to better use by writing page-turning stories that leave readers begging for more.

Stacy occasionally dabbles in other genres, so as you peruse her library of works, you'll find some romance and paranormal tales, all with strong suspense elements.

*For more information:*

[stacyclaflin.com/about](http://stacyclaflin.com/about)

