



PERFECT

Fling

**CARLY
PHILLIPS**

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Serendipity's Finest Series

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Kindle Edition

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In loving memory of my father, Leonard Weinberg (August 6, 1941–October 10, 2012), the best man I—or anyone who met him—ever knew. Dad, I hope I appreciated you while you were here. I know you are with me now that you are gone. I just need time to feel you. This book is dedicated to you for believing in me, for loving me, for somehow convincing me I can do anything I set my mind to. At some point I began to believe you . . . And look at me now. It's all because of you. I love you and I miss you more than words can say.

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Table of Contents

Title Page

Copyright Page

Dedication

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Epilogue

[Excerpt from Perfect Together](#)

[Want even more Carly books?](#)

[Carly's Booklist](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Excerpt from Perfect Together](#)

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[About the Author](#)

Chapter One

ERIN MARSDEN HAD always been Serendipity's good girl. As assistant attorney in the small Upstate New York town, only daughter of the police chief, and youngest sibling of two overprotective brothers (both one of whom was the current police chief), Erin always lived up to her family's expectations. She'd never made a misstep, more afraid of disappointing her family than of stepping out of the stereotypical role she'd always, dutifully, fulfilled.

Until last night.

She blinked and took stock of her surroundings: a strange bed, which she didn't recognize, and a warm, nude male body beside her very naked one. It was Cole Sanders.

Staring at his too-long mess of dark hair and the muscles in his back, she thought about the way her body ached in all the right places and how she shivered. No doubt about it, when she finally stepped out of the mold she'd created, she'd not only done a one-eighty but made the most un-godly move she could think of. A one-night stand.

A one-night stand.

The thought made her giddy and also slightly nauseous as she traced the path that had led her here. She'd started yesterday at her brother Mike's wedding to one of Erin's closest friends, Cara Hartley, now Mike's wife. Erin had been surrounded by friends, family, and happy, loving people everywhere she looked, making her the odd woman out. Not wanting to go home alone just yet, she'd stopped by Joe's Bar. *Misstep number one.*

She'd let Cole Sanders, the man for whom she'd had an unrequited crush since she was as young as a teenage girl, interrupt her dance with an old friend. *Misstep number two.*

He'd pulled her close against his hard body. She'd looked into his almost navy eyes and seen a world-weariness that tore at her heart. She'd acknowledged the sexual tension they'd both ignored since his arrival. *Misstep number three.*

And then she'd gone for the gold, agreeing to join him upstairs room over the bar for an all-night session of marathon sex. But she called that *misstep number four*, because sex with Cole had been phenomenal. She didn't know two people could generate such heat. It had been fantastic. In fact, Erin thought, she'd stretch and purr in contentment now if she weren't afraid of waking the man snoring lightly beside her.

Although their parents were good friends, Erin didn't know Cole. Nobody did, not anymore. Not even her brother Mike, who had been her father's closest pals, though Mike seemed concerned since Cole's return. Her father had been her dad's deputy chief of police until last year when he retired, but Jed Sanders never spoke of his son.

According to Mike, Cole had dropped out of the police academy days before his graduation. What Cole did after that was anybody's business, but rumors ran crazy in their small town. Some said Cole had gotten involved in organized crime in Manhattan; others claimed he ran drug and prostitution rings. Having grown up around Cole, even if she had kept her distance from the rough-and-tumble bad boy he'd been, Erin couldn't bring herself to believe he'd gone so wrong.

Call her naïve, but she'd always seen something deeper in Cole. Something good, even when he'd clashed with his tough-as-nails father. Which didn't mean she wouldn't make her escape as cleanly as possible.

What Erin didn't know about awkward mornings after could fill a book. The quiet, tepid affairs in her past always ended the same way, with a silent *It's not you, it's me* before she walked away. She'd never had to slip out of a man's bed undetected before.

She snuck one last glance at his broad shoulders, rising and falling with every breath he took. His arm muscles, sculpted from hard work and discipline, caused her to shiver anew.

Breathe, she silently ordered herself.
Think, she commanded next. Her clothes were scattered around the bedroom, if she called her bridesmaid's dress clothing to sneak out in. She took a last look at the man who'd made the earth move for her last night, Erin slipped out from beneath the warm comforter and rose, searching for her dress. She bent over, stark naked, mortified that her butt was in the air as she grabbed her clothes.

"I didn't peg you as the type to sneak out," Cole said in a lazy, ma-

s in his drawl.

ouldn't She snagged her dress from the floor and turned to face him, hugging a light lavender fabric against herself for protection, suddenly feeling even that the good girl she'd been a mere twenty-four hours ago.

nt right "I've already seen every inch," he reminded her, his heavy-lidded eyes never leaving hers.

le well. She flushed. "What type did you peg me for?" she asked, ignoring one of the humiliating parts of his comment.

Cole's He eased up against the headboard, sexy, tousled, and too handsome. Jed looked had her wanting to crawl back into bed with him. That wasn't hard for a number of reasons, the first being that a one-night stand had a shy mere end she'd used up hers. Second, to her extreme disappointment, he was a guess, asking. And third, bad-girl Erin was an aberration. This morning, involved champagne in her system, respectable Erin had returned, more's the pity. He stretched his hands behind his head and leaned back, studying the sheet slipped below his navel and it took all her strength not to look at his flat abdomen and the tented sheet.

"You were pretty gutsy last night, so I wouldn't have figured you out, Cole, the coward's way out." He cocked an eyebrow, his expression serious.

father. Did the man never smile? "And I wouldn't have thought you were the type who'd want a woman to stick around . . . *after*."

a book. Which made her wonder why he hadn't let her check out unnoticed if he had been awake. It would have spared them both the awkward conversation out of . . . this. Then again, they'd have to play this conversation out sooner or later.

Might as well get it over with, she thought.

ng with Then his words came back to her. "I was gutsy?" She straightened her shoulders a bit at that.

Erin was tough with her brothers and at work, where she had to work hard in order to keep up with her boss and hold her own against defense attorneys and their clients. But gutsy with men? That was a first, and she kind of liked it. With a hearing it.

n eased "I left the bar with you. That took nerve," she said, almost pleased with herself.

grabbed He eyed her without cracking a grin, but she'd swear she saw a flicker of amusement in his eyes. Before he banked it, that is.

isculine "I meant you were gutsy in bed."

His words, along with the deep rumble of approval in his tone, vibrating the her inside and out, and the heat of a blush rose to her cheeks.

“Thank you,” she said, immediately horrified. Had she really just done that?

That earned her a sexy grin she’d never forget.

“Back to my original point. We go way back. So no, I didn’t expect you to sneak out,” he said. “Regrets?” he asked, surprising her with his question and the suddenly defensive edge to his voice.

She immediately shook her head. “None.” It saddened her that he’d have them.

Not that it surprised her. No one in town had welcomed him with open arms, and if anyone found out about last night, they’d think she’d done it with no mind. And if her brothers discovered her secret . . . She refused to go to bed with a regret hadn’t kicked in yet, she doubted it would. And she wouldn’t want anyone to think she was embarrassed that she’d slept with him.

“You surprise me,” he admitted, studying her intently. “And I didn’t think there was much left in this world that could.”

He sounded as if he’d seen and done too much in his lifetime. And she wanted to reach out and soothe his hidden pain. But before she could dissect her thoughts or, heaven forbid, act on them, he spoke.

“But your instincts about me were right on. I’m not much for long-term relationships, even on mornings after.”

Disappointment stabbed her in the heart, and *that* was too dangerous a thought to even contemplate for long. “Glad to know I’m still on my game,” she said, forcing flippancy when she felt anything but.

Now that it was time to say good-bye, it wasn’t just awkward; it was a little more than she’d imagined it would. Which was what she’d wanted to be in thinking she could handle a one-night stand with a guy she’d always considered somewhat of a thing for. No matter how young she’d been at the time.

“Since it was just a one-night stand, you won’t have to worry about a repeat performance.” She tossed the words as flippantly as she could manage.

“Pity,” he murmured.

She jerked in surprise.

Just as she was wondering if she had the nerve to ask him to turn around so she could get dressed, he flipped the covers off himself and rose from the bed—stark, gloriously naked.

warmed All thoughts fled from her brain. She tried to swallow and choked
ending up with another blush as she continued to cough until the
ist said passed.

“And that just confirms why it has to be one night only,” he m
low, obviously more to himself than to her.

ect you Erin hated puzzles and enigmas. “What does that mean?” she asked
oth the “Erin, honey, in a world where nothing and no one is what they
you’re real. And that makes you dangerous.”

’d think “More riddles,” she told him.

He ignored her. Strolling over to the dresser, he opened a draw
th opentossed her a pair of drawstring sweats and a faded gray T-shirt. “Here.
lost herbe more comfortable—not to mention less conspicuous—leaving in th
here. If She swallowed hard. “Thank you.”

ant him He gestured to the open door in the corner. “Bathroom’s there. To
the shower are in one of the drawers. Take your time,” he said and
’t think toward the small kitchen not far away in this small apartment. Nude. C
he was a man comfortable in his own skin.

part of She shook her head, pushing away all thoughts unconnected to the
e could shower, dress, and leave. Any emotions or lingering feelings could wa
she was alone. At which point she’d do her customary internal sum
-drawn-of events and tuck this episode away in her memory banks for safek
never to be revisited again—except on long, lonely nights when it v
rous to her and her vibrator. Because everything inside her knew, despite his
re said, off and surly attitude this morning, Cole had set the bar way too high
man who came after him.

t hurt a And Erin had already set it pretty damned high on her own.

got for
ays had



about a *Three months later . . .*

manage. IF THIS CASE didn’t end soon, Erin would either pass out on the desk in
the judge, the jury, and the entire courtroom, or she’d throw up on her
new shoes. It was a toss-up about which would happen first. Judge
around whose hair matched his name, droned on with jury instructions, w
om the Erin, the next twenty minutes passed in a blur of nausea and exha
Finally, she heard the blessed sound of the gavel adjourning them for t

instead, and she dropped her head to the table with a thud.

spasm “Don’t worry, I took notes on everything the judge said, and there
anything we didn’t anticipate, or I’d have objected,” Trina Lewis,
uttered second chair for this trial, assured her.

“Thanks,” Erin mumbled into the desk.

1. “Come on. Let’s get you out of here. Bathroom before we go home
7 seem, Erin forced her head up. “Yeah. Please.”

Trina had already gathered Erin’s things and put them into her bag.
together, they walked out of the courtroom. To her relief, most everyone
ver and already left, so she didn’t need to deal with people.

. You’ll “Erin, umm, can I talk to you?” Trina asked as she pushed open the
ese.” to the ladies’ room and they stepped inside.

“Of course.”

vels for Trina had been working in the DA’s office for the past two years.
padded was close to Erin’s age, and as the only two female lawyers, she and Erin
Clearly, became friends. There was no professional jealousy between them.
was Erin’s escape from the male posturing when she needed one a
rush to versa. Along with Macy Donovan, she made up the threesome for their
ait until at Joe’s, trips to the movies, and girls’ nights at home, which had
arizing included Alexa Collins prior to the other woman’s move to Texas.

eeping, Before speaking, Trina checked underneath the stall doors to make
was just they were empty. Ever since Lyle Gordon, the lazy bastard who
; brush-happened to be the defense attorney on their current case, had posed
for any paralegal in here to overhear anything that could help him win, Erin
Trina were extra careful about where they spoke and in front of whom.

“All clear,” Trina said.

“What’s up?” Erin turned on the faucet and splashed cold water
face.

“Don’t you think this is the longest stomach virus in the history
world?” Trina ripped a paper towel from the dispenser and handed it to
front of “It’s getting better,” Erin lied.

: brand- “No, it’s not. You’ve been sick for weeks.”

White, Erin didn’t argue. She’d run the gamut, from thinking she had
hile for poisoning, to the flu, to a long-lasting virus.

rustion. “You’ve missed more mornings of work and left early more times
he day, all the years I’ve known you.”

Erin shot Trina a wry glance. “That’s a whole two years.” But she wasn’t point. Even her boss, Evan Carmichael, had begun to question her about Erin’s and illness with concern, and Evan rarely noticed anything . . . except

“Anyway, while you were sipping tea in the hallway during lunch out to the pharmacy and bought you this.” Trina held out a brown paper bag.

Erin narrowed her gaze, cautiously accepting the bag. “What’s in it?” Erin didn’t wait for Trina to answer, peeking instead. “A pregnancy test bag, and shrieked before slapping her hand over her own mouth.

True, she hadn’t had her period, but she’d attributed the lack the work-related stress. Not once had she connected her illness to being pregnant. “Hey, it’s possible,” Trina said.

“Are you kidding me? We’ve been working twenty-four seven for know how long. I can’t remember the last time I used my birth control pills. She friend, never mind had a real man.”

“Liar,” Trina said for the second time.

Erin scowled at her friend. They both knew she remembered the exact time she’d had sex, and Erin recalled every perfect, muscular inch of Sanders and their night together.

Their *safe* night. He’d used protection each time, and there’d been

Besides, what were the chances that something life-altering had happened the one and only time she’d stepped outside her comfort zone? Just wouldn’t do that to her after all her well-behaved years. Would it?

Erin regretted having shared vague details with her two friends. One of them now stood next to her, pointing at the offending test, recognized by every woman on the planet.

“Take it,” Trina ordered.

“I can’t be pregnant.” Erin’s stomach revolted at the very thought every nerve in her body shouted in denial.

“Good. Then prove me wrong, and I’ll take you to the doctor to find out why you’ve been nauseous for almost a month straight.” Trina pinned Erin with a gaze that had potential defendants shaking and crying for mercy.

“Fine.” Erin grabbed the box and headed for the private stall. Her food shook so badly she was barely able to read, let alone follow the instructions, but a few minutes later, she and Trina were waiting in uncomfortable silence for the requisite pink or blue line.

As the second hand of her watch ticked slowly by, Erin thought

got the Cole. He'd deliberately steered clear of her in the time since their absence together. When she'd see him at Cuppa Café, he'd nod his head and wave at her from the door.

h, I ran The other day, while at Joe's on Ladies' Night, fighting against an ongoing nausea, a strange impulse had her approaching him. She'd attempted a friendly conversation, ignoring the flutters in her stomach caused by his presence near him and his delicious masculine scent. With a long line of people waiting for drinks, he'd had no choice but to indulge her.

proof to She'd even made him laugh once or twice, giving rise to a stupid feeling of hope . . . that what? Erin refused to go there, which was smart, considering that as soon as his beer was served, he'd grabbed the bottle, treated her to a dismissive nod, and disappeared. Cole made it clear that one night meeting him was not meant to be. They weren't even destined to be friends. Her stomach cramped as a reminder.

She couldn't pretend his indifference didn't hurt, and she wished she could just leave their small town so he wouldn't be a permanent reminder of her mistake. Cole stepped outside the lines. She *couldn't* be pregnant and not with his baby. She couldn't think of a worse, more awkward scenario, and her stomach cramped at the possibility.

actually "Ding!" Trina's too-cheerful voice shook Erin out of her painful thoughts. Fate "You look." She wrapped both arms around herself, aware she was shaking.

because Trina extended her hand, and Erin gratefully accepted her support. She held her breath, her heart pounding so hard in her chest she swore she could hear the sound in her ears. At this point, she couldn't tell if the lump in her throat was from nausea or panic.

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"It's positive," Trina whispered, no longer feigning upbeat excitement.

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She couldn't pretend his indifference didn't hurt, and she wished he'd leave their small town so he wouldn't be a permanent reminder of her one step outside the lines. She *couldn't* be pregnant and not with his baby. She couldn't think of a worse, more awkward scenario, and her stomach lurched at the possibility.

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"You look." She wrapped both arms around herself, aware she was shaking.

Trina extended her hand, and Erin gratefully accepted her friend's support. She held her breath, her heart pounding so hard in her chest, she swore she could hear the sound in her ears. At this point, she couldn't tell if the lump in her throat was from nausea or panic.

"Well?" Erin asked, unable to stand the silence or the suspense.

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Chapter Two

COLE WOKE UP to the sun shining through the window in his small apartment over Joe's Bar. As he did every morning since his return home from deep-undercover assignment, he cataloged his state of mind and concluded that today was no different than any other.

Yep, status quo in his world.

He took a hot shower, dressed, and headed downstairs to the coffee shop where every morning, Cole picked up his much-needed jolt of caffeine, ignoring the fact that most people in town gave him a wide berth. Most of them—all—and *not all* included the owner of Cuppa Café, Trisha. Much to the bar-owning brother, Joe, Trisha could listen to anyone's tales of woe. Joe, she tried to use her charming personality to chitchat him into revealing something about where he'd been the last year and why he hadn't been around before now. When her well-meaning prying failed, she tried to get him to agree to let her set him up on a date with one of her friends, but that wasn't happening either.

Cole was back in his hometown on standard R&R after a deep undercover assignment. Usually, he and one of his fellow agents did it while traveling, or he crashed at one of the guys' cabins in Montana, but he hadn't been back to Serendipity in a while. Much as it pained him to admit that he'd missed the place where he'd grown up, if not all the people.

So here he was, back in good old Serendipity, where he had some friends he liked, some he didn't, and a job to return to soon enough. At least he had his job. Cole liked knowing he was taking down the scum of the earth, but the mind that his father was convinced he was just like them. Jed Sanders had approved of his son long before he'd gone into undercover work. He was a replica of the old man and never would be. He was used to that disappointment, but he couldn't deny the constant digs got to him, which was why he'd avoided coming home until now.

Cole figured the last job had gotten to him more than usual if he was now thinking about Jed's opinion of him. He tried to avoid looking back

childhood, taking stock, and learning that just maybe his father had a place. His cell rang, and he picked it up on the first ring. "Hey," he said to his cousin, Nick Mancini.

"Sorry to tell you, but we're not working today. Fire inspector's here by, so everything's on hold."

Since his return, Cole had been working construction for a company, and Cole appreciated knowing he'd always have a place to go to when he needed one. Working for Nick's dad had always been a way to stay out of the house and keep his father off his back. Too bad Cole hadn't been smart enough to work more and stay out of trouble, but he couldn't change the past. And since it had led his mother to take them both away from Jed and out of Serendipity, maybe his juvenile idiocy hadn't been such a bad thing. No matter what his father thought . . . or blamed him for.

"No problem," Cole said. "Any other sites you can use a hand on?"

Silence followed, and Cole knew exactly what his cousin wasn't saying. Unlike Nick had already informed him that a couple of clients preferred their work wasn't on the crew who worked on their homes. As if he'd steal from them, but old neighbors? Friends? Jeez. Much as he hated it, Cole had to admit he had good reason to be suspicious, and nothing he could do or say would dispel their mistrust. Undercover work meant he had to keep a low profile and live with the consequences.

"Don't worry about it. Call me when you need me again," Cole said, letting his cousin off the hook.

"My mother mentioned Uncle Jed needs some help around the house," Nick said. "I can handle it over the weekend if you want."

Nick's mother was Cole's mother's sister. Aunt Gloria had helped her mom when she needed it most, giving her money to leave Jed, and she loved her for it. Nick was like his mom, giving and always there.

As much as he appreciated the offer, Cole didn't need Nick handling Jed's crap. "You spend the weekend with your pretty wife," he said to Nick's wife, Andrews, whom Nick had finally married a few months ago, a wedding he hadn't missed because of work. It had been one of the few times he reser-ved time for a job.

Because undercover defined him. It wasn't just what he did; it was who he was. He didn't have a real life: friends, habits, schedule, or routine. It was his work and his downtime before going back under.

joint. “I don’t mind. I’ll get in and out with no shitstorm. You won’t.”

and to his cousin. “Thanks, but as long as I’m in town, I’ll pick up the slack,” he said.

coming from the old man. Nick’s groan echoed through the phone. “No reason for you to do the old man.”

Nick’s response. “He’s my father. I’m not going to let others do his shit for me with his thanks.”

in a way. Nick cleared his throat. “Fine. Come hang out over the weekend?”

he hadn’t. “We’ll see.” They both knew he wouldn’t show. But Nick still asked. “You wouldn’t.” Cole still gave him his standard answer.

away from him. He said good-bye, grabbed his coffee, and walked out of the shop. As much as Cole liked his cousin, family wasn’t part of his makeup. He

had a strong unit as a kid, at least until his mother married Brody Winters, but by then, Cole had been almost seventeen, self-reliant, self-contained, basically on his own. He’d taught himself not to want what he couldn’t have. That mindset served him well in his line of work, and he didn’t see any reason to change now.

until they reached the street. He stepped onto the curb as he caught sight of two women crossing the street. For a split second, he thought he saw Erin, then realized he was seeing a profile that his subconscious wanted to see. The woman with reddish hair

was Erin, but the thought of her had been firmly implanted in his brain.

he said, “The first time he’d run into her after they’d slept together, he’d been abrupt. Curt. He’d wanted to make sure she knew he wasn’t looking for a house, a happy smile, flushed cheeks, or warm wave hello. Even if she had been

the only good thing about his return home so far. That lack of interest in Cole continued when they saw each other, and though he hated it, he understood

that keeping her at a distance was better than encouraging any thoughts she might have of a *them*. Because Erin was the kind of woman who would both handle and deserve all the things small-town life entailed. Things Cole could not give her.

and Cole saw her. That changed a couple of days ago when, with a cheery smile on her face, she saw him at Joe’s. She walked over and made polite small talk, which

she managed to survive despite the scent of her perfume reminding him of the explosive night together in bed. It had taken fucking weeks for the air

to have a smell to dissipate enough to let him sleep in peace without those memories keeping him constantly hard and wanting her.

Since his beer hadn't been served, he'd had no choice but to wait. Let her put her soft hand on his arm, which brought back memories of talented fingers cupping other places on his body.

As soon as Joe slid his drink across the bar, Cole had cut Erin bolted, getting as far away from her as he possibly could by heading home, but immediately. She might think he was a bastard, and the hurt look on her face made him feel like one, but she didn't need the aggravation that came with being associated with Cole Sanders or the lifestyle he lived.

Even if she did tempt him with her good-girl persona, her creamy skin, and the combustible chemistry that had taken him off guard. As mention the light laughter that warmed his chilled, dark soul.

"Enough," he muttered. Gritting his teeth, he headed to his old man's place, for the drive to his father's place.

Heaven help him.

He wondered what kind of mood he'd find his father in today.

After Cole and his mother left, his parents had divorced, just another of the things for which Jed blamed his no-good son. Though his mother had remarried a good man, Jed remained alone and miserable. Cole never stayed away, but his father was getting older, and as long as Cole was in town, he'd do what he could to help, whether the other man wanted his help or not.

Cole pulled up in front of the house where he grew up, taking it in for her critical eye. Never mind the invisible loose floorboard over which he had tripped and broken his arm—the paint was peeling, the windows were dirty, and if they didn't get the roof fixed by next winter, his father would have his hands full with trouble.

For now, however, he'd focus on the smaller jobs, and if Jed was in a decent mood, Cole would try talking to him about moving into a condo that was easier to take care of and had covered maintenance. His father had bitten his head off the first time he'd made the suggestion.

Cole walked up the driveway, surprised to see a sporty royal-blue car parked in front of the garage. He knew who owned that car and much of their curse. For as much as he'd tried avoiding her in person and thoughts of her were rousing his mind, it appeared luck wasn't on his side.

Memories



t. Talk. ERIN PUT THE TWO casseroles her mother had made for Jed into his free-
zer. The other she placed on a shelf in his refrigerator. Since Jed had been
his father's right-hand man as long as Erin's dad had been the police chief,
and parents treated him like family. So before going on her monthlong
upstairs cruise vacation, Ella had cooked up meals to help him out while his
father was in a cast and had asked Erin to take over her job of making sure
Jed's freezer was stocked while they were away.

It was hard for men like Jed and Erin's father to accept illness
gracefully, softly. Erin's dad was in remission from lymphoma, hence her
father's decision to make the most of the years they had left. Jed's heart attack
last year, his high blood pressure, and now his broken arm frustrated the hell
out of him. He'd always been around when she was growing up, at home
and of course the station, so helping him out wasn't a hardship.

Or it hadn't been when she'd agreed to do it. Now that she was pregnant
with his son's child, she wasn't at all comfortable here.

She turned to Jed to go over the cooking instructions. "So all you
need to do is heat the oven to 350 and put this in for about thirty minutes. Or you
can cut the pieces and microwave them individually. Got it?" Erin asked, turning
toward the refrigerator door.

"You know I appreciate this, but I could have just ordered from
Family Restaurant." Jed sat at the kitchen table, drinking his morning
coffee with a cast on one arm.

"And you know my mother wouldn't let anyone she cares about
make do with takeout. Who would watch your salt intake?" she asked.

"I'm taking those pills, which keep my blood pressure down, so
you can see why I can't eat whatever I want," he muttered with a frown, which
did nothing to detract from his distinguished looks.

Though he had a full head of silver hair, he had masculine and
well-defined features. Cole definitely resembled his dad.

Erin shook her head, knowing better than to let her mind go there.
She'd had an argument for another day. I need to get to work."

"Is he giving you a hard time?" a familiar male voice asked.

Erin started at Cole's voice. "I didn't hear you come in," she said,
her heart now racing at the sight of him.

"Came through the back door."

"Bastard still has a key," Jed muttered. "What the hell do you want?"

private.

Erin didn't miss the deliberate way Cole straightened his shoulder since he were bracing himself so the insults would bounce off him. But if thinking, his jaw was any indication, his father's words clearly hit home. Whether it Jed's ruddy flush in his cheeks told Erin it was as embarrassing for him as the past for her.

Which meant she'd make her escape before things became an ignominious awkward between the Sanders men. She said another good-bye and two wary men alone.

the
small



"WAY TO GO," Jed said to Cole after Erin left the house. "You drove them off."

"You did that all by yourself, Dad." And though Cole was used to his father's attitude and was even proud of the way he'd ignored the obvious comments, it was clear he'd made Erin uncomfortable.

"You heard her. She wasn't itching to leave until you showed up."

Cole clenched his hands into fists. "Do we really need to do this? Do we have that list of things I can fix around here?"

"What? Did your cousin get smart and decide he didn't want to have a no-good SOB like you around his respectable customers?"

Even with Erin gone, Cole didn't plan on engaging his father. Instead, he pushed off the counter and headed for the front door. His tools were in the truck, and at least he could get started on fixing the front step. Once he realized Erin's car was still in the driveway.

Engine running, she sat in the driver's seat, arms on the steering wheel, head resting on her arms. Getting up close and personal with her was something he wanted to do, but he couldn't leave her alone until he found out what was wrong.

He knocked on the window.

She jumped, startled, before lowering the window so he could lean in.

"You okay?" he asked, though as he studied her, he realized she wasn't. Her skin was pale, and dark circles he hadn't noticed before shadowed her eyes.

"I just . . . got a little dizzy, but I'm fine now." She brushed her hair back and remained.

of her eyes with shaking hands.

rs, as if A flush of pink stained her cheeks and a hint of what looked like
e set offlared in her expression. Cole frowned.

rse, the "I'm going now." She started to buckle up.

s it was "Nuh-uh." Before she could put the car in gear, he opened the door

"What are you doing?" she asked, her voice rising.

y more "When did you eat last?"

left the She shifted her gaze away from his.

"I'll rephrase. Did you have breakfast this morning?"

She might not want to look at him, but his body prevented her
closing the car door. If she wanted a battle of wills, he felt certain he'd

"No," she said at last.

he lady "Mind if I ask why?"

"Mind if I ask why you care?" she shot back.

l to his He couldn't help but grin. Even sick, she had spunk. "Because I
roxious about to let you drive off while you're feeling dizzy. Come back inside
I'll get you something to eat."

Do you "That's nice of you, but no thanks. I have a breakfast bar in my ba
riffled through her purse and held one up in triumph. "See?"

He nodded. "Good. Why didn't you eat it before you came over?"

keep a "I wasn't feeling great when I woke up. Look, I'm going to be
work. I have to go."

ead, he "Not until you eat, and I know you won't pass out or swerve
e in the road."

outside, She rolled her eyes, then peeled down the wrapper and took a b
watched her jaw work as she chewed, knowing he was making
wheel, uncomfortable and unable to stop staring anyway.

the last "You look tired. Are you sure you're getting enough sleep?"

ut what She choked on a piece of her food. "What is with the third deg
morning?"

He didn't have a clue. He just knew something was off about her,
closer, was concerned. Unlike him? Yeah. He didn't need another woman to
wasn't, about letting down, like he had Victoria, Vincent Maroni's wife.

ved her Shaking his last case away, he focused on Erin as she finish
breakfast bar, then pulled out a bottle of water and drank a healthy a
hair out "There. I feel all better."

He didn't feel better, nor did he believe her, but whatever. "Good. The panic feel well enough to drive?"

She nodded. "Yes. Thank you," she said, eyeing him as if trying to feel beneath his skin.

She wouldn't find much there; that he knew.

"Okay then. Take care." He patted the top of the car with his hand.

"You too." She paused. "Umm, Cole? Don't pay any attention to your father. He's just grumpy because of his arm."

"No, he's not. He's Jed, expressing his low opinion of me, since I've been here from always." The minute the honest words escaped, he could have bitten his tongue, mostly because he didn't want her pity.

But a glance at her narrowed eyes and tight expression showed an absence of sympathy. "He's wrong, then."

She wasn't defending Jed; she was sticking up for him. Warmth didn't live in Cole's chest, but he ruthlessly squashed the good, clean feeling he wasn't used to, and experiencing. He didn't need her on his side any more than he wanted her to be like him. He couldn't do anything but hurt her sweet-girl reputation. "She couldn't do anything but hurt *her*."

"Go to work," he said gruffly, ignoring the flash of disappointment in her eyes at his response.

And though he wanted to keep her at arm's length, accomplishing his goal didn't make him feel like he'd done her the favor she intended.

After finishing up the porch and fixing a drawer in the kitchen. He noticed was falling off the hinge, Cole decided enough was enough. If he was going to live in this town, he needed more than his own company. An occasional conversation with someone on Nick's crew. Though he knew what kind of welcome he'd receive, Cole headed out to the train station for a visit with Mike Marsden.

He'd avoided this particular reunion because, like Jed, Mike, the Serendipity chief of police, knew about Cole's past, old and more recent. And though Mike had done his share of undercover work, he hadn't ever gone as deep as Cole. But he'd understand enough to empathize—and Cole needed to discuss the last year in his life. But after his run-in with Jed, he needed a reality check and, if he was honest with himself, a friend. That friend was Erin's brother.

Do you



to see STUPID. STUPID. STUPID. If Erin's head wasn't already pounding, she'd it against the car window for good measure.

Breathe, she ordered herself, trying to pretend the breakfast bar trying to force its way back up. What had she been thinking, sitting in to your dad's driveway, her head on the steering wheel, sick as a proverbial ame as Cole seemed to have bought the whole *I didn't eat* bit, so she exhale ten his She needed to tell him, and she didn't want to. Didn't know how.

With no meetings scheduled for this morning, Erin stopped at The ger, not Restaurant to see her friend Macy Donovan instead of going to wo decided it was time to confide in someone she'd known a long while flooded advice on how to handle this from someone other than Trina, wh used to trusted, but who didn't go way back with her.

She pulled into the parking lot and paused, taking in the old build l her to the edge of town. Macy and her siblings had been trying to talk thei on. He into remodeling and changing up the menu, but so far no luck. Still, th it in her was a town staple, and everybody seemed to show up here at one another, either for the food, the company, or a combination of both.

Today, Erin needed Macy's good old-fashioned common sense actually or he'd walked inside and settled at the counter, waving at her friend to let he she was there. After seating an older couple, Macy made her way to th he had beside Erin and settled in.

“Hey, hon. Long time no see. How are you?” Macy asked, tapp he was long hot-pink nails against the counter.

“Truth?” Erin wasn't in the mood to segue into it or beat around th and the

“Of course. What's wrong?” She narrowed her gaze. “I shoul didn't known when I didn't see or hear from you lately that something was up police

Erin nodded, leaning in close. The last thing she wanted was for current become news on the Serendipity grapevine. “I need you to keep thi nt. And okay?”

Eyes serious, Macy nodded. “Cross my heart,” she said, doing a hadn't with her fingers.

Erin swallowed hard. “I'm pregnant,” she whispered, then imme Even if slapped her hand over Macy's mouth before her exuberant friend

scream her reaction.

Macy's eyes opened wide.

"Got a grip?" Erin asked her.

l smack She nodded, and Erin released her hand. "How the fuck did that ha

wasn't Macy asked in her usual outspoken way. "I thought you said yo
protection?"

l Cole's "Shh!"

al dog? Macy nodded. "Okay, we need to talk," she said, this time in
d hard tones.

Family "Nobody knows except Trina, who bought the test because I v
stupid to face reality, and Alexa. And now you."

rk. She "Oh, honey, what are you going to do?" Macy asked with her h
and get Erin's arm.

to Erin "I'm having the baby, of course!"

Macy smiled. "I figured that. I just meant with the rest of it."

ding on "I'm taking it one day at a time. I have to tell him, but I thought
r father I'd wait until I'm past the first trimester." Which wasn't much longer
ie place know, relatively safe and all that."

time or "You're young and healthy. I'd say you're going to be fine, a
longer you wait, the harder it will be. Yes?" Macy asked.

se. She Erin nodded, tears forming. "Sorry. I'm just so damn emotional, or
r know everything else."

ie stool "You know it takes two to make a baby, so don't be afraid to te
That man's bark is worse than his bite, and if you slept with him, I'
ing her you'd agree."

e bush. "Yeah. Except we're not even friends. Ever since that night, he's g
of his way to avoid me." And Erin refused to admit out loud how i
ld have hurt.

p." "He's got demons. He has to. Between how his father always treat
' this to and the fact that nobody knows where he's been . . . You've se
s quiet, shadows in his eyes."

s much *Except that night*, Erin thought. All she'd seen in those dark o
been heat and passion. She shivered in her seat.

"Tell him," Macy said, patting Erin's hand.

ediately Erin nodded. "I'll figure out when. And how."

l could She sat at the counter and drank a cup of tea, which helped se

stomach. Then she paid, hugged Macy, and headed for work.

The district attorney's office building was located adjacent to the station and across the street from the courthouse. In the center of the property was a beautifully manicured lawn and gazebo, the pride and joy of downtown Serendipity. Though her office itself was small, Erin had always loved the view her window provided of her hometown. It made the hours she spent holed up in there easier.

Being late meant she had to park far from the entrance. Though it was August, today was an unseasonably cool day, and the breeze blew gently against her skin. She grabbed her briefcase in one hand, draped her suit jacket over her other arm, and then shut the car door behind her. She was halfway to the office entrance when she heard a distinctive popping sound and whirled around to see what caused the noise. She didn't see anyone nearby. She took another two steps, then she felt a searing burning pain, unlike anything she had ever experienced before, rip through her arm.

She glanced down to see that her silk blouse was now coated with her blood. Confused and suddenly dizzy, she stumbled.

Someone called her name, and she saw the security guard from the entrance running toward her. She opened her mouth to tell him she had been shot, but the pain took over, and she fell to the hard asphalt.

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Chapter Three

COLE WALKED INTO the Serendipity Police Station, ignoring the war people threw his way. If they didn't know him from the past, definitely heard of him by now. He squared his shoulders and coasted through the precinct to the chief's office, raising his hand to knock, and heard voices from inside.

A female laugh and a male chuckle.

Cole was backing away, not wanting to interrupt, when the door swung wide, and Cara Marsden strode out. He had to hand it to her. She tried to look off nonchalant, but her pulled-back hair was mussed from her husband's fingers, her lips were red from being kissed, and her cheeks were flushed.

He shook his head, finding it hard to reconcile the serious Mike Marsden he knew with a man who'd fool around in his office. Cole tipped his hat to the other man's pretty wife, not saying a word as he nodded to her and knocked on his old friend's door.

"Come on in," Mike called.

Cole decided to take the offensive for this initial hello. "So glad you're married and settled in Serendipity. As chief," Cole said as he stepped into the room.

Mike had just finished straightening his tie.

"And apparently getting laid is a perk of the job. Good for you, Cole. You couldn't stifle a chuckle.

"That's my wife you're talking about," Mike said, coming around the desk.

He shoved his hand forward, and Cole knew the other man wasn't merely possessive. Go figure.

"Glad you could finally make time for an old friend." Mike shook hands with a firm grip.

"I had trial and prep in New York City, so I went back and forth a few times while. Lately, I've been trying to decompress."

This, more than any job, had been particularly unpleasant. Mar
mob boss, had a clingy, needy wife he ignored. In Cole's effort to pro
while taking down the drug-dealing, murdering bastard, he'd gotten
Victoria. And she to him. Too close. And when her husband ha
arrested and Cole's role was revealed, she'd revealed her true feelin
neediness bordered on delusional, and she'd convinced herself that C
feelings for her that extended beyond the job.

y looks
they'd
ntinued
hen he

Mike's penetrating gaze settled hard. "Take it from someone who
there yet not as deep as you. It takes time to remember who you are."

Cole remembered. And when he didn't, Jed reminded him.

"How are you getting along with your father?" Mike asked,
Cole's mind.

opened
l to pull
sband's
heavily

"Same. The man blames me for Mom leaving him. He can't see j
punk I once was." And maybe the old man was right, Cole thought.

arsden
head at
before

The truth hurt, but Cole didn't like the kid he'd been. The ma
become after his mother remarried and Brody welcomed Cole in? Tha
Cole he was coming to understand and maybe even respect. But eve
than a decade later, it was hard to wipe away the vestiges of his
negative influence.

"Hell, he blames me for breathing," Cole muttered.

"Jed always was a hard-ass. It's what let him do his job for so
Mike said. "But that doesn't make him right."

you're
into the
man."

Cole waved him away. "Forget it." Because if Mike ever found ou
Cole's one-night stand with his sister, he'd be lining up against him wi

Just because Mike knew what Cole's real job had been didn't me
think Cole was good enough for his sister. There was the danger, a
that Mike knew only too well.

and his
t angry,
k with a

Then there was Cole himself. Erin deserved a man who'd con
being around. She'd grown up surrounded by love and with paren
cared, and no doubt she wanted the same. Cole's job meant he was g
extended periods. This last job had taken a year of his life, excluding t
that came after. He'd never had much in the way of family or friends
of work and wouldn't know how to live that way, let alone blend the tv

th for a

Nor did he want to. Jesus, what was with him, constantly rehash
shit in his head over a woman he knew was all wrong for him and vice

Before Mike could reply, a loud commotion sounded from the

oni, the room. "Excuse me," Mike said, heading for the door. "What's going on here?" he yelled out.

Cara said as she ran up close to him and grabbed his hand. "You need to get out there *now*."

Apparently, things weren't as quiet in his small town as Cole had remembered. He followed the direction of the chaos and stepped out in time to see cops swarming the scene and an ambulance pulling up in the middle of the lot, and for Mike's bellow to reverberate in Cole's head.

"What the hell do you mean my sister was shot?"

Adrenaline spiked in Cole's veins, and he started forward, but an officer restrained him. "No spectators, buddy. Clear the scene so everyone can do their job."

"But I'm—" He was what to Erin? Cole couldn't say family. He wasn't a cop with permission to get past the barrier they were erecting, and he'd

Shit. Waiting around helplessly wasn't his style, but bursting in and more himself arrested wouldn't help matters. Neither would explaining his actions to Mike. He forced himself to think clearly. Erin had been shot, which meant she'd be taken to the hospital, so that was where Cole headed, for information from the family once they arrived.

University Hospital was a hustle of busy people running in all directions, even more so when the ambulance carrying Erin arrived. Cole stood by as they rushed the stretcher inside, but was relieved to see her eyes open. Being conscious was a damn good thing. He absently rubbed the left side of his abdomen, where he'd been shot in the final stage of his last undercover assignment. He wouldn't wish that pain on anyone, let alone someone as innocent as

Mike, who'd accompanied his sister in the ambulance, followed behind the paramedics through the swinging doors. He didn't glance back, and Cole was grateful Mike hadn't noticed him. The other man would have asked questions Cole wasn't sure he could answer. Questions Cole had been asking himself since finding out the identity of the gunshot victim. Why was he so affected by the fact that it was Erin being wheeled in here? He had no concrete answers. He only knew that his gut was churning, and it wasn't settling until he knew she was okay.

He didn't know how much time had passed before he finally saw the other man's squad come back out of the double doors. This time, the other man was mo-

on out and his gaze settled on Cole immediately.

“Hey, man. What are you doing here?”

to him Cole swallowed hard. “I was with you when you got the news. I can very well go home without knowing if you needed anything.” The t
s Cole far as it went.

tside in “I appreciate it.” Mike ran his hand through his already screwed-up

to the “How is she?” Cole asked, attempting not to show the craziness
beginning to feel from wondering what was happening with Erin.

“They’re assessing her now.” Mike checked his cell, then met
armed gaze. “You know, there is something you can do for me. I need to trac
one can Sam,” he said, referring to his brother. “Cara is out handling a d
violence call, so she can’t do it for me. Since you’re here, can yo
And he outside Erin’s cubicle and get me as soon as there’s news?”

“Sure.” Cole hoped he didn’t look as pleased as he felt, being gi
opportunity to see Erin firsthand.

getting “Great. Come on. I’ll walk you back.” Mike led Cole back i
lain his treatment area. “She’s in cubicle three,” he said. “I just want to go
, which and try to call Sam again. I want him to hear this from me, and t
hoping service in this area sucks.” Both of the Marsden brothers were protec
their sister.

ections, “Just wait outside. When the doctor’s finished, you can go in. I’
back as she’ll be glad to see a familiar face and not be alone.”

. Being Cole wasn’t as certain, but he merely nodded. “I’ll call you if
e of his something before you get back inside.”

ver op. Mike nodded. “I owe you one.”

as Erin. Cole didn’t see it that way, so he didn’t reply.

d close With Mike gone, Cole placed himself directly outside Erin’s
around, cubicle, folded his arms across his chest, and waited. His pulse had s
ld have and now his heart beat hard in his chest and he’d begun to sweat. He
asking like hell the bullet hadn’t been lodged somewhere or she’d need sur
is he so have it removed.

had no Son of a bitch, who’d be firing a gun in the parking lot of the
ouldn’t station?

He stepped closer to the cubicle and heard the doctor’s voice thro
w Mike curtain. “. . . bullet appears to have passed straight through, but we’
re alert, more after some tests.”

“Okay,” Erin said softly, sounding weak, probably from loss of blood.
“Since you’re pregnant, we’re limited to what antibiotics and painkillers we couldn’t give you.”

Erin, as “What?!” At the doctor’s words, the blood drained from Cole’s head.

Before he could pull himself together, the curtain swung wide, and Cole came face-to-face with Erin’s doctor.

Erin stared at him with a horrified expression on her pale face.

“Who are you?” the man in the white lab coat asked.

“It’s okay.” Erin spoke in a shaky voice. She glanced at the doctor’s hazel eyes dull with pain. “Can you give us a few minutes?”

“Of course.” The physician stepped out.

And Cole forced himself to take the other man’s place by Erin’s bed.

He took in her ashen skin and the petrified look on her face and even then immediately the pregnancy discussion could wait.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

“I’m okay.”

“Liar.” He chuckled even as he admired her strength. “Now, how do you really feel?”

“It hurts like hell.” She bit down on her lower lip and sucked in a deep breath. Tears shimmered in her pretty eyes, and he felt her pain deeply.
“I’m sure.”

“I know.” He put a hand on her uninjured shoulder. To his relief, she didn’t flinch or pull away.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“I was with your brother when he got word of shots in the parking garage. When I ran outside, I heard it was you . . .” He shrugged. “And here I am.”

He wondered exactly what he was confessing with the admission. His emotions were in turmoil and obviously they were about to be tossed into the air even more. “Erin—”

“Cole—” she said at the same time.

“Were you going to tell me?” Or was she too humiliated by the thought of being pregnant with *his* child?

He wouldn’t blame her, but that didn’t change the fact that the baby she was carrying was his responsibility.

Oh, man. Baby. Responsibility. Jesus.

“I was trying to find the right time. And the right words.” Her

od. turned pink. She still hadn't met his gaze, but now she looked him in the
killers "You don't question the fact that it's yours?"

He cocked an eyebrow, surprised. "I question a hell of a lot of things
ad. life, but this? No."

and he Her lips turned down in a frown. "Because I'm such a good, sweet
huh?"

No, because he knew through the grapevine she hadn't been
anyone lately. He'd have expected her to be relieved he wasn't going to
tor, her paternity. Instead, she'd sounded more annoyed by her reputation.

He shook his head, telling himself this was no time to be amused
her reactions cute. "If it helps, you weren't such a good girl that night
beside. said, memories and heat swamping him.

She managed a laugh, which had been his intent. Now for the
stuff. "About the baby—"

"I'm keeping it." She attempted to fold her arms across her chest
groaned in pain, tears finally leaking from the corners of her eyes.

His heart clenched in his chest. "Stay still, dammit." He curled his
into fists, feeling useless and unable to help her.

"Don't yell at me!"

"Then don't assume I'd ask you to get rid of my kid!" he barked
back.

They glared at each other, and Cole realized they'd just had the
major disagreement . . . while still managing to come down on the same

"What the fuck did I just hear?" Mike asked, shoving through the
lot. We curtain, his glare bouncing between Cole and Erin.

on. His
around



ONE LOOK AT her brother's horrified expression, and Erin shrank low to the
bed. What a nightmare, and she wasn't talking about being shot. Shot
thought of sleepy hometown, in the police station parking lot, of all places.

Although figuring out who fired at her and why should be her biggest
priority, Mike looked as if he were about to attack Cole, and she
baby she wouldn't allow that. "Mike?"

"What?" he asked, his voice gentling when he looked at her. "Why
cheeks this bastard take advantage of you and why didn't you tell me?"

he eye. She pointed at his clenched fist with her good hand. “That’s why. I didn’t take advantage of me. It was mutual.”

ings in “He should have damn well used protection!” Mike thundered, his voice raised.

et girl, Erin’s embarrassment flew off the charts. “Shh!”

“Quit embarrassing your sister,” Cole said in a more subdued voice. “Seeing that it’s any of your business, but we did use protection.”

o argue *Every time*, Erin thought, but knew better than to say *that out loud*. “Accidents happen,” she said instead.

or find “Well, I hope he intends to—”

ght,” he “That’s enough!” Erin used what strength she had left to yell at her brother before collapsing against the hard pillow behind her. “This is the hardest thing I’ve ever done. Cole and me. I know you care, and I understand you’re upset, but you can’t stand down.”

est but “Or take it out on me when we’re alone. Back off your sister,” Cole said, sounding more protective than she’d imagined him being.

fingers Then again, she didn’t know how he’d handle things. Consider how hard he’d heard the news, so far so good.

ed rightbut holding it in. “Sam’s on his way, and so is Cara,” Mike said, still obviously seething.

Erin sucked in a breath. “You can tell Cara when you’re alone. Don’t expect your first wife to keep secrets from your wife, but I’d appreciate you letting me in on the side. Tell Sam myself. Same with Mom and Dad, and not until they come home.” She pinned Mike with her most serious glare.

“Fine. How’s your arm?” he asked, his voice softening.

“Hurts. I have to see what the doctors will let me take for pain since I’m pregnant.” Before that could get him worked up again, Erin changed the subject. “Have your people found anything on the shooter?”

r in the Mike shook his head. “They’re working on it now, scouring through the area. We’re hoping to find the bullet so we can run ballistics. We’re interviewing people who work in the area, and when you’re up to it, I’ll need to talk to you.”

nd Erin She nodded.

hen did “Any cases you’re working on that scream trouble to you?” Cole asked.

“I—” Erin began.

“Police business, Sanders,” Mike interrupted before she could reply.

And he She rolled her eyes. “Cole knows what he’s doing. Another set of ears, and experience might help.”

his voice “He knows what?” Mike asked Erin.

She opened her mouth and closed it again. Her brother was right. What kind of experience did she think Cole had, considering how little she knew about him?

“I don’t know,” she admitted. But she’d gone off and defended him so loudly. He’d been working for the Secret Service for the last few years.

Her brother and Cole eyed each other warily, as if in possession of a big secret. Erin had seen that look over the years between her two brothers when they wanted her left out of something—for her own good.

“What?!” she half yelled at them.

Cole inclined his head at Mike, obviously giving him permission to say it. Whatever it was.

“Your instincts are right,” her brother said through gritted teeth. “Cole knows what he’s doing. He’s been doing undercover work for the NYF.”

Erin blinked in surprise. Not that her gut feelings about Cole had been wrong, but because she hadn’t any idea where he’d been, what he’d done, or seen. She still didn’t have any inkling about the details, but with the darkness that surrounded him now being the beginnings of an explanation, she suppressed a shiver.

“When will you be released?” Mike asked, changing the subject from the shooter and from Cole.

“They aren’t keeping me overnight, but the doctor still has to run some tests, clean the wound, and bandage it better.”

Mike nodded. “Then Cara will take you back to our place.”

“I’ve got her,” Cole said, stepping close to the head of the bed, his hand firm.

“Whoa,” Erin said. “I don’t care who takes me home, but I’m going home to my place.”

“Not alone,” Cole said.

Erin scrunched her nose and looked up at him. “Why on earth not?”

The two men looked at each other, clearly coming to yet another understanding and agreement that didn’t bode well for her. “Well?”

“You were shot, and you were in pain, or has the burn suddenly gone off?” her brother asked.

of eyes, “No.”

“Then it’s not safe for you to be alone,” Mike said, sounding pleased.

ht. Just *Sadistic bastard*, Erin thought, uncharitably.

ttle she “That’s ridiculous. There’s no way someone deliberately aimed I’m sure I was at the wrong place, wrong time. I don’t have any ca- im likewould remotely lead to someone wanting to hurt me!”

“You think.” Mike narrowed his gaze, his mulish expression on of someseen many times before.

rothers “You can’t say for sure, so safety’s an issue until we know it’s not said, not only agreeing with her brother but clearly taking charge admitted to being in pain, which will get worse before it gets better o revealthey let you take painkillers, you’ll be fuzzy. Not to mention that immobile with the arm being bandaged and in a sling.”

. “Cole He leaned closer and met her brother’s determined gaze. “I’ll t- D.” back to her place and stay. She’ll be safe with me.”

een on “The hell she will.” Mike’s expression morphed back to furious. one . . .coming to my place until we can ascertain who shot her and why, and with theknow she’s safe.” Mike straightened his shoulders, preparing for a fight anation, Erin had had enough of their posturing. “*She* is right here. And s decide what’s best for herself.”

rom the Cole lifted her good hand, taking her by surprise with his gen “While you’re deciding, remember that’s my baby you’re carrying, n somemakes you my responsibility.”

“I can take care of myself.”

The two men did that silent communication thing again, but i s voicewould they decide what was best for her. She’d choose for herself wh was going.

ig back “I’m going home,” she told them in the strongest voice she could n Mike set his jaw. “Then Cole’s going with you.”

” Erin whipped her head around and glared at her brother. “Weren’t one who just questioned his ability to keep me safe?”

r silent “I wanted you with me. I also know better than to think I’ll win wh make up your mind. So if you insist on going home, you’re not going y wornIf you prefer, Sam can move in.”

“No!” Erin and Cole spoke in unison.

Erin loved her brother, but if they were staying under one roof almost probably want to throttle him within an hour. “Mike, go do your job and I need to talk, okay?”

Her brother braced an arm behind her head. “Promise me you won’t hurt me here by yourself?”

“I promise,” she said before Cole could answer for her—because she knew he would.

Mike leaned down and kissed Erin on the forehead. “I’ll be by later,” Cole spoke to her, but his intense stare was on Cole.

Then he took off, leaving Erin alone with the father of her baby. “You wanted to move in with her. Which made Erin wonder just when her life got so complicated, and if gotten so complicated.

Just as Mike left, the doctor returned, which put off any conversation you’re

Exhausted and in pain, Erin was relieved, but she knew the reprieve was only temporary. She had a hunch she and Cole would have plenty to talk about once she was released.

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Chapter Four

SEATED IN THE waiting room, Cole watched the clock while Erin was known. Knowing basic protocol, it would be a while before they assessed the extent of the injury, flushed and treated the wound properly, and prepped her for home.

He wasn't surprised when Mike returned, cornering him in the ER waiting room.

"We need to talk," the other man said.

Cole nodded. "I'm listening."

He owed Mike the respect due as Erin's brother, but the decision had already been made, and he refused to budge. As for Mike's feelings about the pregnancy, well, Cole didn't need to hear that either. Facts were facts, and what was done was done. He couldn't change things now.

To Cole's surprise, Mike settled in beside him in a chair instead of remaining on his feet to give himself the tactical advantage.

"You've been gone a while, so you missed the drama with my old man," Mike said.

Cole hadn't expected this line of discussion. "Simon?"

"No. Rex Bransom."

Cole raised an eyebrow, then suddenly recalled old stories about how Simon Marsden had adopted Mike when he was a baby. Unsure where the conversation was going, all Cole could do was listen. "Go on."

Mike groaned. "Rex got my mother pregnant when they were dating. He was always the bachelor, the charming guy, but not the one anyone really counts on for the long haul."

"Like me," Cole said, not missing the similarities—or the dig.

Mike eyed him intently. "I'm hoping the jury's out on that."

Cole appreciated even that much leeway.

Mike leaned back in his seat. "Look, I know what it's like to get rejected, feeling unwanted by my real father. It didn't matter that Simon was everything right; those scars remained. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

“I won’t abandon my kid,” Cole said emphatically. If he knew anything else, he knew that.

He loved his job. It was dangerous, and it took him away from the semblance of a real life or even the chance of one, but it was all Cole had. And it suited him. None of that meant he wouldn’t provide for his kid.

treated. Mike inclined his head. “That’s a start. But it’s not everything.”

to extent Cole swallowed hard. “Erin.” He said her name before Mike could
er to go “This is my baby sister we’re talking about. I know the hell my
went through, loving Rex, or thinking she did.”

hospital “It’s not like that between Erin and me.”

Mike scowled. “Somehow, I think getting pregnant from a one-night stand is worse.”

Cole opened his mouth to speak, but Mike held up a hand. “Listen, as much as I love my sister, I respect that she’s got to live her own life and make her own choices.”

on the Cole narrowed his gaze. “But?” He heard the unspoken word.

ts, just “But she needs to have choices to make.”

thead of “That’s between your sister and me,” Cole bit out tightly. He was about to be pushed into anything by her concerned brother.

l man,” Not only was it none of Mike’s business but the pregnancy had just sprung on him. He wasn’t denying responsibility, but whatever he had decided, it wasn’t Mike’s call.

Mike rose to his feet. “She’s got an entire family willing to step up to help her. If you’re going to break her heart, don’t hang around.”

ut how The other man hovered over him, but Cole wasn’t intimidated and
e Mike to rise from his seat or take the bait. “Wasn’t it you who just said bailing a kid leaves lingering scars?”

ing. He Mike glared at him. “It sucked, but I dealt with it. All it took was the loss of a good woman. Take a hike if you can’t handle it. Erin will find someone worthy of her to step up in your place.”

Cole’s stomach twisted, and he glared at the man he had thought of as a friend. “And now we get to the real point. I’m not good enough for my sister.”

row up “You said it, man.”

on did Cole set his jaw, willing himself not to launch into anything physical.
ying?” suggest you leave before we both say anything more we might regret.

nothing that baby's father, and I'll be around in whatever capacity Erin and I
Deal with it."

om any Cole chose this moment to rise to his feet.

e knew. "I'll be watching over my sister, Sanders. And over you." With that
stormed off, leaving Cole alone to wait for Erin, his entire body tingling
wired.

. It didn't matter that half of what Mike said echoed things Cole
mother thought himself. Hearing someone else say it only made it that much
real, and he was glad he had time to cool off before Erin was finally led
out in a wheelchair.

ie-night By then, Cole had calmed down, although her brother's
reverberated in his brain. Mike had said plenty, but the one thing that he
looked, as hardest was the idea of Erin with another man. But with her in front
of him, he had to focus on the present—taking a groggy, hurting Erin back
place.

In the car, she remained silent, and when he glanced over at the passenger
seat, he realized she'd fallen asleep.

wasn't Watching her, his lips curled into a grin. She was exactly the
he remembered, innocent and sweet. That she'd been a wildcat in bed, a
wildcat been match for him in every way, in no way detracted from the fact that she
and Erin still pure of heart. Her brother knew her well, whether Cole liked it
or not.

But she was in his life for good, that much he knew. So was his
lifelong commitment he hadn't planned—and the thought made him
sweat.

Pushing those thoughts aside, he gently woke Erin and helped her
out of the car and to her condo unit. Injured or not, he was way too aware of
her.

sexy female. She wore a soft tank top under a cream silk blouse, which
he loved loosely off her slender frame. Thanks to the surprisingly cool
temperature, her nipples were puckered and visible through the sheer tulle.
He figured he was a pig for noticing when she was in such bad shape.

But he was a man, and she leaned against him as he walked her from
the car to her house, upping his awareness of all things Erin. From the familiar
and still-familiar scent of her perfume to the way her hair fell loosely
around her face, he was struck by her fragility and how much he wanted to take
care of her. "I love her."

The thought caused him to catch his breath and nearly trip. He groaned.

decide. a halt, pausing for a minute.

“Bedroom’s upstairs,” Erin said, misreading his sudden halt.

He wasn’t about to correct her assumption. “Thanks,” he said, heading for the short flight of steps and into the main bedroom, where he helped Erin on the bed.

Around him, the room was a mixture of feminine touches, silk furniture had and small accessories, and sturdy light wood furniture.

“Cole?” She opened her hazel eyes and focused on him.

“Yeah?”

“I just . . . Thank you,” she said softly and peered up at him with trust that his entire body absorbed the warmth floating through him.

“You’re welcome,” he said. “Now rest.”

She was out cold before he left the room.

Once downstairs, Cole ran a hand through his hair, feeling more was in the twilight zone with every passing minute. A pregnant woman was stubborn pregnant woman. One he was more than attracted to, even in a disheveled, injured state. If anything, seeing her vulnerable and hurt brought something in him he’d never felt before. Moving in with her was a mistake. Unfortunately for him, he had no choice.

She was

or not.



child. A

ERIN WOKE, IMMEDIATELY aware of the excruciating pain in her arm and the sound of male voices coming from downstairs. She dragged herself out of bed and stopped in the bathroom, groaning when she got a look at her reflection. One-handed, she washed off what was left of her makeup, brushed her hair, and headed downstairs to deal with the men in her life.

She found Mike and Sam seated at her kitchen table, stacks of documents around them, Cole hovering in the background. She recognized her files, many of them confidential, open in front of Mike.

Furious, she cleared her throat. “Just what do you think you’re doing?” Mike glanced up, his expression not the least bit remorseful. “I have a recent and open case sent over. I want to figure out who’d have a say in getting you out of the way or scaring you into backing off.”

“And you couldn’t wait until I woke up?” The pain in her arm was secondary to the blood boiling in her head at the sheer gall of her brother.

Sam jumped up from his seat and came up beside her. “You okay?” he asked, concern in his hazel eyes as they stared into hers.

He was her baby brother, and he loved her, but like Mike, he’d settled overprotective way too far. “I was fine until I found you two in my private work files.”

“Relax,” Mike said, ignoring her concerns.

“You know we have a job to do—” Sam began.

“Then go do it!” She cut him off. “Don’t you have a bullet to find? If you want information on my cases, here’s a novel idea . . . *ask me!*”

Ever the distanced observer, Cole watched from across the room. Her very presence in her small condo unnerved her, but she wasn’t about to argue with him before she let her brothers know how unwelcome their meddling was.

The strain of yelling took a lot out of her, pulling at the muscles in her arms and the stitches, and she couldn’t prevent the groan that escaped.

“That’s it. You two heard her. You’ve done enough here, and Erin triggered to rest.” Cole stepped up, his tone brooking no argument as he faced her siblings.

Most men in Erin’s life lived in healthy respect and awe of her bossy cop brothers. Not Cole Sanders. When he faced them he dominated his space. Erin knew she’d be exchanging one overprotective male for another one, but at this point, she felt comfortable handling Cole. He was right. She just wanted her brothers to give her some space for a while.

Mike rose to his full height, and Erin still felt Cole’s presence larger.

“Look, just because you knocked up my sister doesn’t give you the right to boss her—or us—around.”

“What the hell?” Sam asked, obviously getting the memo about pregnancy for the first time.

“Thanks a lot,” Erin muttered.

Cole clenched his jaw. “One, watch how you talk to or about your sister. Got it? Two, I’m just backing her up since she told you to go away, and she refused to listen, and three, I’m here to protect her. If that means again I’ll be here, so be it.” Cole folded his arms across his chest.

Silence echoed around the room in waves as Cole’s words sank in.

ay?” he knew her brothers, and if she didn’t do something, she’d have a brawl in the kitchen. She exhaled hard. “Let’s take a breather and talk again tomorrow. I’ll go through my cases myself, and you two go to work on your personal work.”

“You’re pregnant?” Sam asked, his mind still obviously reeling from the news. “By him?”

Erin nodded. “Yes. And that’s a discussion for another time. I’ll talk to you about everything. I promise. Just give me . . . us . . . some space now.”

Sam straightened his shoulders, his body language obstinate. But when he turned to face her, he reached for her hand. “You’ll always be the one to deal with it, but I get it. I’ll back off for now. But we will talk.”

“Yes. And thank you.” She kissed his cheek, then turned to her brother. “Mike?”

“Yeah,” he muttered, clearly unhappy.

Erin would call Cara later and warn her she’d need to soothe her lioness. “Thank you too,” she said to Mike.

She finally got them out the door and turned to Cole. “Well, they’re gone.”

“Yep.”

“So what happens next?” she asked, wondering just what her brother’s plan for guarding her entailed.

“If you go out, I go with you.”

She nodded. “And if I stay in and watch television?”

“I do that too.”

Short and to the point, she thought. “Uh-huh. And . . . you’ll be home at bedtime and return in the morning before I go to work?”

Cole narrowed his gaze. “I thought we went over this at the hospital when you were staying here. With you.”

“And I thought once I got settled, you’d calm down and realize I’ll be alone. I’ll respect the notion that when I’m out, I need protection until I figure out who took the shot, but here?” She swept her free arm around the condo. “I’m perfectly safe.”

“The alarm system looks pretty standard,” he said with a scowl.

Erin shrugged. “It does its job. It’ll dial Central Station if someone gets in. If the condo and its alarm were good enough for Cara when she lived in it, it’s good enough for me.”

l in her His frown deepened. "I'm staying."

ight or From the determined set of his jaw, she decided not to argue. "Th
back to see what I've got for lunch," she muttered, pulling open the refrigerator

Cole came up behind her, his body heat warm, his masculinity
om the drifting toward her. She didn't know why he had such a potent effect

but just his nearness aroused her, despite the pain she was in. And
talk to and desire for this man were what had gotten her pregnant to begin v
ow." why wasn't a complete one-eighty in her life enough to dampen her ne

when he He peered over her shoulder at the contents of the fridge. "That's
sister I sounded alarmed.

She took in the Greek yogurt, orange juice, eggs, skim milk, an
r older Oh, and the multiple bags of Oreos she'd been craving when she
nauseous. She preferred the cookies hard, cold, and crunchy. "
wrong?"

brother, "There's no substantial food in there, that's what. No wonder yo
ready to pass out and starving," he muttered.

they're She blinked. "Uh, that was morning sickness," she informed him.

He cocked an eyebrow. "Maybe."

Stubborn man. "Fine. Go fill up a shopping cart to your heart's con
thought "I plan to. And you're going with me when I do. I'm not leavi
alone, remember?"

She decided not to dignify that comment with an answer.

"We'll order in today so you can rest, and we'll go food sh
tomorrow. You're not working until next week. The doctor said you
eave attack it easy."

Erin frowned. He might be right, but he was also bossy and cont
tal. I'm "Any other orders for me?"

He lifted his head from the fridge and pinned her with his dark sta
can be I recall, you liked it when I gave orders."

until we Her heart skipped a beat. Yikes! The man went right for the jugula
and the "It's rude to remind me of that," she muttered.

He chuckled and she turned to walk out of the room.

"Where are you going?"

breaks "To take a painkiller and watch some TV."

ed here, "Not on an empty stomach," he said. "I'll make you some eggs."

She whipped her head around to face him. "You cook?" Becau

didn't.

en let's "If I want to eat, I cook. Living over Joe's and the coffee shop, I
r. bothered much, but in this place? Yeah. I'll cook. How about you?" he

e scent Her mother always said she'd regret not spending any time in the
on her, with her, and Erin never thought she'd agree. "Umm . . ."

arousal He raked his gaze over her. "Really? How the hell do you survive?"

with. So "Takeout! Mom lives half a mile away. My best friend's family o
ed? diner in town. I'm hardly starving."

it?" He "You're skinny, though, and now you're eating for two." He open
closed drawers until he found the skillet and other cooking utensils
d fruit. looking for. "Sit." He tapped the chair with a spatula.

wasn't She eased herself into the chair, unwilling to confess that her le
'What's been about to give out, the pain from her arm making her dizzy and we

"I hope you're always going to be this easy," he said, his please
u were causing a distinct flip in her stomach.

"Don't count on it," she muttered.

"Considering you don't cook, your house is filled with all the right

tent." "What can I say? My mom still holds out hope." Her mom. Who
would soon have to tell she was pregnant.

ng you Nausea that had nothing to do with hunger or morning sickness fil
at the realization, and she lay her head on the table to wait for her food



opping
should

ERIN SURVIVED COLE'S first night at her house by passing out and not
rolling. up until late the next morning. Since she was in her bed with no reco
of how she got there, she realized she must have fallen asleep watch
re. "As after dinner. Which meant Cole must have carried her to bed. *Quite the
he's turning out to be*, she thought.

r. A dark knight who'd spent years undercover doing who knows w
or with whom. He obviously carried the emotional scars, and he'd
brooding bad boy when she'd known him before. But now? She couldn
his moods or feelings about their situation, but he was certainly step
and taking care of her.

use she For Erin, who'd never found a guy who treated her like she was p
or meant something to him, she found she appreciated being pampere

she wasn't feeling well. And that was the thought that had her ready to haven't and back on her feet.

asked. She couldn't get used to Cole taking care of her. From here on out, she would have to take care of herself and their child. He'd have a say in their baby's life. She wasn't an idiot . . . she'd accept reasonable financial help. But for this pregnancy meant giving up the dream of having the love and money her parents shared. That her brother and Cara now had. That Alexa and Ryan had. Finding a good man was hard enough. Finding one willing to take care of another man's baby? Those were few and far between. But her reality was that she could allow herself to mistake Cole's obligation to her for caring for her. He'd made himself clear each time she'd seen him peering over the nightstand.

ask. The truth sent a knifelike pain to her heart, and as she climbed out of bed, the throbbing in her arm added to her torment. But she managed. Once she awkwardly used the bathroom and brushed her teeth with one hand, she was starting for the kitchen when the doorbell rang.

tools." Cole beat her to the front door. She heard him talking to someone from Erin looking around before letting whoever it was inside.

Macy barreled past him, waiting until he shut the door and turned around before getting in his face. "What are you doing here, and where's your friend demanded.

"I'm right here," Erin said from the top of the stairs.

Both Macy and Cole turned as Erin walked down the few steps to her friend. Macy's gaze ran over her, her wide-eyed panic subsiding as she saw for herself Erin was okay. "Oh, honey," she said, her gaze falling on the bandage and sling. "Come sit."

"I take it you heard what happened?" Erin asked.

"Good news travels fast," Macy said with sarcasm in her tone.

"I didn't know you were awake," Cole said. He hooked his thumb into his jeans pockets and stared at her with that intense look that set her nerves on edge.

His black T-shirt showed off well-defined muscles. He hadn't been a bodybuilder, but he was even more appealing scruffy than any man should be, with a few scars and a look that looked like roadkill. She could only imagine the sight she presented, and she did her best not to wince.

"How's the pain?" he asked.

to get up “Bad,” she admitted.

His eyes darkened.

But, she’d “Can you take anything given your condition?” Macy asked, smiling, and Erin.

For Erin, She’d forgotten she and Cole weren’t alone. Part for the course around a marriageman, it seemed.

And Luke Suddenly, Macy cleared her throat, her eyes widening in sheer panic. She managed not to laugh at her friend’s distress. “He knows.”

Why didn’t “Oh? Oh!” She whipped her head around to look at Cole, who, with a baby face expression, true to form, was bland, giving nothing away. “So can you just do anything?”

“Tylenol, definitely. And the doctor gave me a prescription for something to take out of bed, stronger to take sporadically if I’m in agony, but . . . I’m trying not to take it again,” Macy squeezed her hand. “Well, I’m sure that makes rest all the more important, then. You need to be still.”

Cole nodded. “She’s right. Sit. I’ll go get you something for breakfast outside,” Macy narrowed her gaze, obviously not sure what to make of his offer.

“I’ve got loads of food for you in my car. My mom sent me over with some toward meals for you to heat for a good couple of days.”

“Erin?” Sonya Donovan, Macy’s mother, was a sweet woman who treated children’s friends like they were her own. “Thank her for me.”

“I will.”

How to greet “Well, I’ve got eggs ready to cook, so you can eat those this morning when Cole shifted his gaze to Macy. “Leave your car keys on the counter and I’ll bring you a carload for you when I’m through.” Without waiting for a reply, Cole and strode back into the kitchen.

“He always so chatty?” Macy asked, not bothering to hide the sarcasm in her tone.

“That was actually Cole at his most charming.”

“So how’d it go when you told him?” Macy asked as she and Erin walked into the club chairs in the den. Macy curled her legs beneath her and leaned forward in her seat.

While she Erin cringed at the memory. “He overheard the doctor say something about me being pregnant. He was shocked, obviously. But it’s all behind us back seat to the shooting. We haven’t really talked much about it yet,” she bit her lower lip.

“Well, he’s here and obviously taking care of you. So does that mean two are . . . together?”

Erin shook her head. “Not even close. He’s my bodyguard. He almost had a brawl over who would take me home and where I would live. When I insisted on coming back here, Mike relented and let Cole be my watchdog.” And she hated being his responsibility just as much as she hated the idea that he was now saddled with her and a baby for the rest of his life.

When Erin envisioned her future, it was with a man she loved and who adored her in return. Maybe it was old-fashioned and silly, but she’d spend her life with her parents together and watched her brother Mike fall hard for Cara, himself inside out to make her happy. She didn’t want to settle for anything less. Like being a man’s burden.

“What was that big sigh for?” Macy asked, too observant for her own good.

“Nothing. No sigh. It’s fine.”

Macy’s scowl let Erin know her friend didn’t buy the lie. “For him yet. Who’s just your bodyguard, he’s pretty concerned about you.”

“Yeah, well, that’s just a sense of obligation.” She frowned. “As soon as I can get this sling off and move my arm a little, he won’t need to hover over me.”

“We’ll see. Meanwhile, any word on the shooter? Word around town is that it was a stupid kid who shouldn’t have been playing with guns.”

Erin cocked an eyebrow. “Really? As far as I know, they have no idea who shot me. Until the police find something, the overprotective men in my life are going to be here and I’ll be taking the shots.”

She laughed at her bad pun, and Macy rolled her eyes. “You’re unbelievably sexy. You know that, right?” Macy said of Cole, lowering her voice as she spoke.

“And brooding, and moody . . .” And occasionally charming and handsome, but she wasn’t giving Macy any ammunition. “And he’s also a complex, settled enigma who doesn’t seem to want to let anybody in.”

“Well, you’re his baby mama. He’s living here. If anyone can get through that gruff exterior, I’m sure it’s my sweet, gentle, caring best friend.” Macy waggled her eyebrows.

“You aren’t warning me away?” Erin asked, surprised. She, too, kept her voice to a whisper. “Because my brothers are livid, my parents will forbid anybody in town will socialize with him except his cousins.”

ean you “And you,” Macy helpfully reminded her. “Besides, you weren’t t
on that when you slept with him,” she said with a grin. “I trust your ju
d Mike completely. I always have. So unless you’ve changed your mind abo
ld stay.—”

le play “No!” She wouldn’t share with Macy what she’d learned about h
e hated but her friend was right. Erin had good instincts. She’d always thoug
s life. was a decent guy, and what she’d learned about him yesterday and his
nd whotoward her proved it—no matter what he’d seen or done.

een her She drummed her fingertips on the chair. “Look, I know h
turning responsible for the baby, but I want more from life, from a relationsh
nything know that.”

Macy nodded, her expression sober as she met Erin’s gaze. “
Erin’s suggest you find a way to get it from the man who fathered your child.

Erin opened her mouth to reply, but Cole’s voice calling from the
stopped her. “Food’s ready.”

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“And you,” Macy helpfully reminded her. “Besides, you weren’t focused on that when you slept with him,” she said with a grin. “I trust your judgment completely. I always have. So unless you’ve changed your mind about him —”

“No!” She wouldn’t share with Macy what she’d learned about his past, but her friend was right. Erin had good instincts. She’d always thought Cole was a decent guy, and what she’d learned about him yesterday and his actions toward her proved it—no matter what he’d seen or done.

She drummed her fingertips on the chair. “Look, I know he’ll be responsible for the baby, but I want more from life, from a relationship. You know that.”

Macy nodded, her expression sober as she met Erin’s gaze. “Then I suggest you find a way to get it from the man who fathered your child.”

Erin opened her mouth to reply, but Cole’s voice calling from the kitchen stopped her. “Food’s ready.”

“He cooks,” Macy said with an already devoted sigh. “He might just be a keeper.”

Not wanting to argue with her friend, Erin pushed herself up from the chair with care. Cole Sanders wasn’t a keeper. He wanted nothing to do with hearth, home, family, and most of all, love.

Chapter Five

MACY STAYED WITH Erin through breakfast, then to help her shower getting her bandage wet, as well as to wash and dry her hair.

Afterward, Erin collapsed onto her bed, exhausted. “Thank you so much. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

Macy grinned. “My pleasure. Mr. Bodyguard might have his uses, but he waggled her eyebrows to emphasize the point—“but only a girlfriend can handle things like this. Unless . . . you wanted him to see you naked again.”

Erin peered up at her friend from her prone position. “Are you kidding me? That’s what got me pregnant,” she muttered.

“Clearly, his sperm is as potent as he is.” Macy chuckled. “Need another condom before I go?”

“Between the food and the help, you’ve gone above and beyond. Thank you. Erin appreciated the bond between them more than she could express in this moment.

“Hey, I know you’d do the same for me. I’ll check in on you later.” Macy blew a kiss and started for the door, turning before she walked out. “If you’re interested in more from Cole than him keeping you safe, you’ve got to be exactly where you want him. Do something about it,” she said, then disappeared out of the room before Erin could reply.

Not that Erin had a ready response anyway. She needed to think, but she thought spontaneously. Again. She placed her hand over her still-flat belly, unable to believe there was life growing inside her. Whatever happened between her and Cole, it wouldn’t be because Erin pushed him beyond what he was capable of giving—or worse, more than what he wanted to give. No, it would be what Macy wanted to whip up in her fairy-tale-oriented brain.

As she thought about Macy, Erin bolted up in bed, groaning in pain. “Shit!” She just realized Macy had gone downstairs alone, which meant she was free to corner and grill Cole.

Unwilling to let that happen, Erin rushed downstairs in time to hear her friend say, “Not that I’m one to meddle, but that’s my best friend up

and if you hurt her, I'll come after you with a shotgun.”

“Get in line behind her brothers,” Cole said, arms folded across his chest with an amused half grin on his sexy mouth.

Erin didn't know what he found funny, but *she* was plain embarrassed.

“This isn't high school revisited,” Erin said to her best friend.

“What are you doing out of bed? You said you were exhausted.” Without a word, she shooed her away with the back of her hand.

Instead of taking the hint, Erin continued down the stairs. “I was trying to stop you from making an ass of yourself—and of me—but I see I was a little late.”

“Nothing wrong with someone having your back,” Cole said to her, taking her by surprise.

“And I believe he's got yours.” Macy nodded toward Cole.

“Message received,” he assured her.

Erin rolled her eyes. “Go home, Macy.”

Her friend blew her a kiss. “Check in on you later!” With a wave, she disappeared out the front door.

“You want to watch TV and rest?” Cole asked.

She nodded.

A few minutes later, they were in the family room, where they watched a half hour of television before her heavy eyelids drifted closed. Cole didn't want her to go back up to sleep, and instead of being annoyed by his bossy tone, she bolted to do his bidding, needing space from her ever-present awareness of him as a man. A sexy, potent, desirable man.

She was just about to head upstairs when her doorbell rang. Erin wanted to go, but Cole held up a hand to stop her.

“I've got it. Stay here.”

She scowled but again let him take charge. Her arm throbbed and she was exhausted, so appeasing him seemed easiest, at least for now.

Once at the door, Cole looked out the glass on the side and opened the door a crack, his hand on his holstered weapon.

Jeez, she thought. Overkill much?

He spoke to someone through the small crack in the door, then opened it wider and returned with a vase full of yellow roses. Her favorite.

“I wonder who they're from,” she said, excitement in her voice. “What woman didn't like receiving roses?”

Cole's expression darkened as he placed them on the table. She pressed the card to her chest, for the card, reading the short inscription:

Take care of yourself and don't rush back till you're up to it. Evan.

"Well?" Annoyance threaded through Cole's tone.

"No one important."

"Macy He reached out and snatched the card from her hand.

"Hey! That's private!"

"What if it's from the shooter?"

He read the words, and his scowl deepened. "Who the hell is Evan?"

"Evan Carmichael. My boss."

Erin, Cole muttered something under his breath.

"What did you say?" she asked, attempting for civility. At this rate they were going to kill each other.

"Nothing." He sat back down in front of the television and did not say another word.

Erin rolled her eyes. If she didn't know better, she'd think he was jealous.

But Cole's past actions taught her he wouldn't get jealous of anything in Erin's life. And he never would.



Erin touched a

finger and insisted

A COUPLE OF days into their new living arrangement, Cole was doing his best to keep his mind off Erin in the guest room of her house, doing his best not to think about Erin's name. A knock sounded.

Erin stood, "Come in."

She stepped inside as he maneuvered to his feet, noting her gaze strayed to his sweaty body.

"I forgot, but I need to go out," she said.

"I see that." He took in her jeans, black silk top, and ballet flats. "Where are we going?"

She narrowed her gaze at his use of the word *we*. "I meet clients on Thursday nights at an office downtown."

"You're not supposed to work for a week," he reminded her.

"It's just tonight, and I don't want to argue about it."

Erin, since He raised an eyebrow and asked, "How far downtown?"

"All the way. Next door to Lynette's Diner."

reached He folded his arms across his chest. “Not a neighborhood I want you
night.”

“Too bad. I’m going. Which, as you so eloquently told me, means going. It’s bad enough to bail on my day job, but these people count on a whole different way.” Without explaining further, she started to leave and turned back for a minute. “Meet me downstairs when you’re ready.”
paused. “Please.”

He hadn’t expected to go out tonight, but one look at her determined expression, and he decided not to fight this particular battle. A little later, Cole parked Erin’s Jeep in a dimly lit parking spot and walked into a small office next door to Lynette’s.

When he reached the entrance and looked up at the writing above the door, the name explained everything. “Pro bono, huh?”

Erin shot him a proud grin and grabbed the door handle before he could do it for her.

Inside, the waiting room was full of people, mostly women, none of whom had young children with them. Although some didn’t look up as they walked in, and others glanced warily at Cole, the kids all perked up when they saw Erin.

“Erin!” A little girl with two missing front teeth ran up to her with a grin.

“Hi, Merry!” Erin knelt so she was eye level with the child. “Hi, Merry!”
when a you?”

“Good. Mommy said if you can get money from my dad, then maybe I can leave the shelter soon and find a real apartment of our own.”

“I’ll do my best,” she promised the child.

Cole’s heart clenched at the seriousness of the girl’s words. Such hope and such a sad situation. Yet she looked up at Erin with such faith that Cole wanted to believe she could perform miracles.

He accepted her request that he sit outside her door, a request of paramount importance, especially for this kind of client. He waited for the next four hours as she worked with as many people as she could get through her office, never turning anyone away. Not even when her eyes were closing from exhaustion, and he caught her mid-yawn when she walked the second-to-last client out.

He knew it was her second-to-last client because he’d turned the

ou in atthe front door. She was pregnant, had been shot, and needed rest. She
to forgive him, assuming she even realized. But thankfully, she didn't.
y, you're "Arm hurt?" he asked as he helped her get settled in the car after t
n me inclient of the night.

ave but "Badly."

y." She He managed not to growl at her for overdoing it and climbed i
driver's seat and got them on the road. "Those women rely on you."

rmained "They do." She leaned her head against the window.

e while "Makes me wonder what my mom would have done if she'd had
with herlike this to come to," he said, staring into the dark night as he drove.

"What?" Erin lifted her head.

ove the "Never mind." He didn't like to talk about those years.

She studied him through wise eyes. "The one thing I always kn
e couldthat I had it good growing up. And my mom? She had it good because
stepped up when Mike's real father wouldn't. But what would have ha
many ofto her if there had been no Simon? If she had been pregnant and alo
p whennowhere to turn? I want to make sure these women know the
ked upsomewhere. Someone."

Oh man, she was too good to be true. His mother would lo
a huge"They're lucky to have you."

She shot him a grateful smile. "That's nice of you to say," s
low arethrough a yawn.

"I'm not nice."

ybe we She rolled her head to the side. "You have your moments," she cou

Thankfully, he pulled into the driveway of her condo before he
reply.

h huge

h, even



ntiality SOMEHOW ERIN SURVIVED the first week of living with Cole. They ma
And he progress in any kind of breakthrough in their relationship, which m
walked uneasy, as she'd have a future of dealing with him. Neither of them di
es were her pregnancy, though she sensed he was taking the time to process l
ked her reality. And since she, too, had needed time after she'd found o
couldn't deny him the same.

lock on For now, Erin had enough to deal with, including the immobility

'd have arm and the pain from the bullet, which was getting slightly better day. For the baby's sake, she took as little medication as possible, but she finally meant she hadn't slept much.

Still, she returned to work, grateful to be getting out of the house and even more grateful to be back in the office.

Trina greeted her with a welcome-back cake, which nearly brought her to tears. She blamed it on the hormones. Her first two days back were more than she'd anticipated. She tired easily, a combination of lingering pain and a placebo drag on her body from the injury combined with the pregnancy.

Always observant, Evan noticed and stepped in, assuring her that he would spread out her workload until she could handle everything again. She appreciated it and stopped insisting she could do more when she knew she couldn't. This unexpected pregnancy had certainly shown her limitations. Simon accepting them was better than thinking she was Superwoman.

Her biggest problem at the office was Cole. His hulking presence near her door had everyone talking, providing an endless source of gossip and speculation among the women. Erin, who'd always been a private person, told them he was her bodyguard because of the shooting, and he'd survived. They figured out who'd shot at her and why. She could only imagine how her colleagues would react when her stomach ballooned and the truth about the shooting and Cole came out.

Especially Evan. He postured around Cole, and Cole returned the favor. And for what? Yes, Evan had asked her out in the past. Yes, they'd gone on one date when he moved back to town before he'd been elected and had to leave for his boss. But no, she hadn't found the chemistry needed to go out with him again. Not that he didn't keep trying, but it had become a game between them. She was his challenge, and he enjoyed the chase. But Evan relied on her legal abilities and she felt the same about his, and that was that. Hardly. Not that Cole understood.

Since the flowers had arrived, Cole acted like Evan was both the threat and direct competition who needed to be chased off. Unfortunately, she treated Cole the same way. In reality, neither man had a claim on her, and the endless stress of the two men's reactions was slowly driving her insane.

As for her shooting, the bullet had been found lodged in a nearby tree well as the shell casing, near the woods. Only an amateur would have left evidence behind, but at least they had something to work with. Mike :

day by evidence to the state police crime lab, which was backed up with which *important cases*, and that news sent her brother over the edge. To catch while waiting on ballistics, Erin had given in and gone over her case and her brother's, even though she believed the possibility was ridiculous—the Serendipity police were questioning people she was prosecuting—right Erin had predicted—with no results.

With Cole around, a reminder of his presence in Erin's future and her brothers were in constant bad moods just as she was in a constant awareness. How could she not be? A sleepy, just-awake Cole was as if he'da ready-for-bed, sleepy-eyed man. Knowing he was just a room away in. She to her tossing and turning.

At least she was now allowed to remove the sling and use her arms, and as she could, which helped her feel better and improve her mood.

She glanced at her watch, noting it was time to leave for her three o'clock appointment. She walked out of her office and nudged her bodyguard to go.

“Where are we off to?” he asked.

“It's a long story,” she said as they made their way out of the office toward the elevator.

“I'm not going anywhere,” he reminded her.

She sighed. “I'm doing a favor for Macy's aunt Lulu. You see, she had an argument with her sister, Macy's grandmother, over the pies at the restaurant. So Aunt Lulu applied for a job at the new supermarket that just opened in town.”

She glanced at Cole to see if he was really listening and was surprised to see his eyes on her, rapt and attentive. With a shrug, she followed him to the elevator. Cole hit the ground-floor button, and she continued her work while they took the short ride down.

“So while Aunt Lulu was setting up the cake displays at the supermarket, a portion of the roof collapsed, and she ended up with a concussion and a bruise. She sued, of course, and it should have been settled quickly, and instead, the parent company sent in a high-powered law firm that immediately slammed Lulu's attorneys with paperwork and documents in an effort to get her to drop the suit.” Erin frowned, hating that the older woman was being railroaded by a big corporation.

“You're a criminal prosecutor. What does this have to do with you

h more asked, pausing by the security desk in the lobby.

Im him Erin shrugged. "I promised her I'd look into why a small workers case has become a legal nightmare. Maybe throw my weight around a s. Still, some strings. It makes no sense to hound an older woman." Erin had and, as made some phone calls prior to being shot, but nobody at the super main office had returned them.

ire, her Cole nodded and turned to Edgar, the afternoon security guard state of in the lobby. "Has it been quiet?"

sexy as "Very few folks in and even fewer out," Edgar said, patting the y added book in front of him. "How are you feeling, Miss Erin?"

She grinned. An older, grandfatherly type, Edgar had been at h n as far longer than Erin had been of legal age. "No worries. I'm better ever she assured him.

o'clock Edgar hadn't been on duty when she was shot, but he'd been as dis . "Time as Murray, the morning guard. She tried not to think about that day. she waved good-bye to Edgar, she paused by the front doors. Those bulletproof, but Erin had been outside when she'd been shot.

ice and Shaking off the thought before she stepped outdoors, she gripped handle—and froze, suddenly unable to push open the door, let alone through it. Though she'd promised herself not to give in to fear, even had an the shooting, a simple walk through the parking lot was more traumatic. she'd like to admit.

ened in "Erin?"

From a distance, she heard Cole's deep voice calling her name, but rised to could hear was the chirping of birds that fateful morning and the p m onto sound of the rifle.

er story Dizziness assaulted her, and dark spots danced before her eyes. M she was back in the moment, and not even the knowledge that it market, happening now helped her move. Without warning, her knees b d some beneath her.

ldy, but Strong arms lifted her, and when she finally focused, she was wra 1, who warmth, protected by a hard male body and enveloped in a purely ma scovery scent that triggered memories of a night she couldn't forget.

ng how "Cole?" She blinked up at him, surprised to find his face so close, near hers. Concern and worry marred his handsome face.

?" Cole "You okay?" he asked.

He'd obviously caught her before she passed out and had taken her to a private corner of the lobby. "I am now." She fought off the embarrassment and pulled herself together, instead appreciating the safety she felt in his arms. "Panic attack, huh?" His serious gaze never left hers.

She shrugged. "I guess."

"I know."

The certainty in his tone intrigued her. How was he so sure this was pregnancy- or nausea-related?

"Miss Erin?" Edgar's voice sounded from above her, interrupting her. She could ask Cole that question. "Are you okay?" the elderly man asked.

"She's fine," Cole said gruffly.

"Can I get you something?" Edgar asked.

Erin nodded. "Water would be great. Thank you."

"Be right back."

Cole refocused on her. "Dizziness better?" he asked.

"Yes." She ran her tongue over her dry lips, noting he hadn't moved to shift her out of his lap. And given that once she moved, she'd lose his warmth and security, she wasn't in any rush.

"The open parking lot scares me," she said softly.

"Jesus," Cole muttered at the admission, his arms tightening around her. "And she accepted the comfort."



At all she was dropping, Cole had taken one look at Erin's pale face, recognized the signs of fainting, and grabbed her before her knees buckled. "Nobody's going to hurt you again." They'd have to go through him first.

The trust in her eyes humbled him, and he hoped he could live up to it. The same thing working in his favor also weighed against him. Cole was protecting a woman in whom he had an emotional investment—a problem. But instead of making him weak, he swore to himself his experience would make him stronger, more vigilant, and aware, instead of less.

Knowing she needed him, whether she wanted to or not, gave him a fortitude he hadn't known was in his genetic makeup. *She's mine* to protect, he thought, tightening his arms around her. *Mine* to protect, he knew the distinction was of the utmost importance in both keeping

er to asafe and giving him the distance he needed to do his job and not h
ment ofwhen he left on his next case.

is. “I know my fear isn’t rational; it’s psychological.” She glanced do
long eyelashes dark against her pale skin.

“It’s like PTSD,” he explained, attempting to keep a detachment fi
subject he didn’t feel. He’d gone through a rough case of post-tra
wasn’tstress disorder after his first undercover op ended. And though his su
and the department shrink had assured him that most felt it at one
; beforeanother, Cole had fought like hell to overcome the debilitating reaction
ed. “What do you mean?” Erin asked.

“Rationally, you know everything is okay, but your mind takes yo
in time, and you have no control over your body or its reactions.”
explanation had him gritting his teeth, knowing how close to the sur
own memories actually were. His fingers curled into tight fists until
soft groan of pain alerted him to the fact that he was pinching t
made abeneath her blouse.

’d lose He ran his thumbs over her arm by way of apology.

“How do you know so much about it?” she asked.

“Water, just like you wanted,” Edgar said, shoving a bottle at her.

und her “Thanks,” she said.

Cole opened the bottle, and she drank, leaving him well aware th
been granted a reprieve from her question. Much of his wor
confidential; more of it was shit he didn’t like or need to talk about.
the required shrink sessions for that, and he’d learned to put it behi
f panic,when he walked away. But Erin was persistent, and he wondered how
urt youwould be before she pushed him for answers he wasn’t ready to give
long he could hold out against the pull she had over him.

ip to it. She wasn’t deliberately tempting him, that much he knew. If ar
ole was she was keeping her distance, or had been until he drew her into
definite wrapped her in his arms, and shielded her from her own fears. It was
notions her appeal, the way she held on to her dignity and pride. But living w
taking care of her—hell, just being around her twenty-four seven—E
a type becoming harder and harder to resist.

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Chapter Six

THE REST OF the week passed with no repeat of Erin's panic attack, she couldn't stop thinking about that out-of-control feeling—and that she had that Cole knew more about what she'd experienced than he'd She'd asked, but he hadn't offered up information, so she'd let it go. she'd let it go when he'd wondered aloud what his mother would have had there been a pro bono clinic back when she'd left his father.

She still hoped for answers one day, but he was so self-contained doubted they'd be forthcoming.

Neither Cole nor her brothers wanted her out in public, in place of Joe's Bar, where she was an easy target, and Erin wasn't used to being confined. Having Cole for company definitely helped her when she was feeling cooped up or antsy.

As she readied for bed, washing up, brushing her teeth, and moisturizing well, she glanced in the mirror at her bare stomach. Not quite flat anymore, there was a slight roundness now that clothes still hid, and her breasts were more sensitive and slightly fuller. She swallowed hard, knowing how not-ready she felt, she'd better get there and fast. Her parents were coming home Wednesday, and she'd have to tell them about her prep for the shooting, and her new roommate-slash-bodyguard.

She climbed into bed and listened to the sounds of Cole in the next room. Familiar noises she was more than growing used to hearing. The creak of the floor as he walked, the sound of him opening, then closing, the bathroom door in the hall. If he worked out, doing sit-ups, push-ups, and chin-ups on a bar he hung in the bedroom doorway, he'd shower before bed.

Erin didn't know what was harder for her, knowing he was a few feet away, naked in her shower, or catching a glimpse of his bare chest flexing muscles as he pulled himself up then lowered from the bar, viewing out the definition she'd once felt beneath her hands. Hot skin she'd lick over her lips over, then followed with her tongue.

Yes, bad-girl Erin was latent and begging to come out, especially

that the morning sickness had begun to subside, just as the doctor pro around fourteen weeks into her pregnancy. To make matters wor sexual desire returned full force, although she could also attribute Cole's invasion into her life. At first, she'd been in too much pain from shot to think much about sex. Then she'd been too shaken up to fo anything beyond one day at a time. But slowly, life had retur normal . . . except for Cole living in her home.

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And her mind consistently rewound to the day she'd panicked at and his immediate reaction. Not only had he been aware of her emotio his reaction had gone over and above what a bodyguard would—or sh do. There were other ways he could have taken care of her dizzini panic, starting with sitting her on a chair and placing her head betw knees. Instead, he'd pulled her onto his lap, cradling her in his war and protecting her with every breath he took.

His gentleness did more to affect her than his potent arousal, an felt the swell of his erection pressing against her core. Nothing had b same for her since, not with her hormones so crazy, her emotions all c place, and desire raging like a furnace inside her. So it was no surpr she tossed and turned in her bed, unable to fall asleep—and when s panicked dreams took hold.

She went to the mall, where someone was stalking her, so she rar car and nearly missed being shot at again. She drove to the police but even there, someone was firing a gun at her in the parking lot. Sh up with a scream, bolting upright in bed, her heart pounding as she around the darkened room.

Without warning, the lights switched on and Cole burst in, gun which only caused her to choke out another shriek.

He lowered the weapon immediately. "Easy," he said, placing the the dresser across from her.

She managed a nod.

"You okay?" he asked, coming up to the side of the bed.

"Yeah," she whispered, once again feeling ridiculous for overreac had a nightmare." Goose bumps raised on her arms as she trembled v aftereffects of the dream.

He sat on the edge of the bed, and Erin suddenly realized he wor of tight boxer briefs . . . and nothing more. It took everything she had

omised, her gaze above his waist, where the dark strip of hair trailed below her waistband. She flicked her stare to his chest, but his bulk and muscles that to help either, so she looked at his face. Concern etched his handsome features as he said, “Want to talk about it?” he asked.

ocus on She managed a nod. “Everywhere I went, someone was after me. I couldn’t escape the gunshots or this stalker. I know it wasn’t real, but it felt like I was being hunted,” she said, mortified when a tear fell.

work— He leaned in and brushed at the moisture with his thumb. “Maybe you should talk to a professional,” he suggested.

ould— She shook her head. “No. It’s stupid, and it’ll go away. Nobody can help me anyway. I still think the shooting was random, but until the police have been here and you don’t need to guard me anymore, I’ll continue to do my best to stay safe.” But believing she hadn’t been targeted and feeling safe warred with her mind, still heavy with the remnants of the dream.

d she’d She shivered and curled deeper under the comforter, not wanting to let go of herself again yet not knowing how to ask him to stay. She was feeling so vulnerable, and if he said no, she might embarrass herself and burst into tears. She took in a deep breath, letting it out with a small shudder. He placed his hand on her shoulder, and she felt that strong touch deep inside her.

She turned and looked up at him, drawing on courage she didn’t have. “Please stay.”

station, He sucked in a surprised breath. Erin held hers, but she refused to let go of the words back. From the moment she found out she was pregnant, she had felt alone—with the shock, with the morning sickness, and on her own when she’d been shot. She was only so strong, and that strength had finally been drawn, the nightmare. She needed comfort, and she wanted it from Cole.

Even if it was just for one night—and Lord knew they were expecting a child.

She held her breath as he pulled down the covers and climbed in next to her, too far away for her even to feel his body heat. That wasn’t good enough for her. She cleared her throat and rolled onto her other side, facing him. “I’m

with the “I can’t sleep. Tell me a story,” she said, getting a chuckle from him. She liked his laugh, more because he didn’t do it often and she had never heard a pair work for the ones he gave her.

to keep “What do you want to hear?” He propped himself up on his side.

ow the “How about what you’ve been up to the last few years?” she sug
s didn’t knowing he wouldn’t like the subject. “In general, if you can’t
atures. specifics.”

His frown told her she was right. “I don’t like to talk about it.”
me. I “Since you’re my baby’s father, I want to know more about you
at I feltdon’t think asking about your past is unreasonable. You said yo
undercover, so it must be serious.”

’be you “It is, when I’m living it. When a case is finished, it’s over.”

She held his gaze, looking into his handsome face and refusing to
’s afteroff the hook. “I don’t think it is. At least not for you.”

e call it He cocked an eyebrow. “Aren’t you the one who had the bad dre
feel onshouldn’t we be talking about who or what could possibly be upsetting

d in her Erin bit the inside of her cheek. “Good try. But I asked about yo
do you know so much about anxiety attacks and PTSD?”

o be by “I just suggested it as a possibility,” he muttered.

ing too “When most people would have attributed it to pregnancy. Co
o tears.Cole. I’m not stupid. I see that something haunts you.”

placed a He shook his head and groaned. “You’re so damned stubbo
muttered.

realize “It’s part of my job to push—but I really want to know you,” she s

“Then you must be damned good at it,” he said, and she knew
take theclose to cracking.

’d been “I am. Now talk.”

n again “There’s not much to tell. It sure as hell isn’t glamorous. It’s dan
ed withspending great lengths of time pretending to be someone else, living

life. It can blur the line between who you’re pretending to be and w
perts atreally are. Sometimes we have to do . . . things that are legally and i
wrong to ensure the greater good. As a result, stress reactions are norm

behind Erin knew he was giving her a clinical reaction and description
oing towork, not the emotionally true one, but she’d take what she could g
facingon,” she said softly, not wanting to break whatever spell had him re
things to her.

n. He stared at the ceiling and continued. “We’re trained to go in, i
had toand when we get out, we’re debriefed and shrunked until they believ
stable and can go back under. That’s how I know what you were feeli
that’s why I suggested help.”

gested, She swallowed hard. "I'm getting help."
discuss He raised an eyebrow.

"I am! From you." She answered his unspoken question. "You're l
me. You diagnosed me," she said with a grin. "That explanation hel
i, and I understand. And I haven't had a panic attack since you held me in yo
u were afterward." She stared into the face she trusted and released a content
"See? Feeling better already."

He narrowed his gaze, clearly uncertain if she was feeding him a li
let him wasn't. Not by a long shot. Everything about this man soothed her i
she didn't understand. Not when those very things screamed danger,
am? So her life and to her heart.

you?" "Anything else I can do to help?" he asked.

u. How Erin's mind had already moved on from her nightmare to her ;
desire. He'd opened up to her and she felt closer to him emotionally
wasn't enough. They'd been living together, tiptoeing around the p
me on, sexual tension, the yearning she could no longer deny.

She was independent and would remain so during Cole's stay as
rn," he after his departure, but right now, she was female, and she had needs
could fill.

aid. He was here and he was offering to help . . . not that he knew wh
he was on her mind. She wanted him—and she had every intention of gettin
she needed.



gerous,
; a fake
ho you WIDE GREEN EYES with flecks of gold stared at Cole as he waited for
morally tell him what he could do to help calm her.

ial." "You can hold me," she said, her boldness shocking him.

l of his When he hesitated, she grinned. "Okay, that's too much for you to

et. "Go "Wiseass," he muttered, stalling for time. Everything about her dr
vealing in—her strength and beauty, her independent spirit and sense of self-w

to deal, She was single, pregnant, and not complaining. Standing up to he
e we're brothers, not to mention going toe-to-toe with him. Only wh
subconscious took over did she allow normal human frailty to show.

ng, and And man, did Cole get that. So how could he deny her this mor
peace?

Especially when he wanted it too.

“Turn around,” he said, sensing he was approaching a threshold here for shouldn’t cross, especially with her wearing a short camisole nightgown and pedicured melange, all her satiny soft skin showing through.

Her eyelids fluttered, and she flipped over, immediately sighed and moved backward until she pressed against his chest and her ass snuggled into his crotch. His cock, which he’d managed to maintain some control over in her presence, reacted immediately, and now he was hard as nails.

With a sigh, she relaxed into him while he was now totally tense and both of them erect.

“I haven’t been sleeping,” she said quietly.

His arms tightened around her. “Probably because you haven’t felt the greatest.” “I feel safe with you.” She snuggled closer against him.

Her words made him uneasy. She had too much faith in him than just the basic protection. If she trusted him, she was doing so without any disappointment. But he couldn’t push her away. Instead, his hand set itself to her stomach.

He couldn’t get over the fact that his baby was in there, and he thought, something warm and unfamiliar settled inside him. Maybe that was wonder what kind of parent he’d be. He didn’t have the best example of what to do. More like what not to do. He figured that was a start.

“How are you feeling?” he asked her.

“The nausea’s almost completely gone. I’m just really tired.” A cue, she yawned, and he forced himself to try to relax.

Erin to He listened to the sound of her breathing even out, and soon she was asleep. It took Cole another hour before his heart rate evened out, chilled out enough to get drowsy with her in his arms, and at least thirty minutes before he finally drifted off.

?”

ew him
orth.



Erin bossy ERIN AWOKE, HER body plastered against a hard male one. She knew where she was and who she was with. She shifted and registered the feel of her silky boxers had ridden up her leg, and she was brazenly rubbing her hand against the front of Cole’s hard, muscular thigh. Mini explosions ignited inside her as she climbed a steady peak that felt so good. Mortified, she immediately :

wriggling, and the delicious sensations pouring through her body received really She wanted to weep at the loss.

ie with They were generating so much heat. The kind that was impossible to resist. And they were living together. More important, and as she'd been coming out to him, she felt safe here in his arms. She didn't care if it was temporary, she wanted him, and she knew he still wanted her. Even the good girl in her accepted that something had to give between them sooner or later.

Why not sooner?

as well Her overly hormonal body craved not just sex, but sex with *this man* she no longer wanted to deny herself. Drawing a deep breath, she placed her hands over his bare chest, following the same path with her lips, hoping to "wake up and accept what she was freely offering."

at went another night assailed her, memories of him taking her hard and fast, and tonight he'd been in control.

ttled on This moment was all on her. She slid her fingers beneath the elastic of his briefs and wrapped her hand around his rigid shaft. *Steel covered in sweat* at the thought, marveling at the magnificent feel of him. This was exactly what she needed.

of what She slid her thumb over the head and moisture slickened her fingers. He jerked in her grasp, and her hips writhed in response.

as if on "What the hell?" He bolted upright in bed and caught her gaze. His tone held a serious warning.

d fallen at "Mmm?" She pulled down the comforter with her free hand, then reached for his briefs, wanting them gone.

and he "We shouldn't do this again," he said, his voice thick with arousal. another She paused and looked up, knowing from his gruff tone he was fighting with himself and his desire. "Why not? It's not like you can get pregnant."

at once His eyes darkened. "You're going to be the death of me," he muttered. "But what a death it'll be," she teased, tugging on his briefs once more, urging more action and less speech.

act that He held his body stiff, drawing her attention. "As long as you understand that I'm here for you and the baby, but as far as the future, I don't . . . as she I can't give you—"

stopped "Happily ever after," she said before he could put his own spin on it.

led. “Exactly,” he breathed out, sounding relieved, and shifted his gaze from hers. “I have a job that takes me away for long stretches of time—sensible to dangerous, and I just don’t—”

Erin didn’t need to hear any more about why he couldn’t provide her with a temporary; the family she craved. Instead, she pulled her pride around her like a shield inside. “What makes you think I’d want that kind of future from you anyway?” she asked, deliberately nonchalant.

Which was true, for right now. Combustible chemistry and parenthood weren’t enough to base a lifetime commitment on.

But the fact that he already knew he wouldn’t want her *that way* hung over her more than it should. So she pushed the thought out of her mind and focused on the present and on him.

“Lift your hips,” she said and was shocked when he complied.

She drew his briefs down his muscular legs and tossed them aside. When she came up next to him once more, she found him propped on his elbows, waiting. For her.

Completely nude, his erection now freed, he was hard and big. She knew that she hers.

“Be careful what you wish for,” he said, studying her until he was flushed with heat.

He thought she was uncomfortable? That she’d change her mind? “Erin,” he probably forgot the woman she’d become that night. Emboldened by memories, she ran her finger down his long, hot length until he shuddered. She grinned and lowered her head until her hair brushed his thigh. Her breath heated his skin. His groan told her she was getting to him, but she hadn’t really touched him yet. Not the way she wanted to. Closing her fighting eyes, she licked him once, twice, and then finally slid her tongue down the same path her finger had taken. His hips bucked upward, and she let out a pleased sigh. Finally, she grasped him with one hand and slid her mouth over his waiting erection, enclosing him completely.

With his acquiescence, she gave herself permission to do the same. To lose herself in his taste, his scent . . .

In him.

I mean,



things.

away. ONE LICK AND Cole's entire body lit up. And when she pulled him in. It's warm, wet mouth, he thought he had died and gone to heaven. His arms out, and he fell back against the mattress. Apparently, the superior with seductress took that as a *go* because she started to work his cock in the armor, perfect combination possible.

"y?" she Her hand cupped his length, twisting up and down while her mouth, unbelievable mouth, took him deeper than he thought she could handle. She almost swore he touched the back of her throat. Then she eased her delicate tongue circling the head with an occasional hum that vibrated through his shaft. Up and down with her hand, accepting every thrust of his hand and pushed him deeper into her waiting mouth. Faster than he thought possible, his climax drew closer, his cock grew harder. His balls drew up tight and he saw stars behind his eyes.

When Reaching down, he tugged at her hair, letting her know he was real. Instead of backing off, she kept at it, maintaining that delicious suction. When she grazed her teeth along his shaft, he was done for. His hips bucked and all up, and he came, his entire being thrown into the strongest, hardest climax of his life. Erin accepted everything he gave, slowing her movements until she'd wrung every last shudder from his body and every drop of moisture from him.

Then Cole lost all sense of time and place. When he came back to himself, he was staring at her with glassy eyes and a pleased smile on her swollen lips. Hell. Why did they have to be so damned good together in bed? He'd always kept his distance if they didn't go and do . . . *this*. But they had. And they weren't finished. Not by a long shot. The hell of it was that he didn't want to be done. What man could turn down a sexual dynamic with Erin?

He crooked a finger her way. "Your turn."

"I don't think you're quite ready," she said, her cheeks pinched with embarrassment.

Cole closed his eyes and groaned. That cute little blush encapsulating Erin Marsden was everything Cole should stay away from. Beneath the woman who'd given him the best blow job he ever had was a sweet girl who could still be embarrassed by what she'd done. Cole was dark where Erin was light, his past ugly where everything about her was beauty and grace. He'd remain that way long after he went under again . . . as long as he

nto her destroy her first.

m gave Still, he'd gotten them into this position, and he didn't just mean
rprising They were connected by more than just sex. But as long as she knew
ie most build white picket fences around him, they'd be just fine. They'd already
that conversation, he reminded himself. So he could feel free to just
ith, that now.

lle until "I said, come here," he told her.

off, her Her eyes glazed a bit more at his command, and she shifted until s
d along beside him once again. He pushed her tangled hair off her face. V
ips that makeup, she was even more sweet and innocent-looking.

ossible, He'd tasted that sweetness before, and he intended to do it again
iter. He "Lie back."

She raised her eyebrows and complied without question. He grasped
idy, but of her legs and pulled it open, then the other, until she was spread w
on. And him. With shaking hands and little finesse, he yanked her silk shorts
; jerked shocked to realize she wasn't wearing underwear beneath.

max of. "You're just trying to torture me," he muttered.

but not "Not really. I sleep like this every night," she informed him.

ry drop "Of course you do." He'd already decided to torment her the same
she'd done him and lowered his head, allowing only his hot breath to
elf, she her bare mound.

lips. He took in her feminine scent, and his entire body stiffened in re
e could In record time, he was ready to go again. But he wasn't giving her that
too quickly. If he was going to allow himself this, knowing that what
is, Cole and Erin shared in bed had to be temporary, he wanted memories to
no like with him in the future.

So when they played nice for the sake of their kid, when she
looked at him and saw the real Cole Sanders, the one his father raised
k with would have them to hold on to.

Right now, he wanted her begging him to take her.

ed why Her legs were trembling, and he braced a hand on either thigh
ath the dipping his head for the long-awaited treat, and sweet heaven, she
girl who good. He slid his tongue between her wet folds, lapping at her over ar
rin was savoring the unique flavor that was Erin. He remembered exactly wha
. She'd her moan, made her writhe in need, buck her hips and call out his na
e didn't knew where to lick, where to suckle, and when to ease off with teasin

induced conversations, but he was glad for them now.

ase, did “Honey, you are so damned beautiful. Of course I want you.” Heat and traveled from her stomach, to the breasts he intended to explore later, to stiff her mouth.

through Which he realized he hadn't yet kissed. Maybe that connection off her reassure her that no matter what he couldn't give her in the future, he nothing more than to get inside her body right now.

He leaned down and trapped her mouth with his, and what he'd intended to be a soft seduction flared into a raging inferno. He devoured her, kissing her as he was not only giving her a taste of him but also showing her what he was capable of. Her moans tasted like on his tongue. She groaned beneath him and threaded her fingers through his hair, pulling at the same time she kissed him back, matching his in both desire and need.

Unable to stop himself, he rocked his hips against hers, letting his erection swell and thicken against her soft folds, arousing her with a slow, blushing stroke.

“Mmm.” She sighed into his mouth and arched her back up for him. “I am friction.”

He shifted his hips from side to side, giving her some of what she wanted but not everything. Not yet. Even if he was killing himself, he thought he wanted more from her first.

He trailed his lips from her mouth, down the side of her cheek to her throat, pausing to dampen a patch of skin that begged for a taste.

She was She tugged at his hair. “Inside me. Now.”

“Greedy,” he said, chuckling. “Not yet.”

He slid lower until he reached her breast, licking around her soft nipple, noting she was bigger than he remembered. Not much, but enough for notice. He plumped one full mound in his hand before pulling the other nipple into his mouth.

to hear She whimpered. Obviously she was more sensitive too, but since she wasn't complaining, he took advantage, flicking his tongue back and forth over her nipples.

“Please, please,” she said, bending her knees to entice him.

whose Her hips gyrated beneath him and he loved the way she cradled her thighs and her slick moisture dampened his cock. He grinned and moved to her other breast, giving it the same treatment, prolonging her sweet

This time, he used his teeth, grazing her sensitive nipples.

His gaze She nearly bucked him off her as she writhed and cried out. “I need you then to inside me,” she said, her voice almost breaking with the depth of her desire.
“Now, Cole. Please, I need you now.”

He would “That’s what I wanted to hear.” He braced his arms on either side of her, wanting to ready himself.

Her eyes were bright, her face glistening, desire making her even more beautiful. Fuck.

Nowing He poised at her entrance, unable to tear his gaze from her face. What she entered her, even as he knew he shouldn’t look. That watching her fingers soften as he pressed inside, felt her heat and warmth cushion him, would make him want to do things. *As if they aren’t complicated enough*, Cole thrust and thrust into her completely.

ing his “Oh my God,” she said, her body clamping tight around him.

a slow, He knew exactly what she meant. It was just them. Skin to skin, no barrier. He’d never felt anything like it before. Never not used a condom. With this woman, he never planned to use one again.

Unable to remain still, he slid out and back in and suddenly he needed to think; he was feeling. An avalanche of sensation hit him from all sides, taking him higher, faster than ever before. She met his thrusts, her moans and sighs telling him she was right there with him. No way would he leave her neck, without her, but he didn’t have to worry. As quickly as his fingers approached, hers did as well, her body slamming upward with each thrust he made inside. She came beneath him, her nails digging into his back. When he heard his name on her lips, he followed her right over the cliff.

It flesh,
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Chapter Seven

ERIN WOKE UP wrapped in heat, her body totally sore in the best way. She enjoyed every aching muscle, especially when she recalled the reasons behind each one. A glance at the clock told her it was almost time to get up for work, but she had a few minutes before her alarm went off.

Time enough to think about last night. A night she wouldn't trade for any other in the world. Right now Cole slept beside her, having pulled her into his arm for a good night's sleep, but she had no doubt he'd wake up, remember . . . and withdraw. She swallowed hard, deciding her best defense was to expect the behavior she'd just experienced. Like she just didn't care. If she was going to play in his league, she'd accept his rules.

Even if she was developing feelings for the self-contained man who had pulled her close in sleep and pushed her away during daylight hours. She knew she was one of those girls for whom sex wasn't just sex. She could help it. She'd been raised to take it seriously, and when she did sleep with a guy, it was because she was ready to deepen the relationship.

Cole was the one man for whom she'd broken her rule, but that had been the first time they slept together. This time she'd had time to think. A time she knew him better. If no details about his past, she understood about the kind of man he'd become, and she'd discovered her instincts about him were correct. He had a protective streak, he knew how to take care of her, he did it without complaint, and he anticipated her needs.

How could she not have begun to appreciate his finer qualities? But she'd agreed that this was about sex, not commitment. Their future held shared custody agreements, joint parenting—when he was in town—and other things she hadn't begun to contemplate.

All she needed to do was act cool and remind herself his caring was just his protective streak and not anything he felt for her beyond a sense of duty. Yeah, that hurt. But it was the truth, and she'd do well to remember it.

On that thought, she lifted the covers and rolled away from Cole. She attempted to get out of bed before he woke. Unfortunately, her alarm w

before she made her escape.

“Running again?” he asked in a sleep-roughened voice.

She shut the alarm on her cell phone. “Nope. Just getting up for t
It’s not like I can disappear on you this time.”

“Are you okay?” he asked, surprising her.

“I’m fine. Why?”

“You haven’t looked at me, for one thing.”

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Forcing herself to turn over, she met his gaze. And wished she
First thing in the morning, Cole Sanders was even more sexy than ev
hair was mussed and stood at odd angles, razor stubble darkened his j
brooding eyes assessed her through heavy lids, and all she could thin
was climbing on top of his broad chest and kissing him senseless.

“Pregnancy hormones,” she muttered.

“What?”

“Nothing. I’m hungry. I need to shower and get something to eat
work.”

“Okay, well, I’ll jump in the shower real quick and make us sor
while you get ready.” Throwing the comforter off, he rose, perfect
nudity.

From his muscled arms and defined abs to the tattoos on his bice
upper back, he was simply amazing. If she allowed her gaze to travel
there were even more things she could ogle, but she refrained. Becau
on the other hand, had pulled the blanket back over her and now held
dear life.

She wasn’t one to flaunt her body on a good day. At four
pregnant, she wasn’t feeling particularly comfortable with herself, the
she was developing, or the lack of a waist that had suddenly occurre
night she’d been too caught up in the moment to be shy, but that wa
case this morning.

“Go ahead.” She waved him away, indicating he should use the
first. And quickly.

His gaze dropped to her fingers, clutching at the blanket. “Erin?”

“Hmm?” she asked too brightly.

“You’re gorgeous, and if you didn’t need to get to work, I’d st
cover off you and pick up where we left off last night.”

A small moan escaped her lips, but he was gone without indicati

heard. A few minutes later, she heard the creaking of pipes and the sound of water running in the shower. She was dying to join him. The day. With a groan, she snuggled deeper into the blanket. How she was going to keep her distance was beyond her, but she had no choice if she was to survive their enforced closeness with her emotions intact.



hadn't. COLE WAS MAKING breakfast in the kitchen. He removed the bread from the refrigerator and was opening the bag when Erin's scream from the other side of the door startled him.

He dropped the bread and bolted for the front door. "What happened?" She pointed beyond the entry, her hand shaking, her face pale. "I went to get the newspaper from the porch. I opened the door and took a look!"

He shifted her behind him and pulled his gun from his back holster, cautiously checking outside. A dead animal that looked more like a raccoon than a pet lay on her porch in an open shoebox.

A gagging noise sounded behind him. He turned to see Erin run into the bathroom in the hall.

"Shit," he muttered. Not wanting to taint evidence, he left the box alone and headed to help her first.

He stood in the doorway of the half-bath downstairs while she dry-heaved into the toilet. He cringed, something too near the region of his heart to look at her pain and discomfort.

Without asking, he stepped inside and wet a damp towel, the towel beside her.

"Go away," she moaned into the toilet.

Cole ignored her, merely lifting her hair so he could lay the towel over the back of her neck.

"Feels good," she said begrudgingly. He understood she was embarrassed rather than angry with him for not giving her privacy.

"If you're okay, I need to call your brother and get someone over here to process the . . . evidence." Since her retching had stopped, he didn't touch the dead animal specifically.

"Go." She waved a hand, and this time, he listened.

A few minutes later, both Mike and Sam arrived in separate cars, looking

ound of an SUV and Sam in his patrol car. Erin was in the kitchen sipping gin and Cole met the men at the door.

going to Sam, in uniform, knelt in front of the box and frowned. “Jesus intended to murther. “What kind of sicko would scoop an already dead animal road?”

“One who doesn’t want to do the dirty work herself to make her Cole said.

“Her?” Erin came up behind him.

om the He glanced over, noting she was still pale. Unable to help him: r room wrapped a steady arm around her shoulders. “Let’s sit down inside can talk this through,” Cole suggested.

ed?” “One of our forensics people will be here to process things any n and . . . Sam said.

They all headed for the family room, where Erin curled on the cou: before eyes were cloudy and shadowed, a far cry from the sexy, teasing mir roadkill last night, and he realized how badly he wanted that Erin back, a worried, fearful one.

for the “I suppose I should be grateful they didn’t throw it through the wi just had replaced,” she said.

outside All three men’s heads came up at that. “What window?” Cole aske

heaved “A baseball destroyed my front window a few months ago. I replace the broken glass.”

wisting “Any reason you didn’t mention it?” Sam asked.

n knelt Mike cocked an eyebrow, pinning his sister with an annoyed glanc

“Get that look off your faces. It was a baseball! I’m sure some n kid had an accident and was too scared to admit it. It happened way the shooting and I forgot all about it until now.”

d towel Cole frowned, not happy about any of this. Something niggled at t of his mind, something that made him uneasy, but he couldn’t pinpoir s more Or why.

“Let’s get back to this morning’s . . . gift,” Mike said.

here to The doorbell rang, interrupting them. “That’ll be forensics.” Sam nention answer.

Erin, Mike, and Cole sat in silence, waiting for details, whi observed the evidence collection outside.

Mike in Sensing Erin’s stress, Cole placed a hand on her stocking-coverec

ger ale, She'd been dressed for work when she came downstairs and opened the

Mike's gaze immediately shot to the intimate contact and he scowled. Cole ignored him. Mike's sister needed comfort, and Cole was the one who could give it to her. He didn't give a damn if Mike liked it or not.

"Erin, did you call in sick to work?" he asked her.
point," "Oh God. I can't afford to miss more time."

"More?" Cole turned to face her.
"She had morning sickness but thought it was a stomach bug. I figured you wouldn't know anything about that, considering you're so well-versed where to be found." Mike eyed him with a healthy amount of disgust.

"Can you just lay off?" Erin said to her brother. "I can't deal with this right now. Give me a phone. By the time we're finished here, I won't have time to go in to work before my appointment."

ch. Her "What appointment?" Cole asked. They hadn't yet discussed her situation for the day.

not this "I have a doctor's appointment at noon."

"Is something wrong?" he asked, concerned.

indow I She shook her head. "Regular monthly appointment. Every pregnant woman has them."

d. He nodded. They could discuss this further later. He handed her a portable receiver lying on the table.

While she dialed and called in sick, Mike's furious gaze didn't match Cole's. Ah, well. He knew better than to think the Marsden brothers would give him any kind of pass on the situation with Erin. He didn't have a neighbor but he imagined he'd react the same way, so he let it go.

before He wasn't too thrilled with himself at the moment. He hadn't known he missed any work because of the pregnancy, hadn't thought about what he'd gone through the first three months alone. He closed his eyes and found what he needed to calm.

"Let's discuss what we know," Mike said, drawing his attention to what was important. "First a shooting, then a warning."

rose to "That's de-escalation," Cole said. "Normally the warning would come first."

le Sam Mike nodded. "Unless . . . maybe the softball through the window was a warning."

l ankle. "Possibly, but that doesn't explain going from shooting to

e door. warning.”

ed. Erin’s gaze traveled between them. She was listening. Processing closest participating—and that concerned Cole. In the short time he’d known not. wasn’t used to her being a bystander in her own life.

“Shell casings left at the site, leaving roadkill in a condo neighbor. Both of these things seem like they were done by amateurs,” Mike con

“Cole, you referred to the person who left the—present—as But it before. Why?” Erin asked.

u were And there she was, Cole thought with relief. Erin was speaking up it. meant she was okay.

ith this “Because a man would have no compunction killing a cat or a i’t have make his point. A female would have more trouble with it. A woman

likely to use an already dead animal. It’s easier to justify to themselves chedule Erin pulled in a deep breath. “But what woman would scoop up i herself?”

Cole could tell she was trying to control her breathing and gag response to the dead animal she’d seen.

regnant “She probably has an accomplice,” Mike said. “A male who would do that kind of dirty work.”

her the Erin nodded. “That makes sense, but who? Who would shoot me would target me like this?” she asked, her voice rising.

’t leave Cole squeezed her ankle in reassurance that he was there. No ; would anywhere while she was in any danger.

a sister, “Hey, you might want to see this,” Sam said, returning with a plastic bag, a note inside.

wn Erin Erin scrambled to a sitting position. “What is it?”

at she’d “A note. Handwritten.”

ight for “What’s it say?” Mike asked.

“Leave him alone,” Sam said.

back to Erin wrinkled her nose. “Him who?”

“That’s the thousand-dollar question.” Sam sounded as frustrated d come rest of them.

“Someone’s telling me to leave *him* alone. That’s further confi v was awe’re dealing with a woman, right?” Erin glanced at Cole, her co clear in her tight expression and troubled eyes.

another He nodded. “On the roadkill, yes. On the shooting? I’m not sc

Something felt so off about this whole thing. It could be because the but not was unstable—

her, he “Are you suggesting it’s two people after me?” Erin asked, so more panicked by the second.

orhood. Cole kept a firm hand on her leg. “It’s possible, that’s all. Mike continued. looked at her brother for confirmation. They’d gone through similar t female and they’d both been undercover. Both been given the same beh courses.

, which “Rifle shooting doesn’t sound like a woman,” Mike agreed. “This But like I said, could just be an accomplice or someone doing somet dog to their own, not listening to the woman.”

is more “My head hurts,” Erin muttered.

is.” “Look, let’s get this processed, see if we can pull any prints. Y roadkill didn’t touch anything?” Sam asked.

Cole shook his head.

g reflex “Are you insane?” Erin asked, obviously doing her best not to gag

ould do doing on the gun.” “I want answers,” she said. “I hope the lab can work faster than they’

“They will.” Cole agreed and he’d already taken steps to ensure e? Who have a call in to my people along with a promise to get things movi should know something soon.” He’d given everyone involved time t t going without stepping on toes, but he’d gotten tired of waiting and he was f tiptoeing around her brothers’ egos. While Mike had contacts high sealed Manhattan, Cole had people who owed him more recent favors, both and state. Erin was worth pulling them in for.

Mike looked ready to argue but obviously thought better. “Thank he said begrudgingly.

“No problem.”

Mike rose from his seat and walked over to Erin. “You okay, sis?”

She nodded. “I thought morning sickness was over, but that just . l as the closed her eyes against the memory.

“Yeah. But I didn’t mean just that.”

rmation “He meant with me being here,” Cole clarified for her.

nfusion Erin let out a long sigh. “I’m fine. If I wasn’t, Cole wouldn’t be he of discussion.” She folded her arms across her chest, a sign she was o sure.” in her heels.

person Cole had come to know that about her at least.

ounding “Fine.” Mike raised both hands in a gesture of defeat. “Just know—
“You’re here for me. I know. And I love you for it.” Her voice so
“But if you want me calm through this, I suggest you accept that Cole
e?” He of my life—my baby’s life now. Whatever we work out between us w
raining to be okay with you too.”

avioral Mike inclined his head, then leaned over and kissed Erin’s cheek
call you as soon as I know something.”

is does. She nodded.

hing on “You.” Mike stood and Cole did as well. “Don’t let her out of your
“They’ll have to go through me to get to her,” Cole told the other
They might not agree on everything, but when it came to Erin’s safety
ou two were one hundred percent in accord.

Mike inclined his head, obviously satisfied.

Once he left, Cole turned to Erin. “Let’s get you reshowered and changed
again. You’ll feel better, and then maybe you’ll want to eat.”

ve been Erin rose. Her color looked better, a touch of pink in her cheeks.
handle myself. I’ll meet you back in the kitchen in a few minutes.”
e it. “I He backed off, recognizing that despite everything, she was
ng. We withdrawal mode. He’d noticed it this morning but let it go without
o work Although he preferred her soft and giving, he understood self-protection
inished too well.

1 up in Besides, he didn’t want Erin getting attached to him, and her ac
federal how things needed to be was a good thing. He’d laid out the rules
commitment, just sex—and today she was giving him the space that
k you,” those boundaries. A part of him approved because it was safer that way
both of them. But damned if her turning away from him hurt more
should.

And it grated that she’d pulled into herself, since she so obviously
. . .” She someone to lean on. Another thing he liked about Erin: She might need
but she wouldn’t let herself depend on him in that needy way some
did. His thoughts immediately traveled to Victoria Maroni and her telling
him not to leave or to take her with him. It’d been a goddamned case, he
re. End had made it sound like he was bailing on an actual relationship. He
digging slept with the woman or sent her mixed signals, that he knew for sure.

He refocused on Erin, guilt riding him that she’d been alone through

months of misery, when he was equally responsible for causing pregnancy. Now she'd mentioned a doctor's appointment he'd forgotten about. He was shocked by how possessive he felt about her in her short time, warning signals going off in his brain. She didn't want him hovering, but suddenly he needed to be there for her, to take care of her and show her she wasn't alone.

Which went against every instinct he had that told him to encourage her to preserve her independence because she'd need it when he was gone. He couldn't let her go through this alone when he was here, now. Especially because once he was gone, she'd be needing that independent streak once more.

ty, they



ALREADY EXHAUSTED BEFORE her day had even begun, Erin made her way downstairs, her nerves shot from this morning. What kind of sicko would leave a dead animal outside her door and not get specific about what she wanted from her? Leave *who* alone? Which case? Why?

Her stomach grumbled and she realized she was so hungry she could barely think. Well, at least the nausea had passed.

She found Cole in the kitchen with a delicious-looking breakfast of French toast and orange juice waiting for her at the table. "You really answered my calling," she said with a grin.

He'd shocked her with his culinary skills, and she suddenly had to learn how to feed herself this well. Not to mention her child.

"Not really. I just like to eat," he said with an endearing grin.

"Would you teach me?" she asked. "You know, so I can give little Erin the kind of Sunday meals my mom gave us?"

Cole's eyes warmed as she spoke. "Yeah, I can do that."

She reached for the maple syrup and smothered her French toast. She remembered how her dad would go get the papers, and when he came home Mom would have the most amazing pancakes waiting for when he came and we all woke up." Erin would love to have that in her future.

Of course Cole wouldn't be part of that scenario, and she quickly looked down at her plate, not wanting him to see the disappointment in her eyes.

Instead she cut herself a piece and tasted. "Oh my God, you

ng hermagician.”

known He laughed and began eating his own food. “So tell me more about such a doctor’s appointment you have today.”

nt him She shrugged. “Nothing much to tell. Just a normal monthly appointment. You can just drop me off at the hospital. My doctor sees me there, call you when it’s time to pick me up.”

age her “Erin,” he said, a distinct edge to his voice. “Just because you were before doesn’t mean you are now.”

pecially She glanced up, noticed the tight set to his jaw, and realized of her worried about her safety. “You can sit in the waiting room if it makes you feel better, but nobody’s going to hurt me in a hospital.” She drank a little of orange juice and her body thanked her by perking up a bit more.

“Try again, sweetheart.”

ay back She narrowed her gaze. “Surely you don’t want to sit in the same room while the doctor examines me!”

would His grip tightened around his fork. “That’s exactly what I want.”

at they “But it’s just me and my doctor! Nobody can get near me!” Not even his brothers would make such a ridiculous demand, and they were overprotective as they came.

“This has nothing to do with someone being after you.”

fast of She placed her glass back on the table. “Then what? I don’t get missed you’re going to have to lay it out for me.”

an urge “Did it occur to you that I might *want* to be there for you? For our doctor appointment?”

him or No, she thought. It hadn’t occurred to her. She’d gone into this town when she was alone. Even after he’d said he’d be there for her and the bank thought he’d meant just financially.

He was only living here now because she might be in danger, not because he wanted to be with Erin. He’d made that clear last night. Given a moment’s thought, he’d be in his room over Joe’s, ignoring her when they saw each other at home. Sex was a perk, nothing more. Even as obvious hurt and frustration flashed in his expression, she couldn’t understand it.

glanced “You don’t have to go through this by yourself. I’ll be with you and I want a list of future appointments. I’ll be going with you from now on.”

“Umm, okay.” Maybe?

are a She wasn’t sure how she felt about his proclamation. She doubted

knew either, considering the conflicting messages he was sending her. out this *No future. You aren't alone.* Two very different concepts, and he was spinning, but one thing stood out. She'd hurt his feelings in a way that included him, but she'd never have thought Cole would be interested in the little things her doctor discussed with her about the baby.

he alone



he was COLE SHOOK HIS head. Erin had thought he'd . . . what? Hand her child and walk away? Was that the kind of man she believed him to be? ces you They finished eating and cleaned up in silence, Cole dealing with a long sip of warring feelings. His emotional reaction to her doctor's appointment caught him off guard. Way off guard. Since when did he want to be in the room in things like doctor's appointments? Where did these protective instincts Erin even come from?

ven her Yeah, he was the baby's father, and he'd planned to do right by the kid, but even he hadn't considered what that entailed. Maybe she were as either, which meant he'd overreacted. But when her brother slammed the door with what she'd gone through alone, something inside him had been leaving him confused.

it, and His head pounded, and he decided he needed to talk to someone who could give him clarity, but who could he turn to? Not her brother, Mike. Mike's man would likely throttle him. There was his stepfather, but he wasn't ready to have that conversation with him just yet. Or with his mother either. hinking sure as hell wouldn't turn to his father. Cole let out a low laugh, knowing by, she the shit would hit the fan when his old man found out Erin was pregnant. Cole was responsible. He'd like to put that conversation off as long as possible. because

choice, Maybe his cousin Nick. The man was recently married, so he might have more of a handle on something like this than Cole did. He'd get in touch with his cousin soon. Because what Cole was feeling and what he was capable of giving were two different things. So was what Erin deserved. They weren't completely compatible people on paper, and when they were together, they were explosive, but Cole didn't know how to live the family life she obviously craved. The one she'd grown up experiencing. The one she wanted—he and he wanted her to have. bted he

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Chapter Eight

DR. REED SQUIRTED warm gel on Erin's skin, then placed the ultrasound on her stomach. By now, the procedure was a familiar one as he searched for the baby's heartbeat. In a few seconds, the reassuring *whooshing* echoed throughout the room, and Erin let herself relax. From the moment the doctor let her hear the heartbeat, she held her breath each time the probe moved during his scan.

"And that is your baby's heartbeat, Mr. Sanders," Dr. Reed said to Erin.

He sucked in a sharp, surprised breath and reached for Erin's hand, squeezing it tight. His excitement was palpable, and she understood why she was feeling all too well. Unfortunately, other emotions were rushing through her too. Ones that made her feel fragile, raw, and vulnerable. With Cole Sanders here, Erin felt as exposed as her bare belly, his presence making her wish for things he'd flat-out told her she would never have.

At least, not with him.

Of all the reasons she hadn't let herself think about including him in her doctor's appointments, this overwhelming emotional pit in her stomach was the main one. Erin had dreamed of a family in her future, and one night her life suddenly changed and complicated everything. She swallowed over the lump in her throat, determined to get through this with her dignity intact, and she meant no crying.

"Erin? Did you hear me?" the middle-aged ob-gyn asked.

Erin smiled at the man. He'd come highly recommended by her doctor, and so far, Erin was pleased with his practice, his partners, and his choice.

"I'm sorry. Can you say that again?"

He smiled back indulgently. "You're somewhere else today. I assume you two would like to know the sex of the baby. You're at the right time in my view is pretty good, so I'd say I can give you a pretty accurate prediction. It's up to you."

Erin's heart skipped a beat. In her excitement, she was about to

when Cole's voice stopped her.

"Can we have time to talk?" he asked the doctor, taking her by surprise.

"Of course. I'll be back in a few minutes." He placed the wand in a tray and draped a paper sheet over Erin's stomach before leaving them alone.

"This is overwhelming," he said, taking her by surprise.

And, of course, with his admission, her heart melted. How could she have looked at him at a distance when they were sharing something so fundamental and important and deep?

"That's how I felt the first time I heard the heartbeat and saw the baby on the screen." She met his gaze, startled to find softness where there never had been any before.

"Makes me want to take a second look at myself. And a third, fourth."

The surprises kept coming. "Why?" she asked him. "I like what I see. I wouldn't be in this situation if I didn't."

His lips turned down. "Then you see something my old man does that your brothers sure as hell don't."

Anger at Jed surged through her. She definitely wouldn't be bringing any more of her mother's casseroles. As for her brothers, they would be around once they got over the shock of her pregnancy.

"Your father's a harsh, unforgiving man who obviously wanted a better life for himself. Nothing less would make him happy. That's not who you are. Your mom wouldn't have left town with you if she didn't want better for both." He still held her hand, and she squeezed tighter.

"My mom's great," he agreed.

"And she took you away from Jed, right?" She held her breath, waiting for he'd tell her more. That the intimacy of her lying here on an exam table, seeing the black-and-white sonogram of their baby, would help him to finally confide in her.

"I was a handful, make no mistake. The harder Jed pushed at me, the more I rebelled. So when he threatened to send me to military school, I went so far as to make the calls and hang the brochures on the refrigerator, and something had to give."

"What happened?"

"Got myself arrested. It was stupid. I was drunk. Me and another guy graffitied a wall downtown." Cole grinned sheepishly as if the mem-

the power to embarrass him.

Despite the seriousness of the subject, Erin laughed. “What happened?”
“I wasn’t calling my dad.” He let out a harsh laugh. “I called Mom and she came and talked to me through the jail cell bars. She said she’d take me from here, and we’d make a life somewhere else, but only if I swore that my relationship with Jed would turn me around.”

“Wow.”

He nodded, his expression pensive and pained. “I promised. I didn’t want anything more than to get away from the old man. Imagine my surprise when I found out she felt the same. Her sister, my cousin Nick’s mother, gave me her start-up money and the name of a friend in New York who’d promised to rent me an apartment. She took a secretarial job at a local PD and met Cole. He’s my stepdad.”

Erin fell a little in love with his mother at that moment, even if she didn’t remember her. “Cole?”

“Hmm?”

She knew she was treading in dangerous territory, but the doctor’s return had inspired her and she wanted so badly to get inside his head and understand him better. “If your mom was so good to you, why doesn’t her belief overshadow your father’s lack of it?”

Cole ran his free hand through his hair and groaned. “There’s a lot of people out there. Your many times you can hear negative shit before you start believing it yourself. By the time we got out, I’d had sixteen years of disappointing Jed under my belt.”

His words seared through her and she decided to change the subject, hoping for a more pleasant one. “Tell me about your stepdad.”

“That’s easy. Brody Williams is a good man. He fell hard for my mother and she must’ve been miserable long before she left Jed because she was always open to a new relationship pretty fast.”

“Was he a good stepfather?” she asked, hoping Cole had had a positive male role model in his life at some point in time.

He nodded, his facial muscles relaxing with the new topic. “The best I could do was to do everything he could to turn my head around. He got my arrest experience from my record. If not for him, I wouldn’t have gone to the police academy. That’s for damn sure. I didn’t want anything to do with a legacy that my father had.”

“What made you change your mind?”

“I wanted Brody to be proud of me.” Cole shrugged his shoulders. She indicated it was that simple.

Maybe it was. Erin had certainly always strived to please her parents, getting through them without getting into her good-girl mode. For her, it was just a matter of time, naturally.

“Then you need to focus on the things Brody said to and about your father. Hell, I mean the things Jed said.”

Cole treated her to a rare smile, and her stomach flipped at the sight. “You can be damned sure *he’ll* be my role model for how to be a good parent,” he said, and Erin nodded in understanding.

She hurt for the childhood he’d had and the way his father emotionally abused him. Cole had so many more scars and dark places than Erin had barely realized, and it made her mad. Unlike Cole, she’d been blessed with a good family. Sure, they had their share of dysfunction—her mom had gotten pregnant with Mike, another man’s child, when she’d married Jed and hadn’t married Marsden. And just last year, Mike’s real father, Rex Bransom, had shown up and brought painful secrets with him. But her family had pulled together and survived because of the love they shared and the solid background of her mother, Ella, and her dad, Simon, had given their children.

Erin wanted that same sense of security for her baby, and she just didn’t know how to get it. Cole felt the same way. He didn’t believe they could provide a good environment together because he’d have to return to undercover work, but she didn’t know if that was what they both desired? They wouldn’t know unless they tried to make it work between them before the baby was born.

Did that mean he couldn’t come back to her when he was finished? It was a hard question to ask. What did they both desire? They wouldn’t know unless they tried to make it work between them before the baby was born.

She was scared, she admitted to herself, and suddenly she was remembering how she’d wanted her parents to come home so she could confide in her mother. Ella had been through something similar . . . Why hadn’t Erin realized it before now?

The recognition made her smile.

“What are you grinning at?” Cole asked.

“I just realized some things.” Things that helped her look at her situation differently, just as Cole needed to do the same. “Don’t let Jed’s father define you as a man or as a parent, Cole. Just be yourself. Our son, if he was my daughter, will be lucky to have you.” She tightened her hand around his arm.

His dark eyes heated, and corresponding warmth settled in her chest.

“Speaking of the kid, do we want to know the sex?” he asked, breaking the silent but charged moment.

“I thought I did, but now . . . I think I’d like to be surprised. You?”

“Whatever you want works fine for me.”

Erin nodded, wishing the rest of her life with him could be as decided.



COLE SENSED ERIN’S unease when she arrived at work on Monday. Cole didn’t blame her. After all her arguing about the shooting being a fluke, she had finally been forced to accept that for some unknown reason, a crazy person was after her. Maybe two crazies. Cole hadn’t wrapped his mind around which.

Ballistics should come in today, giving them answers, or at least a partial one. In the meantime, he settled into his chair outside her office door, satisfied knowing he had a firsthand view of whoever went in to see her. Especially when that smarmy boss of hers arrived not too long after she came in the morning.

Dressed in a suit and tie, his brown hair expensively cut, the man looked like he’d stepped out of a magazine ad. He was too slick, and Cole disliked him on sight. Carmichael walked past him without a word, but just made Cole want to give him a hard time—because he could.

Rising, Cole placed his arm across the doorway and cleared his throat. Carmichael turned. “What’s wrong, Sanders? Need to pat me on the back before I’m allowed entry?”

“Evan, come on in,” Erin called, interrupting.

Probably on purpose. Cole lifted his arm and Carmichael shot him a smug look before stepping inside.

“What can I do for you?” Erin asked, sounding pleased to see him.

Cole insisted she keep her door open, enabling him to hear whatever she said on when her boss commanded an audience. In Cole’s opinion, because of Carmichael’s fake charm and the way he constantly self-promoted, he was the consummate politician, a man wrapped up in appearances only.

“I just wanted to remind you about our date Saturday night.”

Cole stiffened—despite the fact that he had no claim on Erin and no

ed her, bones about his lack of intentions regarding marriage and the happy after he knew she wanted. And regardless of the fact that his own might push Erin into the arms of another man.

One day.

s easily In the very distant future, if ever.

But not this bastard. And not while Erin was sleeping with Cole.

“Oh no,” Erin said, sounding truly upset. A riffling of papers followed completely forgot. And it wasn’t a *date* date, it was me accompanying the annual Bar Association dinner.”

e didn’t “Call it what you want, I’ve been looking forward to it. And you
s, she’d, it’s important that we’re seen at this, what with me planning to run for
person attorney general and you the logical successor to my office.”

around “Evan, I never said—”

lead. In “Hush,” he said in an affectionate tone that made Cole’s skin crawl
ed with He itched to storm in there, but knew there was only one way *that*
pecially end—badly. So he held his anger and frustration in check, bit his tongue
waited.

lid this “We both know you’re the perfect choice to take my place. Together
we’re a power couple in this town, or we could be.”

looked Damn the man. He obviously viewed Erin and her family connections
ole had this town as the perfect way to take his next career step. They’d be a
which couple over Cole’s dead body. She was pregnant with *his* baby,
wondered how Mr. Family Values would take that bit of news.

oat. *Tell him*, Cole thought, with uncharacteristic possessiveness and need

down Erin whispered something Cole couldn’t hear.

“Just think about it. In the meantime, I’ll pick you up around six
want to get there in time for cocktails and schmoozing.”

Cole a “Umm—”

Cole had had enough. He rose and stood in the doorway, glaring at
other man. “Just how did you factor her bodyguard in to this occasion?”

er went Evan turned to face Cole. “Frankly, I didn’t. She’ll be perfectly satisfied
sed on me for the evening.”

he man Cole raised an eyebrow. “Because you’re trained to protect her
folded his arms across his chest.

“Cut it out,” Erin muttered.

made no “Well?” Cole pushed, determined to verbally shove the other man

ly everdoor. “If someone shoots again, are you willing to throw yourself in fr
choicesbullet to protect her?”

Evan paled.

“Because I can assure you, I am. Trained, capable, and willing.”

Evan assessed Cole with a different look on his face now. “I sti
you belong at this event, Erin. But maybe your . . . bodyguard is rigl
wed. “I need protection I can’t provide.”

And Cole could see what it cost him to admit it. For the first ti
dredged up a modicum of respect for the man.

“Your safety is of paramount importance, but so is your career.
or statenothing to do with me, you need to be there this weekend.”

Erin rose to her feet. “I don’t even know if I want your job.”

“Doesn’t matter.” Evan stepped to the desk, ignoring Cole and r
l. her gaze. “I don’t know what’s going on between you two, but rer
t wouldsomething for me?”

She glanced up at him, her hazel eyes soft as if she sensed
something important to say. Vulnerable, Erin was even more beautiful.

“What is it?” she asked.

“I don’t know what kind of game he’s playing, but trust me, he’s
tions inone. He’s been gone from here for how many years? And now he’
t poweracting possessive and staking a claim, but he’ll be gone again soon. Ev
and heknows it, including your brothers.”

Erin straightened her shoulders. “Evan, you’re overstepping—”

“Maybe, but I’m not finished. He will leave, or at the very leas
you.”

Cole had enough. “Do not presume to speak for me,” he said, hol
to his anger for Erin’s sake. If it were up to him he’d take the arroga
down a peg, but she didn’t need added stress.

Evan didn’t react to Cole. “Mark my words, when he’s gone,
” going to want your career to fall back on. Not to mention your friends,
ife withmatter how I come off, I am that.”

Erin’s eyes glistened and Cole realized the bastard had hit a nerve.

“You’re finished, Carmichael.” Cole started for the man but Evan
his hands.

“Take it easy. I’m going. And if you really cared about what was l
out theErin? You’d do the same thing.” Carmichael stormed out of the ro

out of a shoulder deliberately bumping Cole's on the way out.



BY THE TIME lunch hour rolled around, Erin still hadn't processed the s
ll think her office, and wasn't sure she wanted to. Both men infuriated her
ht. You thing she already had lunch plans with Macy, the one person she could
ime, he talk to. And since she'd already given Cole her schedule when she c
this morning, there was no reason to speak to him now.

Having She strode out of her office. "I'm going to lunch," she told him, a
on walking.

He rose to his feet and kept pace with her as she made her way
neeting parking lot. The one good thing about her fit of pique was that she did
member to worry about being scared, just pushed the thought out of her he
headed for the car.

he had "Are we going to talk?" he asked her.

"I have nothing to say." She still couldn't believe he'd gotten
middle of a work discussion with her boss, any more than she could
playing the personal comments Evan had thrown at her about Cole.

Knowing it was an exercise in futility, Erin had long since s
s back, arguing with Cole over letting her drive.
everyone

He settled in the driver's seat of her Jeep. But instead of starting
engine, he turned to face her. "You're mad."

"You think?" she asked, voice rising. "Where did you get off ans
t, leave Evan for me? We were discussing plans we'd made, plans that had not
ding on do with you."

nt SOB She stared at her clenched hands, willing herself not to get into a
personal with him. He merely needed to respect her boundaries, an
you're crossed over them today.

and no "What did I tell you when I moved in with you?" He didn't wait
reply. "Where you go, I go. I was just making that clear to *Mr. I War*
One Half of a Power Couple in This Town."

held up She swung around to face him, all her earlier resolve to remain
flying south in the face of his words. "Careful, Cole. You almost
best for jealous, and we both know that's not the kind of relationship you
om, his because you can't promise me any kind of happily ever aft

commitment.”

He sucked in a sharp breath at her sudden fury. Well, let him get it, because she had more to say. “Well, guess what? Evan or some other can give me what I want,” she said, on a roll and unable to stop the words spouting from her mouth. “Just because we’re going to be raised together doesn’t give you the right to dictate whether I can see real men!”

His eyes narrowed to mere slits, the navy irises turning nearly black. A low growl emanated from his chest. “Let’s get something straight, okay? As long as you’re in danger, I damn well can and will dictate who you see if you’re sleeping in my bed, you sure as hell won’t be going on business or otherwise, with some other man.” A muscle ticked in his jaw. “I’ll be a match for hers.”

But his possessive tone startled her, and he wasn’t finished. Before she could blink, he’d wrapped his hand around the back of her neck and pulled her across the center console, sealing his lips over hers.

Erin lifted her hands to his chest, to push the arrogant man away, but a part of her was unreasonably affected by his jealous display. His actions made it perfectly clear this was about more than mere obligation, that she was more affected by her than he’d let on. While she’d been fighting to keep her feelings out of the equation, just maybe he’d been doing the same thing.

She didn’t shove him away, but she didn’t welcome him either.

Until he licked his tongue over her lips and whispered, “Open up for me, honey.”

Accepting that in this, they were equally affected, she did not seductively asked, letting him inside. His kiss was as possessive as his actions and she melted into him, allowing him to overwhelm her common sense with the sweeps of his tongue and nibbles on her lips. She lost herself in his descent, the amazing way he kissed as if she were the only thing that mattered.

He finally lifted his head and looked into her eyes. “Are we clear?”

“Arrogant son of a bitch,” she muttered, finding it hard to believe she could be falling for this man. Finding it impossible not to.

He looked after her, protected her, cooked her meals, and kissed her like a dream—but he also came with a boatload of issues and warnings.

Did she dare give in to this thing between them on the mere whim of a moment? No, she didn’t want to hope that he could get beyond his past and let her in? When she had no

that taking that risk would leave her heart shredded if—and when—used towards came true?

“Erin? I said, are we clear?” He still held the back of her head with a strong hand.

As long as he touched her, she couldn’t focus. She desperately needed to think.

“We’re clear,” she said, buying herself time to decide what her next move ought to be.

“Say? As

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THEY WALKED INTO The Family Restaurant, and Erin immediately heard Macy, leaving Cole alone. Good thing for him that when he’d seen Erin’s schedule, he’d asked Nick to meet him for lunch. He settled into a seat with a decent view of both the front door and Erin’s table, his head swimming with how badly he’d fucked up this morning with Erin and her boss. He continued to screw up worse in the car ride over here.

What the hell had he been thinking, staking any kind of claim? He’d been using the right head, that was for certain. Cole needed a strong kick to get his thoughts straight, but since that wouldn’t be happening, he’d settle for a swift kick in the ass. He hoped he could count on his cousin to give him and remind him why he needed to keep his distance from Erin.

A glance at Erin told him she and Macy sat with heads bent together, though Erin hadn’t looked at him since they walked in, Macy glanced up at him and waved. Her grin had a calculating look that made his hair on the back of his neck standing on end.

“Hey,” Nick said, drawing Cole out of his brooding thoughts.

“Thanks for coming.”

Nick settled into the chair across from him. “Well, you look like

Nick gestured to the server, a young woman neither of them knew.

She walked over and smiled. “What can I get you?”

“I’ll take a Coke and the meat loaf special,” Nick said without looking at

the menu.

“You?” She turned to Cole.

“Same.”

The redhead scribbled their orders and walked away.

his own relaxed than Cole had ever seen him, and considering Nick's ease in his personality, that was saying something.

Cole didn't pretend not to know what his cousin was talking about. "So screwed," he said out loud.

Nick barked out a laugh. "That's got to refer to a woman, and since the next step whole town knows you're watching out for Erin Marsden, I'm guessing it's the one."

Only the server's return with their sodas prevented Cole from answering. When she walked away, Cole tipped his head toward the women. "Those two? I think they're plotting something."

Nick turned Erin and Macy's way and burst out laughing. Again. "I can see why you'd think that, but seriously, what gives?"

Cole debated how much to tell Nick, then decided that since Erin had already confided in her best friend and her brothers wanted his head on a platter, then might as well have someone in his corner.

He leaned closer to his cousin. "Erin's pregnant." Nick choked on his drink. "No way. This is Erin we're talking about, the chief's daughter. The same girl who never stepped out of the lines a little for her life."

"Doesn't make her a nun," Cole said, sounding defensive even to his own ears.

"Point taken." Nick paused, probably to digest the information. "I don't envy the father. Her brothers are going to string him up by the . . ."

"Balls," Cole finished for him. "Yeah, they probably would if they need me to watch out for her twenty-four seven."

Nick's eyes opened wide. "Oh, shit," he muttered, the revelation hitting him. "What are you going to do?"

"Support her and the baby. What else?" At least he had a healthy bank account, courtesy of living undercover and not spending what he earned.

"Oh, I don't know." Nick raised an eyebrow, looking at Cole like he was an utter moron. "You knocked up about the sweetest girl in town. I can't even consider marriage—"

"Do not say that word." Cole's mouth grew dry at the mere thought of tying Erin to him in any legal way. She deserved so much better, so much more than he could ever hope to give her.

ing more Nick scowled. “Come on, man. You need to at least consider it.”

sygoing Cole shook his head. “Think about what you just said. She’s sw
good. Then you’ve got me. The bane of my father’s existence, coming
t. “I ama world that’s dark and ugly, with plans to head back under. What par
and my life is good for her?” he asked, laying the truth out for his cou
nce thefor himself.

ig she’s Because sometimes Erin got to him so badly even he needed a rem
“Are you seriously going back under?” Nick asked. “I was hopinq
ering. give it up and try living a normal life.”

s table. Cole let out a harsh laugh. “What the hell do I know about norm
my father come home to family dinners with my mom like June and
“I canClever? Or did he come in slamming doors, grumbling about her
cooking and whatever shit he could throw at me? I don’t have real
rin hadother than you, because I’m not in one place, living my own life, long
d, Coleto make any. Is that the kind of life you think she wants?” he asked, l
harsh but his voice low.

“I think that’s up to her to decide.”

out. The Cole set his jaw. “She deserves better.”

day in “Sounds like bullshit excuses to me.”

“Shut up. I know what I’m talking about. Even her brothers agree.”

his own Nick assessed him with a knowing stare. “Again, it only matters w
want and what Erin agrees to accept for herself.”

“Man, I Cole didn’t reply. Circular arguments weren’t his thing.

.” But Nick being Nick, he wouldn’t give up—which served him wel
y didn’tthat’s how he had finally convinced Kate he meant it when he said he
her. And only her. Cole still liked to give him shit about setting Kat
sinkingspend time alone with him. He had to give his cousin credit for ingenu

“Unless it really is just sex for you, in which case, let her go. Give
savingssee your kid on occasion, when Erin and whichever schmuck she
d. give you time.”

he was Yeah, like Cole thought, Nick didn’t give up. “Leave it alone,” he
Did youother man.

Nick braced his arms on the table and leaned in close. “Somebody
ught ofspell things out for you, because you’re too stubborn to see things cle
o muchthat way, sorry to tell you, you’re just like your old man.”

Cole’s hands clenched into fists.

“Chill out. Just giving you something to think about. So I suggest you take the next however many months until she’s due to sort through your issues. A kid’s not something to take lightly,” Nick said, as serious as Cole had ever seen him.

“I’m not taking anything about this lightly.”

Nick shook his head and let out a groan. “You’d better not be. Take it from someone who had to fight for the woman he wanted. It’s worth it. And so is she.” He tipped his head toward Erin.

She was worth it, Cole thought. And that was the exact reason he was sticking to his plan. But for now? While he was here, living in her house, protecting her, taking care of her?

She was his—until he had no choice but to let her go.

Chapter Nine

BECAUSE ERIN WAS starving, Macy, being a good pal whose family The Family Restaurant, went into the kitchen and returned with a big chocolate seven-layer cake that had Erin's name written all over it.

Erin eyed the dessert and sighed with pleasure. "I have so earned this baby." She picked up her fork, ready to dig in. "Come to mama," she said and whisked the plate from Macy's grasp.

"Okay, if you need chocolate, you must not be getting sex."

Erin paused, her fork halfway to her lips. "I'm getting. Sort of," she said, shoving the fork in, hoping Macy would change the subject.

Macy snatched the plate away. "Spill."

Erin scowled at her friend, but knew she wouldn't get her cake back. "Fine. We slept together again, but before we did, he said it was perfectly clear it didn't change the future. And I agreed."

Macy shook her head sadly. "And here I thought the man had potential."

"Not finished," Erin said, eyeing the cake longingly. It was her desire to be backed off the next day. There's no way I'm going to let myself get emotionally involved when I know the outcome ahead of time. But then I say and do things that lead me to believe he feels more than he's admitting to himself."

"Such as?"

Erin shrugged. "Acting all possessive. I mean, get this: He *forbade* me to go to the Bar Association event with Evan. He said, and I quote, 'If I see you sleeping in my bed, you sure as hell won't be going on a *date*, business or otherwise, with some other man,'" she said in a baritone imitation of Evan's voice.

Macy chuckled but her eyes opened wide. "Did you kick him in the nuts for ordering you around?"

"He was driving. Can I have my cake back now?"

"I'll rephrase. Did you want to kick him in the nuts for ordering you around?"

No. No, I did not, Erin thought, knowing her reaction had been a surprise to herself at the time.

“You’re blushing!” Macy squealed.

“Shh!”

“So . . . you liked his command.”

Erin resigned herself to the inevitable mortification. “It turned out she whispered. “Now give me my cake!” Her voice rose in direct relation to her frustration.

Macy grinned and returned the plate.

Erin dug in. “Thank God, Aunt Lulu is back with you. This is something else.”

“Aunt Lulu is still hoping for a settlement from the grocery store. Do you think her chances are?”

“Good, actually. Turns out there’s a family feud going on over who should be able to run the business. The high-powered legal team was over his brother’s way of trying to manipulate the other brother into caving. Anyway, when I found out what was going on, I called the man who’d left his two moron sons fighting over the running of his business. He retired in Florida.”

“Family-run businesses can get hairy.” Macy shuddered, knowing the truth from experience.

Erin nodded. “I told the father that if he didn’t come home and his sons would bankrupt the business in no time.” She grinned. “I’m sure Aunt Lulu gets a nice settlement and the whole thing goes away.”

Macy’s smile grew wider. “Thank you. She’ll be thrilled!”

“You’re welcome.” Erin licked the back of the fork and placed the fork on the plate, finally full.

“Now that you’re sated . . . so to speak . . . let’s talk about what you’re going to do to get the big lug to see if you two can make a go of any relationship.” Macy waggled her eyebrows.

“Not happening. He made that clear.”

“But his actions are saying something else, yes?”

Erin shrugged. “Doesn’t matter. He’s stubborn.”

“So, my friend, are you. The way I see it, you can go all in, sleep with him as long as he’s staying with you and seems interested, go through the baby thing together and hope that he sees what an amazing woman you are.”

hock to and what a great life he could have. Then if he doesn't come around, y
kick him in the nuts." Macy grinned. "Or you can give up now witho
really trying."

Erin wasn't a quitter. She didn't give up when things got tough
wouldn't have survived law school or the bar exam. She understood
ne on," had it easier than many of her friends, no major drama in her life. Un
ation to *that is*, she thought, glancing down at her stomach.

"So which will it be?" Macy asked. "And decide quick, because
his way over here. You in or out?"

Erin straightened her shoulders and set her jaw. "In." She was in.

"Hello, ladies," Nick Mancini greeted them before Cole said a wor

"Hi, Nick. How's the wife?" Macy asked.

"Pretty damned good." And from his wide grin, Erin figured he me
er who meant it.

"Which reminds me, Kate and I are having a small get-toget
Long Sunday for family and friends. We'd love it if you two came."

"You are?" Cole asked. "You didn't say a word to me."

"Because you always turn me down. But if this lovely lady sa
you'll have no choice, because you're her shadow these days." Nick la
ng that obviously pleased with his way of thinking.

Cole's low growl of annoyance didn't surprise Erin, and she swall
choose, chuckle. Obviously Nick knew his cousin well.

"So can I let Kate know you'll both be there?" Nick asked.

Erin glanced at Macy. It had been so long since she'd been o
friends, just having a good time.

Her friend inclined her head and nodded. "I'd love to come."

"Same!" Erin said excitedly, but without meeting Cole's gaze.

"I'll call Kate and see what she needs in the way of food," Ma
sort of Nick.

"And I'll bring one of Aunt Lulu's cakes," Erin said before Mac
take over that idea.

"Because we all know you can't cook." Macy snickered.

Erin shook her head. "I'll have you know that Cole promised t
ep with me," Erin said, knowing that in that instant, she'd mentally and v
ugh the committed to her course of action. She'd drop her guard and let
you are hoping he'd do the same.

you can And if things fell apart? Well, like Macy said, at least she'd know
out evergiven it her best effort. Then when he left, she'd have a baby to raise
job to keep her so busy she wouldn't have time to miss him when
or shegone.

d she'd It was a nice lie she told herself, anyway. The distinct ringing o
til now, phone broke into Erin's thoughts.

She looked to where the sound came from as Cole pulled his phone
he's on his pocket. "Sanders," he said. "What do you have for me?"

He listened, his steady gaze never leaving Erin. It had to be answered
the ballistics from her shooting. Her stomach in knots, she leaned forward,
d. waiting for him to finish the call.

"Yeah, I got it. I'll pass it on to someone who can run down the
more than Expect a call from a Mike Marsden. Thanks. I owe you one." He ended
call and looked at Erin. "They traced the bullet to a gun used in a shooting
there on last year. With a little luck, the guy who owns it is someone for hire or
tell us where he unloaded the gun or who has it now. It's a long shot,
all we've got."

Yes yes, Erin drank a long sip of water to ease the dryness in her mouth. "I
laughed, it's something."

"I'm going to step outside and call Mike. Let him get the information
owed a start to run down the lead. I'll be right back. Don't move," he ordered.

Since she was suddenly dizzy and shaken, she wasn't about to argue
the command.

out with



ALTHOUGH ERIN HAD decided to go all in with Cole, after his possessive
cy told about sleeping with her and her not seeing other men, she'd also expected
y could him to act first. But in the last forty-eight hours, he'd been on his
behavior, leaving Erin with the decision about how to start showing him
kind of future he could have with her. It wasn't all about sex; that much
understood.

A life with her included friends, family, dinners out, and work functions.
o teach She had the latter coming up Saturday night and she'd already informed
verbally he'd need a suit and tie, which had necessitated a mall trip after work
him in, other day. They had Nick's party on Sunday, which was another plan.

she'd could out them in public by being affectionate in front of others, *if* the end and her intention. But she couldn't do any of those things if she and Cole he was establish a change in their relationship here. At home.

It would have to be tonight, then, Erin decided, nerves making a cell stomach dance and flutter. But first, she had to deal with welcoming her parents home and of course telling them her news. From the shooting since the pregnancy, they were completely in the dark.

She had no desire to have such a personal conversation in front of her brothers, who were already biased against Cole. In fact, she decided to go forward, have to talk to her mom alone, and discuss how to break the truth to her father. She didn't think her brothers would have the nerve to be the lead.

Erin changed from her work clothes, choosing a sexier panty and top than normal because she planned to end up in Cole's bed. But when she attempted to button her jeans, she had no luck closing them. Overnight but it had stopped fitting. She stripped them off, walked to her closet, and began a systematic trying-on of her casual clothes, only to have the same result. At least Frustrated, she tossed item by item onto the bed.

"Erin, almost time to go," Cole called from the hallway, knocking on the door.

"I'm not going anywhere," she yelled back, eyeing the pile in disbelief. He entered without knocking.

She didn't bother to cover up. First, he'd seen it all before. Second, she was too upset with herself for not thinking ahead about buying maternity clothes. And third, she had a plan, and belly or not, she might as well show him. He responded.

He did. One look and his eyes glazed with desire, and relief washed through her. She did everything she could not to squeeze her legs together in an effort to alleviate the sudden ache in her core.

"What's going on?" he asked, his voice gruff, the raspy sound setting her nerve endings aflame.

"Umm, I'm having a . . . malfunction."

He cocked his head to one side, his gaze never leaving her exposed. "Explain."

She gestured to the bed. His gaze followed the direction of her hand. He blinked in shock. "Whoa. Your closet explode?"

hat was “Along with my middle,” she muttered. “Nothing fits.”
e didn’t He was gentleman enough not to comment. “Why not wear what y
on for work?” he asked, rather diplomatically, she thought.

ing her “That was tight too.” She felt her cheeks heat. “I had to unbutton t
ing her and then untuck my shirt so the blouse covered the waist. The ski
g to her falling down and it wasn’t comfortable.” She knew she sounded
grumbling, whiny pain in the ass.

of her She didn’t care.

d she’d Cole chuckled, annoying her further. “What’s so funny?” she snap
to her “Nothing.” He held up both hands, the nervous expression of
ones to dealing with a hormonal female on his face. “Look, I don’t think your
would appreciate it if you showed up in my sweatpants. Don’t yc
bra setsomething you can put on until we can go shopping?”

en she “We?” Though she ought to be used to him grouping them as a
ght they whenever she needed to go somewhere or do something, he always
began aher off guard.

Or maybe it was the lurch in her chest when he used the term we, c
hope to settle in her heart, that upset her so much.

g on her She folded her arms across her chest while he attempted not to loo
at her bare legs and the slight swell of her stomach that peeked bene
elief. silk camisole.

“If you need to go shopping, I’m going to have to drive you, so y
nd, she Now, are you going to get dressed for your parents, or is show-and-
aternity way you want to break the news?” Cole studied her patiently.

ll see if Contrarily, she threw up her hands in frustration. “Fine. These seem
loosest.” She grabbed a pair of black pants from the pile. “I’ll just leav
flowed unbuttoned and hope nobody notices.”

ether in She waited, but he didn’t leave so she could dress, so she started
on her pants anyway.

ing her “Erin?”

“Hmm?”

“I meant it earlier when I offered to go with you to talk to your p
d body. He’d offered on the drive home from work and she’d put him off, i
time to think. “I know you don’t need my protection while you’re the
and and your brothers and father, but you don’t have to face your parents alone

His words disarmed her irrational—and yes, hormonal—anger o

lack of wardrobe. As usual when dealing with Cole, her emotions
you hadgamut from being frustrated to being thrown completely by his kind
concern.

he skirt “Talk about facing a dad with a shotgun.” She couldn’t help but
irt kepthem.

like a He grimaced, and she got serious. “I appreciate you being willing
up,” she said softly, admiring his courage in his willingness to face her
the police chief. She drew a deep breath before explaining her decisio
ped. alone. “I just think since we’re not a couple, this is something I need to
a manmy own.”

parents Erin might want them to be one, she might be planning to use eve
u havein her arsenal to get him to come around and see things her way,
wouldn’t set her parents up for disappointment by showing up with
coupleannounce her pregnancy. Not when the reality was that she’d be mostl
caughtthis alone.

“Fine,” he bit out, obviously hurt by her answer.

causing Erin understood, but she hadn’t made her choice lightly. In fact
talked it over with Sam, who so far had been the more rational brother
k downwith, and he’d agreed.

ath her Cole stalked to the door and turned, bracing a hand on the fram
come on down when you’re ready. I’ll drop you at your folks’ before
es. We. over to Joe’s. You can ring me when you’re done and I’ll get you on t
tell thehome.”

Erin bit down on her lower lip, knowing she was about to dig the l
ned thedeeper. “Umm, my brother called a little while ago. He offered to pick
e themand bring me home. I figured I’d give you a break from babysitting
said yes.”

pulling Cole’s hand tightened on the doorframe. “Fucking Mike.”

Erin winced. “Actually, it was Sam.” She just hadn’t had a chance
Cole he was off duty before her clothing dilemma sidetracked her.

He shrugged as if he didn’t care, but she knew the damage was dor
arents.” “I’ll be at Joe’s, enjoying my break. Make sure you call or tex
eedingyou’re on your way back, and I’ll meet you here.” He walked c
re withfootsteps ringing as he hit the hall, leaving Erin with a stomachach
.” tiny hole in her heart.

ver her

ran the
ess and



IT WAS SO good to have her parents back and the whole family in one
it tease Sam, Mike and Cara, and Erin were all at the house. Erin didn't reali
much she'd missed her folks until she found herself wrapped i
to step welcoming embrace. Suddenly the stress of her life caved in on her, i
: father, burst into tears.

in to go Ella Marsden stepped back and braced her hand on Erin's shoulder
o do on here now." She looked over Erin's shoulder to Simon, Mike, and

"We'll be back. You all catch up without us." Then taking Erin's har
rything led her to the kitchen, her mother's domain and sanctuary.

but she "You know what that's about?" Erin heard her father ask her broth

Cole to She cringed, not knowing what they'd reveal, but after her em
y doing outburst, she figured *everything* was a fair guess.

"What's going on?" her mother asked.

Erin looked at her mom, who appeared healthy and happy. Th
t, she'dauburn hair she'd shared with Erin framed her face. If possible, the s
to deal Simon's cancer last year had dissipated, thanks to their overdue vacati

Erin was pleased.

e. "Just "I guess you wouldn't rather tell me about your trip?" she asked,
: I head to stall the inevitable.

he way Her mother shot her a look that, when Erin and her brothers we
had meant *Talk now, or else*.

knife in "Okay." Erin glanced down at her hands, which she'd begun t
c me up together. "The night of Mike's wedding, I was feeling . . . out of sorts."

me and "Lonely," Ella said softly.

Eyes filling again, Erin nodded. "It seemed like everyone around
finding that special someone. I guess I was feeling sorry for myse
e to tell stopped at Joe's on the way home, and . . . Cole Sanders was there."

Ella's face remained understanding just as she kept silent, letting E
ie. the story at her own speed.

t when "We danced. One thing led to another, and . . . we had a one-night
out, his Erin didn't meet Ella's gaze. Discussing sex with her mother wasn't
e and a comfortable. "And it was just that one night." No need to mention how
times that evening, Erin thought. "He barely spoke to me in th
afterward."

“And that hurt your feelings,” Ella said with a woman’s wisdom and a parent’s understanding.

Erin nodded. “A lot. But I understood. He’d just come back to town and he obviously had been through something bad before coming home. I drew a deep breath. “About a month later, I started getting nauseous.”

“Oh my God.” Ella clasped Erin’s clenched hands. Obviously, there was no need to go on. Her mother got the point loud and clear.

“I’m not sure,” Erin said. “I guess I didn’t want to face it because I didn’t let myself make a connection, and as a result, I didn’t take a test for a while. Anyway, I couldn’t bring myself to tell anyone because I needed to process it myself.”

“Does Cole know?”

Erin exhaled a long breath. “He does now, but he didn’t then.” She shook her head, met her mom’s gaze. “There’s more.”

“I’m listening.” To her mother’s credit, she held on to Erin’s hand and didn’t say a word, not judging or asking questions.

“The day after you left, I was on my way to work when I was stopped in a parking lot.”

“What!” Ella’s face leached color.

“I’m fine, Mom. I promise. The bullet passed through my arm and I’m hoping for permanent harm done. And I’ll explain everything I know about the situation which isn’t much, in a few minutes. Anyway, I was taken to the hospital where the other kids were, when Mike went to find Sam, he had Cole wait outside the cubicle where they were treating me. Cole heard the doctor mention I was pregnant. I don’t know how he found out.”

“Good Lord, I don’t know what to react to first.”

Erin winced. “How about you let me finish.”

Her mother’s eyes opened wide. “There’s more?”

“Not too much. Cole and Mike argued over who would take me to the hospital. I insisted that I was going home. Cole said he was going with me. Erin told me Mike wanted me to have round-the-clock protection and finally agreed to Cole staying with me, which I thought was ridiculous since I figured I could stand.”

“It wasn’t?” Her mother’s voice took on a harsh yet worried tone.

Erin shrugged. “It doesn’t look like it.” She told her mother about the roadkill delivery to her front door. “In the meantime, Cole told me that he and Sam have a lead, thanks to the ballistics on the gun. But now they

and assure the two things are related, because a shooting is major and road de-escalation. It doesn't make sense. Plus the note with the animal, and 'Leave him alone,' and that's just odd."

"She Ella stood and began pacing the kitchen. "First, you should have me."

Erin exhaled long and hard, having expected this. "You were on a You'd just gone through a hellish year, and you deserved the time awake the Dad. Besides, you're here now."

"And not a minute too soon. You need your mother." Ella held arms, and Erin gratefully went back into her mom's embrace. Her scent eased the anxiety Erin had been living with for so long.

"Now, tell me what's going on with you and Cole Sanders."

Erin's face heated at the mention of Cole's name, while her body reacted to the mere thought of him.

"I see," Ella said thoughtfully.

Knowing her mother, she probably did. "He said he can't make plans for the future beyond him taking care of both me and the baby. We defined anything, but I'm guessing that's financial. And he'll want to be home. No child when he's home between jobs." Erin crossed her arms in a comforting, self-supplied hug.

Ella made a humming sound while she pursed her lips in thought. "Where more than Rex gave me," Ella said, speaking of Mike's biological father.

Erin swallowed hard. "The thing is, his actions are so opposite from words. He's decided he's in charge of everything, beyond the book thing. He cooks meals. He makes sure the fridge is stocked and the well. He was insulted I didn't ask him to come to my monthly appointment and insisted he'd be there for the rest of them. And he from the jealous fit when Evan Carmichael reminded me about the event that I supposed to attend together on Saturday night."

Her mother's eyes opened wide. "Not the actions of a disinterested it was a Erin shook her head. "He holds himself back from me emotionally. He's definitely scarred by how Jed treated him growing up. How he still him. My God, Mom, it was awful." And she was pretty sure Cole had rubbed out their touch with Jed since he'd moved in with her.

With a sigh, her mother lowered herself back into her seat. "Jed's a y're not man. Very set in his beliefs and in his ways." She shook her head. "

kill is a little patience for a child, let alone an independent one with a mind of his own like Cole was. They butted heads so often I wasn't surprised Cole would be looking for trouble when he was younger."

Ella called "That's so sad." She couldn't imagine growing up without a loving father. "I guess I was too young to realize how bad things were."

Erin said "As deputy police chief, Jed was loyal and good to your father, and our friendship stemmed from there. We tried to tell him the damage he was doing in his private life, but he didn't listen. To be honest, I was glad when he took Cole and left Serendipity. But I didn't realize how much he'd hurt Cole by then." Ella paused. "Does Jed know about the baby?"

Erin shook her head. "I'm sure Cole's avoiding that conversation until the last possible moment. He doesn't need to hear what a crappy father he still makes from the man who still makes digs every chance he gets."

Her mother's face showed her disappointment. "I'll have your father talk to him."

Erin said "No. We should all mind our own business and let Cole deal with it. Speaking of fathers, I think Mike and Sam might be telling Dad everything they see. Erin placed her hand over her belly.

Erin said "We're not going to judge you, honey. Especially not me. That would be like the pot calling the kettle black. I just want to know if you're happy with it." Erin looked into her mother's wise eyes. "I was shocked. Not scared. I'm excited too." She drew a deep breath. "I'm on my way to being happy, but . . ."

Erin said "What is it?" her mother asked.

Erin said "Cole. I want to try to see if anything that's between us can be real. It's just pieces of a relationship that he's unwilling to string together. I had something that makes sense. It's like, I can feel how right we could be, but then *bam*, it's gone." Erin's chest squeezed tight.

"I'm sure he's scared, just like you are."

Erin said "I know. But it's more than that. He's alluded to the fact that somebody like me deserves better. More than he can give. But nobody could tell him that better than he does, and that's without emotional commitment or involvement."

"Oh, honey, you're in love with him?" Ella asked.

Erin sniffed, her throat full. "I can't know that yet, but I think I could. He had. If he opened himself more. If he could accept that he was meant to be with me."

l of his life, not just live undercover. “But I’m afraid he’ll never give us a chance
le went “Honey . . .”

Before Ella could finish, Mike strode into the room. “Sorry. I caught
; father help overhearing. I came to see if you were ready to join us yet.”

Erin shook her head, annoyed by the interruption. “In a few minutes

and our “Can I say something before I go?” Mike asked.

s doing “Can I stop you?”

Olivia He settled into a chair next to her. “Umm . . . I might have over-
already and hurt the situation between you and Cole.”

Erin narrowed her gaze. “What did you do?”

until the “Michael?” Ella asked, her voice low.

er he’ll “Back when you were shot? I confronted him at the hospital. I said
things, and he took them to mean I thought he wasn’t good enough for

her talk “And you didn’t correct him?” Erin asked, her voice rising.

Mike shook his head. “I agreed with him”—he held up his hands
with Jed, you have to understand I’d just found out you were pregnant. And you
/thing.” been shot.” To his credit, her brother appeared embarrassed, but I
hadn’t bothered to fix things either.

ould be “It’s not like you’ve done anything to make him feel better about
/.” since, so cut it with the puppy dog eyes. I’m not buying the whole
ow I’m a cat.”

o being “Erin, Michael, stop. What’s done is done. But Michael, you of all
know what it’s like to doubt yourself. What were you thinking, talking
Cole that way?” Ella asked, sounding disappointed in her son.

. So far “I’ve been worrying about Erin.”

er into Erin rose to her feet. “Well, if you care that much, you should have
be, and listening to me the last few weeks when I asked you to ease up on Cole.
is my life, and whatever happens, it’s up to me.”

He exhaled hard. “I know. Cara said the same thing on the way
omeone here.”

reat me Erin knew how fragile Cole’s psyche was in general, thanks
ent or Undercover work suited him, yes, but it also let him avoid reality and
who could love and care about him.

Erin had decided to make her move with Cole tonight, back home
uld be.” hearing what Mike had done, she decided any move she made had to be

share in And it had to be public. “Take me to Joe’s,” she said to Mike.

ice.” He raised an eyebrow. “We all just got here.”

Erin glanced at her mother, who waved her away with a smile
couldn't face. “Go do what you have to do. I'll talk to you tomorrow.”

“Don't you want to talk to Dad before you go?” Mike asked Erin
s.” barely got the gist of what's going on with you.”

“I'll handle Simon,” Ella said. “Michael, take your sister and stay
the way,” she said in the authoritative voice she'd used on them as child
stepped Despite how upset she was, Erin couldn't help but laugh.

“And keep my baby safe,” Ella said sternly.

“Yes, Mom.” Mike kissed Ella's cheek.

Of course, it took longer than Erin would have liked to get out
d a few parents' house. Simon insisted on talking to her about stalker safe
you.” assuring her he would be there for her and the baby, no judgment. The
way he'd been there for Ella when she'd been pregnant so many years—
s—“but Simon was a good and decent man, and Erin was lucky to have him
u'd just father. She just wished Cole had been as fortunate.

he sure Finally, Sam stayed behind with their parents, while Mike, Cara, a
headed for Mike's truck for the short ride to town. As they pulled up to
t things Mike turned to Erin in the back seat.

contrite “You do realize Cole's got more issues than just the things I said
right?” he asked.

people “Erin's a grown woman,” Cara reminded Mike. “Give her the ti
king to space to handle things without always having to stick your nose into her
Erin bit the inside of her cheek. She loved how Cara took her hus
hand.

ve been “Thank you,” she said to her sister-in-law. “Mike, yes, I know.
le. This believe I can handle everything about Cole.” She just needed to make
wanted to be handled.

ay over Because if she went all out only to discover Cole really didn't
anything to do with settling in Serendipity, with her—in whatever c
to Jed. they worked out between them—Erin couldn't change his mind.

people Still, she wouldn't know unless she tried. Tonight, she decided,
time to do just that.

e. After
e now.

on her

.. “He’s

7 out of
ldren.

: of her
ety and
ie same
rs ago.
t as her

nd Erin
o Joe’s,

to him,

me and
er life.”
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Chapter Ten

COLE HAD FORGOTTEN Wednesday night was Ladies' Night, which wasn't a quiet evening at Joe's. Instead, Cole took in the various groups of people, some of whom he remembered well, some he merely recognized, and others too young for him to know at all.

He spent some time shooting the shit with Joe. The other man, Annie, friendly since Cole had moved in, tried chatting, and though he gave it his best shot, he wasn't in the mood for small talk that inevitably led to the subject of Erin's shooting and Cole playing bodyguard. Annie was perceptive and backed off, which left Cole as he usually was. Alone.

He nursed a beer for most of the night, trying unsuccessfully not to think about the things he couldn't change. He didn't blame Erin for not wanting to go with her when she told her parents—and did he really want to put himself through that kind of torture? Still, sooner or later he'd have to face Sam. Sam was a man Cole had always respected, who'd now look at him with disgust and disappointment. He was used to it from his own father and from other people who didn't know him at all, but it would bother Cole coming from Erin's father.

And he couldn't forget the look on her face when she'd given him the reason for going alone. *Since we're not a couple, this is something I do on my own.*

So hurt. And so very brave, pretending everything in her world was fine. He ran a hand over his burning eyes and glanced around the crowd of people watching people dance to music from an old-fashioned jukebox.

Time crept by slowly.

A glance at his watch told him he still had a good stretch before he expected Erin to call to meet her back at the house, so he was surprised when he heard her voice. Sure he was imagining things, he turned to see Erin standing up to him, her eyes blazing with determination—over what, he hadn't known. She was followed closely by Mike and Cara.

Mike stepped around his sister. "Got a minute?" He spoke before

could.

Erin narrowed her gaze. "You were just my ride. I don't need opening your big mouth any further."

Uh-oh. Looks like brother and sister had had an argument.

"Mike, let's go dance." Cara tugged at her husband's arm.

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oups of
ed, and
the way."
"In a second." Mike turned to Cole. "Look, what I said at the bar after Erin was shot? And the way I've acted since? I was out of my mind. Everything going on is between you two. Whatever happens, I won't be in the way."

's wife,
h Cole
bly led
seemed
Cole narrowed his gaze, wondering what brought on the apology, other than maybe Erin's wrath over her brother's feelings about him. "I can't blame you for looking out for her."

"We were friends a long time ago. Maybe when things set in, we could . . . I don't know. Have drinks?"

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himself
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ig from
Cole wasn't one to hold a grudge. Especially when the other man was right to his feelings. "Sure." He held out his hand and Mike shook it.

"One more thing before I go. We ran down the trail on the gun that was used in the shooting."

"Yeah?" Cole sat up straighter in his seat. "What'd you find out?"

"The weapon was stolen from the legal owner and used in a robbery last year. Guy's out on parole. Says he sold the gun to a guy named John who was a drug addict who'd do anything to get cash for a fix."

"Did they find him?"

im her
need to
Mike nodded. "So high it didn't take long for him to confess to the shooting. Says a brunette hired him. She didn't say why and he didn't say who. Idiot didn't get a name, either. She just showed him a picture of Erin and asked him where to find her."

is okay.
led bar,
Erin's eyes opened wide.

Sensing her distress, Cole acted without thinking. He snagged her hand and pulled her close. "Did your people get a look at the photograph?"

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d when
in walk
a clue.
"Didn't have it anymore."

"Shit. Where's this Brass guy now?" Cole asked.

"Detoxing in a Bronx jail cell. They'll take another crack at him in a few days, but I have a feeling we got all we could from him." Mike scowled, frustration evident.

ore she
"So whoever this woman is, she's still out there." Erin shivered.

Cole slid his hand up her shirt, along the soft skin of her back where she stood, with her back to her brother, nobody could see the touch, which eased her trembling and pleased him. When she did away, he was even more thrilled.

“We’ll get her. I promise you that,” Mike swore to his sister.

Erin nodded. “I believe you.”

Whatever problems the siblings had been having, it was obvious to get intrusted her brother. A part of him wished for that same faith, even as he’d never deserve it.

“You okay for me to go?” Mike asked.

“I’m with Cole. I’ll be fine.” She glanced back at him, her eyes steady in their certainty.

Mike hesitated, as if he wanted to add something, when Cara stepped in. “I’m stealing my husband now.” She grabbed Mike’s hand and led him to the dance floor.

Erin waited a beat before turning to face Cole.

“So what brings you here? I thought you were having dinner with family?” he asked.

When she’d bolted out of her parents’ house, she hadn’t had a plan. She only knew she needed to see him. Now she was here—and she still had Brass, she had one, so she fell back on her old standby.

Honesty. “I didn’t like how we left things earlier and I wanted to see you.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You broke up a family gathering for me?”
A hint of . . . vulnerability mixed with pleasure flashed across his handsome face.

No more dancing around the issue. Erin drew a deep breath and said, “I did.”

He beckoned with a crook of his finger. “Come here.”

She stepped into the V of his legs, and without caring who was looking she looped her arms around his neck.

His eyes opened wide. “What are you—”

“Shut up,” Erin said, and she leaned in close and kissed him full on the lips.

He stiffened at first, not, she knew, from lack of desire, but from the fact that they were in a public place. *Well, tough luck*, she thought, be-

From phase one of her suddenly formed plan: getting Cole Sanders used to private part of her life.

Don't pull Determined, she ran her tongue over the seam of his lips. With a his hands gripped her waist and he kissed her back with a passion that matched her own.

When they parted, Erin felt pleased with herself . . . until she looked at Erin's wary eyes. "What's going on?"

Erin knew "I just don't see a reason to hide what's happening between us. I know it'll be obvious soon enough." She patted her stomach.

"We agreed—"

Startling "About the future, yes, I know. But wasn't it you who said if I moved into your bed, I wouldn't be dating anyone else?" She fluttered her eyelashes in a not-so-innocent gesture.

Erin nodded. A muscle ticked in his jaw. "You haven't been in my bed the last few nights."

"But I plan to be from now on."

Erin thought your His eyes darkened, desire blazing in the inky depths. "You want to know about us?"

Erin answered. She "Yep. Whatever it is, for as long as it lasts—" She wouldn't tell him if she didn't she really hoped for. That would send him running. But to acclimate her Serendipity life, she needed him on board. "Yes. I want to be able to see you out. To act on impulse. And when it's over, we'll figure out our plan and go from there. Are you okay with that?" she asked, her tone deliberately challenging.

Erin tossed his He shook his head and her stomach flipped over, disappointment hitting her. She hadn't expected him to turn her down, not when everyone had nodded. She knew he was her baby's father eventually anyway.

"Fine. Forget it." She whipped around before he could catch a glimpse of her tear-filled eyes.

Erin was looking, He grabbed her wrist. "Whoa. You didn't let me finish."

She hesitated before turning back.

Erin said "I shook my head because you never cease to surprise me, challenge me on the and take me off guard."

She swallowed hard. "Is that a good thing?"

Erin said "I shock An unexpected grin curved his lips. "I'm still working that out. But I'm not answering your question? I may live to regret this, but yeah. I'm in."

being a Her eyes opened wide. “You are? Why?”

He let out a laugh that had people around them staring. “Because I groan, idiot would turn down what you’re offering.”

on that “Yeah?” she asked with what she figured had to be a goofy smile face.

ed into “Yeah.” He brushed her hair off her cheek in a tender gesture that eyes burning all over again.

I mean, “Want to dance?” she asked.

He nodded.

A few minutes later, he’d settled up with Joe, and Erin found her was in the dance floor, surrounded by a crush of people, Cole’s hard body presses in deliciously against hers while a slow, old Air Supply song crooned from the jukebox. Cole held her tight, her curves molded against his harder mass. She lay her head on his shoulder and let herself pretend, just for a moment, that everything she was feeling was real.

Permanent.

people to That this tough man with his protective alpha ways could actually care for her just as she was beginning to care for him. And maybe she could, but she understood on a pragmatic level that caring didn’t mean he would trust her to accept or live his kind of life—because he’d been ingrained with the belief that he wasn’t worth it.

renting The next hour passed in a blur of stares and cautious conversations with friends and acquaintances of Erin’s who were obviously surprised by the public display of affection between her and Cole. Erin played it cool, not wanting to fill real—introducing Cole with an easy, “You remember Cole Sanders from the party last week, would you?” and letting them draw their own conclusions about them together. She hoped that on the way they danced and the way she stayed by his side. She hoped to help acclimate the people of Serendipity to Cole and vice versa. Everyone was polite, even with Cole acting as wary as she would have expected, Erin satisfied with her night’s work.

“Okay, we played things your way. Now it’s my turn.” Cole’s love reverberated throughout her body, already primed from dancing so close to him. “Let’s go home.”

ut as to



COLE WAS A man of few words to begin with, so when Erin walked into the room, she swung her arm around his neck and kissed him senseless, in front of all of Serendipity, she stunned him into silence.

And then she seduced him with her mouth and her words. She wanted to be in his bed? He had no problem taking her there. Not long after she had her Joe's, they were back at Erin's. He did a quick perimeter check and a sweep of the house before opening her car door, scooping her into his arms and carrying her through the house and upstairs to her bedroom.

Cole lowered her to the bed. He stripped off his clothes until he was himself completely nude. It was easy enough to rid her of a skirt that was pressed open anyway, before removing the rest of her outfit. Soon, he had her where he wanted her, in nothing but a flimsy pair of panties and a sexy bra with muscular lush cleavage spilling over the lace cups, staring up at him with pure desire for her hazel-green eyes.

As hard as it was to accept what the idea of the pregnancy meant for his future it tied him to whether he'd planned it or not, the changes in her body came cemented him in reality. Right now, when he looked down at her, he may feel panic but rather tenderness. He wasn't experiencing dread but rather an intense pure bolt of desire.

He bent to ease one bra strap off her shoulder, but instead of reaching for the flimsy material, he found his hand covering her stomach, gently caressing it from the slight swell there now. Eyes wide, Erin watched him, wonder and awe by her gaze. He knew the feeling—was experiencing it himself—of knowing she had his baby inside her. And it made him want her even more.

He planned to go slow, to taste every last inch of her exposed skin, but she was a writhing mass of need.

“How much longer are you going to make me wait?” she asked in a pleading voice. “I mean, I was happy to let you do your control thing, but if you’re leaving going to move, I suppose I should take over.” A wicked gleam lit his eyes and suddenly he wanted nothing more than to change places.

He flipped over and braced his hands behind his head. “Go for it.”



ERIN GRINNED. SHE looked her fill of his gorgeous body, his olive skin appearing tan, a dark sprinkling of hair on his chest running down

o Joe's, abdomen to the thatch of hair between his thighs. His thick, pulsing erection
Joe and called to her, and she couldn't wait to touch.

So she did, wrapping her hand around his straining shaft and pumped
up and down until a drop of moisture pooled at the head. She licked
leaving lips and moaned.

“Like what you see?” he asked in a hoarse voice.

“I most certainly do.” She continued to slide her hand back and forth
she lowered her mouth and took him inside, tasting his unique flavor
he was and musk, his erection so hot and smooth as it passed her lips and
partially through her mouth.

She'd loved doing this to him before, had reveled in the power
with her possessed to bring this big, strong man to a mind-blowing orgasm. His
desire in Marsden, the good girl. The one who never before loved sex the way
with him. More important, she'd never enjoyed giving to a man the way
she did with him, like his gratification meant as much if not more than her
er body. Because giving him pleasure did the same for her.

She swirled her tongue over the sensitive head, down his shaft, then
up again. He thrust his hips, and she accepted all of him, would
whatever he needed or even demanded.

She was shocked when he reached down and lifted her off him,
pressing her up his prone body.

“Hey! I was busy,” she said, teasing him.

He kissed her damp lips. “I am not coming unless I'm inside you.”

“You would have been.” She chuckled, a sound he cut off by sealing
his lips over hers.

He kissed her long and hard, telling her with his mouth and his rough
a husky hands how much he wanted her. Erin didn't need the words, she just
knew he was. Even on top, she handed back the reins, taking direction as he pulled
her gaze over his hips until she was poised over his waiting erection.

She aligned their bodies and started a slow downward glide. At that
time, he cupped her breasts in his hands and fondled her nipples, toyed
them together. Every pinch and pull went straight to her core, and she
glided downward, engulfing him completely.

“Oh God, you feel good.” Erin couldn't hold back the words; the feelings
swamping her were too strong, too incredible.

“So do you.” He jerked upward and groaned. “So hot and tight.”

erection His words inflamed her and she began to rock against him, taking pleasure, and from the tightness in his cheekbones and the rough grinding her coming from deep inside him, giving to him as well.

ked her Suddenly he managed to flip them, Erin flat on her back, Cole above her with a predatory gleam in his eyes. As he slid out, then into her once more, she felt him everywhere, in a deeper way than ever before. She tried to clear her mind to the emotions building and open her senses instead but it didn't work—salteasy, and it wasn't working.

glided He grasped her hands over her head and pumped into her hard. "Good?" he asked, picking up the pace, thrusting faster.

ver she She moaned in reply, and Cole did the one thing guaranteed to shake her, Erin to the core. His gaze met hers and held on as he continued to make her feel what she did her—and though she'd never say the words, never admit aloud to him, he loved her with his body.

er own. More than sex, more than primal lust and thrusting, she felt the way he took his time, never breaking eye contact, making sure the ripples in her backbody were real before letting go and taking his own pleasure. And when she'd give orgasm, when it came, caught up with hers, matching the intensity of her sheer explosive pleasure shredding her to pieces before she slowly came back together in his arms.

Long after her breathing evened out and Cole fell asleep, Erin lay in bed, accepting some hard truths. What happened in that bed meant more to her than it had to him.

ling his But she also sensed they were bound together in a stronger way than they'd been before, giving her something to build on. She knew it. Even when she was moaning, it didn't.

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ished at



ie same SATURDAY ARRIVED BEFORE Erin was ready. The Bar Association dinner was at the Pierpont Hotel, thirty minutes from Serendipity. This year's dinner was important to her, though not for the reasons Evan had said. She needed to get her job and even if she didn't plan to take over Evan's position or run for political office, she had a reputation to maintain. And she would not let her career after the baby was born.

She didn't kid herself that tonight would be easy, not with

ing her determined to make a statement and Cole equally insistent on keep
sounds away from her boss. Still, Erin had a statement of her own to make
begun on Wednesday night at Joe's, and she'd continued at work, no
ve her, treating Cole like the man who guarded her but like one she cared abo
re, Erin's relationship with.

lose off At first he'd seemed uncomfortable with her public touch
wasn't tender moments—as if he'd never had a girlfriend before, one where the
committed and outright affectionate, but he'd slowly warmed to the ide
l. “Feel In the meantime, she'd gone maternity shopping with her mo
Friday's lunch hour, Cole hovering in the background as her bod
ake her Thanks to the salesgirl's expertise, Erin now had stylish clothing
love to forward with this pregnancy, and she felt better about herself wh
feeling walked out of the house than she had before. She was still able to disgi
slightly swelling stomach with flowing tops, but she knew soon enou
way he wouldn't work. For now, she had time.

side her Early Saturday evening, she showered and dressed for the event,
and his special care with her hair and makeup, wanting to make an impressio
and the man in the other room. She'd chosen a form-fitting lapis-colored dres
ne backup with a gorgeous crystal brooch on one shoulder, draped in the righ
to accent her breasts and not her stomach, and which hit above th
awake, Sparkly silver shoes picked up the glitter on the brooch. Appropria
to her work event, yet a touch sexy enough to appeal to the man who w
officially sharing her bed.

ay than
en if he



COLE WAITED FOR Erin in her family room. He paced, acknowledging
himself how uncomfortable he was with the idea of going out in public
date. This wasn't a part of his normal life. Hell, he didn't have a nor
r dance outside of undercover work. But if he was going to have a kid, he su
y event he should get used to various conventional situations and events. Dati
enjoyed—well, it wasn't something that would continue once the baby wa
run for They'd agreed on that.

eed her The sound of a door opening drew his attention and he turned
stairs. Erin stood at the top, glowing from head to toe, in a gorgeo
1 Evandress that showed off her long legs, set off by high heels. Her face wa

ing her up in a way he'd never seen before, and though her fresh-faced look a
. She'd to him on a gut level, this Erin took his breath away.

longer He walked to the bottom of the stairs, held out his hand and gra
ut. Had when she met him at the bottom.

“You look spectacular.”

es and Her beaming smile was the only thanks he needed.

y were “You look pretty hot yourself, Mr. Sanders. Ready to deal with
ea. full of stuffy lawyers?”

ther on He let out a laugh. “I don’t think I’ll ever be ready for that.” But
y guard. he was making an exception. Not just as her watchdog, but as her date.

; to go He refused to delve too deeply into that.

ien she On the drive over, Erin surprised him by bringing up the stalkin
aise her longer we go between incidents, the more worked up I get.” She p
gh that hand over her stomach.

He reached over and grabbed her, lacing her fingers through his.
, taking think about it. Stress isn’t good for you, and as long as I’m around, a
i on the she can do is try to scare you. Nobody will get near you, remembe
ss, held squeezed her trembling hand.

t places “Thank you,” she said in that husky voice he liked so much
e knee. tonight? Whatever Evan pulls, ignore him, okay?”

ie for a Cole remained silent, unsure he could make that promise.

as now “Cole? He’s all bluster. A true politician.”

“Who wants you.”

“I’m not so sure about that.” Erin laughed. “He’s only stepped
rhetoric about us as a power couple now that you’re around. I think I
getting to you because he knows you’re a worthy opponent. Don’t gi
ging to the satisfaction.”

c as her Cole let out a rumbling growl.

nal life “I’ll take that as an okay.”

pposed “For you? I’ll do my best.” He slid his hand to the exposed skin
ng Erin thigh and ran his thumb back and forth over the silky flesh.

s born. “Thanks.” The sound came out reed-thin.

He grinned and kept his eyes on the road. He was adept enough
l to the looking. “So tell me what to expect this evening.” He inched his hand
us blue until the pad of his fingers hit the elastic on her panties.

is made She squeaked. “Cole!”

pealed “Yes?”

Before she could tell him to stop, he brushed his thumb over the
sped itthe silken material, pressing downward on her sensitive nub. She sti
sighed, and gave in, spreading her thighs as far as the tight dress woul
Beneath his touch, she was warm, damp, and aroused.

A glance told him she’d leaned her head back against the sea
a roomclosed, lost in sensation. He maintained a consistent pressure until th
came into view.

for her He withdrew his hand and cleared his throat. “We’re here,” he s
voice none too steady.

“Noo—”

g. “The “Look at it this way. You have something to look forward to du
laced aboring speeches and Carmichael’s posturing.”

She shifted, straightening her dress. She opened the visor and chec
“Don’tmakeup and hair in the mirror, all without saying a word.

ll he or Though he had a hunch he’d pay for his sensual torture later, for n
er?” Hewas hot, bothered, and thinking only about him. Just the way he wan
for the rest of the night.

. “And



ERIN HAD BEEN to events like this before, but never with her entir
quivering with need and arousal. She stepped from the car on wobb
up his Handed her coat in with shaking hands. Took Cole’s elbow to join
ne likes they walked into the cocktail area, wondering how she’d survive th
ive him Beside her, Cole, in a navy blue suit with a dark red tie, looked scru
and good enough to devour whole, something she intended to do wh
got home. First she had to maneuver among her colleagues.

They walked the room, Erin greeting her coworkers from Serendip
on her others she knew from various conferences in other jurisdiction
introduced Cole and accepted the surprised looks from the locals wh
him and figured out from Erin’s body language that he was more than
without bodyguard.

higher, Instead of letting him drift behind her, she included him in conve
and soon, her friends and colleagues did the same, and it wasn’t to
before he was involved in a baseball conversation with a group of me

as he spoke, Cole kept a possessive hand on her back.

front of Erin had just finished talking to one of the judges when Trina arrived, greeted Erin with a huge grin, her eyes focused on where Cole's hand remained possessively on her back. His touch burned through the dress.

As if aware Erin's focus had changed, Cole excused himself from the group, eyesmen and turned to Trina, remaining beside Erin the entire time.

the hotel "Well, well, well, look at you two." She leaned in to hug Erin and whispered in her ear, "Doesn't look like it's for show to me."

aid, his Erin pinched her friend in response.

"Ouch!" Trina squealed and stepped back, scowling at Erin.

Erin merely grinned in reply, knowing they'd talk about this another time.

ing the "How are you, handsome?" Trina asked Cole.

Erin rolled her eyes. "Trina's quite the flirt, if you didn't already recognize her in the office," Erin told him. But a nonthreatening flirt. Her occasional outrageous behavior fit her personality.

ow, she Cole merely grinned. "I'm fine. You?"

ited her "Oh, you know. Surviving this yearly event." She grabbed a champagne glass from a passing server's tray. "I know you can't have one," she said to Erin. "But how about you?"

Cole shook his head. "On duty."

"How are things on that front?" Trina asked, sobering.

the body "Quiet in a way that scares me," Erin said, repeating what she'd told Trina on the way over.

ly feet, on the way over.

him as He pulled her closer, the move not getting lost on Trina, whose eyes were full of approval.

the night, approval.

inptious "Well, on to schmooze," she said. "Catch up with you later. When they're sitting together since the DA's office took one table."

ity and "Now *that* you neglected to mention," Cole growled.

is. She Erin laughed. "I figured the less you knew, the better."

o knew you." His eyes darkened, bringing her back to that moment in the courtroom when he'd had his hands beneath her skirt and she'd been so close to coming.

just her he'd had his hands beneath her skirt and she'd been so close to coming.

rsation, eyes. And it was his comment that had her beaming. She knew it and she'd try to hide how much his words pleased her.

so long try to hide how much his words pleased her.

n. Even She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. Guessing her intention.

turned his head, and her lips met his. It was a brief kiss, but one that
ed. She public and filled her with absolute contentment.

's hand "So that's how it is," a familiar voice said.

s. Cole placed his hand on her hip and lifted his head. "Carmichael."

om the "Sanders." He slid his gaze to Erin. "You look beautiful. In fact,
glowing."

rin and Cole's grip tightened.

"Thank you, Evan." Before she could continue any conversation
lights above them flickered.

He glanced up. "I guess that's our cue to move on to the next part
er time. evening."

Erin nodded. "See you at the table?"

realize it Her boss met and held her gaze. "I wouldn't miss it for the world."

asional "What was that all about?" Cole asked when Evan walked away.

Erin shrugged. "Beats me. The man's always got some agenda."

Cole's gaze followed the path Evan had taken to the main ball
mpagne "Then I guess it's time to see what he's got planned now."

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“So that’s how it is,” a familiar voice said.

Cole placed his hand on her hip and lifted his head. “Carmichael.”

“Sanders.” He slid his gaze to Erin. “You look beautiful. In fact, you’re glowing.”

Cole’s grip tightened.

“Thank you, Evan.” Before she could continue any conversation, the lights above them flickered.

He glanced up. “I guess that’s our cue to move on to the next part of the evening.”

Erin nodded. “See you at the table?”

Her boss met and held her gaze. “I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

“What was that all about?” Cole asked when Evan walked away.

Erin shrugged. “Beats me. The man’s always got some agenda.”

Cole’s gaze followed the path Evan had taken to the main ballroom. “Then I guess it’s time to see what he’s got planned now.”

Chapter Eleven

AS ALWAYS DURING these sorts of dinners, which Cole had been to in various guises and disguises over the years, the speeches and awards portion of the evening came first. It tended to be a dry, boring, yawn-inducing affair no matter which association hosted the festivities. Erin's Bar Association, which encompassed quite a few New York counties and jurisdictions, was no different.

More than once, Cole was tempted to reach beneath the table and where he'd left off with Erin in the car. Only respect for her prevented him from acting on his dirty inclination, but that didn't stop him from creating his own fantasies about the idea. Sliding his hand into her warm, wet heat while the speeches droned on . . .

"You might want to pay attention now." Carmichael leaned over and spoke to Cole, snapping him back into the present.

"And now we get to the last award of the evening," the speaker on the podium said.

Cole didn't know why this should matter to him, but he refocused his attention.

"The recipient of this year's Rising Star Award, given by the Lawyers' Section of the Bar, is a woman with remarkable legal skills who shows exceptional promise for a bright future in our profession. A graduate of New York University School of Law, our honoree went on to work as an assistant district attorney in the town of Serendipity, Putnam County, where she has worked for the last five years."

Evan Carmichael spoke once more. "She's special. Don't hurt her."

Before Cole could tell the man to mind his own business, Erin was announced as the recipient of the Rising Star award.

From the way she sucked in a startled breath beside him, she was shocked by the news.

"Congratulations," Cole whispered as she turned to him, her eyes wide. "I had no idea!" She glanced over his shoulder. "Evan?"

“You earned it,” he assured her.

From the podium, the speaker continued to list her credits and accomplishments. She sat on a number of young lawyer committees for the state bar association, and she had a record number of prosecutorial wins to her credit. But what seemed to sway the votes in her favor was the establishment of a pro bono office in downtown Serendipity, where, among other things, she had helped many of the women who had often been caught in the recent recession find legal help in an attempt to retain their homes. And to staff said office, she’d recruited attorneys from all over the law and coaxed them to donate their hours. For free.

No wonder she’d insisted she not miss her weekly night there. She was just a volunteer; she’d founded the thing. It was her baby. Another pick-up artist saw her as a political asset. Family connections aside, Marsden was indeed special. Cole had merely sensed it in her giving tonight had shown him concrete proof.

A few minutes later, they called her to the podium; a round of applause followed, and Erin stepped up to thank the audience and accept her award. As she spoke, a lump formed in Cole’s throat. And stayed there.

He hadn’t planned on having children, but he was, and he couldn’t find a better mother to his son or daughter, a better role model, or a finer person than this one. He wasn’t sure what to do with the feelings rolling through him and was grateful when she stepped down from the podium, rejoining the table.

He reached over and squeezed her hand. “I’m really proud of you.” Her eyes sparkled with pleasure. “I don’t know what to say. There are many worthy candidates. I didn’t even think—”

“Don’t. Just enjoy.” Before he could say anything more, the portion of the evening drew to a close, and Erin was surrounded by colleagues who came to the table to congratulate her.

He let her have her moment in the spotlight, in awe of the easy way she had with people, the genuine pleasure she took in helping others, and everything about her.



BY THE TIME they pulled back up to her condo, Erin was still floating.

award was such a proud moment for her, a validation of all the hard work she'd put into her career over the last five years. To have Cole by her side was the icing on a very special cake, and she looked forward to contribute to the celebration in private.

Once they were back upstairs in her room, Cole picked her up and laid her on the bed. "Do you have any idea how proud I was to be the one in your ownerside tonight?"

"No, why don't you tell me?"

"Beyond." He kissed her hard on the lips. "Zipper?" he asked.

"Right side."

His fingers went unerringly to the fastening, and he unzipped, then pulled her out of the dress, his gaze never leaving hers. Bra came next. A flick of Erin's fingers undid the front clasp, sliding the cups open and the straps down her arms. She was more than eager to maneuver herself to make his life easier.

soon she lay before him in nothing but her strappy high-heeled sandals. He bent his head and pulled one of her sensitive nipples into his mouth.

He took his time to pleasure her with his tongue. With every long lick, Erin moaned. With each tiny nibble, she arched her back, pushing her breasts farther into his eager mouth, wanting more of the fiery darts of pleasure shooting through her body and centering at her very core.

Without releasing her breast, he used his hands to cup and mold it, rolling the peak between his thumb and forefinger until she cried out, to stand the dual sensations on both breasts.

"Shh. I've got you," he promised. But instead of release, he switched sides, tugging her other nipple with his teeth while working the other breast with his large hands.

She writhed beneath him, lifting her hips, silently begging him to touch her where she needed relief the most. Without her having to ask, he laid his hand down her belly, taking deliberate care to lay his hand over the place where their child lay, a move that never failed to touch her deeply.

He lifted his head, and she stared into his handsome face, knowing well she was dangerously close to losing her heart to this man, if she hadn't already. And she could do nothing about it except pray with everything she had that he'd be there to catch her when she fell.

He finally cupped her mound in his large hand, applying pressure with his palm and delicious friction with his finger, spreading her moisture over

d workaround her sensitive flesh.

er side “You are always so wet for me,” he said, his voice laced with app
tinuing His husky tone and the obvious satisfaction he took from her bc
her wanting him even more. She bent her knees and whimpered ou
nd laid “What are you waiting for?”

by your He spread her legs and eased himself between them. “I’m draw
your pleasure. And mine,” he said, dipping his head for a too-leisure
before settling in to bring her to heights she’d only imagined. W
worked her clit with his mouth, licking the hardened bud with the tip,
one long finger inside her.

ipped “Cole.” She moaned and tried to pull him in farther, clenching he
k of his around him, needing him harder and deeper.

own her “Need more?” He added a second finger and nipped at her harder, c
isy, and the first wave of sensation to hit. He was so in tune to her body, he kn
. instant the first tremor began and flattened his tongue against h
mouth, pumping his fingers in and out while she came hard around him, again
ck, she and for him.

breast Erin didn’t know how long she rocked against his mouth and har
leasure that he drew out her orgasm as long as possible.

“You’re incredible,” he murmured, sliding away from her onl
ts twin, enough to undress.

unable She bent, intending to unhook her shoes, but he stilled her with a
hand on her leg.

merely “Leave them on. With those heels, you’re a goddamned fantasy c
ing her life.”

As if to prove his point, he stood before her, completely naked, hi
o touch hard erection protruding from his gorgeous body. While raking his h
slid his over her body, he wrapped his hand around his cock, pumping onc
e swell twice, before joining her.

He bracketed her, one knee on either side of her, as he poised his e
ing full at her damp, pulsing entrance.

hadn’t Erin looked up at him, afraid everything she felt for him showed
ing she eyes. Not wanting to lose him because she was becoming emot
invested when that wasn’t what he wanted, she drew on bad-girl Erin
with his met his gaze. “Fuck me, Cole.”

ver and His eyes darkened to a stormy black, and with a strangled gro

plunged hard and deep. Erin cried out, taking all of him, feeling all of
oval. he laid claim to her with a punishing rhythm that somehow felt so ver
dy hadHer body, which had been sated seconds before, came alive once
it loud.taking a fast climb to an inevitable end that arrived in an explosi
encompassed everything that was Erin. She held nothing back—could
ing outhe demanded and took all of her with him when he came.

ly taste

hile he

he slid



COLE STOOD IN Erin's kitchen cooking breakfast. A mundane task he'd
to enjoy because she appreciated and liked his food so damn much. A
er walls thing he wasn't used to. Doing things for someone else on a daily
causing Giving and receiving approval for little things. Someone else con
new the expect things from him.

And him learning to rely on things from another human being. E
er clit, begun to do his laundry, something he'd tried unsuccessfully to preve
ist him, was doing hers anyway, and since she came home from work and
id, only routine she followed, he'd started to let her scoop up his towels and
ly long scanned the comics and "Dear Abby," a weird choice for such a
i strong devoured his food.

Little things that he'd miss when he was gone. None of which m
ome to wanted this psycho to continue to toy with her life. The very thought
is rock- his blood boil. Nobody wanted to catch this bastard more than he did,
brothers were at a standstill.

To top things off, he'd gotten a couple of voicemail messages fr
ot gaze boss, asking when he'd be ready to go back under. Normally the ans
e, then yesterday, but no way would he leave Erin alone when she was being :
irection And with the baby on the way, he admitted to needing time to get his l
straight. Not that he'd tell his superiors any such thing. He wanted spa
l in her after the years he'd put in, he was entitled.

He'd just served them both and was about to call Erin when the d
tionally rang. Knowing she'd learned not to answer, he felt for his weap
i as she headed to see who was there at ten o'clock on a Sunday morning.

A look outside and he froze.

oan, he

him as “Who is it?” Erin asked from the top of the stairs.
y right. “Jed.” Cole didn’t turn around.
e more, “Oh. Umm, I’ll let you handle it,” she said, and he sensed rather th
on thather head back to her room. He appreciated the privacy since nothin;
n’t—asthis visit could possibly be good.

Cole opened the door and faced his old man.

“You took your sweet time letting me in.”

“Good morning to you too. What brings you by? Want to see Er
asked, on the slight chance he could avoid the inevitable confrontation
l begun He shook his head. “I had breakfast with Ella and Simon. ’Course
Another you were here playing bodyguard. Despite it all, I figured you’d take
y basis care of Erin, but damn it all, couldn’t you keep it in your pants?”

ning to Cole grabbed his father by his good arm and pulled him insid
public condo unit, he didn’t need Erin’s older neighbor coming outs
rin had getting an earful.

nt. She “None of this is any of your business,” he said, shutting the door
l had a Jed.

l things His father ran his good hand through his hair. The cast had been re
he only on his other arm, leaving him with just a sling. “You feeling okay?
t bright asked him.

ile she “What do you mean, it’s none of my business? She’s the daughter
best friend, the former police chief of this town. Not to mention an a
eant he DA.”

it made “Still don’t see where it’s your business,” Cole said, then n
but her counted to ten to calm his temper. “Do you think I planned this? And
you ask, of course I used protection, so don’t go there.”

rom his “You’re still a goddamned moron. Who do you think you are, tou
ver was girl like her?”

stalked. Cole set his jaw. “She’s a woman, Dad. It was mutual.”

read on “She’s a damned nice *woman*,” Jed barked at him. “You shoul
ice, and known better than to lay a hand on her. You’re just going to hurt he
you leave her high and dry.”

loorbell “That’s between Cole and me, don’t you think?” Erin walked dc
on and stairs, dressed for a day at his cousin Nick’s cabin on the lake. “Sorry
but I couldn’t help overhearing, and there’s no way I’m going to let l
all this on you.”

Cole's head began to throb. "Erin, go back upstairs." She didn't hear his father beat up on him once again. And he didn't need her stickman saw for him or attempting to fight a battle he'd long since learned he could win about.

She shook her head. "It's my house; that gives me some rights. If you'd like to stay and congratulate us on having a baby, that's great. If you came to cause trouble, I'm going to have to ask you to leave." "Erin?" he asked. Cole was torn between admiration and frustration.

"Erin, I've known you since you were a little girl. What were you thinking?"

She tipped her head to one side, eyeing his father as she would a defendant in a courtroom—much like he envisioned her going after a little. In a way, he wanted to squash. Cole decided his father deserved whatever he was a part of and get.

"I was thinking I couldn't find a better man than your son to sleep behind when I was lonely."

Cole didn't know which admission hit him harder, that she found a removed good man even then, or that she'd gone to Joe's that night because she was looking for company.

He didn't have time to chew on either because she wasn't finished with her. "And until you can find it in yourself to see Cole the way I do, you're not a welcome here." She stepped around Jed and opened her front door, making it perfectly clear she wanted the older man gone.

"I see my son's manners are rubbing off on you. Your mama will be disappointed."

"Actually, I think she'd applaud," Erin muttered as Jed made his way out the door.

"Now you've got a woman fighting your battles," Jed said, getting in a parting shot at Cole.

"Go home, Dad."

"He'll break your heart just like his mother broke mine, mark my words."

"But I'll be a better father than you ever were," Cole said, getting in a few words on the face with the man who'd fathered and raised him but had never even seen him. "And I'll have Brody to thank." Cole slammed the door behind him before Erin could take the pleasure away from him.

A few intense, quiet seconds passed, in which Cole took a few minutes

need to compose himself, breathing in and out, letting his heart rate re-
turning to normal.

“Cole?” Erin asked softly, placing a hand on his shoulder.

He didn’t want to have this conversation. If he could change a
bit about his relationship with Jed, it would be so he didn’t have to su-
ffer. If you humiliation of confrontations like these in front of a woman like her. E-
ven if anything Jed said had been right, it was that Erin was a damn
woman, one whom he’d hurt in the end.

But not only was he tied to her through his child; he couldn’t
himself to walk away from her—from this relationship she was attempt-
ing to build with him—yet.

He turned. “Sorry about that.”

She raised an eyebrow, a defiant look on her face. “Don’t you
apologize for his behavior. The one thing you should learn? How Jed
operates with no reflection on you. Now, I’m hungry.” She spun around and started
in the kitchen.

“It’s cold by now,” he informed her.

“That’s what microwaves are for.” She strode into the cheery kitchen
with lavender-purple accents and picked up both their dishes. “Luckily for
me, that’s my specialty in the kitchen.” She shot him a cheeky grin and pro-
ceeded to heat their breakfast.

The conversation about Jed was seemingly over.

But was it?

Didn’t she want to dig deeper? To poke into his and Jed’s unhealth-
y, definitely ugly relationship? Wasn’t she worried that Jed’s view of her
was somehow right? That maybe their kid would inherit his behavioral
issues?

Because Jed might be an emotionally abusive jerk, but he hadn’t made
it in his fact that during his childhood, Cole was one hundred percent an
emotional control pain in the ass. But since Erin wasn’t bringing it up, Cole didn’t
bring the stomach to either.

words.”

face-to-

er liked

and Jed

oments



A FEW HOURS later, after a stop at The Family Restaurant to pick up the
Erin had promised Nick she’d bring with her today, they pulled up to
and Kate’s cabin on the lake. Serendipity Lake was located on the

turn to town. Many of the wealthier residents owned summer cabins, and so
been renovated.

Erin was surprised when she'd heard Nick had built his permanent
anything here, but she knew he was a builder, having inherited his father's bu-
ffer the when he passed away. She'd figured he'd bought a run-down place at
because price and fixed it up.

ed nice Except that as they approached, it became clear Nick's home was
renovated cabin—this was more like a state-of-the-art luxury home.

't bring "Wow," Erin murmured as they pulled up the paved drive. The
pting to homes they'd passed had gravel-lined paths for cars to take.

"It's something, right?"

"Amazing!" Erin loved the house on sight.

ou dare Nick had maintained the rustic feel, so the house wasn't completely
l acts is place in the area, but it had a newer, more modern look on way mo-
for the one lot of land.

"Nick put his heart and soul into building this house. He planned
years and worked during slow times when he could get his crew here
en with parked behind a Ford F-150. "Inside and out. He even carved a lot
or you, furniture."

ucceeded "Impressive," she murmured.

"Nick doesn't like to brag, though. He doesn't show off."

Erin nodded. "Kate's not like that either. I've always liked her."

Cole met her on her side of the car. She took a few steps forward,
thy and realize he wasn't beside her.

im was "Cole?" She turned back to face him. "What's wrong?"

flaws? "Nothing." He took two steps forward, and she stopped him, pu-
e up the hand on his arm.

out-of- "Tell me."

i't have He raised an eyebrow. "How do you read me so damned well?
undercover agent, for God's sake. I'm good at hiding things."

She grinned, pleased he thought she could get past any façade he
erect. "I'm just good at knowing *you*. Now talk."

he cake Just . . . be."

to Nick Her heart twisted at his hesitantly admitted words. "I know. Just to
edge of after a little while, you want to leave, just get my attention and tug (

me hadear. I'll take the hint and make an excuse to go. Fair?"

"More than fair." He slid his hand over her cheek, cupping her face, holding her in place for a kiss that was rich for all he didn't say, but the business wealth of feeling behind it.

a good



wasn't a

FRIENDS AND FAMILY. Cole might not know from them, but he spent the last few weeks with Erin had been doing that too. And despite everything he once believed about himself, he couldn't deny the appeal of his cousin's life. The same one he was currently living. Except Cole's current situation just like his undercover one, was a pretense built on necessity. As Erin didn't need his protection anymore, Cole could go back to his existence, which suddenly didn't hold as much interest as it used to.

Then there were the babies and toddlers running around, whose ages Cole couldn't remember, never mind which kid belonged to which parent. Nick and Kate opened their home, happy to have everyone hanging out together, neither seeming the least bit overwhelmed by the sheer number of people or the noise level of the screaming, laughing, and sometimes crying kids.

Cole expected to feel so far out of his element, his skin would itch, his need to get back to what he knew—pretending to be someone else, a lie, the pretense manageable because he was doing what he did best, his job for the greater good. And because he didn't know how to do anything differently.

Today was giving him a glimpse of what he was missing. Hell, the last few weeks with Erin had been doing that too. And despite everything he once believed about himself, he couldn't deny the appeal of his cousin's life. The same one he was currently living. Except Cole's current situation just like his undercover one, was a pretense built on necessity. As Erin didn't need his protection anymore, Cole could go back to his existence, which suddenly didn't hold as much interest as it used to.

"Hey, you okay?" Nick asked, joining him on a lounge chair beside Erin.

overlooking the lake.

ace and “Fine. Just taking a breather.”

ere was “Yeah, it can all be a bit much,” the other man said, laughing. “V
Erin?”

Cole tipped his head toward the pier Nick had built near the shall
of the water. She, along with some of her friends—Macy included
with the toddler-aged kids. Erin was holding one child beneath her littl
the day despite the round tube encircling the girl’s stomach. Shrieks and l
l sister, would occasionally reach his ears.

ie three One thing was for sure—she looked . . . happy. No stress of a
ool, his anywhere in her beautiful face. Cole couldn’t tear his gaze from her b
of the suit-clad body. Though she’d chosen a one-piece that covered her stor
ansion was cut high enough on her thighs and low enough on her cleavage to
r Ponzi him and make his mouth water. Her long legs beckoned, reminding
, Kelly, how they felt wrapped around his back as he slid into her hot, wet bod
ugh the he thought, shifting in his chair to conceal what that thought did to him
ight, an “Someone’s got it bad.” Laughing, Nick handed Cole a cold b

beer. “You two seem to have come to an understanding.”
es Cole Cole shrugged, still not used to personal conversations like thes
it. Nick this was Nick. “Erin figures if we’re together right now, there’s no re
gether, hide it. Once her pregnancy becomes obvious, people will know I
ople or father anyway.” He took a long pull of brew, which tasted good
summer heat.

ch with “Why do I hear a *but* coming?”

, living Cole groaned. Wasn’t it obvious? “But my job hasn’t changed, a
, doing not here to build white picket fences. I’m not built for that life.”

o things Nick raised an eyebrow. “You’re looking pretty comfortable surr
by the proverbial one right now,” his cousin pointed out.

he past “It’s temporary. She knows that. So do you, asshole.”

ng he’d Nick snorted. “Yeah, like Erin’s going to be easy to walk away fro
r’s type gestured to the water, where Erin lifted her little charge up high and
tuation, her lips to the girl’s cheek, causing her to shriek with delight and k
soon as little legs in excitement.

his old Something warm unfurled in Cole’s chest. He told himself it w
she’d be a great mother to their kid, nothing more. “I do what I do.
ide his, going to leave her here wondering when my cover’s over, when she

from me. Or if she'll get a call that says my cover was blown and I'll never coming back."

Where's Cole shook his head, remembering the last guy whose wife had to deal with that kind of news. No way would he put Erin through that hell.

How part "I still say it's her call to make," Nick insisted.

—were Cole exhaled hard. "That's not how it is between us. It's forced proximity, and just sex." He winced as he spoke the words that felt like a lie coming from his lips and a betrayal to everything Erin stood for.

Nothing about Erin was *just* anything. Still, *whatever it is, for as long as it lasts*, she'd said, and he'd agreed. If she'd developed deeper feelings for him, she was smart enough to keep them to herself because he'd made his future plans clear.

Nick tipped the bottle back and drank before addressing Cole. "I'm telling you, it's not about me. I'm sure it'll keep you warm when you're under the covers. *Shit*, I'm through hitting my head against a wall. Did I tell you I bought property on the edge of the lake and built a house on spec?"

Grateful for the subject change because it meant he could ignore the thought that felt like a ball stuck in his chest, Cole shook his head. "I'm waiting for housing sales to pick up a little before I list it."

"That's great."

"Want to take a quick look? I've got some time before I have to go in the grill for the burgers."

"Sure thing." Nick was always proud of his finished projects, and he enjoyed looking at his cousin's talent.

He stood and, along with Nick, walked to the water to tell Kate where they were going.

Erin met his gaze and lifted a hand to her ear in question.

He grinned, knowing she was asking if he was feeling closed in and wanted to go home. Worrying about him and looking out for him.

Cole pushed those thoughts away and shook his head. "Nick is going to drive me around the lake and show me the house he built and is ready to put on the market."

Her eyes lit up. "Ooh, another Nick Mancini masterpiece? Can I come see it?" "Sure thing," Nick said, pride in his voice.

Faith took her wriggling daughter from Erin's arms. "I told you that you'd hear good things about being a friend or relative. You can enjoy the baby a

I'm not them back!"

Erin laughed. "Soon enough, I'll be looking for people to relieve me. I received said, and everyone around them slid into stunned silence.

"What?!" Kate asked, her voice rising in pitch.

Cole froze.

Erin's eyes opened wide, and her cheeks turned bright red as she recovered from her slip of the tongue. "Umm . . . I—"

Cole met her gaze and gave her permission with a slight tip of his head. *long as* was her call if she wanted to cover or reveal. But he couldn't do anything. His stomach was in knots as she pondered her decision.

"Erin?" Faith asked softly.

Meeting Cole's gaze, Erin gave him a tiny nod back.

"Keep But he saw how awkward things had become and didn't want her to recover. He was dumping it all on her. "Erin's pregnant. You all would've figured it out soon enough," Cole said, reaching out a hand toward the water.

The tightness in her face gave way to relief. She clasped his hand and the knot climbed out to stand next to him. "We're having a baby," she told them then. There. It was out, Cole thought. Dizziness that had nothing to do with the heat assaulted him as the women around them shrieked. The other guy was running to see what the commotion was all about. As they found their way to start the center of attention, they were separated by the surprised well-wishers patting Cole on the back and kissing Erin's cheeks.

He accepted the congratulations, ducked most of the questions, and finally managed to catch Erin's gaze. She appeared flustered and Erin overwhelmed by the attention and when she lifted a hand and tugged at her ear, he knew he'd read her correctly.

"Hey, Nick, you going to show Erin and me that house sometime ready century?" Cole called out to his cousin.

Nick caught on quick. "Yeah. Let's go through the house so I can get my keys. Everyone go back to your regularly scheduled programming. I'll be there to put it all in order."

Cole grabbed Erin's hand and pulled her away from her well-meaning question-hungry friends.

"Hurry back," Kate called to their retreating backs. "The natives are getting hungry soon."

"Yeah, yeah," Nick grumbled, but even Cole could hear the good-

chuckle behind the words.

ie,” she With Cole’s hand on Erin’s back, they followed Nick to the house.

Erin didn’t say a word, but Cole sensed her need for peace, quiet space. If she didn’t get better after the house tour, he’d make their way and get her home. Ironic she was the one who’d needed to get away from the realized crush of people, not him.

Surprisingly, even between Nick’s pushing Cole on personal issues, the public reveal of Erin’s pregnancy, Cole didn’t feel a hint of the shock he’d anticipated. They drove to his cousin’s place and walked around the massive house, which Erin loved, and the tour seemed to draw her out of shock. Nick had even had a decorator come in and furnish it, so selling the house really would be like selling a model home.

While Nick explained each room and the extras he’d built in, Cole drifted, and he contemplated the day further. Cole hadn’t been the one he’d expected to be. Everyone talked to him, wanting to catch up and have a friendly conversation. Shockingly, Cole had been not just receptive but also enjoyed hearing what was going on in old acquaintances’ lives. In fact, some of the guys suggested they meet up for drinks at Joe’s or that Cole’s came them for poker one night soon.

Cole’s conclusion was startling. When he didn’t withdraw into himself, he put himself on the fringe of the crowd, he seemed to be accepted enough. This made him wonder if his reception on his return was more about his behavior toward everyone else rather than their feelings about him. It would be something to think about if he’d planned on sticking around. But he didn’t. He ignored the sudden uncomfortable feeling that arose from the thought of leaving Serendipity.

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Chapter Twelve

ERIN WAS EXHAUSTED. She lay her head back against the seat while he drove them home. Boy, would she miss this chauffeur service when it was done. She couldn't believe how quickly she'd gotten used to being taken care of. Such a dangerous proposition, but at this moment, as she kicked her shoes and curled into the seat, she couldn't bring herself to care.

Although she'd long since accepted being pregnant, she hadn't thought about the world knowing. The exposure had taken everything out of her. She had watching the happy couples. *Families*, she amended. A melancholy sadness washed over her for what she'd never have with the father of her child. But Erin knew once the exhaustion went away, the sadness would be replaced by her determination to make the most of the time she had together and see where things led.

After all, Erin had always prided herself on being a go-with-the-flow type of person. All things considered, she'd dealt with the pregnancy news, the shooting, and the stalking, and she hadn't fallen apart. Yay her. Most of it came from having such a stable family behind her, something Cole had never had and which he'd admitted had affected how he viewed life.

She sighed and closed her eyes, determined to let sleep overtake her at least for the ride home. Better than talking about what was bothering her. Something Cole, with his perceptive personality, was sure to notice.

Unfortunately, her mind was too worked up to slow down and rest, even for a few short minutes, but she kept her eyes closed. Just in case.

Of course, her thoughts went to Cole and that moment before they got into Nick's when she'd caught the hint of vulnerability in his expression. She was as attuned to him as he was to her. She hadn't expected him to be so vulnerable. Why the day would be difficult for him, but he had. He'd let her in more.

And in the end, he'd not just survived the day, but he'd found a place with these people—if he wanted one.

Please let him want that place with them, but most of all, with me.

thought. Because though she wouldn't let herself use the word, not in the most private recesses of her own mind, she was falling in . . . even with Cole Sanders.

Even if she couldn't sleep, she let the lull of the truck soothe her w thoughts until she felt the familiar set of turns into the condo complex finally, into her driveway.

"Stay here."

Cole's voice pulled her out of her stupor, and she forced her eyelids open to see two police cars in front of her house, lights flashing. Neighbors had congregated on their lawns. Cara and Sam, who'd left before Cole and Erin had arrived for their evening shift, stood on her porch.

Erin threw open her car door and headed for her brother.

"I said wait in the car," Cole called after her.

She still ignored him. "What's going on?"

Sam eyed her with concern. "Break-in."

"Why didn't you call me? Why didn't the alarm company call me?"

Cara answered, her voice calm but her blue eyes warm and sympathetic. "Someone cut the phone line. The alarm went off, but the call never reached Central Station. The old woman on the right is almost deaf, and the ones on the left are on vacation. At least, according to Mrs. Flynn."

The nearly deaf neighbor, Erin thought.

"Someone nearby must have finally realized the noise meant something and called it in," Sam said. "You arrived before we could call you."

"What happened?" Cole asked.

Sam tipped his head toward her condo. "Went in through the window. Broad daylight, brazen as you please," he muttered.

"*She* was in my house?" Erin asked, feeling a very unusual kind of hysteria coming on.

Cole's hand clamped down on her shoulder.

"What did she do in there?" Erin started forward, but he held on firmly.

Sam met Cole's gaze over Erin's head.

She stiffened, unwilling to be left out of the loop this time. "Oh no, not that silent male communication crap. Talk to me."

"There's some damage," Cara said to her. "Erin, look. Assuming it's the same person behind everything else, and assuming we're right that

even in woman, she went for your personal things.”

Nothing Nausea, which came so easily these days, rose in Erin’s throat. “I see.”

awayward “No!” Cole and Sam said at the same time.

ex and, Erin froze at the unilateral command. “Do not tell me what I can’t do. Not now.” She shook Cole’s hand off her arm and stomped her home.

heavy “Let me,” Cara said, catching up to Erin as she approached the front. HerShe touched Erin’s arm. “It’s more the emotional aspect of what this Nick’s did that will affect you,” she said softly, more as a friend than a cop.

er front violation, sweetie. And you’re going to feel it. Are you sure you’re ready? Erin nodded, certain no matter how shaky her insides had become.

“Then I’m right there with you. Let’s go. Just remember—”

“Don’t touch anything. I’m still an ADA. I know the drill.”

Cara sighed. “Sometimes it’s easy to forget when you’re also the victim. Erin hated that word, had avoided using it or thinking of her those terms since all this had started. But as she entered her house, athletic now smelled of another woman’s strong perfume, she felt every inch went to injured party. The same people whose rights Erin usually fought for.

ones on “Upstairs,” Cara said.

Erin pushed forward and headed for her bedroom without having told. She knew Cole and Sam had joined them, felt their presence behind her, nothing silently following Erin and Cara.

She stepped into her room and came to a halt, taking in the carnage with her own eyes, yet unable to comprehend what she was actually seeing. Her sideclothes—her new maternity clothes that she’d spent so much money on—were scattered around her bed and floor, shredded, cut, torn in pieces.

about of “Son of a bitch,” Cole muttered.

Ignoring him, Erin forced herself to take in each item until her gaze landed on the distinctive lapis blue dress she’d worn Saturday night, cut in half. From there, she was compelled to shift her gaze to her dresser, where she’d proudly put her award. Sure enough, the star had been snapped off the top. NoneBut that wasn’t what caused the lurch in her heart.

Her large mirror had a message scrawled across the glass with a red lipstick: *HE’S MINE*.

It was a question Erin’s gaze flew to Cole’s in question because who else could

referring to? Why go after Erin's maternity clothes and nothing else want to she felt possessive of him? There was no other *he* in her life, none that elicit this kind of reaction, anyway.

Color highlighted his cheekbones, anger and a hint of regret an expression. Clearly, they'd come to the same conclusion.

toward "Who is she?" Erin asked him directly, ignoring the dizziness flowing through her.

front door. He didn't answer immediately, but Erin could see the wheels turning in his mind as he ran through the possibilities.

"It's a "Let's get you out of here," Cara suggested, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. "Sam and Cole can talk some more."

Erin shook her head. "I want to hear what they say."

"I'm not hiding anything. Hell, I don't know anything." Frustrated by Cole's tone. He met and held her gaze, his expression angry but open. "Victim."

herself in "Go downstairs with Cara. Sit down. You're pale and look like you're about to collapse."

much the Erin didn't want to admit it, but Cole was right. She was shaky and wouldn't hurt to get off her feet for a little while.

"Go," he said firmly. "I'll talk to your brother and make some changes to be calls, see if something is going on with any old cases that I don't mind her, about."

"Fine." She spun around and walked out.

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ng. Her
y on—



COLE'S HEAD POUNDED as he turned to Sam. Usually considered the more mannered Marsden brother but no less intimidating than Mike, Sam's gaze fell on Cole with full-on fury.

pieces. "If there's another woman, if you're fucking with my sister, I've got you. If she'd only told me..."

ie base. If Cole had been hiding anything from this cop, he might be very close. "I'm as in the dark as you are." Ignoring Sam's snort of disbelief, he grabbed his phone and called his boss on his home number. No screwing around.

l he be The man answered on the first ring. "Rockford? It's me."

unless Cole listened as the older man reamed him for not returning his call, it would fall off the grid, and immediately jumped to wanting to know when he'd be ready to return.

in his "No time soon. I've got a situation." He spelled out the entire deal to Erin, from her being pregnant with his kid to the shredding of clothes in the loading room.

No time to hide the truth from his boss, not if Cole wanted to get the things he needed in return. Besides, much as he tried to ignore the truth, Erin and a baby would change his life. *How* remained to be seen. But Cole overruled the other man the truth if it affected his job, and it did. Already Cole was operating differently, ignoring calls and remaining on leave longer than before.

placed "Pull recent cases, names of people who had a hard-on for women who've indicated interest." As Cole spoke, a vision of the one he'd done his best to forget about came back to him in vivid detail.

you're Victoria Maroni wanted Cole for herself. And that was her scent that smelled downstairs. She'd always had a heavy hand with the perfume.

, and it Son of a bitch.

"Call Witsec. Check on Victoria Maroni," Cole added.

phone Sam's eyebrows rose at the mention of a specific name.

to know Cole held up a hand. "Right. They were holding her to testify in a case involving her husband's associates." The last time Cole saw Victoria was right after he'd shot her husband during the raid that took down the operation.

His boss said he'd get back to him when he had something. Cole picked up the call and turned to Sam. "Before you say a word, she's the wife of a mild-guy whose organization I infiltrated. He treated her like dirt, and as I lared at up in his inner circle, I befriended her. When things went down, I made sure she was protected. She misread the situation."

vill kill She'd looked at Cole as her savior, her white knight, a man who rescued her from a life of hell for no other reason than his love for her. worried, just been doing his job. He remembered how he'd thought of her as a deluded woman, one deprived of love and affection.

f, Cole "She mistook my friendship and protection as something more than it was. I felt sorry for her, but I never perceived her as a threat."

"Maybe you were wrong," Sam said in disgust.

alls, for The way Cole's stomach was churning, he agreed. "And that mist
en he'dErin in harm's way." Nothing he could do about the past, but he co
something now. "I need to get her out of here while you do your jobs."

al with Sam nodded. "Where?"

s in her Cole remembered the look on her face when she'd walked through
spec home. "I'll talk to Nick." He explained his idea, and Sam agreed.

call in "How are you going to get Erin to go along quietly? And miss wo
nd thisthis is over?"

ved the "She'll go if I have to tie her up for a goddamn month," Cole mutte
le was Sam barked out a laugh. "I don't like one thing about this mes
an everhave to admit I'd pay to see that."

Cole didn't reply because if he had Erin tied up anywhere, her
re, andwas the last person he'd want around to see what he did with her.

female "I need you to help me get her out of here unnoticed," Cole tol
"And I need you to talk to your mother. Whatever clothes Erin bought
nt he'dthey were together? Tell her to replace them and have them sent to y
me. I'll make arrangements to get them from you."

Sam's expression turned from wary to something more akin to
Cole didn't deserve it. As far as he was concerned, Jed finally had
All Cole had done was mess up Erin's life from the second he'd come
anotherThe best he could do now was to make sure she remained safe.

Victoria

own his



ended THIS WAS WHAT her life had come to. Hiding under a blanket in a car
the last drove her away from her house. Seriously? Where was the dignity?

moved She groaned.

de sure "I'll make it up to you," Cole said from the driver's seat.

who'dhis fault. At least, it had better not be his fault. Whoever this woman
r. He'dbetter not have led her on. She bit the inside of her cheek and thought
a poor what she knew of Cole. He'd never pretended with Erin. She knew
than it where she stood with him from day one. But he'd been undercover
knew what he'd had to do . . .

The car came to a stop.

Erin didn't know where they were headed. Cole said it was a surpr

ake putsince she'd had to pack what she could of her personal things and to
ould doshe hadn't been privy to his phone conversations to set up a place for
' go. Sam stayed behind at her house, supervising the forensics team th
dusting for prints and making sure everything was bagged and tagged
Nick's speak.

"Hang on," Cole said.

rk until She heard him opening the car door, getting out, then returni
shutting the door again. Soon the car moved another few feet. Not lon
ered. he rescued her from her hiding place in the back seat.

s, but I She stepped out of the car and into a darkened garage. "Where are
"Guess." A dimple flashed in his cheek.

brother She loved it when he got playful. He didn't do it that often, but w
did, it was downright adorable. Not that Mr. Tough Guy would want
d Sam.that about himself, so she remained silent.

it when She let her eyes adjust, and he opened the unlocked door to the
rou. OnThe minute she stepped inside, she knew. "We're at Nick's spec hous
said excitedly. She'd fallen in love at first sight.

respect. With their bags in hand, he gestured for her to go upstairs. "I calle
a point.and explained the situation. It's ours as long as we need it."

into it. "Oh my God." It would be even more like living her dream. A big
the perfect man, Erin pregnant . . . but it wasn't. Her balloon of exc
popped as she reminded herself she needed to keep reality firmly in
She was here because she was being stalked, and Cole was only with
that same reason.

as Cole Suddenly, she didn't want to think anymore. "I'm wiped out."

Understanding lit his heavy-lidded gaze. "Go up to the main bedro
lie down. Nick left the house open for me, so I want to walk throu
make sure everything's secure." He hesitated before continuing. "I'
wasn't you up there?"

was, he She was surprised he'd phrased it as a question. After all the l
it about around, suddenly he was hesitant?

exactly "Sure." Hadn't she told him she wanted to be in his bed? Unless
r. Who you want to."

"I just thought maybe you were pissed. You wouldn't be in this m
weren't for me."

ise, and She rolled her eyes. "It's not like you asked this crazy lady to st

toiletries, Assuming it's her, anyway. But I do have a question," she said before she could get to her nerve.

What was "Shoot."

Oh. So to "Maybe I don't have the right to ask this, but . . . did you sleep with her? Is that why she got the wrong idea about the two of you?" she asked.

"No!" The word exploded from him, his expression horrified. "What the hell is going on and what do you think? That I led her on during the assignment and then dumped her after, as soon as it was over?"

She bit the inside of her cheek. "Not really." "What about you?"

He folded his arms across his chest. "But the thought crossed your mind, didn't it?" "For a minute," she admitted. "I mean, it's pretty extreme for a woman when she goes psycho. Although I have prosecuted cases where it's happened to her, I raised her hands, then let them drop, knowing she was rambling, not making sense. "Just chalk it up to me being hormonal."

house. And wanting to be special to this man and so very afraid she would lose him, she had another body in his bed. Her pulse set a rapid beat in her throat.

He studied her for a long moment. She stared back, taking in his tired and Nick-exhausted features, the tension in his taut cheekbones, his eyes dark, his mouth pulled tight. This was getting to him every bit as much as it was her, and she, in her house, felt bad getting into arguments with him over nothing.

Her. "Go lock up. I'll see you in a few minutes," she told him. They were both in their own mind, tortured by their own thoughts, so maybe space would help.

For her. She just wished she knew what his thoughts were.

Despite wanting to stay awake, Erin passed out the minute she lay down on the comfortable bed and slept straight through until sunlight streamed through the windows the next morning. She wasn't usually such a heavy sleeper, but this pregnancy was totally changing so much about her sleep habits.

She blinked, studying her surroundings. Windows with large plantation shutters wrapped around one side of the room. The decor was neutral, a light cream color scheme, allowing whoever moved into the house to add their own touches. . . .

Not letting herself dwell on the thought of another owner of this business if it were home, she stretched and suddenly noticed she was alone in the bed. She must have gotten up much earlier.

Talk to me. She went to the bathroom, surprised to find all her toiletries set out

she lost already. This sweet, caring side of him never ceased to amaze her and her addicted to hope—the very thing that might destroy her in the end. Ignoring her wayward thoughts, she brushed her teeth, washed her face, and walked out in time to see Cole step into the room.

His hair was still mussed from sleep, but he'd pulled on an old pair of jeans, leaving them unbuttoned. His feet were bare, as was his chest. Erin's mouth watered at the sight of him.

"Morning," she said, not surprised the word came out a husky croak.

"Hey. Sleep okay?"

"Like a dead person."

His mouth turned down. "Don't even joke like that."

She settled on the bed, tucking one leg beneath her. "If I don't go to the funeral, I'm making cry, and I refuse to go there."

His eyes darkened, and he joined her on the bed. "I hate that anyone's just my life has touched yours. Jed was right when he said I'd be no good to you."

"Jed's an ass," Erin muttered. "Are you seriously telling me you're responsible for a crazy woman's actions?" It wasn't the first time he'd made himself feel responsible for someone else's behavior. First his father, then this woman.

He let out a snort of disbelief. "A crazy woman whose radar you would even be on if not for me."

"It could just have easily been someone I prosecuted who got caught. I don't want revenge. We aren't responsible for other people's actions."

Cole eyed her warily and she waited for him to process her words.

A heavy

normal



AS USUAL, COLE found himself disarmed by Erin's practical nature and her ability to let life just go on around her. "It's not the same thing," he said, but her insistence he wasn't responsible for the things that happened in his life.

"Why? Because you don't like it when your solitary world is invaded by anyone else's?" she asked, challenging him in a way no one else ever had.

Cole's eyes

Her eyes, more green today in the sun-drenched room, flashed with sparks. Her spunk, her ability to bounce back and go up against him, amazed him.

to keep him like crazy. Made it impossible to keep his distance when distance
re end, be in her best interest.

ce, and “Well?” she asked, straightening her shoulders.

Her soft, silky tank fell lower, exposing mouthwatering cleavage.

pair of “Well what?” He’d totally lost the thread of conversation.

st, and Erin’s gaze fell to her chest before she raised her gaze to his once

“You’re such a man,” she muttered, but with cheeky laughter, not at
k. her voice.

That was all she needed to do in order to completely disarm him
make him putty in her hands. “Something wrong with that?” he
suddenly feeling equally playful.

ke, I’ll She raked her gaze over him, the same awareness he’d seen when
walked out of the bathroom flaring there now. “Nope, nothing wrong at

part of Her words and teasing tone poked at him, and with a low growl, he
ood for her beneath him on the bed. She stared up at him with those eyes he
drown in.

ou feel “You’re dangerous, Cole Sanders,” she said, reaching up and brushing
ie’d le hair off his forehead.

er, now She didn’t know the half of it. “Never intentionally, not to you.”

Before she could reply or he could get himself in any more trouble
ouldn’t sealed his mouth over hers, effectively ending all conversation.

She moaned and slid her fingers into his hair, holding him in
out and Another surprise. This woman who clearly didn’t know from or
stands four months ago was now his equal in the bedroom. Damned
didn’t turn him on even more.

And when she hooked a leg around his, locking him in place, he
but by no means did he intend to be passive in this exchange. He gro
hips into hers as he thrust his tongue in and around her mouth, work
and her into a writhing frenzy of want.

said of She turned her head to the side and nipped his earlobe. “I need you
life. me,” she said, following the small bite with a loving lap of her tongue.

touches His cock swelled and hardened. “Jesus,” he muttered, his entire
r dared shaking too.

It didn’t take long to strip her of her flimsy top and shorts, discov
l angry she was bare beneath. “You’re going to be the death of me.”

aroused With a laugh, she went to unzip his fly, but he stilled her hand. “I

“I wouldn’t do it.” If he let her try to pull the zipper over him now, he’d lose it for sure.

He rose and stripped fast, returning to the bed and coming over her in a swift move. She reached for his erection, but he grabbed her wrist, pinning it over her head. “No touching,” he said through clenched teeth. “Not even if it meant it when you said you need me inside you.”

“I need you more.” At his words, a soft moan escaped her lips, and she arched her back, her fingers digging inward, her damp heat coming into direct contact with his aching shaft.

He met her clouded gaze, enjoying the depth of need reflected in her eyes. “Other hand over your head too,” he said.

“I asked,” she said. Eyes wide, she obeyed.

“Now keep them there so I can focus on not coming until you can’t take it any more.” He slid his cock over her clit, and her eyelids fluttered closed.

“Happy to have her break that emotional connection threatening to pull him under, he chose that moment to plunge deep into her hot channel.

“Oh, Cole.”

She moaned his name, and as her body throbbed and clenched around his, he felt more than the physical connection of their bodies. A warmth welled in his chest, a thick, heavy, and unfamiliar sensation beating from the inside out. He knew the feeling, recognized it despite it being so unfamiliar and unwanted.

And he refused to give *it* a name. Instead, he concentrated on the movement of their bodies, the singular desire to seek release. That was easy—but Erin wasn’t. And being Erin, she took him out of his comfort zone by burying herself between his neck and shoulder, where he felt her hot breath against his skin, her lips pressing warm, wet kisses to his flesh.

Her softness called to him, beckoned to that part of him he kept caged in ice. She stole his ability to remain detached by keeping him focused not on the pounding thrusting of their bodies but on *them*. He wanted her all inside her. All of her. He was driven to own, to possess. His cock full to bursting, he pressed harder, plunged deeper, and must have hit her sweet spot because she threw her head back and moaned.

“God, do that again.” Her hips shifted and urged him on. He forced his eyes open. Her arms remained above her head, her skin flushed a pretty pink, eyes dilated, lips swollen, and he couldn’t resist. “I’ve got pleasure.”

“I’ve got pleasure.”

“I’ve got pleasure.”

“I’ve got pleasure.”

e. Holding back his own orgasm, Lord only knew how, he braced himself on one or either side of her head and focused on his thrust and grind, making sure it hit the same spot over and over. Her eyes rolled back, and he swore if you breathing stopped for a split second before she came—long and shaking, shuddering, her body clamping around him—screaming his name over his hips. Cole waited until every last shudder subsided before letting himself t. and taking his own pleasure, losing himself completely inside her in a place there never had before.

It took him a hell of a long time to come back to reality, and when his sweat-slickened body covered hers, the only sound in the room was his heavy breathing. The first thing he realized? The air surrounding them was comfortable. Next after that? He was still pulling inside her.

And he liked it.

He pulled out quickly, and she groaned. “Don’t go.”
“I’m heavy.” And he needed space. “I’ll be back,” he said and motioned into the bathroom to regroup.

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Holding back his own orgasm, Lord only knew how, he braced his hands on either side of her head and focused on his thrust and grind, making sure to hit the same spot over and over. Her eyes rolled back, and he swore her breathing stopped for a split second before she came—long and hard, shaking, shuddering, her body clamping around him—screaming his name.

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It took him a hell of a long time to come back to reality, and when he did, his sweat-slickened body covered hers, the only sound in the room their commingled heavy breathing. The first thing he realized? The silence surrounding them was comfortable. Next after that? He was still partially inside her.

And he liked it.

He pulled out quickly, and she groaned. “Don’t go.”

“I’m heavy.” And he needed space. “I’ll be back,” he said and slipped into the bathroom to regroup.

Chapter Thirteen

WHEN THE SHOWER water ran in the bathroom, Erin knew Cole coming back to bed. She pulled her top and shorts back on and walked to the windows, adjusting the shutter so she could see out. Below her was a stone-covered patio with a built-in brick barbecue and wall surrounded by an array of colorful flowers. It was so beautiful, she thought. So real.

So out of her reach, just like Cole.

Suddenly chilled, she wrapped her arms around herself in search of comfort. Each time they came together, Erin *felt* more, and by the time she reacted to her touch, she was convinced he'd experienced the emotional connection too. But considering how quickly he'd pulled back, those feelings frightened him, because she refused to believe the alternative—that she was just another woman he slept with. One he'd gotten pregnant and was now stuck with in his life.

Erin came from a family of cops who prided themselves on their integrity in life and in dealing with people. And hers were screaming at her not to mess up on Cole. But damn, he didn't make it easy.

She was lost in thought when the bathroom door opened with a creak. "Needs WD-40," she muttered, spinning around to see Cole step out of the steam-filled room.

A towel wrapped low on his waist, he dried his hair with a hand towel and one hand. Sexy didn't begin to describe him, while she looked like a disheveled pregnant woman who'd woken up, had sex, and hadn't even taken a shower.

She straightened her shoulders, intending to tell him they were done with the talk.

"We need to talk," he said first.

Oh. "We do," she agreed.

"About work. You can't go in today."

"Oh my God, it's Monday!" How had she forgotten? She glanced at the clock on the nightstand.

Eight thirty. She did a quick mental calculation. "I'll be late, but I can get there at a decent hour." Heart racing, she started for the bathroom, but Cole had to have Cole stop her with a touch on her shoulder.

"Whoa. Didn't you hear me? You can't go in today. Or any other day this week." Before she could argue or ask questions, he held up one hand. "This psycho is off the streets, it's too dangerous for you—and the baby. Don't follow your normal routine and make yourself an easy target."

Erin exhaled a long, slow breath and let his words sink in. She didn't know what disturbed her more, the fact that despite her hating it with every fiber of her being, Cole had a point, or that she'd completely forgotten it was Monday and a workday.

"Okay," she said at last. He narrowed his gaze. "You aren't going to fight me on this?" he asked, sounding stupefied.

This stalker woman, whoever she was, had gotten into Erin's home and up her things. Had her shot at. Even if she wanted to go about her business and not give in to fear, she'd never ever put the child she was carrying

"I'm not a fool. I understand how dangerous this woman is. And I know what you think, I don't argue for the sake of arguing. I only do it with the women in my life think they know what's best for me. I just want the right to make those decisions for myself." Her throat ached from holding back unexpected, sudden tears.

"Dammit," she swore, and stormed into the bathroom and slammed the door behind her.

She splashed cold water on her face, embarrassed and frustrated at the same time. She'd had it with the pregnancy hormones, the ups and downs of being stalked, and she'd had it with Cole blowing hot and cold. But she didn't want to cry in front of him, and just because she'd shut herself in the bathroom didn't mean he hadn't figured out she was upset.

As evidenced by the barrage of knocking on the door. "Erin, let me in." Not wanting to be any more dramatic than she'd been, she opened the door. "Go away. I need to shower."

He raised an eyebrow. "First, tell me you're okay."

"I'm okay," she deadpanned.

A muscle ticked in his jaw. "I'm not joking."

"Hormones suck. Is that what you want to hear? Being stalked by

can still freaky female that wants you to herself sucks.” She drew a deep breath, only to know what was coming and unable to stop herself. “And while being honest, your freaking changing moods suck! Now go away and lay this shower.” She grabbed for the door, but he blocked her from closing it. “Until his body.”

aby—to His eyes softened. “You’re right. Everything’s been dumped on my shoulders, and it’s not fair.”

She didn’t blink, first in surprise, then in an effort to push back on her own every tear. She didn’t want him to feel sorry for her. “Don’t be nice. It’ll just make me cry today.”

She tried to turn, but he grasped her shoulders. “Erin.”

“What?”

She asked, “You deserve to have me be nice to you. You deserve a hell of a lot of things—”

He cut her off. “That you can’t give. Blah, blah, blah. I know. Do you hear me, business you for anything? Hmm?” No matter what she wanted, she’d never put herself at risk. She expressed her private hopes or wishes.

In spite of that, He opened his mouth, then closed it again.

When she said, “Well, other than asking you not to get out of bed two seconds after a right to make—” She caught her mistake before the words were out, and panic backcleared her throat. “After we fucked, then no, I don’t believe I’ve required a damned thing.”

He said the words. Fire flashed behind his dark eyes. “Erin,” he said, his voice sounding like a warning growl.

She said, “Now what?” She set her jaw, not wanting to have this—or worse, the conversation with him right now.

She didn’t want to say, “I don’t care how big of an ass I’ve been, don’t say we fucked in this room demeaning both to you and to—”

“To what? To us? To everything we share?” she asked, her voice rising. “Well, do me a favor. Unless and until you’re ready to commit to an unchangeable you dare ask me to call it anything else. Because you’re right about one thing. The way you’re behaving right now? I do deserve better.” She opened the door through the doorway. “Now out. I’m taking a shower. Alone.”

Cole looked like he wanted to say something, but just as Erin exited the room, he turned and walked out, leaving her alone.

by some

breath,



we're

FOR THE REST of the morning and into the afternoon, Cole kept himself it with He made phone calls to people she didn't know, asking questions about cases. He called Nick and informed him that he wanted a better system here, which Erin tried to say was ridiculous, since for all she they could be gone tomorrow. But Nick apparently had no problem with coming idea, and a crew was coming out later in the day to work.

Erin called Evan and explained the situation as best she could, leaving the connection to Cole. She didn't need the man riled up any more on her behalf. As it was, she had to refuse to tell him where she was *in hiding* wanting a confrontation between the two men. She promised Evan she a lot of in touch while he assured her he'd redistribute her caseload. Erin with the thought of the extra work others in the office would have to do asking because of her. Between her pregnancy-related days off and now this, or once like she was abusing her position and her colleagues.

Then she'd have the baby and be entitled to maternity leave, and she knew how she'd handle things after that. Her head began to swim with after we implications, and Erin deliberately pushed those thoughts aside. The used to time enough to deal with her future once her present was settled. Arrived at her brothers found psycho-lady, as Erin had begun to think of her stall was stuck in limbo.

With Cole.

And who knew where he'd disappeared to, but she had heard the any—beeps, informing her he'd opened one of the exit doors and gone outside.

She was surprised a few minutes later when her mother walked in the kitchen with bags of groceries in her hands. "Mom! I can't believe you're here."

Ella put the supermarket bags on the counter and turned to Erin with a smile, don't your mother a hug." She held out her arms, and just like when she was a little girl, Erin went.

Her mother's familiar scent wrapped around her, easing the ache in her chest. "So?" Erin asked. "How'd you know?"

"Sam called and told me what happened. He said Cole asked him to come by, so here I am."

Erin looked over her shoulder, but saw no sign of Cole. "Where is

“Bringing all your new clothes in from the car, I’d imagine.”

“What?”

If busy. Her mother’s attractive face wrinkled in confusion. “He didn’t tell me Cole asked Sam to have me go to the store where we went shopping and replace everything that was *destroyed*,” her mother knew diplomatic description if Erin had ever heard one. “He said to buy what we chose that day, and whatever else I found that you’d like.” With a smile in her eye, one that indicated how pleased Ella was with Cole’s behavior, she turned away and began unpacking the groceries.

Erin stood stunned, unable to process what she’d heard. “Cole said I should pay for it all. Now close your mouth. You’re catching flies.”

Her mother nodded. “And he took the bill from me when I pulled it out of my pocket.” Erin lowered herself into the nearest chair, needing to think about actions. On the one hand, they made sense. It was obvious she had not worn—right now she was in a pair of her biggest drawstring sweats and one of his old T-shirts, which he’d left out for her on the bed. But the other thing would have been to have her mother pick up a couple of items for all the things she had to replace.

But to replace everything? And add more? And pay for it all himself? “Guilt,” Erin said out loud. “He feels responsible that my life happened, she turned upside down and my clothes ruined, probably by some psycho and he blames himself.”

“Maybe.” Ella’s eyes narrowed at Erin’s conclusion. “Or maybe he wants to take care of you, and this is the way he thought to do it.”

Erin wrinkled her nose at the notion. “Doubtful.”

“Oh ye of little faith. Even your brother seemed impressed,” her mother said.

“Sam?”

“Give me a minute.” “Yep. He said he doubted he would have done something that thoughtful.” Then Mike said—

Erin jumped up from her seat. “I don’t want to hear Mike’s nonsense in her comments.” She stuck her hand in the nearest bag and began helping her mother put away the groceries.

“You’ll want to hear this,” Ella said. “Mike actually told Sam that he would think that way unless he cared about the woman in question.”

Erin froze in the process of putting eggs in the refrigerator and turned

her mom. “Mike took Cole’s side? He said he thinks Cole cares about *that way?*” Shock and disbelief reverberated through her.

Will you? Erin knew Mike paid lip service to cutting Cole slack, but she eternally believed her protective older brother would actually do it.

said, a Ella nodded. “Of course, then Mike ribbed Sam about his single hatever and ended by informing him that only when Sam fell that hard would he understand.”

rior, she “I think I might faint,” Erin muttered.

Her mother chuckled, shutting the fridge door behind Erin. “Over *that?*” part? Mike taking Cole’s side? Or the possibility that he might be right. He’s that man might really be falling for you?”

Erin closed her eyes, wishing with everything in her that Mike would see Cole’s point, that Cole could care about her—as deeply as Mike loved Cara.

thing to “I know how I feel, what I want—and sometimes I think I’m on the edge of breaking through to him. But then something clicks in his male brain and he just withdraws. It’s like he’s feeling too much, and it scares him.”

as until “Maybe that’s true. Remember, he doesn’t have two parents who grew up together like yours are. By the time his mother married her second husband, Cole was older. Cynical. With his negative views about himself as been formed by Jed. You know how young and impressionable children can be, damaged by bad parenting.”

“Cole said the same thing to me once. When I asked him why he wanted his stepfather’s positive views of him didn’t override his father’s negative views of him.”

There are only so many times you can hear negative shit before you stop believing it yourself. By the time we got out, I’d had sixteen years of my mother disappointing Jed under my belt.

She shivered at the memory. “Every time he pushes me away, I push myself I won’t react. But it hurts, and I push back.” This time, she had a rightful, worse than that.

Unless and until you’re ready to commit to an us, don’t you dare negatively call it anything else. Because you’re right about one thing. The way you’re behaving right now? I do deserve better.

She’d reacted with hurt and anger, hormones and frustration, so she’d validated his worst fears about himself. She rubbed her hand over her eyes.

Erin turned to “You’re human, Erin. You can’t blame yourself for acting like it.”

me . . . She forced a smile for her mother's sake. "You're the best, you that?"

didn't "So are you, honey. And so is that man of yours."

Erin nodded in agreement. She knew that. *Now.* "I just wish he belonged to you."

Her mother patted her shoulder. "If anyone can show him the error of his ways, it's you."

Erin shook her head, not as certain as her mother in her abilities. It was easy to see things clearly when not overwhelmed with him. By his side and

Now to somehow remember that when dealing with the hardheaded warm-blooded man she desperately wanted for herself.

she had a



on the verge of a breakdown, and COLE STARED AT the ceiling in the bedroom, wondering how his life with the solitary living being undercover entailed, to . . . this complicated fuckup. Didn't matter, anyway. One thing he knew for sure: this ended. Now.

Erin's outburst merely cemented what he should have known all along. She wasn't cut out for his kind of life or affair. Every time he was with her he gave her false hope, only to pull it away again when he withdrew more.

Why his mother said, "The way you're behaving right now? I do deserve better."

And he intended to make sure she got it, by getting her through the stalker mess with what was left of her emotions and pride intact and walking away. Just like he should have done all along.

Cole's cell phone rang, interrupting him from his painful thoughts. "Sanders," he said, happy to talk to someone, anyone, to take him out on his own head.

"It's Rockford."

"What do you have for me?" Cole asked, eager for any news that would end Erin's nightmare faster.

"When do I get you back?" the other man asked.

Cole wasn't in the mood for games. "Never, if I don't get some answers." Rockford cursed.

Cole braced his free hand beneath his head. "Not joking."

I know “I can’t believe you’re threatening to sacrifice everything for a p
ass.”

Cole clenched his jaw tight, and he actually thought he might
bleed blood vessel. “Talk about her like that again, and I’ll offer my service
federal government instead.”

His boss let out a low groan. “She’s not just your baby’s m
Another round of cursing commenced. “And I’ll be losing you anyway

“No, you won’t. Give me what I need, and I’ll be back before yo
it.”

He could hear the sound of shuffling papers in the background. “V
Maroni went AWOL on Witness Protection after she testified.”

Cole bolted upright in bed. But instead of swearing up a storm o
crazy, everything inside him went silent, much as it did when
undercover and things were about to come to a head. “The feds didn’t
up on her?”

“Why should they? She did her job, testified, and the guy was cor
They won’t spend manpower or money to keep track. She’s not their p
anymore.”

But she was his, and Cole had just gotten proof that Victoria had c
off the grid.

He ran a hand through his hair. The crazy woman could be any
including Serendipity. But how the hell could she have been in such
town all this time and not have drawn attention to herself? Unless s
came and went, slipping in and out unnoticed.

“You there?” Rockford asked into the silence.

“I’ve got to follow up on something. I’ll be in touch.”

“Hey! I got you your information. You owe me—”

“Talk to you later,” Cole said, disconnecting the call. He imme
dialed Mike. “Pull photos of Victoria Maroni. Show them to John Br
see if she’s the brunette who hired him.” Cole felt certain she was beh
shooting and was now stalking Erin, but he wanted to build an airtight

“Who was that?” Erin asked, joining him in the bedroom.

“Where’s your mom?”

“She left.” Erin pointed at the phone, indicating she expected an an

“That was Mike.” He explained everything he’d learned up to that

“So basically all we have now is confirmation.”

piece of He nodded.

“That and a buck fifty will get me a bus ticket.” She began pacing and forth on the plush cream carpet.

“But now we have a face. Your brothers know who to look out for in this small town, and if they show her photograph often enough, someone’s bound to have seen her.”

Erin paused. “Okay, I’ll think positive,” she said, correctly interpreting his unspoken message.

“Good.”

“Cole?”

“Yes?” he asked.

She stepped to the bed, settling next to him. His T-shirt was huge on his leaner frame, but he liked her in his clothing. It was a damn fine fit, especially since he wouldn’t be seeing her undressed anymore.

“My mother told me about the clothes you had her buy.”

“They’re hanging in your closet. I brought a few shopping bags over for you. Problem in too.” He hadn’t wanted to go through the more personal items.

“I’m . . . well, thank you. It was beyond sweet of you to have her drop everything and—”

“You lost everything. It was the least I could do.” He really didn’t want to make her making him out to be some sort of nice-guy hero. Just because a small replacement of her clothes didn’t mean he could give her what she expressed she just wanted.

His head pounding, he rose to his feet.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

This was it. “Moving my stuff into another room.”

Erin reared back as if he’d slapped her. Exactly how he’d felt on the day she said those words, knowing that each time he indulged in her sweetness, she was hurting her more and more. Yet he wasn’t doing this for payback. He was trying to be a decent guy. Sleeping with her when she wanted to was one thing. Pulling away when she needed him was another case. That would be more cruel than pulling back now.

She folded her arms across her chest. “That night at Joe’s, you said you’d stay with me. Whatever it is, for as long as it lasts. Isn’t that what we said?” He didn’t answer. He quivered, but she kept it together.

“That was before I realized how much I’m hurting you. I’m in, with you. Together, you hope for more, I pull away . . . it’s a vicious cycle. You can’t win.”

better. At least now we both agree on that.”

ing back She looked down and ran her tongue over her lips, clearly collect
thoughts before speaking. Finally she raised her head and looked at him.
r. It’s soon. “You know I said that out of frustration. I’m pregnant and hormones
boundwhole enforced confinement thing is getting to me, and it hasn’t even
yet. Don’t use my stupid words, said in the heat of the moment, as an
pretingof agreement. I told you all along, you’re not the man Jed says you are

“But I told you all along, I’m not the man for you. As soon as this
situation ends and you’re safe, I’m expected back in Manhattan. They
me and send me back undercover for who knows how long. I can’t call
Check in at all. It’s not any kind of life you’d want.”

on her “Says you.” Anger shimmered in her eyes, which narrowed.

e view, “Someone has to be rational.”

“And you telling me what I can or can’t handle, or better yet, what
don’t want in my life, that’s rational?”

f things “Yes.”

She blew out a long, clearly pissed-off breath. He waited
replaceexplosion he felt sure was coming. Instead, she turned and, in silence,
for the door.

’t want “Where are you going?”

use he She swung back around. “I don’t know. But I have thirty-five h
sly saidsquare feet to find a place far away from you.” With that, she walked c

And Cole’s headache turned into a full-blown pounding in his temp



hearing COLE DIDN’T KNOW how much more of this he could take. Two da
he was passed since he moved out of the main bedroom. By dinnertime on M
e really Erin had gotten over her fit of anger, but as the next couple of days
l more? Cole realized she’d changed the rules between them drastically.

Whereas she’d been letting him cook for them both when they wer
agreed. house, insisting she clean up in exchange, now she was taking care of
r voice She beat him to the kitchen for every meal, heating up her mother’s
adding a premade salad for dinner, also courtesy of her mother, and
re sleep him to figure out his own breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Of course, he v
deserve to join her, she’d told him, and to eat whatever she was having if he w

the mood to cook. But she wasn't doing anything *for* him.

ing her She handled her own laundry but didn't touch his. Straightened
n head-main bedroom and bathroom, along with anything she used in the l
al. Thisbut left him to clean up after himself. She was perfectly please
startedcompletely aloof, treating him like . . . she'd treat any bodyguard who
ny kindhired for the job.

.” No, he realized. Knowing Erin, she'd be nicer to someone hired to
stalkerover her than she was to him. In fact, he felt sure she'd offer to heat a
'll briefslice of lasagna along with her own, or pour a salad into an extra bowl.
l. Text. He'd thought she wasn't angry with him anymore, and maybe she
—but she clearly had an agenda. One he'd yet to figure out. All he kn
that they were in the same house, living even more separate lives than
they'd started sleeping together again.

I do or She was back in independent Erin mode, and as much as he respe
he hated it at the same time.

He stalked to the sliding glass doors of the kitchen and looked out,
for thesee her sitting in a lounge chair, a glass of water on the table, along wi
startedreader of some sort beside it. She talked on her cell phone, wav
animated hand in the air.

But what struck him hardest was the bathing suit she'd chosen. Al
undredaway from friends, family, and prying eyes, Erin had chosen a purple
out. A two-piece number that left nothing to the imagination.

gles. The all-purple top exposed her now even more generous cleavage
the bottom was the same color, cut high on the thigh, but a white b
across her belly, and she'd rolled it down lower than necessary, enabl
to tan. He took in her generous curves and her softly rounded stoma
ys had ground his teeth so hard, he wondered if he'd crack a molar.

Monday, Torturing himself wasn't his style, and he'd just turned away wi
passed, doorbell rang.

Grateful for any reprieve, he went downstairs to answer it, surpr
e at her see Mike and Cara waiting on the front porch.

herself. He let the couple inside. “What's up?” Cole asked, hoping like
's food, wasn't in for any kind of brotherly lecture.

leaving “Cara wanted to see how Erin was doing, and I figured I'd tag along

was free “Erin's out back. I'm sure she'll be happy to have company.” Si
asn't in wasn't including him in her daily interactions and plans.

“Let’s all go out back. It’s nice out.”

up the “This way.” Cole led them to the kitchen and the sliding doors, kitchen, them out back.

nt and Erin didn’t seem all that surprised to see them, and when Cara s’ d been off her top, revealing a bikini that Mike couldn’t stop ogling, Cole w if Erin hadn’t invited the couple over without his knowledge.

o watch At this point, nothing Erin did should surprise him. Acting like the second the house, he offered everyone a drink, brought sodas out back, and got himself settled in a chair next to Mike.

wasn’t “You look like hell,” Mike said, stretching his legs out in front of h

ew was “Thanks. Aren’t you two supposed to be at work?”

before Mike grinned. “It’s Cara’s day off, and I’m the boss.”

“Any news?” Cole wanted Victoria caught already.

ected it, Mike shook his head. “Positive ID on Victoria Maroni as the o paid Brass to shoot Erin, but that’s all. In the meantime, I’ve got only to watching Erin’s house and your apartment. We’ve both got pe th an e-Manhattan covering Maroni’s favorite places before she went into ring an And we’re discreetly showing her picture around Serendipity at plac the supermarket or Joe’s. Nothing.”

one and Cole exhaled low and hard. “I’m losing it,” he muttered.

o bikini. “I noticed there haven’t been any looks between you two, n touches. What gives?” Mike eyed him warily.

e, while Cole didn’t have much to lose by telling the truth. “You’ll be ha and cut know I’ve come to my senses. I’m giving Erin space until this is over a ling her gone.”

ach and Mike raised an eyebrow. “You are one stupid fuck. Almost as du was,” he said, laughing.

hen the “What’s so funny over there?” Cara called out.

“Mind your own business, baby.”

rised to “You’ll pay for that later,” she promised, blowing him a kiss.

Erin let out a gleeful laugh, obviously appreciating her brother be hell he in his place by his wife.

Cole merely rolled his eyes.

g.” “Hey, don’t knock it till you’ve tried it,” Mike told him. “S nce she happened between you two? Why aren’t you still behaving more couple?”

Cole adjusted the frames of his sunglasses and looked over the manicured lawn. "Nothing is going on between us anymore."

Mike rocked forward in his chair, resting his elbows on his knees, stripped at Cole like he could see inside his skin. "When my sister's happiness makes me happy. So when she convinced me she could get that from me, I backed off. What's changed?"

Cole didn't do the buddy-buddy talk thing, but with Mike pressing him, he finally had no choice. "Once she's safe, I'm back to work. You tell me if it makes any sense to keep up something that has to end. Especially when she admitted she wants more than I can give her. Being with her only hurts me and that's not something I ever wanted to do, no matter what you think."

Mike studied him, assessing him in silence. "How about this," he said. "You play things your way . . . for now. But when you're losing people's minds over losing her, and you don't know which end is up? Call me. I'll be in your ass the way Sam kicked mine."

Cole didn't know what Mike meant, and before he had a chance to answer, like both his and Mike's cell phones rang.

His gut screaming, he answered. Mike did the same. Both men had conversations, then, hanging up at the same time, met each other's gazes.

Mike merely nodded, giving Cole permission, not that he needed it. Cole turned to the women. "Erin?"

Mid-laughter over something Cara said, Erin turned, her beautiful and void of expression when she looked at him. *Intentional, no doubt*, he felt his heart lurching. He ignored the sensation.

"What is it?" she asked.

Though he wished he could handle this without involving her, he knew she'd never forgive him for keeping her in the dark. "Enforced confidentiality has just come to an end. Sam just arrested a woman lurking outside your windows."

Erin put

Erin what
like a

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Chapter Fourteen

COLE AND MIKE headed to the precinct, leaving an angry Erin behind Cara. Although she wanted to be there, and Cole respected the desire of Mike, and Cara thought it was a bad idea to put her in the same vicinity as a woman stalking her.

Now, at the precinct and knowing Victoria was a room away, Mike wanted to burst in and question her himself, but Mike refused. “Let us do our jobs. Sam’s in with her now.”

“Then let me watch.”

Silence settled around them in Mike’s office as the other man looked at Cole. “You look ready to explode.”

“You’re damn right. But I know how to keep it together.”

Mike inclined his head. “Let’s go, but don’t make me regret this.”

A few minutes later, Cole found himself on the opposite side of the precinct watching Sam and Victoria, knowing she couldn’t see him.

He shoved his hands in the back pockets of his jeans and studied the scene in front of him.

Sam sat with his back to the mirrored window. Victoria stared at him while Mike studied her. Granted, it had been a while since he’d seen her, but she looked . . . different.

He braced his arm on the wall and leaned in closer, trying to figure out what was off. “I want to hear.”

“You promise to stay calm?” Mike asked.

Cole nodded.

Mike flipped the switch, turning on the sound.

“Let’s try this again,” Sam said. “What’s your name?”

“Is he kidding?” The muscles in Cole’s arm strained from holding back his anger.

Mike placed a restraining hand on his shoulder. “Listen.”

“How many times do we have to go over this? No matter how often I ask me, the answer’s the same. Nicole Farnsworth.”

“Victoria’s maiden name is Farnsworth. Parents are rich. Disapproved their daughter getting involved with a known mob guy. She ran off with him anyway,” Cole said.

But why wasn’t she owning up to who she was?

“Did you fingerprint her?” Cole asked.

“I checked when we arrived. She was printed and booked for trespassing as soon as she came in. We’re running her prints.”

Cole set his jaw. “What about the rest of the charges? Attempted kidnapping, stalking . . .”

“We’ll get there. For now, we just need enough to hold her.”

Cole studied the woman carefully. Same dark hair, longer than he remembered, but again, time had passed. She dressed differently from Victoria. More casual. Victoria was always well-groomed, to perfect form. Full face of makeup, dark lipstick, hair teased. This Victoria was softer.

That was the word he’d been searching for. Softer. More gentle. A woman who said her name was Nicole.

Cole narrowed his gaze, then pulled out his cell and dialed. “Give me information on Victoria Maroni’s siblings. ASAP,” Cole said into the phone, then hung up without waiting for a response.

“You think she’s telling the truth?” Mike asked.

Cole nodded, hating what that meant. “The woman in there with Vincent Maroni. She couldn’t spend five minutes with Vincent Maroni and not get killed. Alive.”

Mike swore. Cole understood, because it meant Victoria was still there. At least Erin was with Cara, a trained police officer, which soothed him—just barely.

Mike picked up the phone in the room and dialed. “Put a rush on the prints.”

“Let’s go with my gut on this and assume she’s telling the truth. I’ll be more out of her than Sam, so will you let me in there now?” Cole asked.

“You can’t interrogate her like a cop.”

“I am a cop,” he reminded the other man.

“Out of your jurisdiction. But I agree. Your personal stake in this is to get her talking—assuming she feels bad when she finds out what her brother did.”

oved of Cole nodded. "Let's go."

ith him Before they could walk in, an out-of-breath rookie burst into the
"Prints you requested, boss." He handed a file to Mike, who opened
folder, scanned the results, and nodded at Cole.

"Let's do this thing." Mike opened the door.

passing Sam and the woman across from him turned their way, as Mike, followed
by Cole, stepped into the small room. A table, the two chairs, dingy
murder, and not much else.

"What's up?" Sam asked, rising from his chair.

"Seems she's telling the truth." He slapped the folder onto the table
han he The other woman jumped at the loud sound. Cole would have felt
y than for her if this mess weren't so serious.

tion, in "I *told* you I'm not Victoria," she said, pinning Sam with a triumphant
as . . . look that had her cheeks flushed pink with victory. The other man
squirmed.

And she She surprised them by rising from her seat.

Mike stepped in front of the door. "Where do you think you're going
'I need She blinked, startled that the answer wasn't obvious to them. "I'm
phone, person you're looking for, so I'm leaving."

The hell she was. "Not so fast." Cole braced his hands on the table
were still found trespassing, and we have questions about your sister
h Sam? *Down.*" His voice rose and the woman flinched.

it eaten Cole realized his initial impression was right. She was nothing like
sister.

still out Before he could moderate his tone, Sam jumped from his seat so
ied him chair hit the wall behind him.

"Back off," the younger Marsden snapped at Cole. "This isn't
n those interrogation." The easier brother was suddenly every inch the defender
in-charge cop Cole knew him to be.

can get "Everyone calm down." Mike stepped to the table as Sam right
d. chair. "Miss Farnsworth? This is Detective Cole Sanders. He's NYPD
has a—"

"You're Cole? The same Cole my sister's gone crazy over?" His
s might blue eyes settled on his.

sister's "What do you know?" Cole asked, controlling his frustration with
lack of answers. Sam was right. Scaring her wouldn't accomplish his

getting her to talk.

the room. “Why don’t you sit back down?” Sam asked, gesturing to her chair.

and the She lowered herself into her seat.

“Drink?” Sam asked.

Mike whipped his head around to stare at his brother.

ollowed “No, thank you. I’m fine.” She shot Sam a grateful look before g

7 walls, at Cole. “Before I answer your questions, I want to know what my

been up to. You tell me that, and I’ll tell you whatever you want to know.

3. Cole glanced at Mike, then Sam. “You don’t know? You haven’t
touch with her?”

It sorry She folded her arms across her chest and waited. Apparently s

serious. They answered her first. Maybe there was more steel in N

mphant spine than Cole had previously thought.

actually Knowing whose jurisdiction he was in, Cole deferred to Mike. “Wh

The other man shrugged. “Tell her what she wants to know.”

Cole did. From the shooting to disabling Erin’s security, breaking i

ng?” home and destroying her clothes, he ran down a laundry list of wh

not the believed Victoria had done to Erin.

3. Nicole Farnsworth’s face paled. “It’s worse than I thought,” sh

3. “You more to herself than to him.

, so sit. “Now will you tell us what’s going on with your sister? When y

spoke to her, what you know, and why you were at Erin Marsden’s, i

ike her into her side window?” Sam asked, his voice gentler than Cole ha

heard him.

fast his Cole shook his head, hoping the other man knew what he was doin

’t yoursurprise. “First, drop the charges against me,” she said, taking all three of t

der, the

Cole stiffened. “That wasn’t the agreement. You asked what you

had done, and we told you.”

ited his “Well, forgive me for not thinking about everything important all a

and he It’s not like I’ve been arrested before! Cuffed, printed, humiliated–

scowled at Sam. “I’ll tell you this. I was trying to find out what was g

er light with my sister, and if she’d gone looking for this Erin. And I was g

warn Erin if I saw her.”

with her “By lurking at her windows and scaring her?” Cole asked in disbel

goal of “If I rang the doorbell and either one of you saw my face, would yo

let me in for conversation and coffee?” she asked, her sarcasm thick.

Sam let out an unexpected chuckle. “She’s got a point.”

“Shut up,” Cole muttered.

“Drop the charges or I want my lawyer.” Ignoring Cole and Nicole’s gaze settled on Sam, as if she’d already figured out he was flinching to getting what she wanted.

Or she was just responding to the same mental deficiency that sister’s . . .” Sam.

Mike groaned. “I’ll take care of it. Meanwhile, *you*.” He pointed at Nicole. “Talk. This is my sister’s life we’re talking about.” Mike stormed and slammed the door without looking back.

Silence surrounded them, until Sam cleared his throat. “We’ve a personal interest in this case. Erin’s my sister too. We need your information you can give us about your sister and her plans. Start from last time you heard from her.”

Nicole ran a shaking hand through her hair. “It’s not that simple. What they always been . . . *unstable* is the best word I can give you. She has emotional issues.” She hesitated, as if debating how much to reveal.

Cole decided to let her do this her own way in the hope of slowly earning her trust, and with it, more details.

“To start with, she’s always been needy, and transferred that need from one man to man.”

“Her husband treated her like dirt,” Cole said bluntly.

Nicole swallowed hard. “Well, she didn’t get much attention from her parents, but going out with Vincent got them to notice her enough to break up the relationship. She ran off with him anyway. I didn’t hear from her over the years, but after the raid and Vincent’s death, we had the first conversation we’d had in ages.”

“What did she say?” Sam asked.

Nicole clasped her hands tightly together on the table. “She called me—” She orders, I’m guessing, to tell me she was going into Witness Protection because she had to testify in a federal case against some of Vincent’s business associates. But once it was over, she was going after the one person who really loved her and treated her like a queen.” Her blue eyes

Cole with an icy glare. “I’m not saying she’s rational, but if you led her to you have any way, so help me—”

Damn, Cole was tired of that accusation. "I was nice to her," through gritted teeth. "I talked to her like she was a lady, something I didn't find much in her husband's crowd. I felt sorry for her, if you Mike, know the truth, but no sane person would mistake my behavior for anything more than simple human kindness or friendship. And once she learned there undercover, it should have been perfectly obvious why I befriended her had hit in any way."

"You needed information from her." She scowled.
"That, and frankly, once I realized she wasn't in on anything with the outorganization, I thought I could protect her when things went down. The Cole spread his hands wide, indicating he'd done what he could to help her get assistance."

Whatever She stared at her intertwined hands for a while. Finally she looked at the Cole, but let her gaze settle on Sam when she spoke next. "He just like a sane person would mistake his behavior as genuine interest. Well, 't Vicky's bipolar." She choked over the word.

Emotional And there it was, Cole thought as he leaned against the wall. They'd gotten the truth. Now to find out whether, beyond wanting to help her gain assistance, Nicole would be willing to help them too.

"Thank you for that," Sam said, his hand covering hers. "Is she on medication?"

Nicole swallowed hard. "Supposed to be. But she has a history of stopping when she's feeling good, of refusing to believe she needs to help them in order to function in the same world as the rest of us."

So they were dealing with a sick woman. Cole hoped that was better than often her being purely delusional. Maybe there were threads of humanity in her, just long that they could work with.

"Did she tell you where she was going when she left the program?" he asked.

Nicole shook her head. "I asked, and she said that Cole was meant to protect her and she was going after him. That's when I knew she was probably on her medication and I tried to keep closer tabs on her, but she never answered my phone, and her contact was sporadic." She twisted her hands together in a way that had to be painful. "Then a few days ago, she called in the middle of the night, hysterical. She was rambling about how this Erin Marsden was ruining all her plans. She said something about watching Cole, wait

he said the right time to approach him, but Erin was in the way.”

ing she “That’s another thing that doesn’t make sense. Why didn’t she just want to find me right away?” Cole asked.

nything “From what I could understand of her rambling, when she first called I was down, she watched. She wanted to get an idea of your life. And she started her leaving your apartment.”

“That was over four months ago!” Cole’s head nearly exploded.

“I know. Like I said . . . bipolar. She’s always spent more time just thinking and planning than doing. But when she makes a move, it’s big.”

at’s it.” “Like running away with Vincent,” Sam said.

help her Nicole nodded.

“When did you hear from her again?”

nd up at “The day she saw Cole and Erin talking at some coffee shop. She said no ballistic. I guess that’s when she started targeting Erin specifically. Vicky didn’t know she’d hired someone to shoot her! I didn’t think she was violent.” Nicole lay her head in her hands and moaned. “I don’t know

Finally say.” She lifted her pain-filled eyes to Sam’s.

help her The way she kept focusing on Sam and not Cole, despite her association with her sister, he knew he hadn’t imagined the connection she was on. Interesting.

“Do you know where she’s hiding out? Because this is a small town, oftown that we’d have had a sighting by now if she was living here,” Sam said. She lived on gently.

Her eyes shimmered with tears. “I don’t even know how to tell you better than Cole’s nerves jangled. “What is it?”

in there “Last time Vicky called me, it was right before the weekend. She was hysterical because she’d been setting up a special place for the two of us to live in?” Cole asked and she found out Erin was pregnant.”

“Where is this place?” Cole asked.

it to be Nicole spread her hands wide. “I don’t know.”

ably off “Who would?” Cole asked.

answered She shrugged, looking helplessly at Sam.

her in a Sam cleared his throat. “We just need you to think. You said she was setting up a special place. Would she use a real estate agent? Does she have any friends she’d confide in?”

ting for She pressed her fingers against her forehead. “Umm . . .”

“Anyone you can think of,” he encouraged her.

st come “No friends. She’s not good at keeping them,” she muttered.

“Real estate agent?” Cole asked.

ame to She shook her head.

aw Erin “Decorator?” Sam said, obviously grasping. “Someone who’d have an address for deliveries.”

“Well . . . there’s this antiques dealer she’s used for unique items. I had a plottingone apartment she had on her own and both houses Victor owned.”

Cole exhaled a long breath. “Call him.”

“I don’t remember his name and I certainly don’t have his phone number memorized. I need to think, and I can’t do that with all of you present me.”

ie went Cole nodded and took a step toward the door. “Fine. I’ll go.” This was the only shot they had at finding Victoria before she went home he was Erin again. She wouldn’t cooperate if he suffocated her. “Just answer what to question for me?”

She turned in her seat. “What is it?”

Cole’s “How dangerous do you think your sister is? How big a threat?”

n there. She bit down on her lower lip. “Truth? I’ve never heard her so out of control before. That’s why I came here. To find her and try to make sure enough that she’s behaving this way because she’s off her meds. And to warn you I am said Son of a bitch. “Thank you for being honest.”

Nicole inclined her head. “She’s my sister. I want her to get help.”
i this.” Cole wanted her behind bars or, at the very least, padded walls, far from Erin and his unborn child, but he couldn’t tell her sister that he was needed Nicole to keep them in the loop.

you to She didn’t trust Cole. Sam was another story.

Cole leaned his head against the wall, trying to think clearly. “What word?” Cole tipped his head to the outer room.

Sam placed a hand over Nicole’s. “Sit tight. I’ll be right back.”



setting
ive any ERIN AND CARA remained out back at the house while Cole and Mike stayed at the station. Erin was not happy they all insisted she remain behind. She wanted to see this woman firsthand. Confront the threat. But she

understood the wisdom of being smart and protecting herself and th
Which didn't mean she had to like it.

The only good news was that the day had remained full-on gorgeou
bright sunshine and warm temperatures, allowing Cara and her to sit
ave the patio and soak up the rays.

Cara's cell rang suddenly, interrupting the serene peace Erin had
s in the begun to find.

"Hello?" Cara answered. She waited a couple of beats, then . . .
understand. I'll tell her. Thanks. Tell Sam to be careful."
number Erin sat up straighter. "Tell Sam to be careful about what?" Her he
ssuring picked up speed.

Cara met her gaze. "Apparently the woman Sam arrested wasn't V
woman but her twin sister, Nicole. It seems Victoria is bipolar and off her
nt after which goes a ways toward making sense of her irrational, im
ver one behavior."

"I'd feel bad if my whole life weren't turned upside down," Er
"Okay, I do feel bad. But she's still a threat to me."

Cara nodded. "But Nicole isn't. Mike said she was at your house to
out off find her twin and to warn you."

her see Erin narrowed her gaze. "Why does Mike believe her?"
Erin." "I don't know yet. We'll have to see what he has to say when
here, but I'm guessing he's not one hundred percent convinced, l
Sam's going to stick close in case her sister makes contact."

ar away Erin frowned. "So that psycho's still out there."

t. They "I'm sorry," Cara said.

Erin rose from her seat. "I have to do something." She paced th
patio. "We need to draw her out. She wants me—let her think she ca
Sam. A me."

"Over my dead body." Cole approached from the side of the house
jeans molded to his well-defined body and a white T-shirt hugged hi
and muscular forearms. His expression was dark, frustration emanating
him.

went to "Why are you coming up that way?" Erin asked.
id. She "I wanted to walk the property, check the perimeter. Just in case."
he also "Okay."
"You are not making yourself a target. If Victoria wants anyone, it

e baby. Erin nodded, an idea slowly forming. “Then let’s give her what she wants.”

is, with “What?” Cara touched Erin’s arm. “What are you talking about?”

on the Erin swallowed hard, hating her idea, as much as she thought it made perfect sense. “A public breakup. A loud, ugly public breakup where it almost makes it clear we will never be a couple.”

Cole stared at her long and hard. “That won’t remove you as a threat.” “Yes, Iher. You’re still the mother of my child.”

Oh, Erin knew that all too well. One she wouldn’t or couldn’t confront and she wasn’t so sure the distinction mattered anymore.

“I know. I’m just thinking about the psychological profile of this woman, Victoria. She’s clearly in a manic state. She wants a man who will take care of her, love her. A man who needs her. She’s going to respond to any open offer. You’re going to make sure she thinks you’ll be happy to see her.”

in said. Cole tipped his head. “How?”

Cara watched them both carefully, as if looking for hidden meanings in Erin’s words. Considering her sister-in-law knew just what had transpired between Erin and Cole, Erin didn’t blame her. But this plan really intended to play into Victoria’s needs, not Erin’s insecurities—although in the end, Cole’s words would indeed slice open her heart.

because “You’ll let me know, in public, that just because I’m having your child, we shouldn’t expect us to be a family. But that you know firsthand a kid needs two loving parents, like your mother and Brody, so I’m free to find someone else. And you’ll do the same.”

he back Cole’s eyes darkened. “What the hell do you expect to accomplish with that?”

Cara blinked. “As warped as it sounds, that makes sense. She’ll know you’re open to being with someone else. That Erin’s no threat to her.”

is chest Erin nodded. “I’ll move back home, and you’ll leave, taking a big step from things with you. When you’re on your own again, she’ll know you’re what you said. That gives her a chance to come to you.” Erin finished with what she thought was a flourish.

Inside, she was sick to her stomach. She might have known her tirade with Cole would come to an end, but she wasn’t ready now. And she had no choice but to play this scene out in public. Still, it would give Cole a chance to

hat sheVictoria, once and for all.

Cole's expression was as dark as she'd ever seen it. "If I go along with this, I want Cara taking over for me until Victoria's caught. You have to be my madetime bodyguard or this doesn't happen," Cole said.

ere you "Done." Cara agreed immediately, not giving Erin a chance to argue. "I happen to have an in with the boss." She smirked at the threat to mention that he'll want his sister protected too."

"But—"

omit to, Cole silenced Erin's complaints with a glare. "If you want to play your way, you'll give me this."

woman. She clenched her teeth, wanting to scream at his bossy tone. Still, she granted her a concession by giving in to her plan, and she knew it. She remained silent.

ace. So "Good." He folded his arms across his chest, his eyes still stormy.

Cara stepped between them. "So how about this for a plan? You stay until Wednesday night. Then at Joe's, you play out the breakup thing. Nothing in excitement grew as she described the plan. "I'll be there for you, Erin. I'm inspired you're *upset*, and I'll take you back here. Meanwhile, Cole will be upstairs alone. If Victoria doesn't come to Cole that night, we move in home in the morning and wait."

Cole exhaled hard. "Yeah. Fine."

baby, I "Erin?" Cara asked.

d needs She tossed her hands in the air. "Fine. We wait till Wednesday. Someone was two more days when all she'd been doing lately was *waiting*."

She wanted her life back. So if she had to live through a public tussle with Cole and humiliate herself to achieve her goal, she'd do it.

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Victoria, once and for all.

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"Done." Cara agreed immediately, not giving Erin a chance to argue. "I'll take time off. I happen to have an in with the boss." She smirked at that. "Not to mention that he'll want his sister protected too."

"But—"

Cole silenced Erin's complaints with a glare. "If you want to play things your way, you'll give me this."

She clenched her teeth, wanting to scream at his bossy tone. Still, he'd granted her a concession by giving in to her plan, and she knew it. So she remained silent.

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"Erin?" Cara asked.

She tossed her hands in the air. "Fine. We wait till Wednesday." What was two more days when all she'd been doing lately was *waiting*.

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Chapter Fifteen

WEDNESDAY ARRIVED TOO soon. Cole hated what was about to go down if the idea, once he let himself accept it, was brilliant. Remaining in and out of sight had kept Erin safe, but it did nothing to lure Victor. Tonight's plan would. He didn't blame Erin for wanting to reclaim her life, but he'd never approve of her making herself a target to do it.

Making himself one was another story.

But once their *show* ended, Cole's entire life would change. He'd go back to the solitary life he hadn't wanted to leave in the first place. So how could that now he'd rather live with a cool-to-him Erin than move back up to his small apartment over Joe's? He'd gotten used to more space and privacy, and company. Sleeping with Erin's warm body by his side—and damn, he'd missed that already.

Cole shook his head in disgust. Obviously ending their arrangement before he lost more of his mind made sense after all.

He'd just stepped into the kitchen, where Erin was eating yogurt with granola, having reverted back to her old eating habits. He was cooking, but she was eating her own food, and nothing he did or said would change her mind.

"I'm making eggs. Do you want some?"

"No thanks. I'm almost full."

He groaned. "How long are you going to punish me for doing that thing?"

Erin met his gaze with wide, too-innocent eyes. "I'm doing nothing."

"You're cutting off your nose to spite your face. So to speak."

She shook her head. "Because I don't want your eggs?"

"Because you don't want anything from me, including my company? Had he really just said that?"

A whisper of a smile crossed her lips. "Still sending those messages." She rose and cleaned up her breakfast without saying

word.

He muttered a curse. Just then, his cell rang. A glance told him Mike on the line. “Hey.” He turned away from Erin.

“Nicole got in touch with Sam. Said she called her mother, who did the antiques dealer, and she gave Sam an address where she thinks he set up house. It’s about twenty minutes from here,” Mike said.

n, even
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ria out.
er life,

“You going to check it out?”

“Yeah. I’ll wait to hear if you find Victoria.”

Mike clicked off and Cole returned to where Erin stood. “Mike has a lead on where Victoria’s hiding out.”

“If he finds her, we won’t have to go through with tonight?” she asked with stark relief in her voice.

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“You don’t have to go through with it no matter what. We can still wait her out, hope she shows herself eventually.”

And damn if a part of him wished she’d choose that option.



gement
circumstances, she put thought and effort into her style. Maternity clothing mixed not, she wanted to look good. And she wanted to hang out with her friends before all hell broke loose, so she called Trina and Macy to make sure they would be there for moral support. She hadn’t filled them in on the details of the plan. She wanted to do it in person.

She also wanted an outlet for the stress building inside her. Mike called earlier, and he’d found Victoria’s location, but not the woman she was right. He wondered if she’d been tipped off by her sister, but unable to prove it, said he had to live with Sam keeping an eye out.

io such
had crept her brother out. Inside, there were photos of Cole from a framed and lying around, making it look like it had come from an episode of *Criminal Minds*. Or at least *America’s Most Obsessed*—not that the company.” such a thing.

She and Cole were going to Joe’s separately in order to make a statement they’d further reinforce later. Erin knew the plan. She’d crafted it herself and she hoped she could be as good an actress as it required.

ould be Erin had immediately taken a seat. Besides, she was so thin she could cover . . . mostly.

T-shirt But there was nothing she could do about the news being public.

not to “Erin! You’re out and about.” Evan Carmichael’s familiar voice came from behind her. He walked around and eyed her warily.

not their “It’s not what it looks like,” she assured him. Erin knew that if she wanted to save her job, she needed to explain. “Give me a second and I’ll talk, okay?”

ke out.” He nodded, but his expression showed his confusion and displeasure. She swiveled in her seat. “Cara, I need a few minutes to talk to my brother. I won’t go far. Just to the nearest quiet corner.”

ing over The other woman frowned. “Erin—”

l out of “It’s about my job,” she said, rising from her seat before Cara could stop her. “I have to do this,” Erin insisted.

to her Cara let out a groan. “Fine. I’ll call Cole in the meantime. And you’ll be in sight. Your brother’s at the bar with an eye out too. Any problem, let us know,” she said, tipping her head toward Mike, who leaned against the bar, talking with some guys from the station. But Erin didn’t miss that Mike was alert, his gaze shifting around the room.

“I’ll be right back.”

She and Evan stepped to the nearest wall, but they were constantly interrupted by people walking by, and it was too noisy for a private conversation.

“This is ridiculous,” Evan muttered. “Come on.” He steered Erin toward the bathroom hallway. She would have argued but he wasn’t listening, and since she could still see her brother from her location, she tried to relax.

He faced her, his back to the main room. “What’s going on? Asking you not as your boss but as your friend. Because I know you well enough to realize you wouldn’t bail on work but come drink at Joe’s.” He raised his right eyebrow, the concern in his chiseled face very real.

Erin opted to explain the stalker part of her situation first and gave him the briefest overview of why she was in Joe’s Bar tonight and what she needed to accomplish.

He nodded slowly. “So where’s your partner in crime?”

Erin swallowed hard. “I can’t imagine what’s keeping him.”

The other man’s scowl told her just what he thought of Cole. “I don’t really know what you’re getting yourself into with him? You must be Trina, right?”

ould still you can do so much better.”

Erin stiffened. She disliked being told who or what was good for her, and even more, she hated anyone making assumptions and insulting Cole. Cole might not be the man for her, but he had reasons she had to respect—none that warranted Evan putting him down.

“Look, I appreciate that you think you mean well, as a friend and boss, but I’ve told you before, the subject of Cole is off-limits. He’s going to be in my life for the foreseeable future and that’s the end of it.” Her tone sounded harsh, brittle to her own ears.

Evan stepped back and studied her. “For God’s sake, why can’t you just tell him he’s just going to leave you high and dry when he’s had his fill?” Cole asked.

Erin blinked, unable to believe his nerve. Beyond being uncalled for, Cole was just plain rude, with no real care for her feelings. So much for Cole keeping himself her friend. His jealousy was showing, and it was just plain ugly. Erin had been carefully choosing her words, but no longer. “Why are you asking. “You want to know why he’s in my life? Because he’s the father of my unborn child, that’s why!” she yelled at him.

His mouth opened wide, but no sound came out. His gaze traveled from her face down to her stomach. Erin knew she was being bitchy and rude, but she couldn’t stop herself. She flattened the flowing material of her shirt against her stomach, letting him see the tiny bump.

A vein throbbed on one side of his head as he forced himself to look at her, and in the eye once more. “I’m speechless.”

“I know. It doesn’t happen often. Look, Evan—”

He held up a hand. “Let it go. Obviously I’ll have to.”

Before he could reply, he turned around and walked away. This time, as Erin left with her mouth open, no sound coming out.

She pulled in a couple of deep breaths, needing to calm down before going back inside to face other people. She reached a point of rationality and hoped she was about to head back, when someone bumped her from behind.

Erin spun around to see a woman with teased blond hair, staring down at her. “Do I know you?” Erin asked.

“No, but you should. I’m the one who matters. Not you.”

At the hate-filled look in the woman’s eyes, a chill raced through Erin, and she realized she shivered. Despite the hair, which had to be a wig, Erin still

knew who she was facing. “Victoria.”

her, but “So he *has* mentioned me to you!” Her eyes lit up in her face.

ole. He “Yes,” Erin murmured, realizing what she should do. “He’s sp
-though you quite often.”

l as my really wants me.”

going to Her throat dry, Erin forced out the words. “Cole and I aren’t toget
r voiceway. He doesn’t want me. I don’t want him.”

“Liar,” the other woman spat.

you see Erin drew in a deep breath. She could wait for Cara to come look
he manher, scream and send Victoria running, or—she reached for Victoria’s

“Look—”

l for, it With a vicious tug, the woman yanked her hand from Erin’s so fas
calling had no time to get a real grip. Erin turned and screamed her brother’s
y. but Victoria was running for the back exit door when she spun back.
y?” she time Mike pushed his way through the crowd, all Erin could do was j
ather of the half-open door.

Mike sprinted after her, but Victoria had disappeared. Her broth
d from furious over the entire turn of events. “And where the hell is Cole?” he
ude but when he, Cara, Erin, and Sam gathered together once the exciteme
irt over down.

“When Cara picked me up, he was supposed to leave to come he
ook her after me.” She turned to Cara. “Any luck reaching him?”

The other woman shook her head.

Erin reached for her purse and pulled out her cell phone. She was a
dial him again when she saw the message indicator. She listened to
time, it message in complete disbelief.

“What?” Mike asked, irritation oozing from him.

before “His father’s in the hospital. Jed had a heart attack.” Erin grev
lity and headed. Her first thoughts were of Cole and how this news would affe

“He said he knew I was safe with Cara, and he’d be in touch when h
ing her something.”

He hadn’t asked her to meet him there. Hadn’t said he’d appreci
company, or support. No, Cole being Cole, he’d chosen to face this al
gh Erin Or so he thought. Because there wasn’t a chance in hell Erin woul
ddenly him alone at a time like this.



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COLE DIDN'T KNOW how to deal with his father on a good day, and wasn't one of those. No sooner had Cole climbed into his car than rang. A nurse from the hospital had used Jed's cell to find his IN CA EMERGENCY number. Lo and behold, the old man still had Cole list hadn't, however, wanted him called, something he'd made perfect when Cole entered the Cardiac Intensive Care Unit. Another thing didn't know how to deal with? These feelings running through him at father's heart attack.

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He'd never thought of Jed as mortal. In fact, he'd always thought man would be around to insult and torture Cole forever. But even in the Cardiac Intensive Care Unit—or CICU, as the nurses referred meant things with his father were serious. His throat swelled at the not
Good thing he had his father to keep his emotions in check. When walked in, Jed had gotten so worked up, the doctors asked Cole to stop because stress wasn't good for him. Cole moved to the waiting room place he'd been before, when Erin had been admitted for the gunshot nt died—and stared at the ceiling.

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about to
Cole's

From the minute he'd received word, he'd been torn between wanting to be with Erin and needing to make certain his father would be okay. I knew, would be fine with her brother and Cara's protection. Jed . . . still waiting for word. A little over an hour had passed since he'd arrived and nobody had been out to see him.

Cole's

He rose, deciding he'd check in at the nurses' station—spare presence but find out when someone would explain his father's condition.

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ect him.
e knew

“Cole?”
He turned at the sound of Erin's voice, surprised to see her. To his surprise, Cara followed her, which meant Erin hadn't run off on her own receiving his message.

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“I didn't mean for you to leave Joe's to come here.”
Her soft lips pursed together. “You thought you'd handle your father's heart attack alone?”

He nodded. Of course he had.

“And you assumed I’d let you.”

He couldn’t help but grin. “Guess I should have known better.” He glanced over her shoulder. “Hi, Cara.”

“How’s Jed?” Erin asked.

“Still don’t know anything,” Cole said, surprised to hear his voice as he spoke. Apparently, he was more upset than he wanted to admit. He cleared his throat. “I was just about to go in and pry clear answers.”

Erin faced Cara. “Go on back to Mike. Plan’s scrapped for today, but he’ll be here as long as Cole is. We’ll just go back to the house together.”

“No,” Cole said. “You go back with Cara and Mike. I don’t know how long I’ll be here.”

“All the more reason for me to stay.” Erin waved Cara away.

He should have known she’d pull the stubborn routine. Despite trying to push her away, he was grateful she wasn’t listening. He didn’t want to step out with doctors by himself, let alone Jed. Hell, he didn’t want to deal with realities inherent with his father being so ill.

Cara glanced back and forth between them. “Well, given the choice between hanging out with you two and all these outdated magazines pointed at the dog-eared glossies on the table—or going home with your husband . . . easy choice. And you’ll be safer with Cole,” she muttered.

“What’s that mean?” Cole asked.

Cara pulled him into an unexpected hug. “Take care. And I hope your dad’s okay,” she said, backing away just as quickly.

Cole was glad. Hugs and emotion from Cara were as unfamiliar as a panic coursing through him.

“Okay, you two, I’m gone,” Cara said.

He nodded. “Drive safely.”

“Will do. And one of you call me when you have news.”

“Sure thing,” Erin promised. She glanced at Cole. “Well? Let’s go see the doctor.”

He shook his head. “Hold up.” There was something they needed to discuss first.

“What is it?” She looked up at him with guileless hazel eyes that, in contrast to Cara’s cryptic comment, Cole suddenly didn’t trust worth a damn. “Tell me.”

Erin blinked. "I don't know what you mean."

er." He "Start with what Cara meant by you'll be *safer* with me? Did something happen at Joe's?"

"Shouldn't we be checking on Jed?" Erin started for the swinging catchdoors, but Cole pulled her back.

admit to He caught her around the waist, stilling any jittery movement. "Oush forit. What happened?"

"Well, I might have had a run-in with Victoria." She winced as sand I'llthe words.

All the blood running in Cole's veins froze. "What?!"

ow how She forced herself to meet his gaze. "Okay, it's like this. I ran into when I was with Cara, and seeing how I haven't been working but he in a bar, I needed to explain. It was crowded and loud, so we stepped into a bathroom hall. Cara and Mike were within shouting distance. It was fine to deal Cole cocked an eyebrow. "Somehow, I don't think it was fine," with the through clenched teeth.

"I'm here, aren't I?"

choice "But she got close to you," he bit out.
s"—she Erin ran her hand down his arm in an obvious effort to soothe her to my instead of calm, all he felt was frustration that he hadn't been there to her.

"Finish the story."

pe your She sighed. "Evan and I argued—"

"About what? The bastard was annoyed you were out?"

as the She shook her head. "Not exactly."

He waited in silence.

"Fine. He insulted you—again—so I told him you'd be in my life foreseeable future, seeing as how you were the father of my baby. And punctuated the point. Like this." She pulled her loose top tight against her tiny baby bump. "See?" She shrugged.

Cole stared at the little spitfire, trying not to laugh at Carmi's expense. Trying harder not to pull her into a hard kiss for defending him yet again. He didn't bother fighting the overwhelming admiration he had for this woman, or the gratitude at how easily she stood up for him. When she said, "You deserved it or not."

"Stop laughing."

He let his grin show. "I'm trying."

nothing She rolled her eyes.

"What'd Carmichael do?" Cole asked.

double "He stormed off," she said, wincing at the memory. "And that's someone bumped me from behind."

but with Cole sobered. Only Erin could have him so distracted on so different levels that he'd forget the reason they'd started this conversation. He said begin with. "What happened?"

"Once she realized I knew her name, she got all excited that I obviously mentioned her to me. I tried to convince her we weren't in love. Evanin any way, not anymore. She called me a liar. I didn't want her to leave. I saw her try to grab her hand, and when she pulled away, I screamed for Mike into the Cara. They came immediately, but she'd run out the emergency door." Mike couldn't find her." Erin spread her hands in front of her. "End of the line." *Not by a long shot*, Cole thought, his pulse pounding so hard he could feel it beat in his left temple. Her brother and sister-in-law should have been a lot closer to Erin than they'd been, but he couldn't do anything about it now. Obviously that was what Cara meant when she'd said Erin was with him, but with him.

protect "It happened fast," Erin said, as if reading his mind. "In seconds, I never left anyone's line of sight. I never figured I'd be alone—"

"Because Carmichael was supposed to be right beside you." Cole's anger at the other man only grew. Her boss wasn't her bodyguard, but the other man knew the seriousness of the situation, had been told Erin was in danger, yet he'd let his ego over Erin's pregnancy get in the way of his common sense.

for the Erin touched his cheek, capturing his attention. "It's all okay. I'm here. She's gone, but I'm here with you now, and we can focus on Jed. That's what matters."

He drew in a calming breath. "You have a way of making me insane." Carmichael's muttered.

him . . . She patted him on the shoulder. "Anything to keep you distracted from your problems."

either he He shook his head. "She shouldn't have gotten close to you. She's gone. What if she'd had a knife on her?" He didn't know what he'd do if he had that way. His hands clenched into fists.

“Mr. Sanders?” A man in a white coat walked through the double doors.
“Yes?” Cole strode over to meet the man, nerves suddenly jangling.
No matter how much conflict existed between he and Jed, the man was his father. The only blood one he had, and dammit, the little boy in Cole wanted the chance to make peace. Getting the other man’s approval wasn’t many asking for too much, but he’d settle for a cease-fire, a cessation of hostilities and maybe even a permanent truce for the future. Especially since Jed was going to be his kid’s grandfather. There was no way Cole wanted his father to experience the kind of constant anticipation of disapproval or rejection involved with Jed that he had.

“As long as Jed had a future,” Cole thought, and heart in his throat, he faced the doctor to hear his father’s prognosis. A few minutes later, the doctor’s word stuck out in Cole’s mind.

“Surgery.” Cole said the word out loud, but hearing it didn’t make it feel more real.

“Quadruple bypass surgery, without which, according to the doctor, you’d have another imminent heart attack, this one probably fatal.” The doctor, an older gentleman with sparse gray hair, continued to explain the procedure to Cole and Erin.

Cole vaguely heard him toss a lot of other medical terms around, but he didn’t hear everything. He couldn’t process all the details of how the doctor would crack open his father’s chest and use a heart and lung machine to keep him breathing during the procedure without wanting to jump out of his skin in danger, thought instead about their strained, difficult relationship and wished it could be different before his father went under the knife.

Erin slipped her hand into Cole’s, and her warmth registered against his fine palm. She not only calmed him but she focused him too.

“He was able to concentrate more on what the doctor was saying, including Jed being a higher-risk patient. ‘Your father has high blood pressure and high cholesterol, and has been suffering from angina for years,’ he reported it to his doctors until the pain was so severe, he almost couldn’t breathe from 911.”

Cole sucked in a startled breath. Damn the stubborn man. The other man continued to run down the risks of the surgery, but he lost her patient, causing Cole to shut down again because he couldn’t let himself think about all the negative possibilities. Not if he would make it through this.

doors. however many hours.

}. “So, all that said, your father’s prognosis is decent, once he wakes up after the surgery,” the doctor said, his words, as well as Erin’s hand squeeze, brought him back once more.

might be “When?” Cole managed to ask.

stilities, “First thing tomorrow morning. The surgery lasts four to six hours, but could be longer. In other words, tomorrow will be a long day. I suggest you go home tonight and get a good night’s sleep.”

on from “I’d like to see him,” Cole said. He couldn’t imagine living with the doctor if anything happened on the table and the last words between them were “Go home, Cole,” he telling him he didn’t need him here.

nly one The other man frowned. “The nurses told me your last visit agitated him. He’s in a fragile physical state. If he works himself up again, we won’t have him in the OR,” the other man said with brutal honesty that Cole respected.

“Fine.”

tor, Jed “Wait.” Erin spoke up.

al. The “It’s okay,” he assured her. Whatever was best for Jed, that was what mattered now. Not Cole’s feelings.

She shook her head. “Jed and Cole have a difficult relationship, but he knows his condition, right? He knows he’s having surgery tomorrow. They’d better be ready.” The doctor nodded.

rep him “So ask him if he’s up to seeing his son. Better yet, let *me* ask him.

kin. He “Erin—” Cole said in a warning tone.

l things “Shh. I’ve known him for years. He likes me, or usually does.”

Cole nor Erin mentioned she’d thrown him out of her house a few weeks ago. Even Jed wouldn’t hold that against Erin. But that didn’t mean Cole

Erin to try to sway Jed on his behalf. He hated the embarrassment caused by their dysfunctional relationship but by Jed’s assessment of his own bloodfailings.

without “Maybe knowing what he’s in for, Jed will *want* to talk to you,” Erin spoke in her softest, most understanding voice. Then she looked up at

Cole, then the doctor, with a sweet, imploring expression that probably had the nurses bending over backward to see things her way. Lord knew he could do anything for anyone. He was pretty sure she’d get Jed to see things her way.

elf hear “Please let me go in?”

re next Dr. Wilson, he’d said his name was, clutched his clipboard and

“You’re persistent, Ms. . . .”

es from “Marsden. Erin Marsden.”

ringing The other man’s eyes widened. “I know your father. His oncologist referred him to me when he was trying to decide on treatments for his last year.”

urs but Erin wrinkled her brow. “Really?”

est you This time Cole squeezed her hand, offering her comfort.

“Some of the chemotherapy drugs can be hard on the heart. We’ll confer, go over a patient’s history and situation before they decide on the course of treatment.”

Erin nodded in understanding. “My parents dealt with everything. They decided on the treatment and the cancer themselves. They kept us kids in the dark. I don’t need specifics, but I do know Dad’s in remission thanks to the care he received. Thank you.” She beamed at the other man, obviously recovering from surprise. “And I’m sure Cole’s father will get the same type of excellent care.”

as what “We’ll do our very best. Now, I’ll take you in to Jed so you can witness the same magic on him you just did on me. If he agrees to a peaceful, quiet death with his son, it’s fine with me.”

ow?” Cole, well aware they were talking about him as if he weren’t there, he owed a debt of gratitude to the amazing woman by his side. No matter what his stubborn father ultimately decided.

Neither
weeks ago.
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used not
his son’s

l.” Erin
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bly had
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“We’ll do our very best. Now, I’ll take you in to Jed so you can work the same magic on him you just did on me. If he agrees to a peaceful, quiet visit with his son, it’s fine with me.”

Cole, well aware they were talking about him as if he weren’t there, knew he owed a debt of gratitude to the amazing woman by his side. No matter what his stubborn father ultimately decided.

Chapter Sixteen

ERIN STOPPED IN the doorway to Jed's room, surprised by how frail the man suddenly looked. The doctor had paved the way for Erin's visit, was expecting her. She knocked, and he turned his gaze from the view overlooking the parking lot.

"Hey, there," Jed said. "Doctor said you wanted to see me."

She nodded and walked up to him, pulling a chair beside the bed. "Still speaking to me after the way I threw you out of my house?" she asked with a quick smile.

"I can't hold a grudge against you, but you knew that or you would have asked to come in. I take it you're here with that son of mine?"

Erin swallowed hard and nodded. "He's worried about you. He came here as soon as the hospital called him. He dropped everything to be here."

"He needn't have bothered. I'm going to be fine."

His voice trembled, and Erin knew his words were more bravado than real belief. "I'm sure you are. But on the off chance we're wrong, do you really want to leave Cole with things left unsaid? Or worse, with no memory of you telling him you didn't want him here?"

Jed turned his head toward the window.

"I don't know why you feel the way you do about him, and I don't know," Erin continued. "That's between the two of you. But I'm your grandchild, and if you want a relationship with him . . . or her . . . you're going to have to forge one with your son first. Think about that for a moment."

Only when she felt enough time had passed for Jed to use that brain did she speak again. "Cole wants to see you before surgery. Based on your reaction last time, the doctor refused because your body can't handle it. Think you can manage to have a civil conversation with Cole?" Erin asked him.

Being a stubborn mule, Jed remained silent. As a prosecutor, Erin was used to waiting out a pigheaded witness, so she remained quietly determined to get the outcome she wanted.

She wasn't sure how much time had passed when Jed finally turned to face her. "You're gonna wait me out, aren't you?" he asked.

Erin only grinned. She was damned sure planning to try, but sensing Jed was beginning to consider her request, she pushed a little more. "It means a lot to me if you talked to him."

The older man eyed her, staring at her longer than she felt comfortable enduring.

"Son of a bitch. You're in love with him," Jed said at last.

Erin felt a hot blush cover her cheeks. "He's a good man. Why can't you see him for who he really is?" Since she had no intention of baring her soul, her reply was the best she could come up with.

And it turned the tables back on Jed, whose jaw worked back and forth as he clearly struggled for a reply. "I'll see him," he muttered, if somewhat reluctantly.

It wasn't an answer to the question Erin had asked, but it was the closest she'd come here seeking to begin with. If Jed's condition weren't so dire, she'd have done a small dance of joy.

"Thank you," she said. Leaning over, she kissed his weathered cheek. "Good luck with the surgery, and I'll see you on the other side. You're going to be fine."

"I have to be if I want to see that baby you're carrying," he said, his voice raw. And even a little scared.

At the unexpected realization, Erin's throat grew tight.

She managed a nod at Jed. "I'll send Cole in."

As she headed back to the waiting room, Erin hoped her brief glimpse into Jed's soul, or at least into the frightened heart of the man in the bed, would lead to some kind of détente between Jed and Cole. And when she told Cole his father would talk to him, she prayed that this wasn't the only chance either man would have to make things right between them.



COLE HAD APPROACHED mob bosses, murderers, and drug dealers with more ease than that with which he faced his father again. The weight of a lifetime—his lifetime—sat on Cole's shoulders. He knew the old man was disappointed in him, and that truth had permeated every part of Cole's life.

ned to from the time he'd been old enough to understand what his father's c
anger meant. As an adult, he'd reached the point where he wa
ing that comfortable pretending to be someone else than he was being himself.
t would For a long time, he'd blamed Jed for that, but his time back

Serendipity made him look at things differently. He couldn't blame hi
fortable for who and what he was. But those deep thoughts, though raised bec
his father's serious condition, didn't need to be dissected now.

He walked into the room, doing his best to ignore the beepin
n't you monitor, the IV drip in his dad's arm, and the way his larger-than-lif
er soul, seemed to be shriveled up in the hospital bed.

"Hi," Cole said stiffly, coming up beside the bed rail.
forth as "Hi, yourself," Jed muttered, unable, it seemed, to meet Cole's gaz
newhat "The doctor says they're taking you to the OR first thing in the mo
Jed nodded. "At least it'll be before I have time to realize I'm
the ones since they're not feeding me beforehand."

serious, Cole managed a laugh. "Says it could be a long surgery, but he do
the time."

cheek. "I won't know it."
e going *Same old gruff Jed*, Cole thought. "I'll be here before they ta
down, even if you don't see me."

gruffly, Jed hesitated before answering. He curled his hands around the
the side of the bed, his knuckles white. "I appreciate that," he said at la

Cole raised an eyebrow. He'd been expecting Jed to tell him
bother. He wondered if Erin had read him the riot act on his beha
glimpse whether genuine fear was behind those words. Like most things v
ospital father, Cole suspected he'd never know.

l as she "Erin's calling her folks. I'm sure they'll want to come by tonight
the last you before surgery."

"I'm not going anywhere."
"They're good people. You're lucky to have them," he said, meani
"I don't deserve them, you mean?"

h more that. And your doctor said we're not to go down that road," he remin
lifetime father.

in was Jed groaned, laying his head back against the pillow. "Sorry. Old h
e's life *Sorry?! What alien had invaded his father's brain?*

constant “They raised a good daughter,” Jed continued before Cole could re
s more “Can’t argue with that,” Cole said, not surprised Erin was the on
they agreed on.

here in “Son,” Jed said, suddenly, meeting Cole’s gaze with a hard stare
s fatherown.

ause of Cole drew a deep breath. “What’s up?” With serious heart
looming, Jed could say anything at this point and Cole wouldn’t be sur
g heart “Don’t let the one good thing in your life slip through your fing
e fatherway I did,” Jed said.

Except that, Cole thought. The old man *had* taken him off guard
—”

e. “No. I don’t want to have any serious discussions. We’re just g
rning.” argue. That’s been our way too long for it to change in the blink of an
hungry Which made Cole wonder if Jed meant he *wanted* it to chang
eventually.

es it all Jed reached for the paper cup filled with water and took a long si
remember what I said. Just in case.”

Cole exhaled a hard breath. No need to ask *just in case* what. “
ke yougoing to be fine,” he told his father. He opted to focus on his father
his obvious allusion to Jed’s mother . . . or to Erin.

bars on Jed didn’t reply. He yawned, though, and Cole took that as his cu
st. some sleep. I’ll be here when you come out of surgery, and I’ll see
not to soon as they let me.”

avior or His father nodded, and an awkward silence ensued, no doubt thank
with his strain of their having been forced to get along for the last couple of n

But Cole had to admit, despite the discomfort between them, it’d be
and see talking to Jed, knowing no yelling was forthcoming.

He left the room, and for the first time he could recall, he prayed
for Jed to come through surgery and for the chance to rebuild some
ng it. connection with his father.

For years, Cole had rejected the idea that he needed anything fr
r imply Sanders. But faced with the prospect of losing his father, Cole was fo
ded his admit he wanted a relationship with Jed. And he sensed, in a surreal
didn’t understand, that the key to who he could become lay with t
abits.” who’d shaped the person he’d been.

ply.
ie thing



COLE AND ERIN drove back to Nick's house in comfortable silence. He
e of his feel the need to discuss what went on in his father's hospital room, a
didn't ask. She knew from his somewhat calm demeanor that at lea
surgery had been no yelling or confrontation, and for that, she was grateful.
prised. She couldn't remember ever being more exhausted. At the top
ers the stairs, she turned toward the main bedroom, expecting Cole to head th
way to the room he'd been staying in for the past couple of days.

l. "Dad "Erin?"

She turned. "What's up?"

oing to "I . . . Never mind."

eye." Oh, there was something, she thought, studying him. Wearine
ge . . . evident in his handsome face, and she realized the strain of all they'
through, plus Jed, was wearing on them both.

p. "But "Talk to me." She walked up to where he stood, leaning on the rail

He shook his head. "There was nothing specific. I just . . ."

'You're Erin took a leap. "You don't want to be alone," she said, hopi
and not wasn't so far off base she'd be mortified when he said she was wrong.

He exhaled and nodded. Relief shot through her, and she held
e. "Get hand. She didn't want to be alone either. As tired as she was, the
you as nothing sexual in her offer, and she didn't get the feeling he was loo
cross that line again either. But they shared the same concerns over he
s to the and over Victoria's craziness and potential next move, and now the
minutes. were worried about Jed. It made sense that they keep each other cc
en nice while waiting for the morning . . . and for the surgery to come.



l—both
kind of

COLE DIDN'T REMEMBER the last time he'd been hesitant in asking—o
what he wanted. But he'd done too much to Erin in a short time
om Jed hurting her again, so no sooner had he called out her name did he re
rced to idea of asking her to stay with him. He was relieved she'd either read
way he well or merely wanted the same thing. He was too raw, too emo
he man drained, to be alone.

By silent agreement, they went to her room, Erin disappearing i

bathroom to wash up. Cole stripped off his jeans and T-shirt and settle the comforter. As soon as he lay back in Erin's bed, a sense of rightness didn't peace settled over him, one he didn't have the strength to think about and Erin. A few minutes later, she walked out of the bathroom wearing a black nightie that hit midthigh. It wasn't one he'd seen before—it was designed for her new, growing figure. It covered enough to be considered decent, but her breasts were larger now, her cleavage enticing no matter she wore. And no matter how tired he was, he couldn't deny the hardness of his groin, or the disappointment that rushed through him as he reminded himself tonight wasn't about *that*.

She paused by the bed and met his gaze.

“Get in. I won't bite.”

She laughed and slipped in. She lay on her side, facing him, and tried to ignore how much of her breasts were exposed at that moment.

“You okay?” she asked.

He shrugged. “I'm numb. So much has happened since this morning. I don't know what to feel. And we haven't dealt with the Victoria situation. We can't just forget she's out there. Waiting. Plotting.”

Erin shivered and swallowed hard. “I know. But we can have Sarah go to the hospital tomorrow and figure out another plan. If nothing else, it's a good way to pass those hours while Jed's in surgery.”

He propped his head up with one hand. “Good idea.”

She treated him to the sweet yet somehow intoxicating smile they both shared uniquely Erin.

She yawned then, and he was reaching over to shut the light when she squealed.

He jerked back around. Her hazel eyes were wide and glittered with emotion he couldn't name. “Erin?”

“I think the baby kicked,” she said in utter and complete awe.

He blinked. That was the last thing he'd expected her to say.

“Oh! I felt it again. It feels like little flutters from the inside.”

Her face glowed with excitement, and he couldn't help but be drawn into the moment along with her. A slow burn of excitement unfurled inside him as unexpected as it was sweet.

“Want to feel?”

The hesitancy in her voice touched him, and he nodded.

under She took his hand and placed it over her stomach. Her skin was soft and smooth to the touch. Her gaze never left his as they waited in anxious anticipation for movement that never came. Just as he was about to remove his hand, she sucked in an excited breath.

“There! Feel it?” she asked.

He shook his head, the disappointment stronger than he would have expected.

She let out a sigh and frowned an adorable pout that had him reminding her to kiss her on those luscious lips. “I was worried about that. The baby sometimes the first kicks are only felt by the mom. It can take a few weeks until you can feel it from the outside.”

At which point, he might be long gone. The thought lingered unheated between them, but Cole didn’t want to ruin the closeness they were sharing.

Nor could he tell her what was really going through his mind because he could hardly grasp the enormity of the thought himself. But if he had to choose between Erin or his child behind, Scarier still? Even if she weren’t pregnant, he’d spent these weeks protecting just her, Cole knew he would still do the same in any way.

This woman, so capable and independent on the outside, so soft and genuine and giving on the inside, had carved out a place for herself in his heart. And that was something he’d never believed possible. Given that he had lived—not just his job, which kept him isolated from the real world, but his preference to remain that way even when off duty—the concept of love and sharing a life had never crossed his mind.

For Cole, sex had fulfilled a basic need. Until he caught sight of Erin in a light purple bridesmaid’s dress in Joe’s Bar. She’d forever altered the course of his life. He just didn’t know what to do about his feelings for her, the only life he’d ever known.

She watched him, her eyes warm and focused on his face as they sat in comfortable silence. His hand remained on her belly, and she didn’t want to move it. Instead, she pressed it against the small bump, practically willing him to feel the kicks.

“I guess you can turn off the light,” she finally said in a low, soft-sounding voice as disappointed as he was that he hadn’t been able to feel the child.

soft and He reached over and turned off the lamp, plunging the room into a
silencedarkness.

and, Erin “Are you okay?” she asked him.

He knew she meant about Jed, not the baby. “Normally, I’m
accepting about whatever life throws at me, but Jed’s heart attack cau
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Cole’sBecause he’d promised himself he wouldn’t send her mixed messag
how hetaking advantage of her being there when he needed her would be all k
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of right.

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“Are you okay?” she asked him.

He knew she meant about Jed, not the baby. “Normally, I’m pretty accepting about whatever life throws at me, but Jed’s heart attack caught me off guard.” And knocked down every wall he’d erected to protect himself from his father.

“Hopefully, he’ll come through fine,” Erin said. “Then maybe you two will have a chance to repair the relationship.”

Cole groaned. “Don’t hold your breath for that to happen.” He wasn’t. And he didn’t want her to be hurt when her hope for reconciliation didn’t work out.

She shifted, obviously trying to get comfortable. “Babies can work miracles,” she said into the darkness. “Or so people say.”

He didn’t know about babies, but he was starting to believe in Erin. As the minutes ticked by, he listened to her breathing even out. Knowing she was finally falling asleep, Cole ached to pull her into his arms and feel her soft, sleepy body curl into his. He missed her warmth, her smile, her happiness aimed at him.

It took everything in him to stay on his side of the bed, but he did. Because he’d promised himself he wouldn’t send her mixed messages and taking advantage of her being there when he needed her would be all kinds of wrong.

Although wanting to hold her didn’t feel wrong, but instead felt all kinds of right.

Chapter Seventeen

ERIN WOKE IN Cole's arms, warm, comfortable, and safe, feeling as if she was exactly where she belonged, with the father of her baby and the man she loved. And that thought had her slipping out of bed to shower before she was awakened.

Last night had been a precious gift, one she hadn't expected but she would always appreciate. They hadn't had sex, yet they couldn't have been more intimate if he'd been inside her body. He'd touched her belly, tried to feel their baby kick, and had been as invested in the moment as she'd been.

He hadn't made a move on her, but she had to admit that if he had, she wouldn't have resisted or turned him away. She'd have grabbed that opportunity with him, and probably regretted it later. Which was why she had been the aggressor. Last night was about Cole, his pain, and what he had done for her.

He'd given so much to her these past weeks, putting his life on the line to watch out for her, take care of her, and she was grateful for the chance to get her life back. She didn't blame him for not being able to offer more—he'd made no promises. She'd done what she needed to do, tried to see if *they* could make it more, and had come to accept his limitations.

He might not realize what a special man he was, but Erin did. She was bonded, and that would help them do what was best for their child's future. But now, Erin had to rebuild her walls and prepare for the time when he would walk away.

A couple of hours later, Erin sat in the hospital waiting room, staring at the clock on the wall, unable to believe the time could pass so slowly. She knew how long the wait would be, the seconds, minutes, and hours crawled by. An optimist by nature, Erin believed in her husband. He would be fine, and she'd keep believing unless and until the doctor broadsided her. In the meantime, she needed to keep Cole's mind on the job and off what was going on in that operating room.

Just when he appeared ready to climb the walls, her brother Sam

into the room with a Victoria look-alike by his side. Having seen her up close, Erin could definitely see the difference in the twins. Something off in Victoria's eyes, while Nicole's were here and present.

"Thank you so much for coming," Erin said, rising from her chair.

"Any word?" Sam asked.

Cole's jaw was set tight.

"Not yet," Erin said. "But it's way too early to expect news. The surgery said it's a long surgery."

Sam nodded in understanding. "Erin, this is Nicole Farnsworth."

Erin approached warily. Cole stopped her by snagging her waist so he wasn't any more sure of this woman either. "Nice to meet you," Erin said.

Nicole's smile was awkward, and Erin realized the other woman was any more comfortable than she was. "I wish I could say the same, but my sister weren't making your life miserable, neither of us would be here."

Erin admired her candor, and her smile for the other woman grew.

"I'm sorry about your father," Nicole said to Cole. "Officer Marsden told me why we have to meet here."

"Sam. You can call me Sam," Erin's brother said, sounding as if he was repeating a refrain.

"Thanks," Cole said to Nicole. "Any word? From your sister?"

She shook her head. "I'm sure the fact that I led you to Victoria's hideaway didn't sit well with her."

"She can't know you were the one who told us. It's not like she told me the location in the first place," Sam reassured her.

"I know." Nicole glanced away. "Look, I wanted to tell you all I'm sorry. I feel awful about everything my sister's done to you." She raised her hands toward them, then lowered them again.

"You aren't responsible for someone else's actions, Nicole." Erin said a sentiment she'd said to Cole many times before, and in case he'd forgotten, she stepped closer and slid her hand into his, squeezing him tightly. "Remember."

She glanced up at his handsome face, but his expression remained stern. His mind, she was sure, was in the OR upstairs. And she didn't blame him.

"Thank you for that," Nicole said to Erin. She hesitated, rubbing her hands against her khaki pants. "The other thing I wanted to tell you is..."

stalker have to get back home soon. I took time off from my job to look
ing was sister. But I'm not getting anywhere, and I haven't heard from her, a
She trailed off.

"Erin has a job, responsibilities . . . and she hasn't been able to do
them because your sister could jump out of a corner with a knife
minute," Cole said, making Erin realize that his silence hadn't m
: doctor wasn't focused on what was going on here. She should have known be
Nicole winced, and Sam stepped up beside her.

"Erin's right. None of that is Nicole's fault," he said, scowling at C
. Okay, Erin decided it was time to empty the room. Cole needed time to fi
1," Erin his father and himself. "Nicole, thank you for coming. I guess I'd hop
would have some fresh ideas for us on how to lure out your sister, but
wasn't "I don't. I really wish I did. Helping you find her hideaway was at
it if my best I could do." Regret shone in her eyes.

" Erin touched the other woman's shoulder. "I believe you." She'
wider. with enough people through the years, questioned the guilty and the in
len told and her gut told her Nicole Farnsworth was nothing more—or less—t
seemed: a woman worried about her mentally ill sister.

he was Sam nodded to Cole and met Erin's gaze. "Let me know as soon
have news about Jed."

She smiled, knowing her brother truly cared about Jed. And in he
ctoria's she wanted to believe her brother had come to like Cole as a person,
the fact that he wasn't thrilled about the one night that had chan
old you course of Erin's life.

Even if she was.
n sorry. Erin blinked, startled at the realization that if she could go ba
r hands wouldn't change that night or its outcome. Her hand came to rest
stomach, on top of the life growing inside her.

echoed Her baby. Cole's baby.
rgotten, How could she ever regret that?
ht as a



neutral.
him. COLE WASN'T SURE how many hours had passed when he jolted awake
ing her there be any place more uncomfortable than a hospital waiting roo
is that I neck hurt from leaning the back of his head against the wall, and he r

for my Erin had stretched out, her legs along the row of chairs, her head in
nd . . .” She hadn’t left him through this whole nightmare, and not because
needed his protection. She could have gone to stay with either one
of brothers for that.

at any He smoothed her hair with his hand, and she shifted, moving her
heart around, making certain parts of his body even more aware of her.

ter. “Hey,” she murmured, yawning as she looked up at him.

“Hey, yourself.” He smiled at her.

ole. “Any news?” She pushed herself into a sitting position, and he mis-
ocus on warmth pressing intimately against him.

ed you He shook his head. “No.”

. . .” She sighed and shut her eyes. He stared down at her beautiful
out them making him realize she might appear fragile, but she possessed an in-
of strength he admired.

’d dealt Before he could speak, the swinging doors opened, and the doctor
nocent, through. “Mr. Sanders?”

han she Cole rose, and Erin stood too. “How’s my father?” he asked.

“He came through the surgery and is in recovery.”

as you Cole’s entire body nearly collapsed in relief. He hadn’t realized
much tension he’d been holding inside until the doctor had spoke
r heart, eased beside him and shoved her smaller body beneath his arm, both
despite him physically as well as emotionally. Sensing his need, as usual.

ged the He swallowed over the unexpected lump in his throat, a dual assault
the news of his father as well as Erin’s unconditional support.

“Thank you,” Cole said to the doctor.

ck, she The other man merely nodded. “He’ll be out of it for a while. You
on her go home and get some rest. Come back in a couple of hours, and you
him for fifteen minutes the first time.”

Cole nodded.

“Make sure the nurses’ station has your cell number, and go on
here for a bit,” the doctor said, then strode off.

Erin turned to him, a huge smile on her face. “That’s great news!”
threw herself into his arms, treating him to a full-body hug. Her
touched his, her breasts pressed into his chest, and her lower body settled
the cradle of his hips.

realized But the overwhelming sense he got from her was emotion and elation.

his lap. “I knew you’d get your second chance with him,” she said.
use she Her words proved right. She was truly relieved Jed had survived
of hersurgery. Not just for Jed but for him.

“It’s over,” she said softly, pushing herself off him. Without mee
er headgaze, she brushed the wrinkles out of her clothes.

He felt a loss that was somehow more than physical, and he watch
carefully. “Erin?”

“Hmm?”

used her “Something wrong?” he asked, going with his gut that this Erin
different from the one who’d held him close before and during his
surgery.

il face, She shook her head. “Not a thing,” she said too brightly. “Let’s c
ier corehe said and go home for a little while. We can eat something, rest in
and come back in a few hours.”

r strode “Sure. There’s nothing more we can do here.”

“Good.” She picked up her purse and started for the door.

He called her name once more, and she turned, her eyebrows raised

He swallowed hard. “Thank you. For being here during all th
ed howdidn’t think he could have gotten through it without her.

n. Erin She inclined her head. “You’re welcome.” Her tense smile did not
lsteringreassure him. “That’s what friends do for each other, right?”

Friends. The word left a foul taste in his mouth, as once again,
ilt fromproved on target. With his father out of imminent danger, Erin was
away.



should

can see

THE SUN STILL shone bright when Erin walked out of the hospital, Cole
behind. She walked quickly, trying to outrun the emotional closeness
last twenty-four hours. She felt too much and wanted way more than
ever get from Cole, and now that his father was out of surgery, it was t
a little self-protection to return.

s!” She

cheek

led into

on.

She sprinted through the parking lot on another unseasonably co
trying to remember where they’d left the car so many hours before.
“Erin! Slow down,” Cole called out to her.
Knowing she couldn’t distance herself from the hurt or disappointr

matter how hard she tried, she slowed her steps and turned back to him. The sound of a gunning car engine ripped through the late-afternoon silence.

From the corner of her eye, she saw a dark sedan barreling toward her. Everything next happened in slow motion.

Cole shouted her name and sprinted forward. Acting on instinct, she dove between the nearest cars, hitting the pavement. Ignoring the jolt shooting through her on impact, she immediately pulled her knees to her chest and curled into a tight ball, her only thought to protect the life in her. Erin heard the deafening crunch of metal as the oncoming car crashed into the cars surrounding her and felt the vibration of impact car next to her while shards of glass sprayed around her.

She wasn't sure how much time passed before she allowed herself to become aware of her surroundings again. Cole was shouting her name. She pushed herself to her knees, gathering her breath. "I'm okay!" she called out to him.

She braced a hand on the car next to her, using it to push herself forward. She could walk through the other aisle and find Cole, she thought. "Ignore the pain in her side."

She took one step forward when she was stopped by the sound of a woman's shriek.

"Liar!" Victoria stumbled into Erin's only way out. "You said you and Cole weren't together, that you didn't want him pulling a clearly unhinged woman screamed at her.

"We're not! I don't!" Erin swallowed over her fear, forcing the words out of her bone-dry mouth.

Suddenly Cole stepped behind Victoria. Relieved, Erin let out a breath of air, though she didn't acknowledge him, knowing he needed the comfort not far from her.

"Liar! You're with him. You're always with him!" She ran a hand through her disheveled hair. "You need to go away and leave us alone." "She will," Cole said in a perfectly calm voice.

Startled, the other woman jerked around to face him. "Cole?" He softened.

He nodded. "Let's talk," he said, gesturing for her to step closer.

"You slept with her. You got her pregnant," Victoria said, her voice full of betrayal and hurt.

just as Erin leaned harder against the car door, the knifelike pain in her chest suddenly robbing her of breath.

Cole caught her gaze, his eyes widening at the realization something was wrong. Erin shook her head. He needed to focus on Victoria.

“It was a one-night stand. It meant nothing,” he assured the other woman.

At this moment, Erin knew he’d say or do anything to calm Victoria down. She’d been prepared to hear the worst on that night at Joe’s, but that hadn’t happened. Now she was unraveling from the stress of the accident, twenty-four hours, oh hell, from everything. The last thing she needed was to listen to Cole dismiss her and everything they’d shared.

“But you moved in with her,” Victoria said, her voice shaking.

“Because you left me no choice. You had her shot, right?”

“I told him to scare her, not to shoot her!”

Erin closed her eyes at the admission.

“But the more you did to Erin, the more I had no choice but to protect her because that’s my baby she’s carrying. It was about the baby, not about you.” Cole’s warm, imploring gaze settled on the crazy woman. He held out his hand to her. “Come here. Let me hold you and calm you down, okay?”

“You really don’t want her?” Victoria shot a triumphant look over her shoulder at Erin before refocusing on the man who was her obsession.

“Not at all.” He beckoned to her with a gesture and a look, and she felt her stomach curl with unwarranted and unreasonable jealousy.

“Come.”

Victoria finally broke and flew into his arms. He whispered in her ear while slipping his arms down until he finally grabbed her wrists, pinning her against the nearest automobile.

“What?!” Victoria realized she’d been had and began to struggle, cursing and cursing, but Cole held on.

Erin sought her bag, wanting her cell phone. Just as she caught it, it had flown in the commotion, the sound of police sirens wailing around them.

“Thank God.” Knowing it was finally over, Erin’s knees buckled, and she let herself sink to the ground.

Erin felt



er side TOO MANY THINGS happened at once, preventing Cole from getting to the
Hospital personnel came running, and Erin was immediately taken into the
ing was emergency room.

Cara arrived and subdued Victoria, who continued to shriek even as the
woman read the hysterical woman her rights. Nicole's arrival didn't help
Victoria and since Victoria blamed her sister for coming to Serendipity and ruin
e's, but chances with Cole. Not rational, but then, this was Victoria. Finally
the last hospital staff had to step in and sedate her, which meant booking would
l was to wait, but at least she was cuffed to her bed and had an officer assigned
watch over her.

Victoria was no longer a threat to Erin. But were Erin and the baby in
danger?

Cole started to head back to the hospital, only to have Cara stop him. "I
need your statement," she called out.

protect her "I need to check on Erin."

at her." "Sam and Mike are with her by now." Cara gentled her voice. "But
: a hand want me to be able to hold Victoria and make the charges stick, you
talk to me now."

over her Cole stared at the woman in uniform, understanding she was doing
job but not liking her timing. "Fine."

l Erin's "Tell me what happened here today. You're the only witness."

He hated reliving the moment he'd seen the sedan aiming for Erin, but
managed to give Cara a play-by-play, including placing Victoria behind
her earwheel. "She aimed directly for Erin and deliberately hit the parked car
ing her attempt to hurt her in some way. She followed her path directly."

Cara finished taking notes and looked at him. "You'll have to come to
hissing the station and sign the statement, but that's it for now. Thanks."

He nodded.

sight of "How's your father?" she asked.

echoed "In recovery," he bit out. Though he knew she meant well, Cole
was in one place only.

and she She nodded. "Go," she said, tipping her head toward the building.

A few minutes later, Cole talked his way past the front desk and
navigated the same cubicle area as the last time Erin was here. He
restrain himself from ripping the curtains open one by one to see what
was.

o Erin. “Cole.”

into the He turned at the sound of his name. “Sam. How is she?”

Erin’s brother walked up to him. “So far, so good. They want to k
as Carafor observation, but the baby’s heartbeat is strong.”

matters If Cole were near a wall, he’d have collapsed against it in relief
ing herErin?”

lly, the “She’s bruised in some places from where she hit the ground, bu
ld havefine.” Sam slapped him on the shoulder. “You’ve been here for to
gned toWhy don’t you go home and get some rest? I’ll call you if anything ch

Cole opened his mouth, then closed it again. “Excuse me? You exp
/ still into leave? Without seeing her?”

Sam met his gaze. “She needs rest.”

him. “I “Who’s with her?” Because Cole knew her brother wouldn’t have
alone.

“Mike’s in there.”

t if you Cole eyed the other man warily. “And you’re out here . . . why? T
need tosure I don’t bother her?”

“Look, I get that you’re worried. We all are. But I was just going
ing hermy parents and let them know she’s okay.”

Cole clenched his hands into tight fists. “So they can come see
doubt. Yet you’re telling me to leave, which means—”

, but he Sam blew out a deep breath. “Erin doesn’t want to see you righ
ind theman.”

rs in an What the hell? “Why not? Is she blaming me for this all of a su

Cole ran a hand through his hair, crazy at the thought of not being abl
ome byfor himself that she was okay.

He wanted to hear the *whoosh, whoosh* on the monitor and know th
was fine.

Sam looked more uncomfortable than Cole had ever seen him. Giv
’s mindhe was the easier-going brother, Cole’s nerves were strung even tighte

“Just say it.”

Sam eyed him with pity. “Look, Erin said now that Victoria isn’t a
sk andyou don’t need to watch over her.”

had to Fuck.

ere she “She’s scared, she’s upset, and she’s been under more stress than
handle. Just give her some time to calm down and see things more c

her brother said, steering Cole toward the door with a hand on his back. Cole let him, only because he knew better than to cause a scene and keep her Erin, never mind that his entire body had gone into shock. A cold broke out on his forehead at the realization that Erin was ending things for good. “And . . . Doing exactly what he’d told her needed to happen. He’d said that when the threat to her was over, he’d be gone. Back to undercover work at the office, out of her life—except for the minute details of raising a child, something they’d never gotten around to hammering out. “Erin had been smart. First, she’d tried to make him see they could have a platonic relationship, but he’d withdrawn or rebuffed her every time. From the moment she realized he couldn’t give her what she wanted, she’d put her armor on. Which was why she’d pulled away the minute she knew he’d left her out of the woods.

She’d known this day was around the corner, and she was preparing herself. He didn’t like it, hated it in fact, but he respected her decision to make because her instincts were right.

It was time for him to wrap things up here and return to his work. The job he loved, Cole was forced to remind himself, even as his stomach clenched and roiled in denial.

“Cole?”

He realized Sam was trying to talk to him. “Yeah.”

“You’re good?”

He forced a nod. “I’m fine. Erin’s right. Victoria’s under guard. Your sister’s safe. She doesn’t need to see any more.”

the baby



ERIN LAY IN the hospital bed, hooked up to the fetal monitor, an IV arm . . . just in case. She hadn’t asked in case of what. She didn’t know.

All her thoughts and whatever energy she had were going toward protecting the baby, calming breaths, and keeping this baby inside her. That was the main reason she’d sent her brother out to the hall, to make sure he’d see Cole before he was able to get through the red tape and come check on her. The other reason she’d sent Sam to intercept Cole was that she was a coward.

She didn't want to face him and burst into tears. She needed time and upset herself together, and to do that, she needed the baby to be okay. The sweat put the pieces of her broken heart back together.

"Knock, knock!"

Erin recognized the voice. "Come in, Macy!"

The minute her best friend lowered herself next to Erin on the bed, raising the tears she'd been holding back ran free. Macy knew exactly what she needed and sat while she cried, not questioning her, not asking which she should have after completely screwed-up life she was crying over, just hugging her from the running a hand over her hair until her tear ducts ran dry.

"Thank you." Erin wiped her eyes on a too-rough hospital tissue.

"Any time. Where is everyone?"

Erin sniffed. "Mike got an emergency call, and Sam's out doing something in your favor."

Macy nodded. "Okay, so what can I do for you?"

God, she loved her friend. "Can you head over to Nick's place and tell him I'm staying and pack up all my things? You have the spare key to my car, right?"

Macy nodded.

"Just drop everything off there."

"Will do. Anything else?"

"Not at the moment."

Macy eyed her with concern. "When are they letting you out of here?"

Erin shrugged. "I'm not sure yet. As soon as it's safe for the baby, I'm not pushing it." She protectively covered her stomach with her hand.

"Gotcha. I'll bring some of Aunt Lulu's cake for you too."

"You're the best."

Macy grinned. "I know." She rose to her feet. "Let me get started on your errand. If you aren't out of here today, I'll be back to see you tonight."

"Thank you." She paused. "Macy?"

Her friend tipped her head to the side, her long black hair falling over her shoulder. "What is it?"

"I haven't told anyone, but I've been thinking . . . about my current situation and the baby and changes I need to make." A planner by nature, her subconscious had been putting together lists and ideas even before they were fully formed in her mind.

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to get “I’m here for you. I’ll give advice or just shut up and listen. When she’d you need.”

Erin managed a smile. “I know.”

“Can I ask . . . what about Cole?”

She shook her head. “Not yet. I can’t talk about him. I can’t stop, she let knowing it’s over . . . but there are some practical things I need to talk about with Erin before he leaves.”

part of Macy eased closer to the bed again. “Like what?”

Erin glanced down at the white, waffle-textured blanket. “I need to talk to a lawyer . . . to discuss how to handle visitation, child support—” she swallowed a sob, determined to remain strong.

“Isn’t it too fast to think about all this? I mean, you’ve been through a huge trauma. Your stalker has just been arrested. You need time—”

“I don’t have time,” Erin cut her off. “You said it yourself. Victor isn’t a threat anymore. I’m safe. That means Cole can leave town anytime he wants. I’ll be back undercover. I need to make sure these things are ironed out before he goes.”

Macy stepped close and touched her hand. “Okay. Whatever you want, we’ll do. And afterward, I can stay over. We can eat cake and ice cream and watch *South Park: The Movie* and laugh over the dirty parts.” Macy wrinkled her eyebrows, causing Erin to chuckle. “Anything for you—as long as it doesn’t hurt that baby’s godmother.”

Erin rolled her eyes. “As if there’d be anyone else.”

“Yay, me!” Macy squealed, clapping her hands in joy, her laughter ringing out in the small cubicle.

“You’re incorrigible,” Erin said with a grin.

“There it is,” Macy said. “I want to see that beautiful smile on your face more often.”

Erin didn’t reply. With the thoughts running through her mind and the plans she had to make, smiling was the last thing she’d feel like doing. It was a good, long while.

ent job

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“I’m here for you. I’ll give advice or just shut up and listen. Whatever you need.”

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Chapter Eighteen

COLE CHECKED IN with the hospital and learned his father was soundly and his vitals were good, but that he couldn't visit until the morning. He drove back to Nick's borrowed home, in no mood to pack up his stuff to do more than kick back and forget his problems for a little while. Tonight he'd move himself out of this house and drop Erin's clothes off at her place at some point during the day.

In the meantime, since Erin didn't want to see him, Cole was on his own for the first time in weeks. He poured himself a bourbon and settled into an oversized chair. Alone with only his thoughts for company, the quiet was a relief to him, though he'd always appreciated silence before.

He'd barely touched the glass to his lips when the doorbell rang. "Who's now?" he muttered, heading to see who was interrupting his surprisingly unwelcome peace and solitude.

He opened the door, took one look at Macy Donovan, and groaned. "Hello to you too," she said brightly, pushing past him and waving her hand inside.

"Make yourself at home," he muttered.

"No thanks. I'm just here to get Erin's things."

On that pronouncement, Cole slammed the door shut, and Macy stared at the sound.

"How is she?" Cole asked Erin's best friend.

Macy eyed him warily. "Physically? She's fine. A little bruised, but otherwise okay."

"And the baby?" He allowed himself a pass of bourbon before answering.

"Also okay. They're both hanging in there," she assured him. "How about you?" she asked, surprising him.

He let out a harsh laugh.

"What was that for?" Macy narrowed her gaze.

"You're concerned about me?" He treated himself to another swig

liquid fire.

Macy stepped forward and grabbed the drink, snatching it before he could react and slamming the glass on the nearest table. “My best friend loves you moron. Of course I’m concerned.”

Cole choked and needed a minute to recover before facing her. “Eeep, that?”

“Men are so dense,” Macy muttered. “She didn’t have to say it so obvious. And you have to know it too. Why else would you duck and run?”

He straightened his shoulders, offended by the comment. “I did not run away from anything! I’ve been there for her ever since I found out she was pregnant and her life was in danger.”

“In every way but the one that really matters to her!” Macy poked him hard in the chest.

“Ouch, dammit.”

“Baby.” Macy flounced over to the couch and settled in, glaring up at him from blue eyes that would drive some other man insane with need, and pitying the unknown sucker.

He shook his head. “Macy, what the hell can I do? My job is dangerous. I’m starting with the people I meet and inadvertently bring home with me. Victoria. She ended up being a direct threat to Erin and the baby. I don’t mention I don’t know from one minute to the next if I’ll get out alive. Can I subject Erin to that kind of existence?”

She stared at him with an expression of disbelief. “Are you for real? You think that just because you decide to spare her the joy of telling her she loves you and want to share your life with her she’ll suffer any less when you go undercover?” Macy raised her voice as she spoke. “She loves you. Whether you tell her you return those feelings or not, she’s going to experience everything you’re trying to spare her from.” Her gaze bore into his, never once letting him turn away or blink.

“Shit,” Cole said at last, staring at the pint-sized dynamo who’d jumped in his place.

“Yeah, I make sense,” Macy gloated, obviously pleased with herself.

Cole wasn’t taking the bait; his mind was on Macy’s words. He had just announced that he loved Erin and he hadn’t gone into a state of panic, but he wanted to run for the hills—or back to Manhattan, as the case may be. He also hadn’t argued the point.

How could he when Macy was right?

When Sam announced that Erin hadn't wanted to see him, he'd punched Cole and ripped out his heart. Cole just hadn't put together until Macy threw the reality in his face.

Men *were* dense. Cole in particular.

His head spun, and not from the little bit of alcohol he'd consumed it. It's Suddenly, Macy hopped up from the couch. "I see I made you think my job here is done. I need to get my best friend's stuff."

Cole gestured to the front of the house. "Erin's things are upstairs, not in her bedroom at the end of the hall, but I can bring them to her tomorrow."

Macy shook her head. "She asked me to get them, and she doesn't want the stress of things not going as she expects—which reminds me. She has plans."

Cole narrowed his gaze. "What kind of plans?"

"I don't know specifically, and if I did, I couldn't tell you. But I've got you a few days to get your head on straight before Erin's given them by her doctors to go about business as usual." Macy paused, undoubtful. "In other words, once she puts some balls in motion, you're in for a tougher time getting through to her . . . emotionally or otherwise."

Cole swallowed hard. "Explain."

The other woman shrugged. "She's talking about seeing lawyers to formalize things between you two. I can't say more than that."

She didn't have to.

Cole understood now, on a gut level, that his legal eagle was strategizing to keep him not only at the emotional distance she'd established but at a legal one as well. She undoubtedly thought to replace her role in her life to that of the baby daddy who'd make payments and provide for the kid on a court-dictated schedule.

Nausea swirled through him as he realized that was exactly what she thought he wanted. What he'd basically told her was exactly what she wanted from him. Enough money to provide for her and the baby while he went back to his undercover life.

A cold existence with no friends, no family, no ties or commitments—no existence he'd liked because it was all he knew and it had suited him fine. He'd met Erin the night she danced her way into his arms and his bed. Until she interrupted his life and pulled him kicking and screaming into hers, opening his mind

his heart to possibilities he thought he'd slammed the door shut on forever. Time and again, he'd thrown those possibilities and Erin's unspoken whyback in her face.

Cole ran a hand over his burning eyes. "Macy?" He looked for she'd disappeared, having obviously headed upstairs to pack up Erin's while he'd been lost in thought.

A few days, she'd said. Not a lot of time to fix the situation and clink, so lifetime. But if he wanted Erin, and heaven knew he did, Cole had to tr

s in the
ow."



it need
ie's got

HOSPITAL RULES GAVE Cole fifteen minutes with Jed for this first post-visit. Since he'd met with the doctor this morning, Cole thought prepared, but the sight of his father hooked up to so many tubes—br tube, stomach tube, IV, chest tube, and God knew what else—made will say breath catch in his throat. He reached out only to realize Erin wasn't t re okay steady him, and that, more than anything, cemented the decisions he' edly for and the things he needed to do once this visit ended. All with no gua e going that he'd get what he wanted in the end. ise."

Cole pulled up a chair to the edge of his father's bed, close to hi, about Jed lay sleeping, and Cole didn't wake him. He needed rest, and enough to know he was breathing, his heart was pumping, and there chance for them to try to come to terms with each other. For the sake already child, if not for himself. Cole had long since stopped expecting anything already Jed, and that hadn't changed.

"Hey, Dad." Since he had his father's ear, if not his attention gate his decided to talk to the man, regardless of whether or not he could hear see his you came through the surgery. You look like hell, but you're strong at he'd to get through this."

Cole spoke low, wanting only to say what was on his mind, wle'd get been in his head and his heart for all these years. "I know I was a pain nt back ass growing up. I'm betting my own kid will give me a run for my n nts. An Cole managed a smile at the thought, along with a solid kick of fear.

1. Until He drew a deep breath. "But I'm not sure why we could nev nvaded common ground. Even as adults." He hesitated before saying the nex ind and but decided he had to get it out before the feelings poisoned him ever

ever. “I’m not sure why you hate me so much or why what I do now is
en lovedisappointment.” Cole shook his head, the pain of all the years
choking him.

her but “I won’t do that to my kid. At least I’ll be aware of trying to do bet
s thingsreality, Cole had no idea how to handle a kid and wished the baby
come with an instruction manual. At least he had Erin to guide h
hange amatter the result between them personally, he had faith they’d do their
y. co-parent.

Cole wanted so much more than some formal arrangement, b
pushing her away for so long and hurting her in ways he was sure e
didn’t know about, he didn’t know what she wanted from him anmc
surgery wasn’t answering her phone, returning his calls, or replying to his text
he was how she was doing. Not a good sign.

He was forging ahead with his plan anyway because no matter wh
eathing Cole’s ultimately decided, leaving his job and starting a life here in Serendip
there to the right thing to do for Cole and for the child he wanted a relationship
d made “I’m going to try to do better than you or I’ve managed so far,” he
irantees the man lying in the hospital bed.

To Cole’s surprise, Jed opened his eyes, meeting Cole’s ga
is head, swallowed hard, wondering how much his father had heard. Wond
it was anything he’d said could break through the hard shell that surround
e was a Sanders.

The same shell that Cole had protected himself with . . . until he
e of his love with Erin and learned how much she—and life—had to offer.
ig from

1, Cole
: “Glad



enoughON DOCTOR’S ORDERS, Erin was on bed rest for a week. If she had n
cramping, she could then start to move around slowly and work her w
hat hadto a normal routine. But Erin had already decided her normal had to c
n in theand she had no desire to wait to start making modifications in her life
oney.”couldn’t go to the people she wanted to see, she’d just have to ask t
come to her.

er find Erin held court from the couch in her family room. Her parents, b
t thing, and friends came by, Macy with a different slice of Aunt Lulu’s cal
n more.day. Although Cole had texted her and she saw missed calls and

such a message on her cell, she wasn't ready to talk to him. Not until she was nearly finished getting herself and her life together. Then when she could finally see lawyer-Erin, not Erin-in-love, she'd face him and know she could let her go. "Without falling apart after he left."

To that end, her newest visitor sat on the chair across from the courtroom. No probably had a permanent indentation from Erin's behind plastered on her face. "Best to 'Hi, Kelly. I really appreciate you coming by.'"

Kelly Barron, Nash's wife, a pretty woman with brown hair with a few white afterstreaks, treated Erin to a warm smile. "My pleasure, believe me. I'd even be happy to leave Nash home alone with the twins," she said, an almost imperceptible winkle in her eye.

Erin laughed. "How old are they now?"

"The boys are thirteen months. I swear they're twin terrors." But the way Erin's voice and her eyes was evident.

"How do you find working with babies at home?" Kelly was a partner with Richard Kane, an outstanding lawyer in Serendipity.

In an odd twist of fate, when Kelly was new in town, she had not fallen for Nash, not knowing he had once been married to Annie Kane. He was now boss's daughter. She'd also befriended Annie, not knowing the connection to Nash. Apparently, both exes had moved on, and with the help of Jed married to Joe now, there were no hard feelings. And to help Richard

Nash's firm had recently merged with his. Sort of incestuous, yet no one fell in everyone got along.

"Hard," Kelly said bluntly.

Erin wouldn't have expected anything less than the hard truth. "I come back on my hours, and we had to hire help at home for when I'm working. And my sister, Tess, comes by a lot, especially now that she's driving more. I love and which helps a lot. Honestly, the only reason I'm still working is to keep my sanity." She brushed her long bangs out of her eyes. "I need the change, hours to feel like a functioning, competent adult. Which I suspect she'll understand soon enough." Kelly laughed.

Erin blew out a long breath. "So I'm guessing being an assistant attorney with night court and on-call hours while also being a single mother could get difficult." She bit down on her lower lip in thought.

"Well, you'd need help at odd hours, but I'm sure it's doable. Anytime if you want it badly enough."

she had And there was the question. The more time she had with this act likegrowing inside her, the more chances she had to think about being : him goand what kind of job would best mesh with that and be right for her
“I’ll have to figure out what I want.”

ich that Kelly leaned forward in her seat. “I’m not trying to poach on into it.territory,” she said of the district attorney. “Well, maybe I am. But v recent merger of the two firms, we had some people leave, and we’re goldenlooking for solid lawyers who can bring business to the firm.”

It’s an Erin’s eyes opened wide at that. “Really?”

ost-evil Kelly nodded. “I can tell you that we’re very flexible with new because I was one, and I made sure to have my husband rewrite any po didn’t like.” She grinned, letting Erin know she definitely had sway c he loveman.

She envied Kelly what she had—a husband she loved, who lov arelegalback, and children they were raising together under one roof. She swa hard.

net and “So . . . want to meet with Nash and talk to him about coming on me, herFor selfish reasons, I’d love to have you around. Another mom to ta ng thefriend I could get closer to . . . and you’d have a whole new cha i Annieinteresting cases, variety. No night hours in the office unless you ard out,them. We’re big on videoconferencing and working from home—”

ot, and “Yes!” Erin didn’t have to think twice. Not only had Kelly done selling job but Erin already knew she had to leave the district att office. She felt like she’d taken advantage of her colleagues there. She cut waypulled her weight lately, and they needed someone with more time tha orking.be able to devote from here on in. She just hadn’t figured out w , whichwanted to do next, and Kelly’s suggestion was perfect.

ig is for “Great! I’ll have Nash call you, and you two can take things from t ose few Kelly’s warm smile assured Erin she was doing the right thing.

t you’ll “Have you lined up babysitting help for when you need to worl asked Erin.

district Erin pushed herself into a more comfortable position on the couc le mommom is going to help in the beginning, and the rest depends on what y I are going to discuss now.” Erin’s stomach flipped at the reminder of thing isreason for needing to see Kelly today.

The other woman raised an eyebrow but didn’t press Erin to explai

is baby She closed her eyes, pushing back the pain and focusing on the
a mom, forcing herself to meet Kelly's patient gaze. "I need to have papers dr
r baby. to give to the baby's father. Of course I want sole custody, but I need
him generous visitation when he's around, given the fact that his job
Evan's let him have set weekly hours."

with the The other woman reached for her bag, pulled out a legal pad and
always and started taking notes. "What's his job?"

"Undercover work in Manhattan. Last time he said he was out o
for a year." Her throat hurt from the effort of pushing back tears. "
r mom think I'll hear from him while he's on a job. He said he wants
olicies I responsibility, and since I need to work, I'll need help paying
ver the babysitter."

Kelly eyed her with concern. "You'll need a lot more than bab
ved her money. Take it from me, you'll want him to pay his share, and if he's
allowed it should be easy enough to take care of."

"I don't think he'll give me a hard time."

board? She just wished she didn't have to take anything from Cole, b
lk to, wasn't stupid enough to let her pride overrule her common sense. S
allenge, already giving up the career she'd planned for a situation they'd both
wanted while he would go back to life as usual. She didn't resent the baby
sacrifice. In fact, she was excited now and couldn't wait. But that didn
a good she would try to do it on her own.

orney's If all Cole could offer was cash, she'd accept only what she ne
e hadn't make ends meet. "This isn't about punishment or anger," she told K
n she'd just want enough to let me care for my baby and be home with him
hat she when I can." It was bad enough this baby would basically have one fi
parent and one he or she barely knew.

here." Erin swiped at her eyes with her palm, and Kelly handed her a ti
silence.

k?" she "Thank you." Erin appreciated the fact that Kelly didn't push
explain her feelings. If she had, Erin knew she'd fall apart.

h. "My While she waited, Kelly jotted down a few more notes. "Erin?"

ou and "Yes?"

her real Kelly looked up. "You know I'm close with Annie, Joe's wife, righ
Erin narrowed her eyes and nodded.

n. "She mentioned to me that Joe has to look for a new tenant

reality, apartment over the bar. It's month to month, so when this one's over .
awn up said he's moving out," she said gently. "Did you know?"

to give Erin shook her head, willing the tears not to fall. "But I haven't ta
won't calls, so for all I know, he would have told me."

"Is it okay with you if I give him a call? See if he has a lawyer h
l a pen, me to be in touch with over these things? Or did you want to talk
yourself?"

of touch Erin waved her hand through the air. "You do it," she said al
'I don't "Please," she added, knowing it wasn't Kelly who she was angry with.

to take Rationally, she wasn't angry with Cole either. Things were play
for the exactly as he'd warned her they would. It was her fault, hoping for mo
something he'd expressly told her would never be.

ysitting Still, the less she had to do with Cole right now, the better off sh
willing, She clutched at the blanket she'd draped over her stomach and legs, h
pounding and her heart breaking. Based on the easy flow of tears
sharp pain slicing into her chest, obviously getting over Cole
ut Erin wouldn't be as easy as she'd hoped.

he was Kelly handling things would let Erin hang on to the one thing she
created of herself.

or the Her pride.

't mean



eded to
elly. "I AFTER VISITING HIS father again, Cole spent the day in Manhattan, giv
or her boss the news in person. Rockford hadn't taken his resignation well, t
all-time sputtering and turning beet red, but in the end, he'd wished Cole we
told him if things got boring, his old job would be waiting.

issue in Cole might be a lot of things in Serendipity, but he knew bored w
wouldn't be one of them. He didn't know it in his gut; he knew it in hi

her to Enough avoiding. While in Manhattan, he called on his moth
stepdad and told them they would be grandparents. Afterward, he plan
the future. He put out feelers with old contacts, hoping to start up h
security firm, which would be based in Serendipity but would wo

it?" retired agents he knew who had spread out to various parts of the c
There'd be some traveling but little danger, and the more guys or

for the whom he trusted, the less Cole himself would have to fly out and

... Colethings in person. In the meantime, he had a huge nest egg from years of minimally and frugally, he had jobs with Nick if he wanted time to work with his hands, and most of all, he had a plan.

With that plan came hope. Though he cautioned himself against it, the wantsoptimism had been contagious. But she was the last stop in his plan, to him meant to tackle things in order, so he could show her that he meant what he said and had taken steps to prove it.

Unpromptly. From the city, Cole headed back to the hospital in time for the visiting hours of the day. He stopped to talk to the doctor, who'd just finished his rounds. Jed had been moved out of the CICU and into his own room. For were already getting him up and moving, and Cole couldn't imagine the effort involved in such an endeavor—or the crap his father was giving the nurse'd be. He began walking toward the room and stopped right outside.

Her head “Mr. Sanders, I need you to breathe into that tube. We can't have your lungs filling with fluid.” An older woman stood beside the bed with the Sandersbreathing apparatus in her hand.

Jed lay back against the pillows, refusing to look at her. “Go away. I've had left Cole bit the inside of his cheek, debating whether or not to step in.

“Not until you blow. You don't scare me, and I'm not leaving. I'm a bit as stubborn as you.”

“Dang it, woman—”

“Ms. Reynolds. Lucy Reynolds. You can call me Lucy if and when you blow into this machine.”

Seeing his father let her help him sit up straighter and did his best to comply with her instructions. Jed groaned and winced, and she finally eased him back onto the bed.

With Erin “Good job, Jed!” the nurse said happily.

His heart. “That's Mr. Sanders to you, and you can call me that until you stop feeling a pain.”

Needed for Ignoring him, she handed him a cup with a straw, from which he took a small sip.

Work with Cole shook his head and walked into the room. “Still cheery as ever, Cole,” asked his old man.

On board Jed's eyes widened as Cole stepped inside.

Handle “He's doing well,” the nurse, who was attractive and about his age,

f livingage, said to Cole.

orking “Well, I appreciate you putting up with him.”

She glanced at Jed, her eyes warming with amusement. “Anytl
, Erin’s dishes out, I can handle.”

and he His father muttered something under his breath, but his cheeks t
what heruddy color.

“I have other patients to check on, but I’ll be back. Buzz me if yo
the lastme, Jed.” She turned and walked out.

inished Cole pulled a chair up to his father’s bedside. Silence surrounde
1. Theyfor a few minutes before he finally spoke up. “Well, you made it throu

he pain “Hurts like hell,” the older man muttered.

urses. “I’ll bet.”

Cole leaned an arm on the metal bed rail. “Listen, there’s somethi
ve yourneed to know.”

with a Jed met his gaze. “What’s that?”

Before Cole could reply, his cell phone rang. Unwilling
” sidetracked, he glanced down to see who was calling. Kelly Barron’
came up on the screen. He narrowed his gaze.

n every “Someone important?” Jed asked.

Kelly was a paralegal at her husband’s law firm. The main
Serendipity. “Yeah, it’s important.” Legal documents, no doubt. B
ien youplanned to intercept Erin before dealing with those. “I’ll take care of it
leave here.” Which had been his intention all along.

zement, Turning back to his father, Cole gathered his courage. Thoug
with herprepped this speech, he knew it wouldn’t be easy, and he could
againstanticipate his father’s reaction. Especially after all he’d been throug
past couple of days.

“I’m staying in Serendipity. Permanently.”

p being Jed blinked, the only indication he’d heard as the announcement
between them. “Erin know?” he finally asked.

took a “Not yet. I had some matters to take care of first.”

Jed nodded, his gaze focused on the wall across the room. “Wha
er?” he won’t have you?” His voice sounded raspy from the tube and weak.

But his words were blunt and very Jed-like. At least it hadn
couched in an insult. “I’m staying anyway. I have a kid to raise. That
father’s important than any job.”

“Don’t screw it up like I did.”

Cole stiffened, unsure he’d heard correctly. In fact, he was certain he hadn’t. But he couldn’t ask. “I plan to do my best.”

“So did I. My mother, your grandmother, raised me by herself. She worked and pretty much ignored me, letting me run wild.”

Cole sat in stunned silence. Jed never discussed his past. Cole had never considered it important. All Cole knew was that Jed’s father hadn’t been around, and his mother had died while Jed was in the Army. Now his father was talking, and Cole was afraid to interrupt and have him stop.

“I was just like you were. Just like it.” He pointed at the can of ginger ale.

Cole copied what the nurse had done and lifted the straw to his mouth. Jed took a few sips and, wincing, relaxed back again.

“Got myself arrested too.”

What the hell?

“Yep. Just like you. But I didn’t have a mother who’d bail me out to get me away. In fact, she wiped her hands of me. So the judge said I could stay in juvie till I hit eighteen, which was only a couple of months, and the judge strongly suggested I join the Army. Get myself some discipline. I ended up back in front of him again. If I enlisted, he’d expunge my record. I didn’t see any better options, so I did.”

Cole’s mouth grew dry. At least Jed didn’t seem to expect a reply when I kept talking.

“I met a colonel who took me under his wing,” Jed said into the microphone. “A hard son of a bitch who decided he’d make a man out of me. It worked. The discipline and routine suited me. Straightened me right up, and I’d had him around growing up, I’d never have ended up in jail in the first place.”

Cole blew out a long breath, finally able to gather his thoughts. “You settled hell didn’t you tell me all this?” Knowing he’d been like Jed would have formed a bond, let him see his father was human and not a cold machine.

“Didn’t see how it mattered.” Jed’s hands worked the blanket on the table, crumpling it into his palms.

Anger washed through Cole, but he wasn’t going to pick an argument with a sick man. “Go on.”

“I thought if I treated you with the same hard hand as soon as you got out of control, I’d reel you back in. Instead, you rebelled hard.”

only pissed me off and made me more determined to get through to damned my terms.”

Cole opened his mouth, but Jed continued to speak. “They were terms I knew. If they worked on me, I didn’t see how it wouldn’t work on you.”

Never Cole shook his head in disbelief. “You didn’t hate me.” Shit, he didn’t stuck that out loud. Cole ran a hand through his hair.

His father “No, I saw myself reflected in you and didn’t like what I saw.”

Cole forced himself to breathe before he got dizzy and managed to get himself together. He hadn’t expected a heart-to-heart with his old man’s father’s or ever. And he wasn’t sure what to do with the information Jed was giving him now. Cole supposed it provided understanding. Forgiveness would come overnight, though. The emotional scars Jed had embedded were deep. How his father treated him equaled how he felt about him, at least in Cole’s mind. And that had permeated every aspect of his life, including his time with Erin.

And then “I’m sorry I disappointed you,” Cole finally said.

Before Jed sighed out loud. “It wasn’t that. I just didn’t know how to adapt. Things didn’t work. And then your mother and me and all that constant arguing, it wore on me.”

Only, just Cole set his jaw. “It wore on her too.”

“Which was why she left, but by that time, I couldn’t see it. I couldn’t blame you.”

Worked. He shook his head. “Well, you did a damn fine job of that, Jed. I knew if I muttered.”

He first “Yeah, well, I’m sorry,” Jed spat.

Cole jerked in his seat. Jed was sorry. He hadn’t said it nicely, but why the hell did he say it. And Cole knew better than to make a production out of it, either way.

He had “What happened when I grew up? You couldn’t let it go, then? You couldn’t help but ask.”

He bed, “Your mother left and almost immediately fell for someone else. She idolized that son of a bitch she married. That soft, good guy. And he was a piece of shit around. I resented that too.” His father stared at the ceiling, his face harsher, lower, and his obvious exhaustion leaching the color from his face.

He started “Dad, get some rest. We can pick this up tomorrow.”

Her. That “Finishing it now. Then I don’t want to talk about it again.”

you on Cole raised an eyebrow. “What made you discuss it in the first place? I couldn’t contain his curiosity.

he only “Erin.”

work on Her name caught him off guard. “How does Erin have anything to do with this?”

he’d said For the first time, Jed turned his head and met Cole’s gaze. Cole looked into his father’s dark eyes, eyes that looked so much like his own, wondering what he was really thinking. Another thing he vowed to do differently was to pull his child know there was someone who cared looking back at him.

Erin—now “She’s a good woman,” Jed said of Erin.

Erin giving “That she is.”

Erin couldn’t “And she sees something good and decent in you. Hell, she’d kick my ass here too if I wasn’t already kicking it myself. Anyway, if someone like her can do at least in you the way she does, and face off against me on your behalf . . . looking his way. Between Erin, the things you said to me after surgery, and lying in the hospital facing my own mortality, I had to take a long look at myself.” Jed took a long, tired breath. “At us.”

Erin at when Cole didn’t know what to say or how to react. He didn’t even know what this all meant, other than that Jed had had some self-awareness lessons. “I’m willing to meet you halfway.” Cole put himself out there not just for Erin but for the child Erin was carrying.

Erin would only Jed’s expression softened. Just a little. “I’m too old to do this completely.”

Erin,” Cole Cole raised an eyebrow. That wasn’t enough for him. But he waited for her to say more. “I’ll wait.”

“But I want to try. And I want to know that baby.”

Erin at he’d Cole inclined his head, letting out a slow breath of air. “Then you’ll have to try. With Cole there watching and making sure that kid was protected from harm?” Coleway Cole had grown up.

Erin He rose from his seat. If he felt worn out from this ordeal, he could rest. You imagine how overwhelmed and exhausted his father must be.

Erin at turned Cole glanced back at the bed only to discover Jed was already asleep. He stepped out of the room and leaned against the nearest wall. It would take a long time to process this talk with Jed. Even longer to discover whether the tentative truce would last.

With Jed taken care of, Cole turned his attention to Erin. He was ready to talk to her.

...e?" He head over and see what remained of the feelings she had for him, if he
enough work on himself and his life to be worthy of her. Or whether E
so set on not being hurt that she'd shut him out of her life complete
g to domatter what he had to say.

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head over and see what remained of the feelings she had for him, if he'd done enough work on himself and his life to be worthy of her. Or whether Erin was so set on not being hurt that she'd shut him out of her life completely—no matter what he had to say.

Chapter Nineteen

ERIN'S DOORBELL RANG, and she walked over, looked out because grown so much more cautious recently, and let Evan in.

"Hi," he said, clasping her hand. "You're looking well."

She smiled. "Thank you. I appreciate you coming straight from work. I know it's been a long day."

He loosened his tie and followed her inside. "Seeing you in my home is a bit of an inconvenience."

"I'm sure you're wondering why I asked you to come over." She gestured for him to follow, and she headed for the kitchen, where she'd left her bag.

"Yes, but I've been meaning to talk to you as well." Evan stepped beside her.

She was still supposed to be resting, but she was allowed to get up for short periods, and Evan was one guest she didn't want to face lying in bed. "Can I get you a drink?" she asked.

"No, thank you. Erin—"

"Evan—"

They laughed. "You first," she said.

"Okay, I was a jerk that night at Joe's," he said. "Your private life is a part of my business, and I reacted from a . . . jealous place. I'd like to be behind us. We don't need this affecting our work or relationship office."

She wrapped her hands around her mug of tea. "I agree. That's what I needed to talk to you about too."

"So I'm forgiven?" he asked, looking boyishly charming.

She nodded her head and laughed. "Yes, you are."

"Good." He braced his hands on her shoulders in thanks, then released her. "So what did you want to discuss?"

She wasn't ready to quit the district attorney's office until she'd spoken to Nash and was certain the job, salary, and benefits worked for her. But she wanted to discuss a current case with Evan, and given how they'd left

between them, she'd known they had to talk in person.

"It's about Victoria Maroni."

"Aah." He nodded. "Something else I'm sorry for. I shouldn't have left you alone in that hallway where she could get to you." He appeared embarrassed.

she'd "I was never your responsibility."

"But I knew you were in danger, that you had a bodyguard—"

She shook her head. "And my brother and his wife, both police officers, were mere feet away. Forget it, please?"

work. I He inclined his head. "Thank you. Again."

sn't an "There is something you can do for me."

He cocked his head to one side. "What's that?"

gestured, "Make sure part of any deal you make for Victoria includes mental help?"

tea. He stared in disbelief. "She had you shot, she nearly ran you down, she stalked you, she shredded your clothes, and here you are making sure she gets psychiatric help?"

up for Erin shrugged. "What can I say? No rational person would do anything like that, so clearly, she needs help. Her sister said she suffers from a mental disorder. Just call a doctor in to evaluate her. I'm not saying she should pay for what she did, but she needs to be medicated. Helped."

down. Evan studied her, his gaze warm, full of more admiration than anyone else, and she wasn't uncomfortable. Maybe they could repair their friendship after all.

is none "That man so does not deserve you," Evan said.

put it She stepped back and leaned against the counter. "Can we please discuss Cole?" To her mortification, her voice cracked on his name.

at the "I told him if he hurt you, I'd kill him."

sort of "He didn't hurt me. Not in the way you think. He never lied, led me on, or told me I could expect more. That's all on me."

released Evan wrapped a friendly arm around her shoulders. "Come on. I'll sit down."

oken to She liked this side of Evan, she thought, as she walked with him into the family room.

she did "Well, this is unexpected."

t things Erin jumped at the sound of Cole's voice, and Evan stiffened.

“Ever hear of ringing the bell, Sanders?” Evan asked.

“The door was partially open.” Cole shot Erin a look that said she should have left to know better.

Erin’s breath lodged in her throat. So much for distance making it easier to deal with him. He looked delicious in a black T-shirt and jeans, and her heart swelled with happiness before she immediately reminded herself she didn’t want a life with her—and sex wasn’t enough.

“What are you doing here?”

She watched as he visibly blew out a long breath, then clenched and unclenched his fists in an obvious effort to control his temper over her with Evan. She didn’t make it easy for him, instead waiting for an answer.

“I need to talk to you,” he said at last.

Erin wondered if Kelly had been in touch with him already.

Evan stepped away from Erin. “Are we all finished?” he asked.

“Yes, I think we covered everything.”

Evan nodded. “Then I’ll go and let you two talk.”

Cole’s jaw worked back and forth, but he said nothing.

A part of her had expected Evan to get into an argument with Cole. She couldn’t surprisingly, her boss didn’t bait him.

“Take care of yourself. Don’t come back until you’re ready.” He turned to Erin and kissed her cheek.

Cole growled, but Erin ignored him. So much for Evan not provoking her, she thought wryly.

“Thanks for being so understanding,” she said, walking him to the door.

She waited until Evan had left before turning to face Cole. Hands on her back, she leaned against the now-closed front door.

He stared back, his eyes warm, his lips almost turning upward in a smile. Not Cole’s normally deep, serious, unapproachable look. No, tonight he was smiling at Erin going for unapproachable, and she prayed she succeeded.

“Are we really going to do this awkward thing?” He gestured back and forth between them. “I mean, I can stand here and stare at you all night if you’re supposed to be resting.”

She frowned. “How would you know?”

He raised an eyebrow. “I spoke to your lawyer on the way here.” He gave her a smile this time.

“Oh.” She swallowed hard. “Maybe sitting down is a good idea.”
“Nervous?” he asked, following her back to the family room.

Erin settled into her normal place on the sofa. Cole didn’t take it as easy as everyone else usually did. Instead, he sat beside her. So close his hand touched hers. She shut her eyes and forced air into her lungs. Big mistake since his musky, masculine scent overwhelmed her, making her want to throw herself into his arms, bury her face in his neck, and drink him in.

“I asked if you were nervous.” He stretched his arm along the back of the sofa, too close to her neck. Her skin tingled at the whisper of sensation he effortlessly evoked.

“Why would I be?” Her voice sounded rough to her own ears.

“Your lawyer called me about custody agreements, visitation, and support.” The words rumbled out of him on a low growl.

“I thought we should finalize things quickly before you go underground again.”

He nodded as if he understood, but those warm eyes of his were locked onto hers, and now she was nervous.

“What makes you think I’m going back under? How would you handle it, but what I plan when you won’t take my calls? Answer my texts? What if you wouldn’t see me in the hospital after you were nearly killed?” he asked. Tension suddenly radiating from him in waves.

“Are you saying you’re not?” she asked.

“I’m the one asking questions. How would you know what I’m thinking? What I want?”

“I wouldn’t.” She swallowed hard. “But I thought I did. You took me behind when the threat was over, you were leaving. Well? The threat was over, just making a clean break.” She folded her arms across her chest.

“What if that’s not what I want?” He reached out, grasped her around her waist, and pulled her onto his lap.

She blinked, stunned. “This isn’t a good idea.”

“Hear me out.”

“Not while I’m sitting on your lap.”

“Trust me.”

She opened her mouth, then closed it once more. “Talk, and I’ll give you a hint quick.” Before she started squirming against him.

“I’m not leaving you, our baby, or Serendipity.” He pushed her back

her shoulder, kissing the sensitive skin of her neck. She shivered but determined to remain in control.

ie chair “You have a job.”

s thigh “I quit.”

nistake, She straightened her shoulders. “I . . . you . . . what?”

o crawl “I quit. Went to the city and did it in person.”

Erin’s eyes opened wide. “Why?”

k of the “Isn’t it obvious?”

ition he She shook her head, afraid to think, to breathe, and lose the moment to find out she was dreaming. “Maybe it’s obvious to you, but to me, it came out of left field.”

id child He placed his hand beneath her chin and turned her face toward him. “I love you, Erin. It’s that complicated . . . and that simple.”

ercover A wave of dizziness assaulted her. “You love me. Enough to quit your job and settle in Serendipity.” She wondered if she’d imagined hearing the words she’d dreamed of but never believed Cole would say.



I know

when you

needed, the COLE NODDED. HE loved Erin enough to do all that and more but he knew simple yes wasn’t enough for this bright woman. “I love you, yes. I also know the fact that you fought for me. For us. That you opened my eyes to what I was missing and to what I needed.”

old me She expelled a breath of air, a small sigh escaping. He leaned in and kissed her parted lips. “What do you need?” she asked.

r. I was “You, sweetheart. I need you and everything that you bring with you. You gave me back my father, or at least a shot at having him; you showed me I could have a life, friends, a family. You make me feel like I matter. I want to give you anything you want in return. Even if that’s just a piece of breakfast.”

und the “Oh, Cole. I love you too.”

Her eyes sparkled with laughter and happiness, and the knot that had settled in Cole’s chest since the shooting finally eased.

make it “Besides, I never did learn to cook,” she said with a grin.

“Say yes to me, and you’ll never have to.”

hair off Erin leaned back to look him in the eyes. “Say yes to what?” she

out was more serious than he'd ever seen her.

He reached into his pocket for the other thing he'd taken care of in Manhattan and pulled out a small jewelry box. "You're already having a baby. Marry me—"

A huge smile lit her face. "Yes!"

A light, airy feeling he didn't recognize suffused him, and he knew what it was. Happiness, something he'd never before truly experienced. She'd given him that too.

"Are you sure?" he asked, teasing her. "You haven't even seen the ring."

"That's just icing on the cake. All I ever wanted was you." She pressed her hand down his cheek. "But go ahead. Show me."

He snapped open the velvet box, revealing a solitary diamond in a simple gold band. Simple yet elegant, like the woman herself.

"How can you . . . I mean . . . it's—big!"

"I never had anyone to spend money on before." He slipped the ring onto her finger, knowing it would fit perfectly. He'd already asked her father for his blessing and her mother for Erin's ring size.

"Oh my God." She held out her hand, admiring the glittering diamond. "I love it because you gave it to me."

"One more thing," he thought, drawing a deep breath. "I bought us a house."

"What?!" she squealed in excitement. "Why?"

"You love it, for one thing. For another, we've already lived together, and you have to admit, it's a perfect fit for our family."

She wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him close and kissing him hard. "I don't know what to say. You're right. It's perfect for us, our family." She sighed softly. "Our family."

He held her close and nodded, groaning in satisfaction. "It's just icing, honey."

She laughed. "Are you sure you won't miss the job?" she asked, so

"I'm starting a business I know will work well. I'll explain it later. It involves security and a lot of guys I used to work with over the years. It's fine. Want to know why?"

She nodded.

"Same answer every time. Because I have you. Everything else—"

"Is just icing," they said at the same time.

“I love you,” she said, sliding her hand beneath his shirt.

e of in “I love you too.”

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and Cole knew the icing was nice, but *she* was all he needed or woul
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“I love you,” she said, sliding her hand beneath his shirt.

“I love you too.”

Erin snuggled into his lap, her arms around him, her head on his shoulder, and Cole knew the icing was nice, but *she* was all he needed or would want. Ever.

Epilogue

“**A**RE YOU SURE the baby seat is strapped in right?” Cole asked, both on the steering wheel of the brand-new SUV he’d bought to bring them home from the hospital. “Is she buckled in?”

“It’s fine. She’s fine.” Erin stared at the bundle wrapped in pink, sitting into her car seat, blissfully unaware that her daddy was freaking out from the front seat.

Erin, sore from the experience of bringing their beautiful baby girl into the world, looked at her husband and managed a laugh. She’d opted to sit in the back with the baby while he drove them home from the hospital.

Not only did they have a new truck, fully loaded and very safe, according to Cole, but they had a new digital SLR camera with home video capabilities, and the house had been wired with video cameras so they could watch the baby in any room. To say Cole had lost his mind was a slight understatement.

But Erin loved every minute of his involvement, knowing what a difference it was from the solitary, withdrawn, disinterested man he’d been when he came back to Serendipity.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Glad you remembered I had something to do with this too,” she said, chuckling.

“Oh, I remember. Every last second of making her to you giving her.”

Erin tried her best not to blush. It might be natural, but it was a mortifying moment, at least until the pain had wiped every last thought from her head.

But she was worth it, Erin thought, stroking her daughter’s face, enthralled with her soft skin and tiny features. She wasn’t paying attention and it seemed like only seconds had passed when Cole pulled into the driveway of the house, shutting the electric door behind them.

A few minutes later, he’d helped Erin out of the car and placed the

in her arms. He let her go ahead, and she slowly made her way up. Although the baby had her own room, they'd agreed to keep her in the bedroom, at least for a little while.

They settled her into the bassinet, and Erin eased herself onto the bed. Cole joined her, stretching out beside her. "Your parents wanted her here when you came home, but I talked them into waiting until the afternoon."

Erin grinned. "Good thinking." It would have been too much to expect people here waiting for her, even if it was her mom and dad.

Ella and Simon had been at the hospital, so they hadn't been disappointed in the time with their granddaughter.

"I wanted my girls all to myself for a little while." His eyes were bright with joy, and Erin hoped she'd never again see the bleakness that had been there nine months ago.

"Say that again," she said, staring into his handsome face.

"What?"

"My girls." Erin would never get tired of hearing him refer to them that way.

"You are my girls. You were mine since the day I laid eyes on you. Joe's. I was just too stubborn to admit it."

She smiled. He was that. "I'm just glad we were able to pull it off before she was born."

"I still wish you'd had a big wedding with all the trimmings. You know, that."

Erin shook her head. "I deserve you."

They'd had a small wedding at the house on December fifteen. Erin's family. Cole's mother and Brody had come—and to everyone's surprise, so had Jed, who had been on his best behavior. He hadn't been long, but he'd witnessed the ceremony, and they took what they could get from him.

"My dad gave me away, and I walked down the aisle to you. That would have been icing." She loved that expression of his. "And you get enough of that every day." She cupped his cheek in her hand. "I love you," she said, her voice catching. She shook her head. "Sorry. I'm still emotional."

He clasped her hand in his. "You think I'm not? Never, not once."

upstairs. life, did I think I'd have . . . this." He swept his arm around for emphasis. "I didn't think I deserved it."

That truth never failed to upset and anger her. "You were so wrong about me." "It's in the past." He brushed a kiss over her lips.

"Not far enough if you can still remember it," she muttered.

He grinned. "Did I ever tell you I love how protective you get of me?"

"You might have mentioned it once or twice." Each time she'd pushed him out of his place, she thought, and it had been more than just once or twice.

"He's trying, and you know it. What's that expression? You can't expect an old dog new tricks? But he's getting better. He catches his own tail now."

She frowned. She thought Cole was too forgiving of Jed's personal life. She supposed he had a point. The older man had stepped up, making an effort to be more of a father and to get rid of his bad attitude, but sometimes he *slipped*. That was when she couldn't help but step in and call him out on his behavior.

She'd do anything for this man just as she knew he'd do anything for her. Everything they'd been through together had been worth it to get to this point.

Cole ran his fingers through Erin's hair. She'd been letting it grow long. He liked to wrap the longer strands in his hand. "Jed's coming over with the folks later too."

"So are Mike and Cara, and Sam."

Cole met her gaze. "Umm, Nick and Kate asked if they could come too."

Erin burst out laughing. "For a man who didn't like to be surrounded by other people, you sure have done a one-eighty."

"I do love our families, but I'd much rather be alone with you. If you could get worried, I'll kick them out in due time."

She grinned. "I'll hold you to that."

A small squeaking noise sounded from the bassinet, and Cole shifted to give it more sitting position before Erin managed to roll over. *She is going to ruin you,* spoiled little girl, Erin thought, smiling.

"Is my Angel hungry?" he asked, his face and voice softening as he talked to his tiny daughter.

The squeaks turned into a full-fledged wail. "I think she wants your milk."

asis. “Isaid, laughing, as Erin unbuttoned her blouse.

He handed her to Erin. “Her name fits, you know.” They’d nan
;.” Angela, but already Cole had taken to calling her Angel, and Erin kr
nickname would stick.

He nodded. “She’s my Angel, just like you are.”
ie?” Erin smiled up at him. “And that makes us both very lucky girls.”
t Jed inin life, lucky in love.

Like Cole, she never dared to dream she could be this happy, or
’t teachshe deserved so much, but she’d do everything she could to appreci
m slipsgood fortune—and remind Cole every day of all the reasons he was wo
it all too.

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PERFECT TOGETHER EXCERPT

stop by
SOMETHING ABOUT BEING a Marsden made people think if they aske
ided by favor, Sam—the younger brother and the *good* cop—would be ni
accommodating. Take how his sister-in-law, Cara, was looking at hi
. Don’tbig, pleading eyes, fully expecting him to agree to her beyond-unrea
request.

“There is no way in hell I’m going on a date with Margie Simpson
ot to aMarsden glared at Cara, a woman he usually also called his best frien
be one across their respective desks at the Serendipity police station.

“Her last name is Stinson, not Simpson, and you know it.” Cara f
hen heback at him. “Come on, Sam. Her parents are the biggest donors
Women’s Heart Health fundraiser, and the Serendipity Police Departm
ou,” he

co-sponsor. Do you want to be the one to tell the hospital, who will need her recipient of that shiny new medical equipment, that the Stinsons pulled the donation because one of our finest wouldn't escort their daughter?"

"She's more like a pit bull," Sam muttered. "And isn't there a single cop you can get to take her? What about Hendler?"

' Lucky "He's too old."

"Martini?"

thought She shook her head. "Too young. Besides, Margie wants to go with

iate her He shuddered. "All the more reason for me to say no. I don't want to offer the wrong idea." Margie was one of those women who assumed that

a look implied male interest. Sam didn't want to go there. No way, not

"Are you giving my wife a hard time?" Sam's brother, Mike, strode to Cara's desk and placed a possessive hand on her shoulder.

"More like she's giving me one. Call her off, will you?" Sam asked

[E to](#) Mike laughed and shook his head. "I like my life just the way it is, bro. You're on your own."

[E!](#) Sam rolled his eyes. Ever since his bachelor brother had fallen—for Sam's sometime partner, Cara, he was now wrapped around his cute little cowboy boots. When she wasn't in uniform, that is. When he went, Mike followed. Sam was happy for him. The problem was, single friends were dwindling fast. First, Dare Barron, then Mike, and their sister, Erin, had fallen.

Sam wasn't jealous, but he could admit that his life and the routine always enjoyed were growing stale around him. But that didn't mean he'd for a open to marriage, let alone escorting the female from hell, even for a nice and cause.

m with Cara rolled a pencil between her palms. "Do you already have a sonable she asked.

"Hell, no," Mike said before Sam could answer. "He hasn't dated a girl." Sam in longer than I can remember. In fact, the last woman who really interested him—"

No, he would not let his brother go *there*. "Don't you have an opportunity to get back to?" Sam pointed at the police chief's workroom at the back of the station house.

ient is a Mike grinned. "Not when this is so much more fun."

Cara elbowed him in the stomach. "Go. I'll have more luck if you

be there poking fun at him and making this worse.”

ed their Mike shrugged. “Hey, it’s not my fault he’s such an easy target.”

another Sam muttered. “Now that you’re happily married, you’re an even bigger pain in the

Mike smirked and kissed his wife on the lips, lingering way too long before he finally walked—make that swaggered—away.

“Get a room.”

1 you.” “You too could find true love,” Cara said, leaning closer. “We are here to give that for you.”

hat just But Sam didn’t want that for himself. He’d tried, come close, and now in the biggest possible way. As a cop, he trusted his instincts, but why did he overcome to women? To relationships? To personal choices? Not so much.

His so-called gut instinct had hurt one good friend, and his gullibility led to him being betrayed by his fiancée and best friend. His family. Sorry, only some of the reasons he remained wary of trusting his personal instincts and with his siblings settled down, Erin with a husband and a baby, the pressure—turned up the pressure on him.

his wife’s Cara leveled him with a serious stare. “I’m not asking you to leave her, Margie. Just accompany her to the benefit. Make nice and go home. Can you do that for me? For Mike and the police station? Please?” Cara bat her eyes and even eyelashes over her big blue eyes.

She’d been his best friend long before she became involved with him, and he’d have thought he was immune—except now she was also his wife, and he didn’t like turning her down. Besides, as she’d pointed out, the fundraiser was for a good cause, and he’d be representing the police force.

He blew out a disgusted breath. “You’re only doing this because you’re a date?” say no to you,” Sam muttered, shuddering at the thought of accompanying the one woman in town who sent fear into any single man’s heart.

anyone “Is that a yes?” Cara tapped her pencil against the blotter on the desk, her expression almost gleeful.

“Yeah,” he muttered, knowing he would absolutely live to regret this decision.

ok of the “Yay!” She jumped up and hugged him tight before resettling herself in the chair behind her desk. “This is *perfect*! One huge problem taken care of. I knew I could count on you.”

u aren’t *Yeah, perfect*, Sam thought, hating that word even more than usual.

“Hey, I promise Mike and I will stick by you all night. I won’t leave alone with that leech.”

“He ass,” Sam narrowed his gaze. “So now you admit she’s a leech.”

Cara didn’t look up or meet his gaze, but the red flush in her cheeks longed to go longer away. Yeah, he was a patsy for his sister-in-law and a good cause.

“You know,” Cara said, peering out from beneath her long fringed lashes, “you could avoid this whole kind of thing if you’d just—”
“I’ll want to find a woman of his own. “Let it go,” he said in response to her unkind words.

“It failed when it—”
“Okay, but Mike’s right. The last woman who interested you was—”
“Let. It. Go.” Sam set his jaw.

“Fine. I won’t say her name.” Cara buried herself in work at her desk until she’d accomplished her mission.

She’d brought up the one female in more than a decade who’d made him want to drop his guard and rethink his vow not to get emotionally involved with any woman ever again. But Nicole Farnsworth, the raven-haired beauty who’d triggered his current state of discontent, had left town months ago and she wasn’t coming back.

Can you
bet her



NICOLE FARNSWORTH PACKED up her clothing and the last of her things to convince herself she was moving, not running away. In fact, she’d planned to leave Manhattan since deciding to end her engagement, but now instead of just the excitement of beginning a new life, she felt the dual need to flee and to stay. She closed her eyes and drew a deep breath. Nothing she could do but get away—and do some soul-searching, during which she hoped to find some clarity. But what clarity was there when she knew she held people’s livelihoods in her hands?

The doorbell rang, and she looked into the peephole, unwilling to give her chances by just opening her door. She stared into the familiar, if unwelcome, face of her mother, who, as usual, was perfectly dressed in a Chanel jacket and wool slacks.

Suppressing a groan, she opened the door and let Marian Farr walk inside.

Before Nicole could say hello, her mother launched into one

ave youtypical tirades. “No sane woman breaks off her engagement to a man extremely wealthy man. One you grew up with, might I remind you? his family are in business with your father. What were you thinking?” ks gave Nicole walked into the family room and leaned against the nearest wall, knowing not to give her mother an edge by sitting down. “I was thinking of I shouldn’t marry a man I don’t love.”

Her mother joined her in the room filled with the remaining luggage, spoken waiting to be loaded into her car. She folded her arms across her chest, pinned Nicole with her disappointed stare. “What does love have to do with anything?”

Nicole did not want an explanation for that bit of insanity. It meant she had to ask, but have to look more deeply than she cared to into her parents’ marriage.

Instead, she drew a deep breath and promised herself she’d be on hand for the de Samsoun.

involved “Nicole, it’s insane to think someone like you needs to worry about your beauty match.”

ago and She shrugged. “You know as well as I do, sanity doesn’t run in my family.”

“Don’t talk that way about your sister,” her mother chided, looking to hide Victoria’s mental instability, as if being bipolar carried a stigma Marian couldn’t bear to admit to in her family.

, trying The irony was Nicole hadn’t been talking about Victoria, merely to planned a not-so-subtle joke.

stead of “Darling, you need to call Tyler and beg him to forgive you.”

ee. She Nicole had heard this before. “No.” And she had more important things to go—get worry about than her mother’s reaction to her breaking her engagement. clarity, the illegal activities Nicole had overheard her ex-fiancé’s father and accountant discussing—and what she was going to do about it.

to take Considering, as her mother reminded her, that the partnership of Farrington and Stanton Financial Investments affected both families, Nicole would welcome the distance to study all the angles.

l jacket Such as, did Nicole’s father know that his partner was accepting money from mob-connected companies and funneling that money into investments from which they all made millions? Did her ex-fiancé Tyler know?

of her “Nicole,” her mother said, snapping her fingers in front of her face. “You’re not listening to me.”

idsome, “Because I have things on my mind. Like moving.” Not just so she
He and get away and think, but so she could forge a new life where people would
to know and like Nicole for herself, not her family’s connections.

st wall, Her mother’s face flushed red at the reminder. It was amazing how
ing that woman could ignore the evidence in front of her: the boxes, packing tape
clothing covered by heavy-duty bags. “You have to reconsider. This
; box situation is humiliating in the extreme. Not to mention, you have
est and Tyler’s mother is running for borough president, and you’re her number
do with fundraiser. She needs you.”

“I gave her notice. My assistant is capable and ready to take over
it she’d be fine.”

riage. “You’ll cause a rift between the families,” her mother pushed on.

ier way Nicole stiffened, not missing the irony. Growing up, she’d sought
parents’ approval and attention by being good and kind and perfect—
t a love success. But now, when she no longer cared what her family thought
choices, she’d accomplished her goal. Her mother was here, paying attention
in our to her life, begging her to help them.

“The Stantons won’t hold my choices against you.”

always “Nicole!”

married a “No. Stop it. I told you before. I’m not going back to Tyler. I don’t
him. I should have realized it long before now.” And the reasons she
making were glaringly obvious in light of her mother’s callous disregard
daughter’s feelings.

She’d desperately wanted someone to love and approve of her, and
rings to unlike her parents, had been kind and caring. He paid attention to her
it. Like he’d given her everything she’d yearned for in her emotionally deprived
and his. Unfortunately, Nicole had mistaken her gratitude toward him for love
them. she’d hurt Tyler in the process.

is worth It had taken her sister’s downward spiral and Nicole’s resulting
needed with a sexy small-town cop to point out to her exactly what she didn’t
her then-fiancé. Desire, excitement, the pounding of her heart every minute
money was near. She’d settled for less every minute of her childhood. She
stments bring herself to do it in marriage.

Nicole realized her mother was still staring at her with frustration
er face. disappointment in her expression.

“It’s better I made the decision now than after the wedding,” Nicole

she could help her.

She would get Marian huffed. “Just when did I teach you that fairy tales come true?” she asked in disgust.

How the Nicole met her mother’s gaze. “You never did.”

She pe, and Without so much as a word, not *good luck* or even *goodbye*, her mother who returned and stormed out the door.

She had a job. Nicole swallowed the lump in her throat. Her mother hadn’t changed her opinion one all of Nicole’s twenty-eight years. But Nicole had. With this mother she wasn’t looking for some improbable happy ending. All she wanted was a life of her own that fulfilled *her* dreams and desires, not the impossible-to-please family.

So she was heading to the one place where she’d found a sense of peace despite the insanity—no pun intended—that had brought her to the town without Upstate town. She hoped that once there, she’d figure out the right thing to do about the information she’d stumbled over.

Her attention Nicole was ready for Serendipity. She just hoped the people at Serendipity were ready for her.



She didn’t love ONE OF THE things Nicole liked about Serendipity was its old-fashioned charm. Where else could you find a diner-slash-restaurant named The Serendipity Restaurant? After spending the morning moving into her new apartment in Tyler, Joe’s Bar, she decided to eat dinner out and go food shopping tomorrow. She sat at the counter, happy to just soak in the atmosphere, and finished a delicious plate of meatloaf and mashed potatoes when a blonde-haired woman approached her from behind the counter.

“Wait. I know you,” the woman said, her gaze narrowing.

Meeting Nicole met the other woman’s concerned stare, well aware of the feeling for the worry in her eyes. The one thing that had concerned Nicole when moving here was being mistaken for her twin. But the pull of the small town couldn’t had been strong, and despite Victoria’s actions, people here hadn’t recognized Nicole, at least not once she’d tried desperately to help them find her twin.

Her opinion and Nicole wanted to give them the same benefit of the doubt. “I can’t believe we’ve met.”

She told “I’m Macy Donovan. Occasional hostess, server, you name it. My

owns the restaurant. Aren't you—”

“Nicole Farnsworth,” she chimed in quickly.

“So you're not Victoria? The psychopath who—”

“No,” Nicole said, cutting her off before she could elaborate on Victoria's mothercrimes. When her sister went off her medication, anything could happen and had. “She's my twin.”

Macy's cheeks turned red in embarrassment. “Sorry, but she hurt me, sheof mine and . . . Never mind.”

Nicole winced. “I expected to deal with the fallout if I moved here. Not those Macy raised her eyebrows. “Yet you still decided to see Serendipity?”

“Yes, I did.” She squared her shoulders, intending to communicate to Macy Donovan that not only was she sure of her decision but she was going to do about to be bullied because of her sister's illness. Her twin was in a mental health facility, living with the consequences of her actions.

“Listen, I'm blunt but I'm not judging you,” the woman said. “Marsden's my best friend, and your sister stalked her for months.”

Nicole grimaced at the reminder.

“But Erin told me you helped them find where your sister was hiding and she said you came to town in the first place to warn her and Cole. . . .” Macy held out her hand.

Letting out a deep breath, Nicole accepted the other woman's offering. “Thanks.” From inside her purse, her phone chimed, calling attention.

“I'm going to do a few things in the back. I'll come out again in a few minutes,” Macy said, leaving her alone to take the call.

A quick look told her it was her ex-fiancé, so she blew out a breath. Decline. She'd explained everything in person, so there was no reason to rehash things. His call only reminded her of what she still needed to deal with, but she wasn't any closer to a decision. Should she confront him and ask what he knew of his partner's accounts? Should she ask Tyler?

She'd stood outside the office of her own father—a man she didn't know all that well, as he certainly never made an effort to spend time with her child—and as she raised her hand to knock on the open door, she'd realized there'd been no question that she'd mistaken the spoken words.

Robert Stanton and the firm accountant had specifically said the

laundering money from the Romanovs, a father and son who were known as the Russian mob dealers in Los Angeles. *The Russian mob*, she thought, her stomach churning. Their entire business could crumble, not to mention they could all end up in California's prison. Her stomach in knots, she'd turned to run, but Nicole's father had stepped up to her at that very moment. He'd called out her name, which, she thought, had brought Robert and Andre, the accountant, out into the hall to greet the woman who was a friend. The look Andre had given her chilled her even now. She told her father she couldn't possibly know she'd heard anything. But she had. Which meant she didn't need to worry just about her family and the business but also about the men on the other side. Dangerous men.

Should she go to her father with the truth? If he already knew about her partner's illegal dealings, she wouldn't accomplish anything except to make herself a scapegoat. If Paul Farnsworth was in the dark, he probably wouldn't believe his daughter's word over his longtime partner's. Nicole's own mother would remain in useless denial even if confronted, and Tyler's mother's main concern was Erin's campaign funds was her husband. No way would she risk using her own money. So she ruled out her being aware. Which left the police—and she wasn't ready for that yet.

And what about Tyler? She knew he was honest to a fault. She could imagine him allowing illegal dealings to go on any more than she could envision his father involving him. He'd grown up as heir to the peaceful throne—entitled, privileged—and to his credit, he rarely acted the role of a spoiled prince. She had to assume they'd keep him squeaky clean.

But again, she couldn't rely on assumption. The unknown player was a few just too dangerous.

Macy picked up a towel and wiped down the counter. "So what brought you to Serendipity?"

Easy answer, Nicole thought. "A fresh start."

Macy grinned. "Because you liked it so much your first time around here." Nicole laughed, grateful for this chatty woman and the distraction she provided. "That too. Seriously. Considering the reason I was here, thank you for the help and the people made an impact."

Macy leaned on the counter. "It just so happens that there's a fundraiser this weekend to raise money for women's heart health. I'm selling tickets and you should come!"

Nicole hesitated; the thought of walking into a big event all alone

own artsomething she was ready to face. “I don’t know. I mean, I’m new in town, turning. “All the more reason to go where you can meet people! Dates and up inrequired. I’m not going with anyone, so we can hang out. What do you r strode Nicole figured Macy was right—as far as it being a good way to in turn,know people—and now that Macy had invited her to join her, she felt comfortable.

rsel he Before Nicole could answer, her new friend chimed in once more ant shefor a good cause. The police department is co-sponsoring the event, ar out thethis place is basically like a doughnut shop for Serendipity’s Finest, I to pimp tickets for them. Please?” Macy was nothing if not persistent, out hisenthusiasm was infectious.

to out So was the fact that the police sponsorship guaranteed Sam M eve hiswould be at the event. And she’d like to see him again . . . “Okay.”

would “Yay!” Macy’s smile dimmed. “But it’s expensive since a sourcefundraiser.”

ig dirty “How much?”

and she “Seventy-five dollars.”

Nicole nodded. She had a plan for her life that included opening a ouldn’tbake shop, but not right away. She needed to research the area and s e couldcould sustain what she had in mind. Which meant she needed a job w iversalplotted her future. In the meantime, she had the trust fund her grand e they’dhad left her, something that irked her parents to no end since it mea couldn’t control what she or Victoria did.

rs were Nicole didn’t plan to blow through the money frivolously, and she it for her business venture, but it did enable her to rent the apartm : bringscover the cost of living until she got on her feet. As far as she was con getting to know people in her new town and supporting a worthwhile certainly fell under that heading.

d?” “No problem.” She met Macy’s gaze, and the other woman smiled

ion she “Great! Oh. Another thing.”

ie place Nicole leaned forward on her arms and waited. Clearly, she someone in the know.

draiser “Cocktail attire.”

tickets, “Also not a problem.” She’d packed up everything she owned, thanks to Tyler and his mother’s world, included formal and cocktail (was notbut she’d kept out a few favorites.

wn—" "That was easy," Macy said.
s aren't Nicole grinned. "I try."
I say?" "So are you interested in a primer on your new hometown?"
o get to "I'm all ears."
It more Macy propped a hip on the counter, relaxed and happy to
"Wednesday night is Ladies' Night at Joe's. You should join us—
e. "It's depends on who is free because there's been way too many marriages
id since babies lately, so the ladies and the men are dwindling. But not if
agreed because you're new to all the men and they'll all be new to you. So
and her come to that too?"

Nicole nodded, pleased to have plans. "Absolutely."
arsden "Great." Macy looked toward the front door and the family
entered. "I have to go seat people. If I don't have time to talk more to
it's see you Wednesday? Seven o'clock."

Nicole smiled as the other woman headed off to do her job.
She liked Macy Donovan, and it seemed like Macy had already a
Nicole. She hoped everyone else in Serendipity felt the same way.

er own
see if it



hile she
parents AS ON A typical Wednesday night, Sam met up with some guys fr
nt they station at Joe's Bar. Josh Mercer had bought the current round and th
were flowing freely. Mike and Cara walked in, followed by his siste
'd need and her husband, Cole.

ent and "Looks like it's family night," Sam said, calling them over. "How
cerned, two get away?"

e cause Erin had had a baby six months ago and rarely left her daughter's s
His sister greeted him with a kiss on the cheek. "Mom showed
wide. practically shoved us out the door. She said we needed a break, a
needed time with Angel." The hazel eyes she shared with Sam lit up
'd met she mentioned her baby daughter.

which, Cole slipped an arm around Erin's waist, greeting Sam with a nod.
dresses, already called home twice to remind your mother about the time of h
bottle and what to do if she cries."

"Like she didn't raise three of us?" Sam teased his sister.

"Funny," Erin said to her brother.

Sam still couldn't believe they'd gone from his sister getting p after a one-night stand with Cole Sanders, undercover cop with no ir of remaining in town, to being a happily married couple and concerned parents.

o chat. "All my favorite people are here!" Sam turned at the sound of -the usvoice.

ges and Erin spun and gave her best friend a hug.

for you "How is that adorable goddaughter of mine?" Macy asked.

o you'll "Cute as ever." Erin beamed.

"Hon, want to go get a drink?" Cole asked her.

Erin nodded.

who'd "Anyone else want anything?" Cole asked.

lay, I'll "I'm good," Macy said.

"Me too," Sam added.

Erin and Cole walked toward the bar, leaving Sam alone with Ma cceptedwas his sister's best friend, so he was used to her being around.

"Hi, Macy. How are you?"

"Hi yourself." Her smile, as usual, was infectious. "I'm good. I usual. You?"

He shrugged. "Same old."

om the She shook her head, her long dark hair falling over one should ie jokes sighed. "You so need to get laid."

r, Erin, Sam rolled his eyes, not surprised by her outgoing ways. In add her blunt manner, she was beautiful, sort of exotic, her Italian l did you showing through. If she hadn't been like family, he might have looke —until she started busting his balls, that is. She wasn't for him, but n ide. she'd give some guy a run for his money.

up and She glanced around, a frown furrowing her brow. "Where's Nicole

nd she Sam whipped his head around to meet her gaze. "Who?" He had p when heard wrong. That or it could be another Nicole. It was a common name.

"She's Macy scanned the crowds before refocusing on Sam. "You p er next know her? Nicole Farnsworth, the stalker's sister? She's new in to renting the room over Joe's. I invited her to meet me here tonight.' glanced at her watch, and her concerned expression turned to a frown. late. You haven't seen her, have you?"

regnant Sam expelled a harsh breath. Nicole had moved here? Months of tention about her and she was now as close as upstairs?

overly “Maybe she’s uncomfortable, not knowing anyone . . . and consid mistook her for her crazy sister at first . . . I should go check on he Macy’s shoved her glass at Sam. “Hold this for me?”

Sam shook his head. “I’ll go.”

Macy narrowed her gaze and stepped into Sam’s direct path. “So know her.”

He nodded, his heart racing at the thought of seeing her again. No had ever made him feel so many things in such a short time. Pro aroused, attracted . . .

“And you’re interested,” Macy concluded in the wake of his silenc

“No comment. I’m going upstairs. You can hold down the fort here time, he handed her his beer bottle.

cy. She Macy watched him, her stare too perceptive for his liking.

“And do not give my sister or brother the wrong impression. I just say hi and welcome her to town. Make sure she feels comfortable en busy as come down and join us.”

“If you say so, Detective,” she said, using his brand-new moniker.

He still wasn’t used to the title or the promotion, but he’d worked l er, and it, and nepotism—his brother being chief—had nothing to do with l position.

ition to He turned and headed for the back entrance of the bar and slipped eritage exit. As soon as he hit the top of the stairs and stood outside the ap d twice door, he paused. Everyone he knew had lived here at one time or a o doubt from Faith and Kelly Barron, to his brother, Mike, and then Erin’s h

Cole. The place was a revolving door, a pit stop before people settle :?” for good.

to have Now Nicole.

enough He’d known her for a short time, when she’d been in Serendipity t her missing sister, who it turned out had been stalking Erin. Sam had a robably her lurking outside Erin’s condo, assuming she was her psychotic tw wn and nothing about Nicole was unstable . . . and she’d made a profound im ” Macy Sam. From her dark hair to her big beautiful blue eyes, he felt like h “She’s see inside her soul.

During their first meeting, she’d been scared, then defiant, but ulti

hinkinghe came to admire how she'd handled herself while in that small interr
room. But the real turning point between them had come when Cole
lering lin. She'd immediately turned to Sam, assuming she could trust him
r." Sheafter her. She hadn't been wrong. And not just because he had a rep
for being the *good cop* in any scenario. With Nicole, the protective sur
experienced surpassed the normal duties of his job. It made no damn s
you dohim then, and it still didn't now. Hell, her draw scared him as muc
pulled him toward her.

woman Once her sister had been arrested, Nicole had gone back to the city
tective,she belonged before Sam could act on any stupid sexual or deeper imp
might have. He hadn't had an emotional connection with any femal
e. Jenna's betrayal, and he wouldn't allow himself to be hurt that way
e." ThisBut none of that seemed to matter now that *she* was back in town.

Sam couldn't imagine why Nicole had opted to move to Serendipi
there was one way to find out. Raising his hand, he knocked on her do

want to
ough to

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mately,

he came to admire how she'd handled herself while in that small interrogation room. But the real turning point between them had come when Cole barged in. She'd immediately turned to Sam, assuming she could trust him to look after her. She hadn't been wrong. And not just because he had a reputation for being the *good cop* in any scenario. With Nicole, the protective surge he'd experienced surpassed the normal duties of his job. It made no damn sense to him then, and it still didn't now. Hell, her draw scared him as much as it pulled him toward her.

Once her sister had been arrested, Nicole had gone back to the city where she belonged before Sam could act on any stupid sexual or deeper impulse he might have. He hadn't had an emotional connection with any female since Jenna's betrayal, and he wouldn't allow himself to be hurt that way again. But none of that seemed to matter now that *she* was back in town.

Sam couldn't imagine why Nicole had opted to move to Serendipity—but there was one way to find out. Raising his hand, he knocked on her door.

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NY Times, Wall Street Journal, and USA Today Bestseller, Carly Phillips is the queen of Alpha Heroes, at least according to The Harlequin Reviewer. Carly married her college sweetheart and lives in Purchase, NY, along with her crazy dogs who are featured on her Facebook and Instagram pages. The author of over 75 romance novels, she has raised two incredible daughters and is now an empty nester. Carly's book, *The Bachelor*, was chosen by Kelly Ripa as her first romance club pick. Carly loves social media and interacting with her readers. Want to keep up with Carly? Sign up for her newsletter and receive TWO FREE books at www.carlyphillips.com.

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NY Times, Wall Street Journal, and USA Today Bestseller, Carly Phillips is the queen of Alpha Heroes, at least according to The Harlequin Junkie Reviewer. Carly married her college sweetheart and lives in Purchase, NY along with her crazy dogs who are featured on her Facebook and Instagram pages. The author of over 75 romance novels, she has raised two incredible daughters and is now an empty nester. Carly's book, *The Bachelor*, was chosen by Kelly Ripa as her first romance club pick. Carly loves social media and interacting with her readers. Want to keep up with Carly? Sign up for her newsletter and receive TWO FREE books at www.carlyphillips.com.