



WITH A SADISTIC KILLER
ON THE LOOSE,
HE'LL HAVE TO CHOOSE...
**TRUST THE EVIDENCE OR
FOLLOW HIS HEART?**

PLAYING WITH *Fire*

ANNA BLAKELY

PLAYING WITH FIRE

EAGLE'S NEST SECURITIES

ANNA BLAKELY



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PLAYING WITH FIRE

Eagle's Nest Securities Series 2

Anna Blakely

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Playing With Fire

Eagle's Nest Securities Series 2

First Edition

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ABOUT THE BOOK

His instincts drew him to her before they ever met. She's terrified, desperate, and running out of time. Together, they must fight both sides of good and evil to uncover the truth...before it's too late.

For former Navy SEAL Archer Nash—now an operative for Eagle' Nest Securities—life takes an unexpected turn when the sexy blonde the media has dubbed The Black Widow Lawyer comes to his firm for help. The case against accused murderer Cassandra Montgomery seemed off from the beginning, so when she walks into his office, desperate for protection and claiming innocence, Archer can't bring himself to say no.

Cassie Montgomery is accused of a murder she didn't commit. Even worse, she was the killer's real target. Out of options, she turns to the men of Eagle's Nest Securities for help. Not only for protection from an unknown assailant but also to help her unmask the real murderer. As she and her sexy bodyguard delve deeper into the case, the danger and deception they discover threaten not only Cassie's freedom...but her very existence.

As the stakes continue to escalate, the line between protector and the protected begins to blur. Soon the inexplicable pull between Archer and Cassie intensifies, as does the undeniable connection forging between them. Together, along with the other members of Eagle's Nest, these two find themselves in the fight of their lives...and the love they've only just begun to share.

*To my family. You are my team. My rock. My everything.
I love you.*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The boys of Eagle's Nest are back with another exciting new story featuring the tall, dark, and suspicious Archer Nash. And if you thought Book 1 was a hit, just wait until you scroll your way through this one!

I had so much fun writing this story, as the meet-cute is much different than ones I've done in the past. Archer and Cassie's story is one of survival and discovery, and when these two finally let go and give in to the inevitable, their passion explodes right off the pages!

So get those seatbelts ready, because you're in for a wild, exciting ride!

Stay safe and Happy Reading!

XO~

Anna

PROLOGUE

“HOME SWEET...*HOME.*” Cassie Montgomery released a very unladylike grunt as she jerked the wheeled suitcase over the threshold. One blind kick of her high-heeled foot later, and the door slammed shut behind her.

Shivering from the cold, rumbling storm that had fallen over the city of Seattle, she used one shoulder to try to wipe away the damp strands of her long, blonde hair that had gotten stuck against her cheeks. Rain was a regularly scheduled part of life in this section of the country, but damn. It was *pouring* out there.

And cold.

Even my goosebumps had goosebumps.

Letting the purse and bag that were slung over her right shoulder fall, they landed with a soft thud against the decorative floor runner beneath her heels. After entering her security system’s code and assuring the locks snicked into place, Cassie unbuttoned the front of her long wool coat as she toed off the uncomfortable as hell shoes.

She flung them to the side, uncaring of where they landed while also silently promising to pick them up later. Flipping on the lights, she looked around with a heavy sigh.

The space truly was beautiful. Large. Elegant. Timeless in its European design and mixture of granite, walnut, marble, and slate.

Coveted by many, the five-thousand square foot house was the nicest in the neighborhood. Every aspect from roof to foundation had been carefully chosen. Each piece specific in its placement and purpose.

Even she had to admit it was impressive. And the views from the structure's massive western windows were captivating. But it wasn't a *home*.

Not to Cassie.

For her, the structure was little more than a glorified prison. One disguised as something most people could only dream of owning. The problem with coveting thy neighbor, however, was never truly knowing what went on behind closed doors.

And in her experience, the fancier the doors...the uglier the secrets.

So many secrets.

Taking in a deep, cleansing breath, she shook the melancholy mood away and grabbed the purse, carry-on, and suitcase. Heading barefoot up the gorgeous walnut staircase a few feet to her left, Cassie reached the top and entered through the first set of double doors she came to.

The master suite had once been a space she'd oohed and awed over. Now she ignored the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking Elliot Bay, dropping the purse and carry-on onto her king-sized bed while rolling the suitcase to a stop where she stood.

With a quick press to a button on the wall closest to her, she activated the room's electronic shades. Cassie waited a few seconds longer before flipping on the lights.

Thanks to the night sky and rumbling storm, it was unlikely anyone was out on the water or walking the shoreline below. But that still didn't keep her from feeling creeped out at the mere *thought* of someone being able to see her from the outside looking in.

Walking past the generous seating area next to the windows on her right, she headed through yet another opened doorway. The bare soles of Cassie's feet hit the en suite bathroom's cool marble tile just as her phone dinged with an incoming text.

Her steps faltered before stopping altogether. Spinning around, she went back into the bedroom where her purse still lay. Giving it a quick unzip, she reached in and pulled out her phone.

Cassie smiled when she saw her best friend Lori's name attached to the message...

Hey, you sexy bitch! You make it home yet, or did your plane float away with all the rain?

With a soft chuckle, she immediately responded...

Just got into the house. Landing was a bit rough due to the storm, but okay flight otherwise. Glad to be home.

Lori's reply came through seconds later...

I bet! You crashing for the night, or are you staying up for a bit?

Her heart warmed knowing her friend was probably going to offer to come over to keep her company. Lori had done that a lot since Cassie's split from her soon-to-be ex-husband. She was a sweet friend like that.

But it had been a long trip with two delays before take-off, and all she wanted was to take a hot shower, have a glass of wine, and to fall asleep in her very own bed. Which is exactly what Cassie texted back to the woman who knew her better than anyone else in the whole wide world...

Cassie: I'm beat. Gonna shower and head to bed. Early office day tomorrow.

She didn't have to explain that last part. Lori would understand.

Lori: *Still playing the avoidance game, I see?*

She smiled again because, yeah. Lori got her.

Cassie: *Every chance I get.*

Lori: *I don't know why you don't just quit that place and start your own firm.*

Cassie: *Can't until after the divorce is final. And who knows when that will be.*

Lori: *I'm sorry, sweetie. Hopefully the SOB gets his head out of his ass soon and finally just agrees to freaking sign! That jerkwad has put you through enough.*

Her friend's unpolished ways made Cassie chuckle. This was how things were when it was just the two of them. Out in public, they were perfectly polite and appropriate, their behavior nothing less than becoming for anyone who might be watching.

But when it was just the two of them, when she and Lori were away from prying eyes and eavesdropping ears, they were all laughs and snorts and unladylike language. Just like the old days when they'd first connected during their undergrad years.

It was a time Cassie thought about often. A time she wished she could return to, if only to make different choices.

Or *choice*, rather. Singular.

Over her thirty-two years of existence, there was only one thing she truly regretted. A tiny blip of a moment, but one that had changed the trajectory of her entire life in ways she never could have predicted.

Now here she was, praying for the day she would finally be free. Free from a house she never wanted and a man she once thought hung the moon. But until then...

Cassie: *From your fingertips to God's ears, sister! Chat tomorrow?*

Lori: *Is that even a question?*

Another chuckle and one heart emoji later, she was back on her way to a much needed shower. Cassie took her time, letting the warmth of the water and steam seep fully into her chilled bones.

Half an hour later, she was dried off, lotioned up, and dressed in her favorite nightgown and robe. Slipping her feet into the ridiculously oversized fuzzy slippers Lori had given her last Christmas, she headed back downstairs for a glass of her favorite wine.

But by the time her cozy feet hit the bottom step, Cassie had changed her own mind, deciding on a cup of hot lavender tea instead. A glass of sweet red wine before bed was her usual go-to, but despite the recent shower, she still felt a bit cold. Plus the tea's warmth and soothing lavender would hopefully help her sleep.

And after months of back-and-forth with her soon-to-be-ex—and his pretentious, overbearing, condescending family—a good night's sleep was something she desperately, *desperately* needed.

Cassie's slippers dragged across the expensive tile floor as she shuffled lazily into the kitchen. Flipping on the lights, she felt a slight easing in the tension in the muscles around her neck and shoulders.

Surrounded by walnut cabinets that went all the way to the ceiling, appliances that would make any professional chef drool, and custom granite countertops with gorgeous swirls of browns, tans, and cream, it was the one place Cassie felt like she could be herself. The only room that harbored good memories in a place that had housed so much heartache and pain.

She lived alone and gave most of what she baked away to the people at their office. For her, it was never about consuming the end result.

For Cassie, it was all about the process.

When she baked, she could become lost in the cathartic creations she chose to make. Hidden away from all the lies, betrayal, and hurt that had so painfully replaced what had once been a loving, caring marriage.

Or so she'd thought, anyway.

The only things that man is capable of loving are himself, money, and sex. And not necessarily in that order.

Cassie huffed out a humorless breath. Unfortunately her subconscious was spot on in that assessment, which was why she hid away in her kitchen every chance she got. She just wished there were more hours in the day so she could lose herself more often.

Baking sure as hell beats the last three therapists I've tried.

Three professionals who, while perfectly pleasant and professional, had been more worried about the potential risk to their careers and reputations than helping her through a very stressful, emotional time in her life.

Lord forbid, anyone dare go against the All-Mighty Montgomerys.

Grabbing her favorite mug—also a gift from Lori—Cassie set about filling the vintage tea kettle she'd picked up on a whim after seeing it on display in a store near her work. While waiting for the water to boil, she walked over to the folding patio doors.

Since the kitchen was tucked away just off a small nook for the round table that never got used, it offered just enough light to prevent a stubbed toe while keeping her comfortably concealed within the room's shadows.

Unable to shake the uneasy feeling she'd had since arriving back home, she pulled the smooth lapel of her robe together while watching the rain as it fell from a blackened sky. Hard. Heavy. And with no signs of stopping.

Sounds a lot like your mess of a marriage.

Cassie released a humorless laugh as she turned to head back into the kitchen. She was halfway between the large glass accordion doors behind her and the end of the granite-topped bar when a sudden—and very loud—pounding sounded from the front door.

She gasped, her hand flying to her chest with a start. Her first instinct was to check the time, but when Cassie glanced down at her wrist, she found it bare.

Your watch is upstairs charging, remember?

Her gaze swung to the microwave mounted beneath one section of cabinets. “Nine-thirty?” she whispered to herself.

Who the heck would be stopping by unannounced at this hour? And in this kind of weather?

Only one name came to mind, and while she loved Lori like a sister, Cassie found herself wanting to strangle her well-meaning friend. Muttering beneath her breath as she walked, the sound of her slippers sliding against the tile filled the air on her way back to her front door.

“Dang it, Lori,” she sighed. “I missed you, too, but I really just wanted to drink my tea and go to bed.”

Barely resisting the urge to slam her foot down in a childish stomp, Cassie passed by several high-priced paintings, a half-bath that barely got used, and the office where she spent most of her time when she was home.

Her footfalls grew silent as her slippers hit the thick runner leading to the door. Reaching for the keypad on her left, she tapped in the four-digit security code to avoid activating the ear-piercing alarm.

Cassie’s fingers had just started to curl around the brass handle the color of aged bronze when another round of loud—and totally unnecessary—pounding began again.

“Okay, already.” She started to pull open one of two solid wood doors. “Geez, woman. What’s the big emergen—”

The rest of her words became lost with a slight gasp of surprise.

“Hey, babe.” Light blue eyes she used to get lost in stared back at her.

“Russ?” Cassie looked out into the dark with confusion, half-expecting to see someone else there. “W-what are you doing here?”

At nine-thirty at night...in the middle of a storm.

“Can I come in?”

Her guarded heart gave a hard thump, but she schooled her expression and gave a curt shake of her head. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.” In fact, she *knew* it wasn’t. “Besides, my lawyer said I’m not really supposed to—”

“Come on, Cass. I won’t stay long. Promise,” her soon-to-be-ex hurriedly assured her. “And I’m not here to cause any trouble, I swear. I just...”

A hand that had once been so tender and loving moved to unzip the top portion of his expensive black windbreaker. Reaching inside, he’d just started to pull out something when Cassie’s pulse spiked with a massive dose of unexpected fear.

The hand reappeared with something clutched tightly in its grasp. On reflex, she took a step back and raised a defensive palm.

“Russel, wait! What are you—”

“What?” The man’s square, chiseled face twisted with confusion. Half-a-beat later, he rolled his eyes in that frustratingly arrogant way only he had. “Jesus, Cass. What’s the matter with you? It’s just the divorce papers.” He unfolded them for her to see.

Heat crept into her cheeks, and she instantly felt horrible for letting her mind go where it had just traveled. Russ may be a cheat and a liar, but he was no cold-blooded murderer.

Said every wife whose husbands killed them.

Though she probably should cut back on her DVR recordings of *Dateline* for a while.

“My attorney and I looked them over this afternoon,” Russ spoke again. “He wanted me to keep holding out for more, but I—”

“*More?*” Anger replaced fear, leaving Cassie’s brows shooting sky high. “Are you *kidding* me right now?”

Thanks to her in-laws’ power and money—and a prenup she was stupid enough to sign without double-checking the fine print first—the lying, cheating jerk was already walking away with over half of everything. Including her third of a company she’d helped build.

And his lawyer wanted to keep dragging this thing out for *more?*

Not a freaking chance.

“You and your attorney can both go straight to hell.” Cassie started to slam the door in Russ’s face, but his booted toe shot out at the last second.

“Wait!” He kept the door from shutting all the way. “I said he *wanted* me to go for more. But I told him no. I told him I’m done fighting with you, and I just...” He blew out a breath. “I told him I was ready to sign.”

She froze, her attempts to shut the door on him and his foot halting mid-push. Had he just said what she thought he said?

“You...what?”

“I said I’m ready to sign. That’s why I came by. I remembered you saying your plane was getting in later this evening, so I thought I’d come over so I could tell you in person.”

Whether he was genuine in his claim, she wasn’t sure. But after an intense and diligent search, Cassie couldn’t find even the slightest hint of a lie swirling back at her from the blues of his eyes.

She pulled her lapels together to stave off the rainy night’s breeze. “You could’ve told me at the office tomorrow.”

“When?” Russ immediately shot back. “Between court, meetings with clients, and you doing everything in your power

to ensure our paths cross as little as possible, we barely see one another anymore. And when we *do*, it's either during our weekly case review or when we're sitting in a room with two lawyers who really don't give a shit about either one of us."

Great. Not only had the man noticed what she'd *hoped* to be a concealed attempt at avoidance, but he also had a point about the lawyers.

God, I hate it when he's right.

"I just want to talk, Cass. Five minutes. That's all. Trust me." Russ flashed those puppy-dog eyes and boyish grin her way. "You're going to want to hear what I have to say."

He'd always done that. Used his natural charm and good looks to get whatever he wanted. Even now, after everything he and his family had put her through, Cassie found herself stepping back to give him room to pass.

"Five minutes," she warned as he entered the house he'd insisted they build. "That's it."

"Thanks. You look good." Russ unzipped his windbreaker before hanging it on the knob of the nearby coat closet door. Turning back around, he gave her an almost leering glance before adding a lowered, "Really good."

Seriously? "The clock's ticking, Russ, and I've had a really long da—" A high-pitched whistling broke through the tense night, reminding her of the water she'd left to heat on the stove. "I was just about to have some tea." Cassie headed back down the entryway hall. "Would you like some?"

"To be honest, I was kind of hoping for something a little stronger." Russ fell in step behind her. "Glass of wine, perhaps?"

"You really think a glass of wine over a five-minute conversation before driving yourself home is a good idea?"

"With the conversation you and I are about to have?" He spoke over the screeching sound of whistling steam. "I think it's the best damn idea I've had in ages."

Rather than play into his attention-seeking dramatics by arguing further about the wine or inquiring about his ominous comment, Cassie went straight to the stove and turned off the heat. The ear-piercing sound dissipated quickly.

“One glass, and then you’re gone,” she informed him. Walking to the fridge, she pulled open the door and reached inside for the near-empty bottle she knew was still there.

“One’s all I need.”

With a tug, Cassie pulled the bottle stopper free, releasing the airtight seal the silicone’s expandable design had previously created. Since she rarely drank more than one glass at a time, buying a stopper like this one had proven itself a smart investment.

“The place looks great.”

“That’s probably because I haven’t changed anything since you left.” She handed him the freshly poured glass of sweet red wine. “So what was so important, you had to drive all the way over here in the pouring rain at almost ten o’clock at night?”

A booming clap of thunder shook the entire house just then, Mother Nature’s impeccable timing making Cassie’s muscles jump.

Russ’s eyes softened with a familiarity she wished they didn’t possess. “Still hate storms, I see.”

“I hate being tired even more.”

The snarky comment almost made her feel bad. Almost.

“Okay, okay.” He took a sip of his wine and walked slowly toward the small kitchen table. “Can we at least sit while we talk? I hate having serious conversations standing up.”

We can hop on one foot, for all I care. I just want you to say what you came to say so I can drink my tea in peace and go to bed.

Lifting the porcelain lid from her decorative tea canister, Cassie scooped just enough loose lavender tea to fill her small, heart-shaped metal strainer. She pulled the hand towel hanging

from the front of the stove, using it as a makeshift hot pad while picking up the steaming kettle.

With her tea properly steeping, she carried the mug over to where the man she'd vowed to love, honor, and cherish for eternity sat. On the table in front of him were the creased and stapled papers that would release her from that promise. And if what Russ had told her at the door was true...

"You said you were ready to sign?" Cassie pulled out the chair across from him and sat.

A mixture of sadness and acceptance fell over him as he gave her a solemn nod. It was a look she desperately, desperately wanted to believe.

"Like I said, my attorney and I went over everything again." He slid the papers across the varnished wood toward her. "After what turned into a fairly heated discussion, I was able to convince him to change a few things to your benefit." His serious stare dropped to the papers. "Including what you'll make when I buy out your share of the firm. It's all highlighted in yellow to make it easier for you to find."

With slow, almost suspicious movements, Cassie slid her forgotten tea to the side and picked up the legal documents. Scanning each one carefully, she flipped through them all until she'd reached the very last page.

And then she started over, reading every single highlighted section again.

Because if what she'd just read was true, and this wasn't some sort of trick he and his scumbag lawyer had cooked up, Russ had changed the total settlement offer to twice the original amount.

He'd also agreed to let her keep the house—or one hundred percent of the profit, should she choose to sell—as well as giving her well over what he'd offered for her portion of the company.

"I don't understand." She lifted her wary gaze to his.

"What's there to understand? It's all right there in black and white...and yellow." A sizeable gulp of vino was followed

by a playful smirk.

But Cassie wasn't much in the smiling mood. "You've contested every single aspect of this divorce for over a year, Russ. Now, all of a sudden, you show up unannounced to say you're giving me more than I asked for from the start? And I'm just supposed to, what...smile and agree without asking questions?" She held the documents up. "I thought you knew me better than that."

"I *do* know you, Cass." Her estranged husband leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table. "Probably better than you know yourself. Which is why I know what you're thinking."

Tossing the papers down, she settled back into her chair and crossed her arms at her chest. "Please...enlighten me. But talk fast and drink faster, because your five minutes were up two minutes ago."

She wasn't sure how accurate her estimation was, but the point had been made, regardless.

After taking another swallow, Russ set the near-empty glass down and smiled. "You're thinking this is all some sort of game. A ploy to screw you out of what you think you deserve." The corners of his thin mouth fell slightly. "I can see why you'd think that, and truthfully I don't blame you. I wasn't a good husband to you, Cassandra. But I did love you." His Adam's apple bobbed. "I *do* love you."

"Russ..."

"Don't worry, this isn't me trying to get back together. I know it's too late for that. For us." He cleared his throat with a frown. "I wanted you to know...what I, uh...what I did to you." Another clearing of his throat. "The cheating and lying..." Russ picked up his cup and gulped the rest of its burgundy contents. "I don't know why I do it. I mean, surely you can agree we never should've gotten married to begin with, but...you didn't deserve to be treated the way you were. And you sure as hell don't deserve to be strung along the way you have."

“Or to have my name dragged through the mud by your parents and their slew of ridiculous lies.”

“Or that.” Russ lifted his fist to his mouth as he gave a slight cough. “Look, Cass. I know you probably don’t believe a word I’ve said, but I do care about you, and I want you to be happy. Which is why I’ve decided to ignore the lawyers and my parents.” Those gray eyes settled onto hers with a sigh. “And it’s why I’m finally letting you go.”

She wanted to believe him. To think the parts of the man she’d fallen in love with still existed. But the flames of his betrayals had burned Cassie far too many times to simply take him at his word.

Because a man who lies was a man without honor. And the word of a man without honor was worthless as far as she was concerned.

“Funny.” She sat up and gave the metal steeper a gentle swirl before pulling it free and setting on the mug’s matching saucer. “I figured you were doing this for yourself. This way you’re finally free and clear to be with *her*.”

Putting the ceramic rim to her lips, she rested her elbows on the table and waited for the clever retort she assumed he had waiting in his arsenal. Cassie didn’t know who *her* was, and she truly didn’t care. But there was definitely another woman warming her husband’s bed at night.

Some things never change.

“I don’t love her.” He shook his dampened head. “I never loved any of them. They were just—”

“I don’t care what they were, or who you love or don’t love, Russell. I just want this all to be done and over with so you and I can go our separate ways.”

He dipped his head with a solemn nod. “I understand. But...just so you know...” Another cough. “I ended things with...her.” He cleared his throat and pulled his collar away from his neck, almost as if he were feeling choked. “Figured I should probably get my head on straight before trying my hand at an actual relationship again. Until I know what I

want...hell, what I *need*...I'm not going to be any good to anybody. So yeah." He coughed again with a frown. "I, uh...I went by her place on the way to my lawyer's office this morning and ended it."

"I think that's a step in the right direction," she told him honestly.

A stretch of awkward silence blanketed the room. As Cassie worked to come up with a way to ask him to leave that wouldn't sound bitchy, Russ pushed himself away from the table as if he were preparing to leave.

"It's late, and I know you're tired." His shoulders fell. "If it's all right with you, I'll call my attorney on the way home and tell him to meet us at the office first thing in the morning." Another clearing of his throat. "Figured it makes more sense to use our own notary to make it official, rather than paying someone else to do the same job."

Yes, that did make more sense.

"I want to keep this here to read back over it between now and then." She lifted the papers as she stood. "And Ellie will want to look them over carefully before anyone signs anything."

Ellie was her attorney and friend.

"If she didn't, I'd suggest you find yourself a new lawyer."

He had a point, but Cassie didn't actually need Ellie to read over the changes. She'd know before she ever laid her head on her pillow tonight whether the newest version of their divorce settlement was one she intended to sign.

Being a lawyer, herself, she was well-versed in all the legal jargon other lawyers loved to throw into the mix. And so help her, if Russ or that jackass attorney of his put anything in there in an attempt to slip something past her—

Her almost-ex rose to his feet, but nearly toppled over in the process.

"Russ!" Cassie rushed around the table to his side, her hands shooting out to help keep his swaying form steady. "Oh

my gosh. Are you okay?”

“I don’t...know.” He cleared his throat yet again before releasing several hard, loud coughs in a row. “I jusss got... really...dizzy...allofa...sssudden.” His words began to slur and run together.

What the...

“Russell?”

“Chest...” He slapped a hand to his heaving chest as he started gasping for air. “Can’t...breathe...”

His knees gave out, the man’s six-foot frame too much weight for her to bear alone. Cassie cried out her husband’s name as they both fell to the tiled floor. Russ’s head bounced with a sickening thud, but the way her arms had been wrapped around him, there hadn’t been time to prevent it.

She looked down and realized his eyelids had closed. His previously heaving chest no longer rose or fell in his lungs’ desperate effort to fill themselves with air. In fact, as he lay motionless in her arms, Cassie realized...

He’s not breathing!

“Russell!” she screamed his name that time. With her head on his chest she listened for a sign—any sign—that said something other than what she already knew to be true.

Her stomach fell when she didn’t hear a heartbeat.

Cassie’s hand shot out, her fingertips pressing against the pulse point on his neck. He felt cool and clammy beneath her touch, despite the sheen of sweat covering his skin.

CPR. You need to start CPR!

Remembering the training their entire office had recently gone through, Cassie went through all the steps. The tilting of the head. Two strong, quick breaths blown into his opened mouth.

Thirty compressions against his chest as she sat straddling a man she both loved and hated, praying with everything she had for him to survive.

Cassie repeated the lifesaving steps as she'd been taught and certified to perform. But after several attempts at reviving the unconscious man, she pushed herself to her feet and ran as fast her quivering legs would take her.

"I-I'm calling for help!" she yelled on the off chance he could hear her.

He's already gone, Cass. He can't hear anything anymore.

Refusing to believe the voice in her head, she grabbed the cordless landline phone stationed on the counter near the other end of the kitchen and immediately dialed nine-one-one. Running back to where Russ still lay, she dropped to her knees and checked his pulse again.

"Come on, Russ." Cassie didn't even realize she was crying. "Don't you do this to me. Goddamn you, don't you do this to me!"

"Nine-one-one, what is the nature of your emergency?"

"I need an ambulance!" Cassie quickly rattled off her name and the address. "M-my husband...h-he just collapsed. I tried administering CPR, but he's still not breathing, and I can't find a pulse."

"Help is on the way, ma'am. I'm going to stay on the line with you until they get there, okay?"

"O-okay."

"I want you to put me on speaker and lay the phone next to you, and then resume CPR on your husband, okay?"

"O-okay."

Following instructions, Cassie tapped the screen to put the call on speaker and then set the phone down on the floor. "Have you started CPR, Cassie?"

"Yes!" she shouted unnecessarily.

Once again in the straddled position, she pushed as hard as her burning arms would allow to try to save his life. "Come on, Russ," she grunted between pumps. "Please. You can't... die. You...*can't!*"

She may not love the guy anymore, and he and his family may have made her life a living hell this past year, but that didn't mean she wanted Russ *dead*.

Sirens blared in the distance, and Cassie wasn't surprised they'd reached the house so quickly. Given the elevated status of the neighborhood—as well as the Montgomery name—attached to her address, the EMS and fire services were always quick to respond when one of their addresses popped up on a call.

It was the first time in years Cassie was thankful she still shared Russ's last name.

“Is the door unlocked?”

Crap. “No!” she answered frantically.

“It's okay. I'm alerting fire right now that entry will need to be forced.”

The next few minutes felt like hours as she continued pushing herself to keep going.

Her muscles burned, and she kept having to wipe the sweat and tears from her eyes, but her life-saving movements never faltered. Not until two firefighters pulled her away so the paramedics could do their jobs.

After that, all she could do was watch and pray. And when the medics both ceased in their heroic efforts, turning to give her and the firemen standing nearby a confident shake of their heads, Cassie heard someone screaming out in denial.

It wasn't until the first responders began their attempts to calm her that she even realized the sound was coming from her.

THREE DAYS LATER...

ARCHER NASH PROPPED HIS FEET UP ON HIS DESK AND crossed his legs at his ankles. Leaning back, he settled himself comfortably against his black leather chair, and for the next few minutes, he listened intently to the latest update in a news story he'd been following closely the last few days.

Perhaps a little too closely?

Ignoring the voice in his head, he reached up with a slight grunt and grabbed the remote from the desk's slick, shiny surface. A rising blue bar appeared in the bottom right corner of the screen as he turned the T.V.'s volume up.

Archer returned to his previous, relaxing position, and lost himself in the oddly intriguing story.

“Cassandra Montgomery was seen leaving the courthouse with her attorney, Elizabeth Ross, shortly before ten this morning. Sources within both the Seattle Police Department and the King County Courthouse have confirmed that Mrs. Montgomery's one-million-dollar bail has been met, and the woman quickly becoming known across social media as The Black Widow Lawyer has been released. Mrs. Montgomery's

bail was set on the condition she does not leave the city of Seattle pending trial.”

Ten percent of a million-dollar bond...probably couch cushion change to a woman like that.

“Those of you at home who have been following this story will remember our station was the first on scene three nights ago when Russell Montgomery—Cassandra’s estranged husband and co-owner of the Montgomery-Yates Law Firm—was found dead inside the couple’s home following a frantic call to nine-one-one.” The news anchor continued with her report. “Authorities have yet to release the exact type of poison used to kill Mr. Montgomery, but they have confirmed Mrs. Montgomery confessed to giving her estranged husband the contaminated wine minutes before his death. Given the damning evidence against Cassandra Montgomery, as well as the high-profile status of those involved, we’ve been told the court proceedings have been fast-tracked, and the trial is slated to begin sometime within the next few weeks. As always, our station will continue to bring you more on this story as it develops.”

Archer snatched up the remote and hit rewind. Keeping his gaze laser focused, he watched with purpose, this time. Pausing it at the exact moment the screen had filled with the accused woman’s face.

Long, blonde hair as shiny as silk. Big, blue eyes he wished would look his way. Features so flawless they almost appeared airbrushed. And though Cassandra Montgomery’s body had been hidden beneath a long wool coat that probably cost more than his entire wardrobe combined, he’d bet his next paycheck the woman’s curves were as perfect as the rest of her.

Killer looks for a killer woman.

But was she really a killer? Or were her attorney’s claims of innocence more than a woman trying to cover her client’s ass?

Archer studied those frozen eyes again.

They weren't looking at the camera, but away as if searching for a means of escape. The Montgomery woman hadn't turned toward the gaggle of reporters who'd shoved their way closer to shamelessly beg for a comment. Nor had the supposed murderer taken advantage of the media exposure to profess her innocence to the court of public appeal.

In fact, every snippet of footage Archer had seen of Cassandra Montgomery since her husband's untimely—and highly sensationalized—death three days ago, the woman seemed to do everything she could to avoid the public eye.

Question was, was the woman trying to shield herself because she was guilty or because she was innocent and afraid? Was there more to the story than the evidence showed, or was this a simple case of a woman scorned?

All questions that had occupied his mind far too often these last three days.

Why the hell he gave a shit about some rich chick who offed her husband, was beyond him. It wasn't like their hoity-toity lives affected his in any way.

In the end, The Black Widow Lawyer would probably pay her way to a not-guilty verdict, get some big, multi-million-dollar book deal, and have a made for T.V. movie produced about her life and how she was the real victim all along. Wasn't that how most stories like those went?

Archer could see the headlines now...

Pretty Murderess Gets Off Scott Free. Public Showers Femme Fatale with Sympathy. Killer Paid Millions for Her Story.

Hitting the button once more, he took the T.V. off pause and watched the last portion of the news story again. This time, however, he imagined it as if Cassandra Montgomery had already been found guilty. A sort of test to see if his gut would react any differently than before.

Surprisingly, it did. Just not in the way Archer had expected.

Rather than relaxing with the notion that justice would be served should a guilty verdict be rendered by a jury of her peers, his gut had filled with even more tension than before. When he studied those avoiding eyes and body movements designed to shield—really watched her with a trained operative’s eyes—Archer didn’t feel a sense of justice.

He felt...wrong.

From the moment the breaking news alert about Russell Montgomery’s death had interrupted the game he’d been watching, something about the case against the man’s wife was just *wrong*. Problem was he had no idea what to do with that.

Nothing to do, dipshit. It’s not your case; therefore it’s not your problem.

No, it wasn’t his problem. *She* wasn’t his problem. But the new company he’d agreed to help run was, so...

Archer turned off the T.V. and slid the remote back onto his desk. Lifting his black boots from the smooth surface, he dropped his feet to the carpeted floor and wheeled his leather chair back into position.

Looking around at the spacious office with its dark woods, earthy tones, and exposed red brick, he couldn’t help but shake his head and grin with wonder. A year ago—hell, a little over six *months* ago—he would have laughed in the face of anyone who tried telling him he’d be living in Seattle and working at a place where he had his very own office and fancy desk.

Yet here he was, living in Seattle, employed by the one of the fastest-growing private security firms in the country. And the best part...

He got to work side-by-side with his brothers again. And this time, *they* were the ones in charge.

Eagle’s Nest Securities—the company Archer and four of his former Navy SEAL teammates started up a few months earlier—had catapulted into what felt like an overnight success. Not only were they *not* hurting for business, but it had gotten to the point they’d actually had to start taking turns with

walk-ins so one of them would always be available for those in dire need of immediate assistance.

So far, that had only happened twice. Both situations had been serious. Both potentially deadly. And thanks to Archer and his team, both would-be victims were safe and sound. Their aggressors now behind bars.

Where assholes like them belonged.

That was how things worked with their firm. Someone came to them with a problem outside law enforcement's reach—stalker, crazy ex who refuses to take no for an answer, personalized home security system designs and installation—the men of Eagle's Nest Securities took care of it all.

“Mr. Nash?”

Archer blinked, his gaze swinging to the phone on his left. The damn thing had more buttons than he'd ever know what to do with, but the tiny red light shining bright said he was no longer alone.

“What's up, Hannah?” he spoke to the young woman they'd hired as their full-time office manager.

“There's a woman here who would like to speak with one of the team.”

And it's my week for walk-in duty. “I'll be right out.”

“Actually, there's no one else out here now. I can show her back if you'd like.”

“Works for me.” Archer grinned as the line went dead, and the red light vanished.

He liked Hannah. At twenty-six, she was young enough to have the energy to keep up with all of them but intelligent enough—and thankfully, mature enough—to tighten in the reins when needed.

Most importantly, she was great with their clients, great at her job, and she seemed to genuinely enjoy it. Just like he enjoyed his.

What's not to like?

He and his teammates got to use their SEAL training to protect the innocent but without all the government red-tape B.S. getting in the way. The money was better than anything Uncle Sam ever bothered to pay, and they hadn't been away from home for a job for more than a couple weeks at a time.

So hell yeah, Archer loved this new gig. And he was pretty damn good at it. They all were, which was why their business was booming.

A few months ago, after their team leader and the man's now-wife were nearly killed by a high-profile corporate god blinded by greed, the couple decided to use their massive settlements they'd received as a result to start up Eagle's Nest Securities. They brought the idea to Archer and the other members of his former SEAL team, and once they started up, news of their existence spread like wildfire.

When the public learned that Archer and the guys had already worked together as one of the most successful SEAL teams on record, business exploded. And as of now, it didn't show any signs of stopping.

Speaking of business...

Archer stood and made his way around the edge of his desk. He straightened the material of his light gray button-down as he went, making it halfway between his desk and the door before a soft knock sounded from the other side.

"Come in," he announced, continuing on his current path.

The door opened, and Hannah's smiling face appeared. She began speaking to the woman standing behind her as she opened the door wider. "This is Mr. Nash. He's one of the firm's five security specialists."

Hannah moved to the side, giving him his first glance at the woman seeking help...

Blonde. Sharp features. Big, blue, incredible eyes.

Holy. Shit.

It was her. The woman from the news. The Black Widow Lawyer who'd allegedly poisoned her estranged husband in

the home they'd once shared was standing two feet away, and damn if Archer could bring himself to stop staring.

Cassandra Montgomery was wearing that same cream colored, wool dress coat she'd worn while leaving the courthouse. In the hours since, she'd pulled her long, thick hair back into a wavy ponytail. But unlike on T.V., Archer could see every silky shade of blonde in God's creation from where he stood.

The color wheel of golds reminding him of a wheat field that's been kissed by the sun. His fingers itched with the urge to rake through it. His pulse spiked with an unexpected shot of arousal.

This woman wasn't just pretty like he'd thought the first time he'd seen her on the news. She was...

Fucking gorgeous.

"It's nice to meet you," she greeted him with a slight raspy voice that made him think of sex.

Not just any sex, mind you. Slow, hot, sensual sex that would last well into the night and leave him totally spent yet begging for more.

What the hell is the matter with you? The woman's a potential client. And probably a murderer. And you're staring like an idiot.

And...she was still holding up her proffered hand.

Shit. "Archer Nash." He finally got his head out of his ass and shook her hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Montgomery."

"Cassie." A set of full lips curved into a guarded smile. "You can call me Cassie."

An unexpected jolt of electricity shot from her palm into his, and it was all he could do not to jerk his hand free from the searing heat. Schooling his expression—barely—Archer released his grip at a slow, natural pace, flashing her the same friendly smile he used with all Eagle's Nest clients upon their initial meeting.

Warm. Welcoming. And guarded in its own right.

Because he never trusted anyone he didn't know. Not until after he got to know them better and the team had the chance to do some digging to prove the client was as innocent as they claimed.

Sometimes not even then.

He turned that same smile in the other blonde's direction. "Thanks, Hannah," he politely dismissed her back to her other duties. "I'll take it from here."

"Of course. If you need anything else, just holler." Hannah's rosy lips curved even more with a parting smile as she spun on her heels and disappeared back down the long hallway.

Spine straight, Cassandra...*Cassie*...Montgomery stood silently beside him. The woman appeared to be calm and collected as she waited patiently for his direction, but Archer could see the desperation hiding behind those entrancing eyes as they stared up into his.

Desperation.

Uncertainty.

Fear.

I could erase that fear if you'd let me.

Archer cleared his throat, barely resisting a physical shake of his head. Where the *fuck* that thought had that come, he had no idea. But he pushed the crazy notion away and motioned toward the two chairs facing his desk.

"Please," he offered, clearing his throat again. "Have a seat."

"Thank you." She walked past with a polite smile that didn't reach those entrancing eyes. "I appreciate you seeing me on such short notice. I wasn't sure I'd be able to speak to anyone since I didn't have an appointment."

The scent of strawberries and vanilla filled his nostrils, and damn if he wasn't tempted to sniff her like a dog in heat.

Pretty sure sniffing clients is against company policy. Especially ones suspected of murder.

“Dangerous situations aren’t always something we can pencil into our schedules. We try to keep someone in-house for that very reason.” Archer made his way around his desk, the two of them sitting in their prospective seats at almost the exact same time. “So tell me, Cassie. What brings you to Eagle’s Nest today?”

“Do you watch the news, Mr. Nash? If you do, I’m assuming you know that I’ve been charged with murdering my husband.”

“I do.”

Her head tilted slightly, that blue stare of hers turning inquisitive as it remained locked with his. “I’m surprised you agreed to meet with me. Considering everyone thinks I’m some sort of sadistic killer who goes around poisoning unsuspecting men, that is.”

“Men?” Archer purposely arched a brow while still watching her closely. “There have been more than one?”

That titled head of hers straightened instantly, the look in her eyes set without the slightest hint of deception as she responded with a sharp, “There hasn’t even been *one*, Mr. Nash.”

Good answer.

The woman was smart, he’d give her that. But she was also a successful attorney, and intelligence and quick, succinct responses played a huge part in that world.

Keeping his tone steady and unthreatening, Archer studied every inch of her breathtakingly beautiful face and asked her point blank, “Are you saying you didn’t kill your husband?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.” Once again, no hesitation. “I didn’t kill Russ, nor do I have any idea how the cyanide got into my wine. That’s the poison that was used, though it’s my understanding that detail has been kept from the general public.”

“Yet you just shared it with me. A man you met less than sixty seconds ago. Why?”

“My attorney said you and your team could be trusted.”

A bold statement

“And what do you think?”

“I think it’s impossible for me to determine your trustworthiness after having only met you two minutes ago.” *Beautiful and smart.* “That being said, your team has already made quite a name for itself in the few short months you’ve been in business. Between that and your former experience as a Navy SEAL, I’m hoping discretion and confidentiality aren’t exactly new concepts for someone with your background.”

“From what my attorney said, someone crushed up several pits from Morello cherries and then put the powder into the bottle of wine. Apparently by crushing the pits, it releases a chemical—”

“Amygdalin.” He nodded. “Which converts into cyanide when ingested.”

Cassie gave a nod of her pretty head. “That’s what my lawyer said, yeah.”

He wondered if she realized the specific cause of death hadn’t been revealed to the general public. Or maybe she was already playing the game...give him a little something extra to try to win him over. Only...

She doesn’t look like she’s playing at anything. She just looks like she wants someone to help her.

“I know what you’re thinking.” The woman sounded quite confident.

“And what is that?”

“You’re wondering if I’m the type of person being portrayed in the news and around social media. Let’s see, I’ve been called a cold-blooded monster, a gold-digging whore... Oh, and my personal favorite, a Black Widow. But I can assure you I’m none of those things.”

“The police disagree.”

“Yeah well, the police are wrong.” She jutted her delicate chin. “Listen, Mr...”

“Archer.”

“Right. Sorry.” A slight crimson hue crept into her flawless cheeks, but Cassie drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Archer, the truth is, Russ was a liar and a cheat. It’s why we were getting divorced.” A flicker of hurt crossed over her, but she blinked it away as quickly as it appeared. “I may not have wanted to still be married to the man, but that doesn’t mean I wanted him dead.”

“If not you, then who?”

She crossed her legs with a shift in her seat. “I was kind of hoping you and your team could figure that part out.”

“Because you don’t want to spend the rest of your life in prison?”

“Because I’d like for there to *be* a rest of my life.” Her tongue swept nervously across her luscious lips. “I didn’t put the poison in that bottle of wine, Archer. Which means someone else did. And since I had no idea Russ was even coming over that night until he showed up at my door, the cyanide couldn’t have been meant for him. And *that* means—”

“It was meant for you.”

“Yes.”

Cassie’s softened tone and solemn expression tugged at his heart much harder than it should have.

“What about the police? Have they not been looking for other suspects?”

“Please.” A soft snort that made him want to smile sounded from the base of her throat. “They had this case closed the second Russ’s lab results came back positive for cyanide.”

“I know a few detectives on the force,” Archer countered. “They’re solid police.”

“Yeah, well, they’re among the lucky few. At least that’s been my experience.”

“As an attorney?”

“As the former daughter-in-law to Alastair and Barbara Montgomery.”

“You saying your late husband’s parents are crooked?”

“Is your shirt gray?” Cassie quipped without pause.

The corner of his mouth twitched with the urge to curve upward. “I take it, that’s a yes?”

“I have no proof, of course. The basis for my opinion is purely circumstantial and speculation.” Spoken like a true attorney. “But the Montgomerys own the largest, most successful corporate law firm in the Pacific Northwest. They’re net worth is over half-a-billion dollars, and pockets like those, well...” Her shoulders shook with a humorless huff. “Let’s just say they run very deep.”

While processing what had just been implied, Archer settled back against his chair and rested his linked fingers on his lap. “You know, some would say those deep pockets are the reason you killed your husband.”

“And just like the cops, they’d be wrong.” Cassie’s eye contact never faltered.

He’d been studying her with a trained, assessing gaze from the moment she’d appeared at his door. The woman spoke clearly, her body language showing none of the telltale signs of deception.

She had an answer for everything and was ready and willing to strike back at anything he threw her way. In fact, Archer hadn’t noticed her taking so much as a fraction of a second to mull a single one of his questions over.

Doesn't mean she's innocent.

No. No, it did not.

Not having to think before she answered, however, was a good sign she was being truthful. Of course, it could also

simply mean she'd come to E.N.S. well-rehearsed.

An attorney carrying the Montgomery name would absolutely be prepared. Especially when she's the defendant this time.

A point that conjured up yet another burning question...

“What about your lawyer? Does she approve of you speaking to us about the case?”

“Who do you think sent me to you?”

“Your attorney suggested you hire a private security firm to investigate the case against you?”

“And protect me.” Cassie nodded. “Ellie's smart, and the only lawyer in the city I trust. If she thinks I need your help investigating Russ's death, it's because she doesn't trust the cops in this city any more than I do.”

“That's a pretty harsh statement to make, considering you're part of the law enforcement system yourself. Also not exactly the best attitude to have when you're trying to get the police on your side.”

“Dirty cops are everywhere, Mr. Nash. Surely you aren't naive enough to believe otherwise. Just like there are dirty lawyers, or”—one of her perfectly shaped brows rose high—“dirty Navy SEALs. But make no mistake. I have a *huge* respect for law enforcement officers, as does Ellie.”

“Yet you're here because you don't trust the local P.D. to give you a fair shake.”

“Like I said, Russ's parents have a lot of pull in this town. Trust me, there was no love lost between us before this. But now...” A light shake of her head. “Alastair and Barbara have spewed hateful lies about me ever since I filed for divorce, and Russ moved out. They've dragged my name through the mud so many times I've lost count. Alastair, especially.” A frown created a tiny group of wrinkles between those perfect brows. “That man has done everything in his power to get me blackballed within my professional community.”

“Because he didn't want you married to his son?”

“Because I didn’t want to *stay* married to his son. A divorce would sully the Montgomery name, you see. Never mind the fact that I caught Russ in bed with another woman. Twice, by the way. A different woman each time.”

Damn. Archer had been cheated on once. He still remembered how much the betrayal had hurt. And that was way back in high school. To walk in on the one person who’d vowed to love, honor, and cherish you until death do you part in bed with someone else...

That had to have been a crushing blow.

Crushing enough to commit murder?

“I’m confused,” he admitted. “Your in-laws didn’t like you, but they didn’t want you and Russ to split up?”

“Like I said...they were trying to protect the Montgomery name. And now that it’s being talked about on every news channel from here to the coast, Russ’s parents are going to do everything they can to separate themselves and their family from me. I’m not exaggerating when I say they will cash in every single favor owed to them if it means seeing me go to prison for life.”

Something to keep in mind, but Archer decided to put a pin in that for now.

“Just so we’re clear, you’re wanting E.N.S. to find the person who killed your husband while also providing you with personal protection. Is that correct?”

“Yes. That’s...yes.” Cassie sighed. For the first time since entering his office, she seemed to let go of what he assumed was her stoic attorney demeanor and leaned forward, resting her forearms on the edge of his desk. “Please, Mr. Nash. I-I don’t know who would want me dead, but clearly someone does. And now, I’m either going to be put on trial for a murder I didn’t commit, or whoever put those crushed up seeds in my wine is going to try to kill me again. Call me selfish, but I’m not exactly keen on either of those options.”

The touch of sarcasm in that last part tugged at the corners of his lips. Even when she was being openly vulnerable, the

woman still had the power to make him want to smile.

Careful. She could be playing you.

Archer trailed over her despairing gaze and adorably stubborn chin. Her voice hadn't wavered any of the times she'd spoken to her innocence. Like before, she hadn't averted her gaze, nor had her pupils dilated.

From the beginning of their brief but informative conversation, Cassie had held a strong, committed presence in his office. But it was the look in her eyes now that reached him somewhere deep inside...

Serious. Disheartened. *Begging* him to help her in her search for the truth.

The woman was either one hell of an actress or she was telling him the truth. He'd find out soon enough.

But as he sat there, looking at her from across his desk, Archer didn't see a soulless, emotionless killer. When he gave himself permission to get drawn into those big, blue eyes—just for a moment—he didn't see a woman looking for him to help her get away with murder.

He saw a beautiful, desperate woman willing to put her future—her *life*—in the hands of a stranger. And wasn't that the reason the others had started Eagle's Nest in the first place?

Protect the innocent no matter the cost.

It was far too soon to know whether Cassie Montgomery was telling him the truth. For now, Archer chose to ignore the evidence that had been shared by the media and follow his gut instead.

He reached for his phone and picked up the receiver. After entering a three-digit extension, he held the receiver to his ear and waited.

Two rings later, he heard...

"Boyer."

"It's me. You busy?"

“Not really,” Chase Boyer drawled. “Both of my afternoon appointments had to reschedule, so I’m just usin’ the time to catch up on some paperwork. Why? What’s up?”

“It’s me. Can you cover walk-ins for a couple hours? There’s...” He kept his gaze on Cassie’s. “...something I need to look into.”

“Beats the hell out of paperwork. So yeah, man. No problem.”

“Thanks, brother. I’ll let Hannah know on my way out.”

“Sounds good. But hey...is everything good? ’Cause Lucky still owes me one for covering one of his days, and I’m pretty sure he’s back from that system install. I could get him to cover, then I could go with you. You know...in case you needed backup or anything.”

“No, it’s nothing like that.” He hoped. “Just need to check out a few things, and the sooner I can, the better.”

“Say no more, my friend. You change your mind; you’ve got my number.”

“Thanks.”

“Sure thing.”

One soft click later, and the line went dead.

Archer returned the receiver to its cradle and looked across the desk to Cassie. “Are you hungry?”

Those big, round eyes blinked from the unexpected question. Lifting her arms from his desk, her spine straightened once again. “I’m sorry?”

He raised a palm, sending her a quick grin. “Let me rephrase. There’s still a lot we need to discuss.” A. Lot. “I skipped breakfast, and it’s almost lunchtime, so I was thinking...if you were hungry...we could go over the basics of how this whole thing’s going to work while also grabbing a bite to eat.”

Something he’d learned during his time working for Uncle Sam...people tended to drop their guard while sharing a meal

and casual conversation. If Cassie was holding something back, then lunch at a cozy, comfortable diner was as good a place to start as any.

“Oh.” The sexy blonde gave a surprised, widened blink. “Um...I haven’t really had much of an appetite. Not since...” Sadness mixed with uncertainty, and she broke eye contact for the first time since sitting down. “But yeah. I guess...” Those eyes came back to his. “I guess I probably should eat something.” The tip of her tongue darted out with a quick swipe of her full, bottom lip. “Plus, like you said, there’s still a lot to go over.” A flicker of hope sparked behind those guarded eyes just then. “Wait. Does this mean you’ve decided to take my case?”

He should consult with the others. That was how they’d agreed to do things. But before Archer could keep from it, he heard himself say, “My team and I will keep you safe, Cassie. And we will find the person who killed your husband.”

Even if that person is you.

In a very not-guilty-like move, Cassie shot to her feet and returned the gesture with a firm handshake of her own. “Thank you, Mr. Nash. You have no idea how relieved I am to know someone like you has my back.”

Oh, I’ve got your back, sweetheart. And your—

He dropped that hand and cleared his throat as he rounded his desk and started for the door. “I’ll walk you back up to Hannah. She’ll uh...she’ll get you in our system and give you the paperwork you need.”

Remember why she’s here, dipshit.

Once again, the voice in his head was right. He couldn’t think about Cassie in that way. For multiple reasons.

At best, she was a client. An automatic hands-off. At worst, the mouthwatering bombshell was a murderer. Either way, nothing could ever happen between the two of them.

And wasn’t that a shame.

“I probably should have mentioned this sooner, but money isn’t an issue.” She fell in step behind him. “I only say that because I’m not sure what you charge for services like this. But I wanted you to know that whatever it is, I can either write you a check today, or—”

“We’ll worry about that part later,” he rumbled. “For now, it’s just basic info to get you in the computer as an official E.N.S. client. Then I’ll drive us to lunch.”

“Wait, you’re driving? What about my car?”

Archer had just reached for the knob but stopped and turned his gaze back to hers. “I want to check it over good before you drive it again.”

“Check it over?” Understanding struck mid-frown. “You think it may have tampered with?”

“If what you’ve told me is true and you didn’t put the poison in the wine—”

“I didn’t.”

“—then we have to act as if they plan to try again. Which means we can’t risk making assumptions to taking unnecessary chances with your safety.”

Cassie seemed to become slightly paler as the reality of her situation appeared to be sinking in. “Okay, so what happens after lunch?”

“We’ll come back here; I’ll brief my team, and then we’ll take a look at your car. If it’s safe to drive, I’ll follow you back to your place.”

“And then?”

“Then you’re going to walk me through that night again. As in physically walk me through the house just as you go back over what happened. We’re talking, from the time you got home until after the police left your house.”

“Okay,” she agreed easily.

“Once we’re finished with that, we’re going to make a list.”

“A list?” Those adorable wrinkles formed again between her confused stare. “What kind of list?”

With his hand curled around the doorknob, he was as serious as he could be when he told her, “The names of anyone who might want you dead.”

ARCHER NASH WAS ARGUABLY the most physically tempting man Cassie had ever laid eyes on. She wasn't quite sure what she'd expected upon entering the private security firm Ellie had recommended. But tall, dark, and belly-tingling sexy sure as heck wasn't it.

If I wasn't in the fight of my life right now...

She stole another glimpse of the alluring private security specialist from over the top of her menu. His focus was on the menu clutched in his strong, masculine hands, so she couldn't see his eyes.

But she'd already seen them well enough.

The color of chocolate, Archer's stare was as dark and intense as his presence. Unreadable, yet from the very first moment it had landed on Cassie—when their hands had first come together for an introductory shake—she'd felt an innate certainty that this was a man she could trust.

Even now as he perused the selections as if they had all the time in the world to spare, she knew he was on high alert and aware of their surroundings. And here *she* was, with the clock of her future ticking steadily away, and rather than thinking

about all she stood to lose, Cassie found herself unable to break the unexplainable trance.

Dark, thick waves fell over the top of Archer's head. Separated by a slightly off-center part, the soft arch of his bangs brushed along his temples, stopping just a touch above his dark brows. The strands there longer than those on the sides and back.

Sharp cheekbones framed a long, straight nose. Dark scruff the same color as his hair covered a strong, square jaw. And those lips...Cassie could only imagine what it would be like to feel them pressing against her—

Really, Cass? Dead husband...murder charge...poisoned wine... Any of this ringing a bell?

Her inner voice was right. The truth was she shouldn't care less what Archer or any of the men of Eagle's Nest Securities looked like. All that really mattered was that they were as good as Ellie had claimed.

Because after finally being released from jail that morning—a horrifying, humiliating experience she had no intention of repeating—her trusted attorney had revealed the lack of suspects in her case. Namely the fact that there *were* no other suspects.

Only Cassie.

Only me.

Knowing her freedom—her *life*—would soon be ripped away from her if she didn't find another plausible suspect to hand over to the police, she'd taken Ellie's advice and drove straight from the other woman's office to the downtown building that was home to Eagle's Nest Securities.

"I'm telling you, these guys are the real deal."

"How can you be so sure, Ellie?"

"Five former Navy SEALs, Cass. It doesn't get any more qualified than that."

No, she didn't suppose it did. Cassie just prayed Archer and the others on his team were enough to catch a killer...and

keep her ass alive.

“See anything you want?”

The rumbled double entendre was no doubt unintentional. But damn if it didn't leave her squeaking out a choked, “I'm sorry?”

With a slight lift of his chin, he motioned toward her menu. “Everything I've ever gotten here has been great. Don't think there's a bad choice on there.”

“Oh, I uh...yeah. I think I'm just going to go with the single smash burger and fries.” She'd picked the first thing that came to mind. “You?”

“Same, but the double.” He set the menu down in front of him. “Figured this place was a good choice since it's small and out of the way.”

“Off the beaten path, is that it?”

“Exactly.” An agreeable nod. “After what you've been through, I thought it might be best to come someplace on the outskirts of town. Less chance of you running into reporters or someone you know.”

“And here I thought you brought me to this little hole-in-the-wall place because it was in one of the poorest neighborhoods in Seattle.”

With a tilt of his head, Archer frowned. “Why would that matter?”

He's trying to play a game I've already mastered.

“I grew up in a neighborhood just like this one.” She looked around at the bustling lunch crowd. “If I had to guess, I'd say most of the people here are on their lunch breaks from their second...maybe even third job they've had to take just to make ends meet. Since they don't have time to waste, they're too busy scarfing down their meals and keeping focused on their own conversations and problems to notice the fancy rich lawyer hiding all the way back here in the shadows.”

That handsome head of his righted itself. “Given your situation, I'd think anonymity would be a good thing.”

“Oh, it is.” Cassie took a sip of her iced water. “But that’s not why you brought me here.”

“It’s not?”

She set her plastic cup down onto the table before her and shook her head. “You brought me here because you were hoping I’d feel comfortable enough to let my guard down. Possibly reveal something telling. Not a confession to murder, of course. But you were hoping for *something* that would give you a more definitive answer as to whether or not I did it. And since people have a tendency to slip up when they’re in a more relaxed, familiar environment...”

Cassie held out both hands palms-up as if to say “Voila!”. At first, Archer didn’t so much as twitch a single muscle. But then...

“You’re good, I’ll give you that.” One corner of his sharp, bow-shaped lips curved upward.

“I am good, Mr. Nash.” *And constantly underestimated.* “I’m a good attorney. I was a good wife...” At least she tried to be. “And I’m not stupid enough to poison the man I was divorcing with a glass of wine from my own kitchen. So if it’s all the same to you, I’d prefer to bypass all these little games you probably play with your other clients and just get to the part where we figure out who actually *did* put the cyanide in that bottle.”

The slightest touch of humor lit the browns in his eyes, and that smirk of his lifted a smidge more. “Fair enough,” Archer rumbled low.

And damn if the man didn’t look even sexier than before.

“So...how exactly does this whole thing work?” She stayed focused on the task at hand.

“That all depends.”

“On what?”

“You.”

There was no hesitation in his answer, and the smirk from before was all but gone. The imposing man simply stared back

at her as if his one-word response had made perfect sense.

To him, it apparently had. To Cassie, not so much.

“Me?” She searched his darkening gaze. “How does it depend on me?”

“The more open and honest you are with me from the beginning, the easier my job will be.”

“Keeping secrets is the Montgomery family’s specialty, Mr. Nash. Not mine. If there’s something you want to know, all you have to do is ask.”

“Okay.” Leaning forward, he lowered his voice so only she could hear. “Did you kill your husband?”

“No.”

“Do you know anyone who’d want to kill you?”

“No.” She frowned, her throat working to swallow down the terrifying thought. “If I did, I would have pointed the cops in that direction from the beginning.”

Those eyes remained locked with hers, the touch from their lasered gaze electrifying as he continued to stare. Studying. Assessing.

Judging?

But as Cassie looked back at him from across the table, she realized there was no judgement there. Curiosity, sure. But no judgement. Which made her wonder...

“Do you believe me, Mr. Nash?”

“Does it matter?”

The irony of his rumbled response wasn’t lost on her. Cassie couldn’t even begin to count the number of times she’d been asked that very same thing by her own clients. Not as much with the corporate cases, but the pro-bono work she did on the side was a different story altogether.

In those cases, more often than not, her clients almost always asked if she believed them to be innocent or guilty.

And each time, Cassie's automatic response was always the same...

My opinion on your guilt or innocence is irrelevant. What matters is whether I believe we can win with the evidence presented to the court by the prosecution.

It was the same response that had been drilled into her during law school. From practically day one, they'd been taught to never share their personal feelings with their clients.

Because feelings had no place in a courtroom.

That ideology had never quite settled well with her. But being a rule-follower by nature, she'd trusted her professors when they claimed it was the best way to practice law.

She could still hear the kind but stern man's voice, even now...

Facts and reasonable doubt, Cassandra. Those are the only two things that matter when trying a case. Everything else is simply fluff that serves no other purpose but to distract you.

The man had been a successful attorney for over two decades and was someone she'd admired throughout her entire collegiate career. So Cassie had taken to heart her trusted mentor's advice, and that was exactly how she'd practiced law ever since.

Oh, she wasn't cold or heartless or anything like that. Just always made sure to keep that professional wall between herself and her clients. It was the best way to prevent being blinded by emotions. Or so she'd believed.

But now...

Things look a whole lot different from the defendant's seat.

And if Archer Nash was the person she was entrusting her freedom to...if this was the man who was supposed to keep her safe...then yeah. His opinion of her mattered one hell of a lot.

"Call me crazy," she finally answered him, "but I'd feel a whole lot better if my bodyguard didn't think I was capable of cold blooded murder."

“We all have a dark side, Cassie.” Those eyes became fixed on hers. “Given the right circumstance, everyone’s capable of murder.”

“Not me.”

“For your sake, I hope that’s true.”

She held his stare a beat longer before reminding him, “You never answered my question.”

Not pretending to misunderstand, the former SEAL gave her another slow, assessing glance. Sitting back up, he gave her an understandable, “I don’t know you well enough yet to make that determination.”

That shouldn’t have stung like it did, but damn. For some reason, Cassie really, *really* needed this man to believe her.

“At least you’re honest,” she answered softly. “Which is more than I can say for the media.”

“You know what they say... If it bleeds—”

“It leads...” Her shoulders shook with a slightly humored huff. “Unfortunately I’m learning the reality of that more and more every day. I am grateful that you’re at least willing to hear me out.” She offered him a hint of a smile. “Aside from my best friend and my lawyer, you’re about the only other person who has.”

“I never run off assumptions, Cassie. Neither do any of the guys on my team.”

“That’s good, because all the evidence points to me being the killer,” she stated bluntly. “If I were the District Attorney and someone came to me with this case, I’d think I was guilty as sin, too. There’s only one problem with the nice, neat bow the D.A.’s all but tied this thing up with.” She kept her hold on his gaze steady. “It wasn’t me.”

“Then we need to get to work figuring out who did.”

Hope began to seep into her veins. “Great. Where do we start?”

“With you.” His dark gaze didn’t so much as twitch. “Cassie, I meant it when I said my team and I can keep you safe. And we will do everything in our power to find the person who slipped that poison into your wine. But you should know, we run a very thorough background check on all our potential clients. *Very* thorough.” That stare of his intensified. “Anything you try to keep from us, we’ll find it. And if at any point during our investigation we uncover anything that supports the D.A.’s case against you, my team and I have a moral and ethical obligation to hand it over to the authorities.”

Was any of this supposed to scare her? After three days dressed in an orange jumpsuit and peeing and showering in front of seven other women awaiting their fate, there was very little this man could say or do that would intimidate her.

“I’ve been charged with murder one, Mr. Nash.” She kept her voice low. “I’m fairly certain you won’t find a bigger skeleton in my closet than that. As for any secrets you think I may be harboring, I have none. And trust me when I say, I understand the importance of being one hundred percent honest in a situation like this.”

“For your sake, I hope that’s true.”

“It’s like I tell my clients...I can’t help them if they don’t trust me. As you pointed out, we don’t know anything about each other. But I do trust my lawyer. And despite how new Eagle’s Nest Securities is, Ellie trusts the reputation of your firm. Since I don’t have the luxury of spending a lot of time shopping around for someone to help keep me alive and out of prison, I figured you’re as good a shot as any I’ve got.”

As far as recommendations went, Cassie knew hers wasn’t the most glowing. But he wanted her to be honest, so...

“You decide what you want?” The cheery young waitress who’d brought them their drinks a few minutes before returned. With her trusty notepad and pen in her hands, she looked back at them expectantly.

“I’ll take the single smash burger with fries, please.”

“One single smash with fries...” The girl scribbled the order down before turning to Archer. “And for you, sir?”

“I’ll have the same but make mine a double.”

“Two smash burgers with fries, one single one double. Anything else I can get for you? The fried pickles here are to die for.”

Archer looked to Cassie, but she shook her head, knowing the burger would be more than enough. “I’m good, but if you want something—”

“I think that’s all for now.” He handed the waitress his menu. “Thanks.”

“My pleasure. I’ll get your order to the kitchen now. Should only be a few minutes.”

“Thank you.” Cassie handed the girl her menu.

Fifteen minutes—and several more questions—later, she was enjoying one of the most deliciously greasy cheeseburgers she’d ever consumed.

“Ohmygod,” the words ran together as she covered her half-filled mouth.

“Told you this place was good.” Archer’s bite took out a quarter of his own burger.

Good was an understatement. “I know you said you’ll run a deep background on me, but is there anything you need to know that can help speed the process along?” When his eyes blinked with surprise at her question, Cassie told him, “I wasn’t kidding when I said I’m an open book, Mr. Nash. And the faster you and your men rule me out as a suspect, the faster we can start looking for the actual killer.”

“Call me Archer.” He took a sip of tea, his Adam’s apple working as he swallowed. “And that’s good, because there’s going to be a lot of questions getting thrown your way over the next few days.”

“From you?”

“And my team.” He nodded. “I plan on meeting with them once we’re done here, but I thought you and I could cover some of the basics in the meantime.”

“Such as?”

“Let’s go back to your marriage.”

Russ’s lifeless face flashed before her eyes, but just as she’d done every other time since that unthinkable night, Cassie ignored it and focused on the present. “What do you want to know?”

“Everything.”

“Everything? Wow, um...okay. Let’s see....” Her wide eyes fluttered with several blinks. “Where do I even start?”

“I find the beginning’s usually the best place.”

Cassie’s focus slid back to his, her lips curving into a slight grin at his smartass remark. “The beginning. Right.” She cleared her throat. “Okay, well...Russ and I met when I was twenty-five. It was our senior year in law school. He and I had a couple classes together, along with Eddie—the third partner in our firm. Anyway, halfway through the semester, Eddie finally got up the courage to ask out my best friend, Lori. A year later, Russ and I were married. Lori and Ed eloped in Vegas six months after that.”

“You said your in-laws didn’t like the idea of you and Russ dating. Why is that?”

“Money.” *With them, it’s always about money.* “They had it and I, well...” Cassie swallowed. “I didn’t.”

“Rich boy falls in love with the girl from the wrong side of the tracks despite his parents’ objections?” Archer guessed.

The corners of her lips turned upward in a sad smile. “Something like that.”

“How did his folks react?”

“Exactly as I’d expected.” She cleared her throat again, this time to purposely shift into her best Alastair Montgomery impression. “She’s fine to sleep with, Russell. But that girl will

never meet the Montgomery standard. Have all the fun you want, but whatever you do, make sure you don't knock her poor ass up."

Archer's pretty eyes rounded with shock. "Your father-in-law actually said that?"

"Ex-father-in-law, but yeah." She nodded. "And he meant every word of it, too."

"Yet Russ still married you."

"He did." She'd been so happy the day he'd proposed. "At first, I thought it was the most romantic thing he could have ever done. Going up against a man as rich and powerful as his father couldn't have been easy. But Russ did it. For me. For us." She gave a quick, nervous lick of her lips. "Or so I let myself believe, anyway."

"What do you mean?"

"It took me a long time to see it. Much longer than it should have. But after that first year of our marriage, I realized Russ hadn't gone against his father's wishes because he was hopelessly in love with me. I mean, I believe he loved me in his own way, but..." Her shoulders fell with a sigh. "Looking back, it was never the kind of love a man should show toward his wife."

"So defying his father's order not to marry you was what? A giant 'fuck you' to his old man?"

Those rosy lips he'd love to taste curved upward. "More like a show of strength," she clarified. "For Russ, I was simply a means to an end. A way to prove himself to Alastair. He needed to show he had the backbone his father had been longing to see. And like the idiot I was, I fell for the façade." Heat crawled into her cheeks as she lifted her glass and took a sip of lemon water in an effort to cool away her embarrassment.

"The news said you were in the process of getting divorced. Who filed?"

"I did."

“When?”

“Nearly a year and a half ago, now.”

Archer frowned. “Do divorces normally take that long?”

“Only if they’re contested.”

“You said before that your in-laws...sorry, former in-laws didn’t want the divorce sullyng their name. Is that why Russ fought so hard to stay married?”

“Russ fought the divorce because that’s what his father wanted him to do.”

“Did you file because he cheated?”

“Among other things.” She sighed. “I should make something clear up front. My marriage was a fight I should’ve tapped out of a long time ago. The cheating just gave me the tangible excuse I needed to get out.”

“And the prenup?”

“That was one of the things I was trying to fight on my end.” A slight shake of her head. “Not because I’m greedy or wanted to take him for all he had.” That wasn’t it at all. “When we first got engaged, I was young and in love. I didn’t care about the Montgomery fortune. I just wanted to be married to Russ.”

“You didn’t read it before you signed it,” Archer guessed.

“Like I said, I was an idiot. At the time, I was willing to agree to whatever they wanted if it meant being able to marry the man I loved.” Boy did *that* come back to bite her in the ass. “But it didn’t matter, because Russ came over that night to tell me he was done fighting the divorce. In fact, according to the copy of the divorce agreement he brought with him that night, he’d instructed his attorney to not only give me what I originally asked for, but double that. Plus he agreed to let me keep the house, and he and Eddie were going to buy me out of my third of the firm so I could make a clean break and open my own practice.”

“So just like that, he up and changed his mind? Why?”

“That’s what I asked. He claimed he was tired of fighting and that he just wanted me to be happy.”

“Did you believe him?”

She shrugged. “He seemed sincere enough. But I’ve fallen for his lies so many times before. I learned to keep my optimism in check where Russ was concerned.”

Another flash from that night filled her mind’s eye, and this time, it brought with it a rush of emotion Cassie wasn’t expecting. Blinking away the sudden onslaught of moisture in her eyes, she took another drink of her water to hopefully conceal the sadness she felt over what happened.

“Here.” A paper napkin appeared before her.

Looking up, she found Archer staring back at her with empathy as he waited for her to take the kind offering. “Thank you.” She used the rough napkin to blot the corners of her eyes. “Sorry.”

“You lost someone you cared about. That’s nothing to apologize for.”

“You’re right.” A strong nod. “I wasn’t in love with him anymore. That ship is long gone. Hell lately, I didn’t even *like* him much. But yeah...I did still care.” *More than I wish I did.* “Russ was a bad husband, but he wasn’t a bad person. Not really. And he certainly didn’t deserve what happened to him.” Cassie used the napkin to catch another tear. “No one deserves to die like that.”

“I’m sorry you had to see that.”

She pictured Russ lying there, motionless on her kitchen floor. “It could have been me, Archer,” she whispered softly. “If I’d gone with a glass of wine instead of the tea, it *would* have been me.”

She’d be dead instead of Russ. And her killer would have gotten away with murder.

They still might if you don’t get your butt in gear and catch them.

“I’ll find the person who did this, Cassie,” Archer rasped the solemn vow as if he’d read her mind.

He’d made that same promise, earlier, back in his office. And like then, she believed he meant it. She just prayed he found them before they found her.

“I’LL COME GET you when I’m done.” Archer motioned toward the choice of leather chairs positioned around their welcoming reception area.

Glancing at the otherwise empty space, Cassie looked back at him and asked, “You don’t think your team will want to talk with me, too?” A quick shrug of a shoulder hoisted up the thin strap of her purse that had started to slip. “I’m assuming they’d have their own questions for me.”

“We typically discuss new cases as a team first,” he explained.

They also never agreed to take on a new client without first discussing it as a team. But this was different. *She* was different.

Despite having known her all of two hours—and the mound of damning evidence against her—he couldn’t shake the gnawing feeling that Cassie was telling the truth.

“Of course.” The classy woman took his explanation in stride. Retrieving her phone from her coat pocket, she dropped her purse into a nearby seat and began unbuttoning her long, wool coat. “I need to make a couple calls anyway.”

Bending at the waist, she took care when folding the coat over the back of the same chair. Archer swallowed hard, forcing himself to keep his eyes up, rather than on her mouthwatering figure.

She's a client, dickhead.

Something he'd do well to remember.

Bulldozing the silent reminder straight through his unusually scattered thoughts, he gave the sexy blonde a muttered, "I shouldn't be long."

"Take your time."

She smiled up at him, and damn if his heart didn't punch hard against his ribs. The woman truly was the most beautiful creature he'd ever seen. Beautiful and...

Scared.

Archer had locked on to the fear in those big, round eyes of hers. First on T.V., and again when she'd appeared in his office doorway. The urge to erase that fear was a prominent, almost primal, need.

One he decided not to fight against but rather fight *for*.

"Call the team into the conference room," he instructed Hannah as he made his way past the expansive reception desk. "And reschedule the rest of this afternoon's appointments. If any walk-ins come in, just explain the team is currently indisposed, and ask them to come back in the morning."

He hadn't meant to bark the commands, but he'd been on edge from the moment Cassie had walked into his office. Lunch with the alleged murderer had only piqued his interest in her case even more.

Something that, before today, Archer would've thought impossible.

"Okay..." Hannah let the word dangle. Reaching for the phone, she followed his movements with a worried stare. Her brown eyes bounced between him and Cassie before she asked in a lower, almost hushed voice. "Is everything...all right?"

No.

Nothing about this was all right. Not his obsession with this case, and sure as hell not the magnetic pull he felt toward the woman standing beside him.

Archer softened his expression, his lips curving into a smile he wasn't exactly feeling. "Everything's fine," he lied. "Just need to brief them on the new case, and I'd like to get things started ASAP."

Once again, the young woman's brown eyes slid to Cassie. Leaning a little further over the granite countertop, Hannah lowered her voice to an almost-whisper as she asked, "So you're taking her case, then?"

Archer followed her gaze before dipping his head in a single, confident nod. "Yeah." He brought his focus back to Hannah. "We're taking her case."

The guys just don't know it yet.

Turning away, he started for the hallway leading to his destination.

"I'll let the others know to head back."

"Thanks." His right hand raised in a half-wave before making his way around the corner and out of her line of sight. Quick, purposeful steps brought him closer and closer to the end of the hall, and when Archer found himself outside the last door on the right, he stopped.

Reaching up, he quickly entered his personalized, six-digit code into the electronic keypad on the wall next to the door. A beat later, the locks disengaged, and he stepped inside the space they affectionately referred to as the Conference Room.

Only it wasn't your typical conference room.

While it did possess a long, oval table large enough to seat eight, the wide-open space offered the team a secured, *practical* place to do the behind-the-scenes work needed for cases like theirs.

It was also cool as shit.

Before renovations, the massive space had been divided into three separate, private offices and a generously sized storage room. Now it was home to the most secure—and soundproof—room in the entire building.

Comprised mostly of concrete and brick, this was where the team did some of their most important work. Intel gathering, brainstorming, planning...this was where almost all their behind-the-scenes work was done.

In a style much different than the polished, presentable look of their reception area and personal offices—areas to where those seeking the firm’s help had access—the “Conference Room” was actually set up to work as the team’s war room.

Directly behind him was a concrete wall that had been reinforced with state-of-the-art soundproofing panels. They’d all agreed on the extra expense as it gave them another layer of protection when discussing their confidential cases.

To Archer’s right was a solid brick wall. Since their team leader’s office was on the other side, the soundproofing wasn’t needed. If Logan had a client in his office when the others were in here, they simply held their conversations on the far side of the room.

The wall he was facing, as well as the one on his left, didn’t need the soundproofing, either. Made of brick and massive floor-to-ceiling windows, their black metal muntins dividing each one into several equal squares.

Thanks to the building’s angle and design, the views from both directions offered an expansive, panoramic snapshot of Elliot Bay.

Strategically placed within the wide-open space were six desks. Separated into pairs, each was butted up against its partner so the two teammates using them could face one another.

Archer looked to his left, toward an elevated, loft-like platform. That was where the real magic happened.

Arguably the most important area of the entire room, the high-tech space had been designed specifically with their technical analyst in mind. A massive L-shaped desk housed several monitors, three computers—each encrypted out the ass—and a slew of other electronic devices Archer couldn't even begin to use.

Lucky for him—and their clients—he didn't have to.

Give me a load of C4 or a tripwire any day.

Explosives. That's where Archer's passion lay. As a former SEAL, he'd had all the same specialized training as his teammates. Weapons, hand-to-hand...he'd even filled in as the team's medic a few times back in the day. But his real expertise was blowing shit up.

Speaking of things blowing up...

He checked his watch and then looked at the door, wondering what the hell was taking everyone so long. Starting in that direction, he'd made it all of two steps when the telltale beeping of the security system alerted him that someone was about to enter.

"Hey, Nash." Chase Boyer, the youngest member of Eagle's Nest, was the first to join him. "What's up? Hannah said you wanted to see us before we left for the day. You catch a big case or something?"

Or something. "It's looking that way, yeah." Archer gave the team's lead sniper a nod.

"Cool." Excitement laced the Texas native's slight drawl.

Standing right at six feet, the brown-haired jokester was the most laid back member of the bunch. But put a TAC-338 sniper rifle in Chase's hands, and the man was as deadly as his expert aim.

Another beep and Jason "Lucky" Lucas sauntered inside. "Okay, Arch. I'm here. But this better not be one of those could-have-been-an-email kind of meetings. I've got a date in an hour, and it's one I do *not* want to be late for."

The clean-cut and chiseled man was a total player when it came to women. But as the team's technical analyst, there wasn't anyone Archer trusted more behind the keyboard.

"This the same gal you went out with a couple weeks ago?" Chase turned his turquoise eyes in Lucky's direction.

"Nope. That was Mandy." The other man scoffed as he made his way to one of the eight empty chairs around the table. "Can you believe she called me two days after our date—which went great, by the way—to say she'd gotten back together with her ex?"

"Ouch." Chase's scruff-covered face twisted with sympathy as he took the seat next to Lucky.

"Eh, it's whatever. Just means I gotta keep looking for The One."

"Is *that* what you've been doing these last few months?" Logan Hayes was the next of the members to appear. "Sleeping your way through Seattle in search of the future Mrs. Lucas?"

The brainchild of Eagle's Nest Securities, Logan had also been their SEAL Team leader back in the day. In fact, if it weren't for Logan and his wife Natalie, there wouldn't even *be* an E.N.S.

And you'd still be flying charter planes for rich assholes and their twenty-something mistresses.

From over his shoulder, Lucky shot Logan a look. "That's a bit of an exaggeration, don't ya think?" He pulled out a wheeled chair and sat down at the table. "And sure I like to go clubbing now and then. But come on...it's not like the woman of my dreams is going to magically appear on my doorstep."

"I mean stranger things *have* happened, I suppose." Chase plopped down in the chair next to Lucky. "Guess we can't all be as lucky as Hayes, here. But enough of that..." With a light push off his booted toe, the thirty-one-year-old swiveled the leather chair around to face Archer. "Okay, Nash. Spill it. What's with the impromptu emergency meeting?"

Glancing back at the door, Archer was about to ask where the final member of the team was when Logan told him, “If you’re waiting for Van, he’s still out dealing with the system glitch at the Lambert estate. I can catch him up later, if you want to go ahead and fill the rest of us in on what you’ve got going on.”

Van’s real name was Donovan Braddock. Technically Van was the team’s medic, but the guy had many talents when it came to the kind of work they did.

Archer turned back around and gave the other man a nod. Sooner he could get the official green light to move forward, the sooner he could get to Cassie’s house and scope out the scene of the crime for himself.

Making his way over to the table, he joined Chase and Lucky. Once he and Logan were settled in their usual seats, Archer began.

“Have any of you been following the news covering the Cassandra Montgomery case?”

“Montgomery...” Lucky’s blue gaze met his. “Oh, shit. You talkin’ about the Black Widow Lawyer?” When Archer nodded his confirmation, the other man let out low whistle and spread his lips into a knowing, crooked grin. “Never seen a murderer as hot as that one.”

“Cassie isn’t a murderer.” The growled denial was out of his mouth before Archer could stop it. “She’s a client.”

Every set of eyes staring back at him grew wide, including Logan’s. “Uh...what do you mean she’s a client?”

Yeah, this was the part where he apologized. “Okay, look. Before you say anything, I know we’re supposed to meet as a team before we agree to take on anyone new. But—”

“Ah, hell.” Chase glanced at the other two men before turning his turquoise eyes back Archer’s way. “You already told her we’d take her case, didn’t you?”

“I know what you’re going to say, and you’re right. I should’ve talked to y’all first, and that’s on me. But I’m telling you, there’s more to this case than the cops and D.A. are

seeing. I've felt it in my gut ever since news broke about her estranged husband's murder."

A heavy, unsettled feeling he couldn't seem to shake.

"Let's back up a few steps." Repositioning himself in his chair, Logan rested his elbows on the table. With his fingers linked together in front of him in a casual manner, their team leader suggested, "Why don't you give us the rundown from where this whole thing began? Might help us understand your urgency to take on the Montgomery woman as a client."

His friend—his team leader—was right. Archer needed to take a breath and follow the same advice he'd given Cassie...

I find the beginning's usually the best place to start.

Filling his lungs to their capacity, he released the inhaled air slowly before he began. Over the next few minutes, he recapped the story as he knew it, starting with that very first news footage he'd seen and going from there.

Archer shared the details that had been released to the public via various television and social media outlets. He recounted the present day's events, starting with seeing Cassie on the news as she'd left the courthouse, after having been bonded out that very morning, to her coming to the office seeking E.N.S.'s services. And finally, Archer ended his summation of the situation by passing along the small bit of intel he'd gained during their shared lunch.

"That's it." He glanced around the table. "That's what I know up to this point."

The room grew quiet as the others processed all he'd shared. After waiting a beat, it was Lucky who finally broke the silence.

"So this Montgomery chick wants us to investigate a murder she's been charged with committing while also protecting her from the supposed 'real' killer?" The tech genius arched a disbelieving brow. "I don't know, man. Sounds pretty desperate to me. Almost like she wants to use us as part of her defense or something."

"Cassie," he bit back sharply.

Lucky shot him a frown. “What?”

“Her name is Cassie, and she *is* desperate. Her future... hell, her *life* is on the line. Of course, she’s hoping to use us as part of her defense. That’s kind of the whole point in hiring us to begin with.”

He could hear the sharpness in his own tone and knew it was undeserved. After all, Lucky’s suspicions surrounding Cassie’s innocence and intent weren’t anything Archer hadn’t already pondered himself. But the primal urge to safeguard a woman he barely knew was instantaneous and without conscious thought.

It was also confusing as hell.

“Dude, relax.” Lucky’s expression turned guarded as he held up a hand to stave off another unwarranted verbal dress-down. “I wasn’t trying to ruffle your feathers. I’m just saying, we’ve barely gotten this company off the ground.” His big eyes traveled around the table before landing back on Archer’s. “I’m just not sure taking on a client who’s been charged with murder is the best move for the business.”

Archer’s initial instinct was to pop back with another sharp remark. But the other man did have a point.

Releasing a deep sigh, he ran a hand over his short, dark beard. “I get what you’re saying, Jason. I really do.” His gaze remained locked with Lucky’s. “And if I were sitting where you are, I’d probably be saying the same thing. But I’ve been following this case from the beginning, and it’s been gnawing at me ever since.”

“Why?” Chase spoke up next. “You know this chi...uh... woman personally or something?”

He gave a curt shake of his head. “Never met her before today.”

“So why the obsession?”

“I’m not obsessed,” Archer insisted, though in the back of his mind he knew the claim was a lie. “I just don’t want to see an innocent woman sent to prison for a crime she didn’t

commit. Or worse, since...according to her...she was the killer's intended victim."

"Is that what you think?" Logan spoke up again. "You believe Cassie's innocent?"

"Honestly? I don't know. But I'd really like the chance to at least investigate things a little deeper." *A lot deeper.* "At least check out the crime scene, talk to the detective in charge..." He slid his gaze back to Lucky's. "And I was hoping, if you have time, you'd run her background. Hers, her late husband's, his family...the people she works with at her firm—"

"People she's defended in the past."

All eyes turned to Chase, who gave him a casual shrug. "She's a defense attorney, right? Pretty sure I read somewhere that she does a lot of pro-bono work through her firm. Mostly small claims stuff, but there were a couple criminal cases mentioned in the article. Maybe one of her clients didn't get the verdict they were hoping for and is convinced it's all their lawyer's fault."

Damn. That was an angle Archer hadn't even considered. But now that he thought about it, he couldn't help but wonder if the cops had also overlooked the revenge angle.

"That's smart." He nodded with approval. "I'll have her put a list of names together."

Maybe that was all there was to this. A simple case of revenge that took a sideways turn when Russell Montgomery drank the wine instead of Cassie.

"Hold up." Lucky shot his hand high into the air, though the man clearly had no intention of waiting for permission to speak. "Wouldn't the D.A. have taken all this into consideration before going to a judge for an arrest warrant?"

Logan's head bobbed with a nod. "That's a good point," their team leader commented. "District Attorneys typically don't take on cases they can't win."

"Well there ya go!" Chase exclaimed. "You and Nat are on a first-name basis with the King County's lead prosecutor.

Why don't you give her a call?"

"We're acquainted with Simone Fitzpatrick, yes," Logan confirmed. "But that's only because we were her two star witnesses against the men who tried to kill my wife to keep from going to prison."

A shadow fell over the other man's striking gaze Archer recognized all too well. It was the same haunted look Logan wore every time he was reminded of just how close he'd come to losing the love of his life.

"Still, she knows who you are. And I bet she knows about Eagle's Nest by now, too."

"What's your point?" Archer looked at Chase and waited.

"Just that she might be willing to partake in a little quid pro quo, that's all. You know...you guys helped her win a massive case that's all but secured her re-election, so maybe she'd be willing to pass along some of what she's got on your girl."

"Cassie isn't my girl; she's a client. One who, from the sounds of things, needs our help to not only stay out of jail, but also stay alive."

A client. That was all. Nothing more. Nothing less.

"I'm not sure D.A. Fitzpatrick will be willing to share anything regarding an ongoing case, but I'd be willing to make the call and try to set up a meeting," Logan offered.

Archer looked the other man's way. "She agrees, I want to be there."

"Of course."

"What about the rest of you?" He turned his focus back to Lucky and Chase. "What do your schedules look like the rest of this week and next?"

An investigation like this could take longer. Much longer. But the sooner they got started—

"I have to testify in court first thing tomorrow," Logan offered.

“Which case is that again?” Chase inquired.

“Lionel Lopez,” their leader reminded the group.

Chase snapped his fingers in recognition. “Lopez. I remember now. He’s the prick who was stalking his ex-wife, right?”

“He’s the one.”

“I can’t believe that one made it to trial,” Lucky grumbled. “Asshole was caught breaking into the ex’s house.”

“Yeah, well that asshole apparently has a lot of money. Which, from what I’ve been told, has nearly all gone to his top-notch defense team. Thanks to the scrupulous records the wife kept—threatening texts, emails, even some handwritten notes left on her car outside her work and at home—the D.A.’s office has assured me the case against Lopez is a slam dunk.”

“So you think you’ll be done with it tomorrow, then?”

“Hopefully.” Logan nodded again. “I may be put on reserve to take the stand again later, but hopefully my part in the trial will be done after tomorrow.”

“What about you guys?” Archer returned his focus to Chase and Lucky.

“I finished up that security install over on Fifth this afternoon.” Lucky settled back in his chair. “So I’m free and clear.”

“Same.” Chase met Archer’s gaze.

He sent the team’s lead sniper a frown. “I thought you were working a stalker case.”

“I was.” The other man lifted one corner of his mouth. “But once I handed the cops the video footage I’d taken showing the woman slashing her ex-boyfriend’s tires outside the pool hall the guy frequents, she was picked up and charged. Got the word about an hour ago that she’d already cut a deal with the prosecutor. Two years, a possibility of parole in eighteen months with good behavior.”

“Nice.” Logan seemed pleased.

“What about Braddock?” Archer mentioned the only team member not present. “You think he’ll be good to go after today, too?”

“Sounds like it. I called him right before coming in here, and he said he thought he found the problem. Something to do with the client’s Wi-Fi not connecting to the system correctly. So other than that, he should be good to go.”

That was exactly what Archer was hoping to hear.

“So it’s settled then?” Chase looked to Logan for the final say. “We’re taking this woman’s case?”

“Do we have a choice?” Lucky arched a brow. When Archer shot him a look, he defended himself with, “I’m just saying. You already told her we would. Probably not good for business if he goes back on his word.”

A fact he’d been selfishly counting on.

But rather than answer straight away, Logan turned his attention solely on Archer. The man’s deep blue eyes searched him as he asked, “You really think there’s a chance this woman is innocent?”

He really, really wanted to say yes. Instead he avoided giving a direct answer “I met her two hours ago.” He ran a hand through his thick waves. “I’ve got no intel other than what I’ve seen on the news and what she’s told me.”

“Yet you agreed to help her before talking to us first.” His closest friend arched a knowing brow. “Come on, man. That gut of yours has saved our asses more than once. What’s it saying now?”

Archer met each of the men’s stares. A hard swallow was followed by a quick lick of his lips. The blind faith he was desperate to give the beautiful stranger was inexplicable. But right or wrong, it was there all the same.

“I think that poison was meant for Cassie.” There, he’d said it. “I think whoever put those pits in that bottle is still out there, and I think they’re going to either try to kill her again or lay low until she’s given a life sentence.”

Dread poured over him from just *imagining* either scenario.

“That’s good enough for me.” Chase gave him a nod.

With a quick, “Me, too,” Logan also threw in his vote. But when Archer turned to Lucky, he was met with an unreadable gaze.

“Never doubted your instincts before, brother.” A quick shake of his head. “Not gonna start now.”

“Then it’s settled.” Logan pushed himself to his feet. “Nash will handle primary protection detail, and we’ll give him support however we can.”

“So...Lucky.” Archer shot his teammate a Cheshire grin. “About that date...”

“Already cancelled it.”

“You did?” He frowned. “When did you—”

“I shot her a text halfway through your whole introductory spiel about this woman you seem intent on helping.”

This was news to him. “Why? Not that I’m not grateful.” He rushed to add that last part. “You just seemed pretty skeptical when I was sharing Cassie’s side of things.”

“Don’t have to trust her, brother.” Lucky’s blue eyes turned serious. “I trust you.”

Coming from a smartass like him, the guy’s comment meant one hell of a lot. “Thanks, man. Really appreciate it.”

“Eh, it’s whatever. We’ve already rescheduled for next weekend.” A slow smirk lifted the other man’s lips. “Which means you have a week to either find the real killer or prove you’ve already met her.”

“Correction.” Archer grinned. “*We* have a week.”

“STAY CLOSE TO ME.”

Archer’s rumbled command came half a second before Cassie found herself being pulled into his protective embrace. The cool winter breeze carried with it notes of leather, spice, and something decidedly unique to only him.

But she had no time to savor the man’s arousing scent. She was too busy trying to shield her face from the trove of reporters littering the street in front of her house, her driveway, and front lawn.

“Why did you kill your husband?” a woman shouted from somewhere to her right.

Stepping over that absurd question was an equally ridiculous, “Did you really think you’d get away with murder?”

Ignoring the continued ratings-fueled interrogation, Archer kept her safe and secured at his side while they continued on their path to her home’s front entrance. As they moved, one overzealous reporter actually jumped onto the sidewalk near the steps leading to her porch, the jerk purposely blocking their path in an attempt to get the money shot.

“Move,” Archer ordered the man sharply. When the reporter refused to budge so much as an inch, her guardian lowered his voice to a low, deadly tone. “You’ve got two seconds to move your ass, or I’m moving it for you.”

Another bright flash of white had Cassie curling her body even further inward, bringing her impossibly closer to the one thing standing between her and the hungry mob.

“Suit yourself.” Archer didn’t wait for the jerk to wise up. Instead, he barreled forward, forcing his way past.

The reporter nearly lost his footing. “Hey, watch it!”

Maybe you should watch it. Or better yet, maybe you should take your nosey, uncaring friends and get the hell off my lawn.

Without giving the intrusive man a second glance, she was carefully guided her up the three steps leading to her door. Keeping her head down and her cheek pressed against his leather-clad chest, Cassie handed Archer the keys she’d already dug out of her purse.

Grumbling something inaudible beneath his breath, her protector unlocked the door and got her safely inside. But rather than shut out the rest of the world, as she’d expected, he sent her a quick glance and turned back for the door.

“Give me a second.”

Before she could ask what he intended to do, Archer was out the door, pulling it shut to keep her hidden from all the looky-loos. She inched closer, leaning her ear toward the spot where he’d just vanished.

Even from the other side of the thick, solid wood barrier, she could hear the man’s raised voice as clearly as if he were standing right beside her.

“Listen up!” Archer’s commanding voice boomed. “This is private property, and the cops are already on their way. So unless you all want to be slapped with a trespassing charge, harassment, and anything else I can think of, I suggest you get yourselves, your equipment, and your vehicles the hell out of here!”

As she was taking in her next breath, Archer reappeared, slamming the door shut behind him.

“Fucking vultures,” he muttered low enough she wasn’t sure he meant for her to hear. His broad shoulders fell as he blew out a frustrated exhale, those large, strong hands of his resting low on his narrow hips. “You okay?”

Cassie nodded, her gaze locking onto those dark, sultry eyes. “Thanks for that.”

For just a second—not even that, really—she could’ve sworn she saw something other than frustration burning within the deep, rich browns there. A flash of heat, perhaps?

But then...

“All part of the job.”

The job. Of course.

What was the matter with her? Was she really standing here, pondering whether or not this man found her attractive when her entire future was literally on the line?

What the hell are you doing? He’s not here on a date, Cass. He’s here to make sure you don’t rot in prison or die.

Clearing her throat, Cassie regrouped and refocused. “Are the police really on their way?”

“They will be.”

He ran a hand over the dark scruff covering his masculine jaw before shooting Logan a text asking for him to put a call into the authorities. When he was finished, Archer returned his focus to the woman still standing before him.

“I can’t believe an upscale neighborhood like this doesn’t have some sort of security patrol.”

“Oh, it does. And they do a lovely job keeping the area safe and in perfect order.” She offered him a sarcastic grin before adding, “As long as you have the right last name...or you’re not a presumed killer.”

Disapproval shadowed his handsome face as he shook his head in disgust. “Bet they’ll still expect their HOA payment on

the first of the month, criminal charges or not.”

A soft chuckle fell past her lips. “I’m actually surprised there wasn’t a notice to vacate waiting for me.”

“They can do that?” Those dark brows arched high.

“Oh, yeah. It’s a clause in the contract for every piece of property in the neighborhood. Get enough signatures on a petition, and you’re basically forced to sell. As long as the HOA board deems the reasoning behind said petition is valid.” She crossed her arms at her chest. “Probably safe to say, being a suspected murderer fits into that category.”

One corner of his kissable lips curved, and suddenly Cassie wanted to know what he looked like with a full-blown smile.

Did his mouth stretch wide? Did he show his near-perfect teeth? When he let himself go and smiled, *really* smiled, did those entrancing eyes of his light up with joy?

Despite his reason for being here, she found herself hoping she got the chance to find out.

“What’s the code?”

Cassie blinked herself back into the moment. “I’m sorry?”

“Your security code.” He shifted over to the electronic pad mounted near her door. “I want to make sure the place is locked up tight before I take a look around.”

“Oh. Right.” She rattled off the numbers.

“This system’s shit,” Archer announced bluntly. “I’ll have a couple of my guys come by first thing tomorrow to install one of ours.”

She wasn’t surprised in the least. “Russ picked that one out when we built the place. I tried to tell him we needed something more, but he insisted it was enough.”

“It is...until it isn’t.”

“That’s exactly what I told him.” But like with most everything else in their tumultuous marriage, Russ got his way.

Russ.

A blanket of sadness fell over her. Not because she was still in love with her late husband. That ship had sailed a long time ago. But even after everything the man had put her through, Cassie couldn't bring herself to believe Russ deserved what happened to him.

No one deserves to die like that.

“Hey, you okay?”

Archer's concerned tone pulled her from her thoughts. Forcing the distracting emotions away, she managed to blink back a few unexpected tears before they could fall.

“I'm fine.” And wasn't that just about the biggest white lie she'd ever told? “You said you wanted to look around.” She made a swift change in subject while removing her coat and purse and hanging them on the ornate coat rack and umbrella holder in the corner near the door. “Come on. I'll give you the nickel tour.”

Turning, Cassie started with the area of the house she assumed Archer would want to see first. It wasn't until she reached the end of the long hallway that she caught her first glimpse of the mess.

The place was a wreck. Cushions tipped off the couch and loveseat. The drawers of her end tables open, their contents having been rummaged through. And the kitchen was even worse.

Nearly every cabinet and drawer had been left open. Even the dishwasher and oven doors were only half-closed. Glasses, plates, and saucers scattered the countertops, and from what she could see from where she stood, Cassie was almost certain the contents of her junk drawer had been unceremoniously dumped in the middle of her granite-topped island.

“What the hell?” She swung her widened gaze to Archer's. “Someone broke into my house!”

Probably one of those damn reporters trying to find something to get them in the top spot on the six o'clock news.

But rather than pull out his phone to make another call to the police, as she'd expected, the intense man reached just behind his right hip and pulled out a gun.

"Stay here." He turned to leave.

"Like hell!" Cassie raced to catch up to him. Doing her best not to panic, she half-whispered, "If they're still here, they could be down in the basement or hiding in one of the closets!"

Though he looked as if he wanted to argue, Archer instead gave her a curt nod. "You stay right behind me. I tell you do something, you do it. No arguing. Understood?"

The second she began nodding, he was on the move again. As promised, Cassie stayed right with him as they made their way through the entire house. Each room they entered greeted them with more of the same.

Half-opened drawers. Items strewn carelessly about. Even her underwear drawer had been gone through, her thongs and panties hanging out over the edge for all who entered to see.

Yeah, that's not embarrassing in the least.

But as they made their way back to where they'd started, Cassie realized whoever had messed up her house was long gone.

"Did you notice anything missing?" He slid the gun back into the concealed holster she'd only just noticed.

With a frown, Cassie tore her eyes from the real-life warrior and looked at her disheveled kitchen once again. "I don't...the place is such a mess." She shook her head in disbelief. "How can I even be sure without making an inventory of every item in every room?"

"Look around. Focus on things that are worth a lot. Either by monetary or sentimental value."

"I mean, it's obvious someone's been in here, Archer. We should call the cops and tell them there's more to report than some annoying reporters."

Turning in a slow, methodical circle, he surprised her by saying, “This doesn’t feel like a typical break-in.”

“What do you mean?”

He stopped moving and looked back at her from over his shoulder. “Those paintings we passed in the hallway. They worth much?”

“Six figures.” Cassie nodded. “At least.”

“And yet, they’re still here. What about those?” He pointed to a pair of matching vases Russ’s mom had given to them as a housewarming present.

“Early Nineteenth-century English porcelain,” she shared the specifics. “Russ’s mom gave those to us as a housewarming present.”

“You happen to know how much they’re worth?”

“Four grand for the pair. Or at least that’s how much Barb claimed she paid.”

This gave the man pause. “Your mother-in-law bought you a housewarming gift and then told you how much she spent on it?”

With a click of her tongue, Cassie planted the same fake smile on her face she always used when talking about her inlaws. “That’s Barb. She makes sure *everyone* knows just how generous a person she is.”

“Well she sounds like a peach.”

A bark of laughter bubbled up from deep inside her chest. She’d been arrested, held in jail for two straight days, and now she comes home to find her house in shambles. And despite all of that, this man had still managed to make her laugh twice since they’d stepped foot inside her door.

“That’s one way to describe her,” she told him. But in the very next beat, another thought struck. One that had her truly panicking.

“What is it?” Archer asked when her face fell flat.

“My office. I was so busy looking for a burglar, I didn’t even think to...” Without waiting, she raced out of the kitchen, past where Archer stood, and back down the hallway. Reaching her office near the home’s entrance, she didn’t wait before making her re-entrance.

Getting her second look at the damage, Cassie realized her office was in worse shape than the rest of the main floor combined.

With a slacked jaw and a pit in her stomach, she took in the books that had been haphazardly pulled from her floor-to-ceiling shelves. The twin filing cabinets she always kept locked had been picked open, their drawers partially closed in various degrees. It was obvious they’d been gone through, as well. As had the contents of her desk.

But what left her feeling more lost than any of that was when she realized the place where she always kept her laptop was empty.

“What is it?” Archer’s deep voice startled her.

She hadn’t heard him following her. Hadn’t heard him enter her office, either. She wouldn’t have thought a man of his stature would be capable of moving so silently.

“My computer.” She went to her desk. “It’s gone.”

“Anything else?”

Cassie shot him an angry stare. “That’s not enough?” She stormed past.

“Where are you going?”

“Someone’s obviously been in here, Archer. And since I have yet to see a police officer pull up, I’m going to call this in and report it.”

“Don’t do that.”

As if following his command blindly, her feet planted in the spot where they were. “Why not?” she snapped angrily.

Seriously. If this guy couldn’t do a better job than this, as far as she was concerned, he could take his protection detail

and shove it up his—

“Because I’m pretty sure the cops are the ones who took your computer.”

“The cops? What are you—”

And just like that, a fast, hard smack of reality struck her square in the face.

Cassie spared another few seconds to look around the room again. This time, she studied the scene with a professional eye, rather than personal. She thought back to the kitchen. Her bedroom. The bathrooms...

“The search warrant,” she mumbled more to herself than him. With a hand to her forehead, she closed her eyes and hung her head. “Of course.”

Crime scene investigators were notorious for leaving a mess in their wake. A mess the accused was then left to deal with, on top of everything else. She’d double-check, of course. But now that he mentioned it, she hadn’t noticed anything valuable missing from any of the other rooms. And the way the stuff had been moved around...

Humiliation settled in deep. She should have thought about the search warrant before now.

I’m such an idiot.

“You’re not an idiot.”

Cassie looked up to find him staring back at her with an empathetic expression. She hadn’t meant to say the self-deprecating words aloud, but she obviously had.

And Archer had heard them loud and freaking clear.

“I am, actually.” Her cheeks burned with embarrassment. “The morning I was arrested, Ellie told me the police had seized some of my personal belongings. Including my laptop. Hell, I read over her copy of the search warrant, myself. I swear I’m not usually this out of sorts. I guess I’m just...” A deep sigh left her entire being feeling deflated. “I owe you an apology, Archer. I never should have spoken to you like that. And if you—”

She cut herself off by pulling her bottom lip between her teeth. But almost immediately, Cassie forced its release and lifted her chin. With the straightest spine she could muster, she offered him an out she prayed he didn't take.

"If you want to sever our professional relationship now," she continued, "I'd completely understand. And of course, I will compensate you for your time spent with me today."

Though the last thing she wanted was for him to leave, what she'd told him was the truth. If Archer high-tailed it right out her front door this very second, she'd hold no ill will toward the man.

It would suck, and Cassie knew she'd be on her own to try to fight this unthinkable battle. But if he did choose to wipe his hands of her, she'd only have herself to blame.

"I'm not leaving, and there's nothing to apologize for."

Cassie's heart gave a hard thump as her lashes lifted so she could meet his gaze. "You're...why not?"

Who cares about the why? The important thing is he's staying!

"You were reacting to an unexpected situation that compounded an already stressful day." The gracious man kindly dismissed her recent outburst. As he spoke, Archer's tone was calm, almost soothing in nature. "You've been through a lot in the last few days. Anyone in your situation would be on edge."

Situation.

It was such a benign way to describe her entire world having been thrown off its axis.

"That's kind of you to say," she offered softly.

"They're not just words, Cassie. I mean it." He walked slowly toward her. "You're already fighting an uphill battle. You've got the cops thinking you did this; the D.A. no doubt sees you as his ticket to reelection..." Archer glanced out the window facing the front yard. "The media has you all but convicted, and I'm sure your neighbors are all too happy to tell

everyone who'll listen that they personally know The Black Widow Lawyer.”

“You know...” Cassie narrowed her gaze as she tilted her head just so. “If this is supposed to be a pep talk, you might want to consider enrolling in a refresher course.”

One corner of his lips twitched as if he were fighting that smile she longed to see. But as he always seemed to do, the former SEAL-turned-investigator-slash-bodyguard kept his expression steady.

“Something you should know about me.” He took another step closer. “I don’t give platitudes, and I won’t blow smoke up your ass. Your safety is my number one concern, not making you feel good.”

The same flash of...*whatever* it was she’d seen earlier crossed over his chocolate eyes. But just as it had before, it vanished with the very next beat of her heart.

I bet you could make me feel good. I bet you could make me feel really, really—

“Cassie? Are you...okay?”

“Yeah, uh...yes. I’m good, I just...” She came so close to choking on the rushed words, she had to clear her throat before continuing. “My comment about the pep talk was supposed to be a joke. My lame attempt at lightening the mood. That being said, I both understand and appreciate your candor. And after being lied to for at least the last year and a half of my marriage, honesty is a trait I welcome with open arms.” When she took a breath and realized what she’d said, Cassie clarified by adding, “Not that we’re married. Or romantically involved in any way. Or will be, for that matter. Because you’re here to do a job, and not—”

“Cass?”

She swallowed what little was left of her pride before squeaking out a soft, “Yeah?”

“I know what you meant.”

“Oh. Well...good. I’m glad there’s no confusion there.” And because she apparently didn’t know when to quit, she kept on going with, “You’re here to do a job, and nothing more. And I’m here just trying not to die, so...yeah. I guess that pretty much sums it up.”

Crap on a cracker, woman. You know, for a lawyer you sure do seem to be struggling to find your words.

It had been like that all afternoon. Ever since that sweet receptionist opened that office door, giving Cassie her first glimpse of the man standing before her.

She’d never felt such a strong reaction to a man before. Not even Russ, and she’d *married* him. But there was just something about Archer Nash. Being in the same room with the man threw her off in ways she couldn’t begin to understand.

Cassie opened her mouth to ask what their first step should be when a very large, very unladylike yawn struck from out of the blue.

“Sorry.” She covered her gaping mouth with her hand. “Anyone ever asks, I would not recommend county lockup to anyone looking for a good night’s sleep.” When he didn’t smile as she’d hoped, Cassie asked, “Okay, so what’s our first step? You mentioned checking out the house and having me walk you through that night. We’ve already checked the house, so if you want, I can—”

“Sleep.”

“I’m sorry?”

“You look dead on your feet.”

Wow. Guess he wasn’t kidding about being a straight shooter.

“Gee, thanks.” She gave a small smile as she tucked some wayward locks behind her ear.

“Didn’t say you looked bad, Cass. Just that you’re obviously exhausted.”

Cass.

Russ had called her that on numerous occasions, as did her friend Lori. But for some reason when *this* man used the shortened version of her name, it sent a sort of fluttery feeling swirling deep inside her belly.

“I know. I tend to be a bit sarcastic at times.”

“Really? I hadn’t noticed.”

On the cusp of another automatic apology, Cassie realized what he’d done. “Touché, Mr. Nash.” Her smile grew a bit more.

Archer’s expression softened, and this time, he let those lips curve into a hint of a smile. “Why don’t you try to get some sleep? When you wake up, you can walk me through what happened the night Russ died.”

“And then?”

“And then, if you feel up to it, we can get this place back in order.”

She felt compelled to ask him, “What about you? What will you do while I’m napping?”

“I’m going to put a call into the team’s tech guy. Have him come over and take a look at your system. I also want to set up a meeting with the lead detective on your case.”

“That would be Detective Knox,” she revealed. “I think his first name is Travis. But do you really think he’ll be willing to talk to you? I mean, I haven’t been convicted yet, so technically the investigation into Russ’s murder is considered ongoing.”

Not that I’m complaining, mind you.

“Won’t know unless we try, right?”

“Right.” Another smile lifted her lips, followed by a second yawn.

“Go on.” Archer put a hand to her shoulder and gently guided her from the room. “Get some rest. We’ll have plenty of things to talk about once you wake up.”

Can’t wait.

Keeping the sarcastic comment to herself, she reached the bottom of the staircase. But before she began to climb the path leading to her bedroom, Cassie stopped and faced the only person who—apart from her lawyer and her best friend—seemed to be on her side.

“I’m glad you’re here, Archer.” The whispered confession seemed to fill the two-story space. “I know you can’t guarantee you’ll find whoever tried to poison me, but just knowing someone with your background and experience is close by makes me feel...safe.”

Something she hadn’t felt since Russ collapsed on her kitchen floor.

“Like I said.” He shoved his hands into his pockets. “Your safety is my number one concern.”

“In case I forget to say it, thank you. For taking my case and for...just being here.”

Though he looked as if he wanted to say more, Archer gave her a soft dip of his chin and said, “Get some sleep, Cassie. We’ve got a lot of work ahead of us.”

CASSIE WOKE to the sound of voices. Deep, hushed, *male* voices. Though she'd known him less than a day, she recognized Archer's deep timbre immediately. But the other...

I don't know him.

She lay still, her body curled comfortably beneath the soft, plush bedding. Doing her best to eavesdrop, she worked to hear the distant conversation. But her door was closed, and the men were downstairs. The clarity of their words having become lost in the distance that separated her from them.

But as the fog from her much-needed nap began to lift, Cassie remembered what Archer had told her just before she'd come upstairs...

I'm going to put a call into the team's tech guy. Have him come over and take a look at your system.

Though she hated to leave the warmth and comfort of her bed, Cassie threw the covers to the side and forced herself to get up. She started to head for the door but thought better of it after catching a glimpse of herself in the large, full-length mirror strategically placed against the wall between her bedroom door and the one leading into the attached bathroom.

Between her disheveled hair, the dark shadows beneath her tired eyes, and the mascara smudged along her bottom lashes, she could have been the poster child for the Hot Mess Express.

Refusing to let anyone see her in such a state—especially Archer—Cassie made an abrupt change in course and headed for the bathroom. The shower she'd used that morning before leaving lockup had barely been lukewarm, and the water pressure had been about as strong as that from a garden hose.

Could've been worse. You could have had to share.

Given all that was at stake, bathing with ten other inmates shouldn't have been a blip on her radar. Still, she'd felt an almost overwhelming sense of relief when the female guard had led her into an otherwise empty restroom. There'd even been a plastic curtain that had offered her some semblance of privacy.

But as she stripped out of her clothes and stepped into the large, custom shower, Cassie instantly discovered a whole new appreciation for the rectangular rain shower head centered high above her.

She closed her eyes and let her head fall backward, the steaming water pouring down over her entire body in gentle, flowing streams. Once the chill she'd felt before entering the tiled space began to dissipate, Cassie got began her normal routine of washing, conditioning, shaving, and rinsing.

By the time she was dressed and her hair had been blown dry, she was finally beginning to feel like herself. After applying a minimal amount of makeup—which had absolutely nothing to do with the attractive bodyguard downstairs—she flipped off the light and exited the room.

As she passed by the oversized mirror once more, Cassie stopped long enough to give herself a final once-over. Knowing she had hours of cleaning and straightening up ahead of her, she'd chosen comfort over style.

The jeans she'd chosen were her favorite pair, the slightly worn and faded material hugging her toned curves with perfection. Her cream-colored crewneck was also a treasured

piece. While it didn't possess a designer tag, nor was it fancy in its design. It was simple. Casual. Comfortable.

And right now, given the massive upheaval of everything else in her life, Cassie craved simplicity and comfort.

That's not all you're craving.

Archer's chiseled face filled her mind's eye. It shouldn't be there. With everything going on, thoughts of tall, dark, and seriously sexy men shouldn't be anywhere near her conscious thoughts. And yet...

I want him.

She couldn't remember ever feeling such a powerful attraction toward a man. Not even Russ. But here she was, fussing in front of the mirror like some teenage girl with a crush.

Your safety is my number one concern, not making you feel good.

The security specialist's words came back with a vengeance, the stark reminder apparently needed. Archer was here to help and nothing more.

Nothing more. Right.

Ignoring her sex-starved body's inexplicable hormonal surge, Cassie left the room and made her way downstairs. Halfway down the curved staircase, she spotted Archer and another man conversing near her front door.

Their backs were to her, and the stranger was doing something to the security panel on her wall while Archer stood to the side. A screwdriver hung loosely from one of his hands, and he appeared to be on standby as he waited to offer his assistance.

On the floor near his booted feet sat three medium-sized cardboard boxes and three white plastic bags. Only two of the boxes were opened, but from her elevated vantage point, she could see cords and what appeared to be electronic equipment packed neatly inside.

The stranger asked Archer to hand him something from one of the boxes. Archer turned to grab it, and that's when he spotted her.

Stopping mid-reach, his eyes homed in on hers as he returned to a more erect stance. "Hey."

"Hey."

Archer's assessing gaze burned into hers as Cassie resumed her descent down the shiny wooden stairs. Reaching the bottom, she crossed her arms tightly at her chest to keep from fidgeting.

"Feel better?"

"Much." She moved a few steps closer. "You were right about the nap. Between that and the shower, I almost feel human again."

"I'm glad." He rewarded her with an almost smile.

The two stood lost in each other's gazes. The moment must have lasted far longer than she realized, because the next thing Cassie knew, the other man cleared his throat while giving Archer a not-so-subtle nudge with his elbow.

Archer blinked, whatever spell they'd both been under vanishing in an instant. "Shit. Sorry." He shook his head as if to clear it. "This is Jason Lucas. He's the team's technical analyst."

"Call me Lucky. Everyone does." Archer's teammate offered her a hand while flashing an almost perfect, toothy smile her way.

Cassie took the man's hand and gave it a solid shake. "It's nice to meet you, Lucky."

"Likewise." Attraction glittered throughout the blues in his eyes. "And let me just say, on behalf of Eagle's Nest Securities, I'm very sorry to hear about all you've been through."

The firm grip on her hand tightened ever-so-slightly, and Archer's teammate held it there a bit longer than what would be considered socially acceptable. And if Cassie didn't know

better, she could've sworn the gleam of his eye held a bit of flirtatious intent.

"That's very kind of you." She sent him a friendly smile. "Thank you."

"Of course."

Standing several inches over her five-five frame, Jason "Lucky" Lucas was very good-looking. His brown hair was cut short and neat, not even a single strand visibly out of place.

The man's sharp features were damn near perfect. His strong, square jaw kept clean-shaven and smooth. And though his body was partially hidden beneath his slightly worn jeans and black, long-sleeve Henley, it was more than obvious the man spent a lot of time in the gym.

Yes, physically, Lucky was perfect in pretty much every way. The man probably had women falling all over themselves to hand the man their numbers. Or invite him into their beds.

Not her.

Cassie looked at Lucky and felt...nothing. There wasn't any sort of magnetic pull toward the man still holding onto her hand. No spark of electricity from his touch.

Despite his attractive features and confident, commanding presence, she hadn't struggled to draw in a breath or become lost in those beautiful blue eyes. But when she'd first met Archer—when her palm had slid into his upon meeting him—Cassie had felt...

Everything.

She started to pull away at the exact same moment the screwdriver Archer had been holding appeared close to Lucky's near-perfect face.

"That new alarm system isn't going to install itself," Archer growled.

Low. Throaty. Almost possessive in its creation. But that couldn't be right.

Like he'd said earlier, before she'd locked herself away from him and the rest of the world...he was here to do a job.

So maybe you should leave him and his friend alone so they can, you know...do it.

Lucky released her hand and yanked the screwdriver out of Archer's hand. His narrowed, sideways glare at his teammate widened back to the same friendly expression when he met her gaze once more. "Shouldn't be much longer. An hour, maybe two. Tops."

"Take your time." She smiled back at him. To Archer, she said, "I thought about making myself a bite to eat. Are either of you hungry? I could make some sandwiches, or—"

"Actually, you can't."

The odd comment took her off guard. "Why not?"

"Because I threw out all your food."

Cassie felt her eyes nearly bug right out of her head. "All of it?" she squeaked.

"Anything that wasn't in a can or verifiably sealed, yeah." Archer nodded. "I used some big lawn trash bags I found in your garage and put them in the back of Lucky's truck."

"I'll take them by our building after I leave here," Lucky shared as he screwed what appeared to be a new control panel where her old one used to be. "That way, we can use the dumpsters in the ally out back, rather than stinking up your garage until trash day comes around."

"Oh. Um...thanks." *I guess?*

Sensing the question in her tone, Archer locked his intense stare onto hers. "I called your attorney while you were asleep. She confirmed the police never checked any of the other food or drinks in the house."

"No, I don't suppose they would have." She hugged herself like before. "The police already have their killer, so I'm sure they don't see a reason to check anything else. After all, I fully admitted to giving Russ the wine that killed him. Admitted that *I* was the one who killed him." She cleared a

knot of emotion from her throat. “Honestly if I were in Detective Knox’s shoes, I’d think I was guilty, too.”

She was guilty. Not of the intent, mind you. But still. Russ had ultimately died by her hand, and that was something Cassie wasn’t sure she’d ever get over.

Tears sprang to her eyes, and while she was busy blinking them away, she almost missed the step Archer had taken to bring himself closer to her. Placing his hands on her shoulders in a firm but gentle hold, his voice was anything but gentle when he spoke to her again.

“You didn’t kill your husband, Cassie.” Another low, masculine growl. “Whoever put those pits in that bottle did. They just used you to do it.”

Yes, because that’s sooo much better.

As the flippant thought rolled through her brain, a dose of guilt seeped deep into her veins. Archer was only trying to help. To offer her the only thing he could to bring her some fraction of peace in the midst of hell and chaos.

His effort to reassure her was very much appreciated, but in the end, Cassie knew it all boiled down to semantics. It had been she who’d poured the glass. *She* was the one who’d willingly handed it to him.

And then, she’d sat there, casually watching while Russ gulped down every last drop of the deadly concoction.

Cassie she wasn’t a killer. She *wasn’t*. But Archer was right. Whoever the real killer was...they’d damn sure made her the weapon.

To say Russ was bad at marriage would be a massive understatement. He’d been bad at the whole marriage thing, but he didn’t deserve to be murdered. And neither did she.

I need to find whoever did this. I need to find them and bring them to justice.

For Russ. For herself.

“If you’re hungry, I can have something delivered.”

Archer's offer tore her from her thoughts. Clearing the cobwebs away, she looked back up at him and said, "Only if you want something, too. Otherwise, I can just make a can of soup or something."

"Not if you need milk to do it," Lucky quipped as he bent down to search for something in one of the boxes.

Milk. Right. Because they would've thrown that out, too.

"I'm not picky," she revealed. "I'm fine with whatever sounds good to you."

"I'll get something ordered now. And while we wait for the food to arrive, you can walk me through everything that happened."

Cassie's lungs filled with a deep, cleansing breath. She knew this was a necessary step in Archer's investigation, but damn. She'd taken Detective Knox through each and every step of what had taken place the night Russ died.

That night. The next morning. And again when she'd been picked up and officially charged.

The first responders. The cops. Her lawyer. Cassie had gone through every single detail she could remember with them all. Over and over...and over.

Each time she did, the same fear, confusion, and heartache returned as if it were all happening again in real-time. And now, Archer was asking her to go back to that place. To recall what had instantly become the absolute worst night of her entire existence.

She didn't want to do it. Had no desire to ever think about that night again. But if it meant helping Archer and his team find the actual killer, Cassie would revisit that horrifying night as many times as he asked.

"I'll tell you everything I can remember," she promised. "And after that, I should probably get started cleaning up the mess the crime scene techs left behind."

"The kitchen and living room are already done," he announced as if it were no big deal. "Figured I'd let you tackle

your office, since you probably have confidential client information in there, and I didn't mess with anything upstairs since you were sleeping."

He'd cleaned her kitchen and living room? Who was this guy...and how the hell was he still single?

No ring doesn't necessarily mean single.

Shit. Her inner voice was spot on with that assessment. Between her perilous situation and the arousing ache she felt whenever he was near, her muddled brain hadn't allowed her thoughts to run deeply enough to consider his marital status.

You could always ask...

Yes, because *that* wouldn't be inappropriate in the least.

"I'm sorry if I overstepped." Archer's rumbled apology came with a drop of his hands. "I probably should've waited for you to—"

"N-no." Cassie gave a vehement shake of her head. Ignoring the noticeable void his touch left behind, she was sincere when she assured him, "You're fine. Really. I just didn't expect..." She stopped talking long enough to take a deep breath and gain control of her words. "Thank you. You didn't have to do all of that."

"He didn't do it alone," Lucky was quick to add. "I helped." With a playful wink and a contagious grin, the man turned back around and continued with the system install.

That man's going to be a whole lotta trouble for some unsuspecting woman someday. If he already isn't.

"Don't thank me just yet." A glimmer of humor lit the browns in Archer's dark eyes, a hint of a smirk lifting one corner of the lips she longed to taste. "It wasn't always obvious where some of the stuff went, so I had to guess and hope for the best."

The playful comment made her smile grow wide. "I'm sure it's fine. I mean, I've been thinking about rearranging my cabinets anyway, so..."

Taking his phone from his pocket, Archer began searching for something for them to eat. While he did, he told her, “Just be sure to remember that when you get pissed because you can’t find your favorite spatula or measuring spoon.”

Cassie chuckled softly, amazed by the ease with which this man could make her smile. She hadn’t done much of that lately. Even before Russ’s untimely death. Yet here she was, standing in her home with two men she’d hired to help her find a killer, and she was *smiling*.

And it was all thanks to the man currently ordering them dinner from his phone.

THREE HOURS—AND ONE NEW SECURITY SYSTEM LATER—SHE and Archer were alone in her house once again. They’d eaten and talked. She’d talked more than she ate. And as promised, Cassie had gone over every minute of that fateful night.

Twice.

From her flight home from the conference to her choice to make tea instead of the glass of wine she usually drank before bed, to the moment she began CPR...and everything that followed after.

There was no detail left unspoken. No fact omitted, accidentally or otherwise. Cassie knew this with utter certainty because the events from that night were forever etched so deep inside her brain that they were a part of her now.

It was a night she wished she could forget but knew she never would. No matter how much she wanted to. No matter how hard she tried.

Ending the life of another human being was something that changed a person. Good or bad. Intentional or not. She didn’t see how anyone could take someone’s life without it changing the very core of who they were.

Despite wanting to more than anything else in the world, Cassie knew there’d be no going back. She couldn’t change what happened. A person’s past was carved in a permanent, unreadable stone.

All she could do now was use every resource available to her—namely Archer and his team—to do whatever she could to uncover the truth. Because the truth was out there, somewhere.

And so was a killer.

TWO DAYS LATER...

“WE THEREFORE COMMIT THIS BODY TO THE GROUND, EARTH to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life.”

Archer stood by Cassie’s side near Russell Montgomery’s grave as the priest began wrapping up the decedent’s committal service. He could feel several sets of eyes burning into his back...from both the uppity rich crowd who’d come to pay their last respects and the reporters and paparazzi forced to stand across the lawn on the other side of the parking lot.

Those lenses of theirs would snap a million pictures of Cassie by the time the service was brought to an end. They’d zoom in nice and tight, making it seem as if the assholes behind the cameras were standing mere feet from the subject of their smear campaigns, rather than behind the barricade put in place to protect those who’d come to mourn.

The rags the photogs sold their intrusive images to were no better. Archer seethed inside knowing they’d spin a compelling and sordid story for their readers. Ones filled with money, power, murder, and scandal.

Hell, when they'd first arrived at the church an hour earlier, reporters had pushed and shoved against one another in an effort to get Cassie to answer their shouted questions. She'd ignored them, of course. As had he when those questions turned his way...

What's your name?

How do you know the accused

Did you know she was going to kill her husband?

Did you help her come up with the plan?

Are you sleeping with The Black Widow Lawyer?

Like Cassie, Archer had shut them all out. Staying focused on the job he was hired to do, he kept his head on a swivel and his focus on protecting his client.

As for the dickheads trying to use a family's grief to pad their bank accounts, he couldn't care less what they thought or wrote about him. His concern was for the incredible woman standing inches to his right.

Archer slid a hidden glance in her direction, his gaze hidden from her and those around them by the dark lenses of his blacked-out tactical sunglasses. Spine straight, shoulders back, and chin up, Cassie possessed the same confident composure she had all morning.

From the outside, she appeared strong. Uncaring of the obvious stares and not-so-hushed whispers that had been swirling around her throughout the entire service. But Archer's chest tightened because he saw what the others couldn't...

A woman who was hurting. Who'd lost a person she'd once loved. A man she'd once planned a life with. A future.

Russell Montgomery was a bastard who'd shit on Cassie and the vows they'd taken by lying and sleeping around. He doesn't deserve anyone's sympathy, let alone hers.

Archer gave their surroundings another indiscernible glance before bringing Cassie back into his peripheral. When she'd gone through everything that had happened the night the man died, she'd also taken him through the timeline of their

short, three-year marriage. Assuring him any romantic feelings she'd felt toward Russell Montgomery were long, *long* gone, he knew today still brought sadness to her heart.

Sadness. Embarrassment. Fear. Determination.

Standing close to her side, Archer could almost *feel* the emotions rolling through her. Emotions the incredible woman refused to let anyone see. But he knew.

I can see them, baby. I can see them all.

It had only been two days since his and Cassie's initial introduction. Two nights he'd spent sleeping under her roof. But in that time, Archer had divided his attention between the work he and his team were doing for her case and learning everything he could about the woman deemed The Black Widow Lawyer.

He knew her favorite guilty-pleasure meal was deep-fried chicken strips and curly fries. Her favorite dessert was cherry pie—served warm with a dollop of plain vanilla ice cream on top.

Archer had also learned that, on the rare occasion, Cassie would sometimes treat herself to a generous piece of Baklava from a tiny Lebanese bakery down the block from where she worked. Either to celebrate a win in court or to drown her professional—or personal—sorrows.

So of course, knowing today would likely be hard for her, he'd made arrangements for a box of the stuff to be waiting for her back at her place.

But Cassie's taste in food wasn't the only thing Archer had learned about the intriguing blonde. He knew the kinds of movies she liked, that she was a woman who enjoyed watching Nascar.

And Archer listened intently as she told him about the pro-bono work she did for her firm. While Russ and their other partner, Edward Yates, took on the more lucrative cases, Cassie's focus had always been on helping those in need of legal representation but couldn't afford the typical high-end lawyer fees often required for a quality defense.

One of the many tidbits he'd gleaned from his time spent talking with her.

Something else that had transpired over the past two days—the most *important* thing, as far as he was concerned—was the solidification of his belief in her innocence. Could she be playing him? Anything was possible. But as far as Archer was concerned, no one was that good of an actress.

“On behalf of the Montgomery family, I would like to thank you all for coming today to celebrate the life of their beloved Russell.” The priest's commanding voice pulled Archer's attention back to where the collared man stood. “Lunch will be served inside the church's main annex located on the south side of the Parish, and you are all invited to partake.”

And with that, the services came to an end.

“Were you wanting to go to the lunch?” Archer asked Cassie in a low enough tone no one else could possibly hear.

“God no,” she whispered back. “The sooner we can get away from these people and those cameras, the better.”

My thoughts exactly.

He'd tried talking her into skipping altogether, but both she and her attorney had insisted Cassie attend. Though it was a nightmare in terms of security, Archer understood why they saw the need for her to come.

Despite having separate lives for over a year, and a divorce that was all but handled, she'd still been married to Russ at the time of his death. That alone gave her the right to be here.

There was another reason behind Cassie's emphatic insistence that she attend her late-husband's funeral...

Do you know who hides, Archer? The scared and the guilty, that's who. Now I may be afraid of going to prison...or worse, of being killed...but I am not afraid of the press, Russ's stuck-up family, or their so-called friends. Nor am I guilty. But if I stay home, if I don't show my face at the services today, I may as well walk into that police station right now and confess to poisoning the man I was trying to divorce. While I

understand and appreciate your concern, I refuse to be complicit in adding to the narrative that I'm a cold-blooded killer by being noticeably absent from my own husband's funeral.

It was an argument he knew he wouldn't win, so Archer had finally agreed. Now here they were dutifully waiting while a massive line formed so guests could pay their final respects to both Russ and his immediate family.

With the rest of the team strategically placed within the crowd and around Lake View Cemetery, Archer was able to focus solely on keeping Cassie safe. That was his job, after all. But the more time he spent with the sexy lawyer, the more personal his reasons for wanting to protect her became.

“I wasn't sure you'd show.”

Both he and Cassie turned to see a petite brunette trying to rush toward them in heels while avoiding the soft earth's pitfalls. He stiffened, his reflexive instinct to shift his body so that he was between her and the possible threat. But then the woman lifted her gaze from the ground she'd been watching and...

“Lori!” Cassie sidestepped his protective move and practically threw herself in the other woman's open arms. “Oh, are you a sight for sore eyes.”

Archer stepped closer, assessing the interaction between friends with an operator's stare. He recognized Cassie's best friend from the electronic file Lucky had sent over the day before.

The tech genius had completed his deep dive into Cassie, Russ, and those who were closest to them. One of the names at the top of that list...Lori Yates.

During their initial meeting, Cassie had shared a bit about the couple. How she and Lori had met in college while the two were studying for their undergrad. According to Cassie, the two women had hit it off immediately and had been all but inseparable ever since.

Lori Yates. Thirty-one. Married to Edward Yates, Cassie and Russ's business partner.

According to Cassie, Lori also had a law degree. But instead of following the same path as Lori and both women's husbands, the cute brunette had decided to give up her dream of becoming an attorney, and instead, dedicated herself to being the best housewife a woman could be.

And from what he'd been told, Lori Yates could rival Martha Stewart any day of the week.

"God, woman." Lori sniffled as she pulled out of Cassie's embrace. "It is so good to see you."

"You, too." They shared another brief hug, followed by dabs of tissue to the corners of their eyes.

Archer stood at the side, keeping a close eye on both the crowd and the friend.

"I'm so sorry I haven't called or been by the house before now. On top of the shock of what happened, things have been completely crazy at the office. Clients are dropping us like flies, and I've even had to start putting in long hours there to help Eddie manage the phones, mail, and—"

"Do *not* apologize." Cassie sounded genuine in her request. "I'm the reason the firm is in this mess to begin with. If it wasn't for me..."

The other woman's perfectly manicured brows bunched together. "Nothing about this is your fault, Cass. The person who actually killed Russ is the reason the firm's a mess. Not you."

A blanket of sadness and regret fell over the woman he'd sworn to protect. "I can't believe people are leaving the firm." Cassie shook her head. "Between Ellie stepping in to take over my pro-bono work and Eddie, we'd be okay at least until the trial."

"Yeah, well...you can thank the press for that." Lori scowled. "

“How’s Eddie holding up?” Cassie glanced around as if to search for the man in question.

“Eddie’s being Eddie.” Lori shrugged. “You know how he gets when he’s stressed.”

The woman turned to look at something across the sea of black dresses and suits. Following her line of sight, Archer spotted Edward Yates speaking to a gray-headed couple he recognized as Alastair and Barbara Montgomery.

Russ’s parents.

Even if he hadn’t already seen them on the news—and in the file Lucky had sent over—Archer would have recognized them instantly. Despite the distance separating them, he could tell the wealthy couple was every bit as poised and polished as Cassie had claimed.

And while Barbara Montgomery appeared genuinely distraught and saddened by the death of her son, the decedent’s father simply looked angry. With a parting hug for Russ’s mother, Yates shook the patriarch’s hand before turning and heading their way.

“I’m so sorry,” Cassie offered again.

The sadness in her sweet voice pulled hard on Archer’s heart.

“Stop apologizing. He’ll be fine. Once the dust settles and Ellie works her courtroom magic, everyone will know you didn’t do this, and Eddie will be back to his normal, workaholic self.”

From what Cassie had shared—which was confirmed by Lucky’s in-depth background search—Edward Yates was the most lawyerly of the group. In Cassie’s words, she was the brains and the heart her pro-bono clients desperately needed; Russ had provided the firm with the Montgomery name and the legal legacy that came with it, and Edward’s serious personality kept them both perfectly grounded.

Yates was also Russ’s closest friend.

“What about you?” Lori searched Cassie’s sorrowful gaze. “This whole thing must seem like a nightmare come to life for you. How are you holding up?”

“As well as anyone in my situation, I guess.” As if only just remembering he was there, Cassie turned to Archer, her unshed tears glittering in the afternoon sun. “This is Lori Yates.” An adorable snuffle. “My closest friend in the world.” She turned back and said, “This is Archer Nash. He’s a private security specialist I’ve hired to help with my case.”

“Security specialist?” Suspicion filled the other woman’s dark stare before she brought it back around to Cass’s. “An expert witness Ellie plans on calling to the stand?”

Cassie’s blonde hair brushed over her shoulders as she gave a slight shake of her pretty head. “Archer works for Eagle’s Nest Securities. They’re a start-up firm here in the city. All former Navy SEALs. Ellie recommended them when she and I were discussing my case after I was released.”

“So what exactly will you be doing to help Cassie’s defense?” Lori posed the question directly to him.

“Whatever she needs me to do,” he rumbled low.

The answer was trite and vague as hell. But he didn’t know this woman, and until his team cleared her as a suspect themselves, Archer wasn’t about to divulge any specifics to her or anyone else.

“Okay, then.” Lori’s slightly widened eyes found their way back to Cassie.

With a much more gracious explanation, she told her friend, “He’s mainly here for protection.”

“Good.” The other woman didn’t hesitate to share her opinion on the matter. “Because you know whoever poisoned Russ was actually trying to kill you, right? I’ve been telling that very same thing to anyone who will listen. The book club I go to on Sunday nights, my neighbors, the baristas at the coffee shop...the clients who’ve been calling or coming by the office. Some are willing to listen, but others...I mean, you and Russ had your issues.” Emotion seemed to momentarily clog

the woman's throat. "But I know you'd never kill him or anyone else." Her serious eyes turned his way once more. "She *wouldn't*."

"I know."

A flicker of surprise flashed across Cassie's gorgeous baby blues as they locked with his. Holding her gaze steady, Archer hoped like hell she could see he meant what he'd said.

To hell with the fact that they'd only known each other three days, and fuck what the evidence said. His time as a Navy SEAL had taught him more about life and the human race than he'd ever wanted to know.

The good, the bad, and the ugliest the world had to offer.

Between his training and subsequent tours in the Middle East, Archer had honed countless lifesaving skills along the way, including his gut instincts and innate ability to read people. And when he looked at Cassie...when he allowed himself to really study her intelligent gaze...there was no doubt in his mind or gut that she was innocent of the crime with which she'd been charged.

I just have to prove it.

"Don't worry, Lori," Cassie spoke up again. "Archer's basically serving as my bodyguard while he and his team do an independent investigation into Russ's death."

Crossing her arms at her chest, her friend's tight jaw clenched shut. Tears welled in her eyes, and with a slightly jutted chin, Lori said, "You have to find the person who did this to Russ. Because I'm afraid..." Her voice cracked, but she cleared her throat and licked her thin red lips. "I'm afraid, if you don't, they'll kill her, too."

"I won't let anything happen to her," he vowed. "You have my word on that."

Lori stared back at him with a pointed look before saying, "Just make sure you keep it."

Archer's only response was a dip of his head. A single nod to seal his promise to keep Cassie out of harm's way.

And as the group of three stood there, waiting for Lori's husband to make his way through the thick crowd and over to them, he couldn't help but feel as though he'd just made the most important promise of his life.

I KNOW.

Cassie's chest tightened, her heart swelling with hope as she stood half-listening to Archer and Lori's conversation. He believed her. The man *believed* her. And the best part about hearing those two powerful words grace his kissable lips...

He meant them.

Archer didn't give platitudes, and he refused to blow smoke up her ass. That's what he'd told her the first night he'd stayed at her house, and so far, he'd been a man of his word.

For the past two days, they'd discussed every detail of her life. The man knew everything there was to know about her. Even things she wouldn't have thought remotely relevant to what he'd been hired to do...

The story of how her dad split when she was three. How her mom died when Cassie was twelve after drinking herself into oblivion and then driving her car down a steep ravine.

She'd shared what it was like moving in with her grandmother. It had been such a scary, uncertain time, and Cassie had been so very thankful her grandma was there.

Yes, she'd answered every question the man had asked, even the ones that seemed completely unrelated to her case. The name of her favorite teacher. Her first crush. Every lover she'd ever had.

That last one was easy enough to answer. She'd only ever been with two men.

Cassie's first had been a guy she'd met her freshman year in college. Matthew Colson was his name, and a lifetime ago, she'd thought he was *the one*.

As it turned out, Matt was nothing more than a baseball player with a killer smile and a wandering eye.

That had been her first lover. She'd just buried her second.

So yeah, the dark and brooding man standing beside her knew all about her sad, uninteresting life. Yet she knew almost nothing about his.

Cassie knew Archer used to be a SEAL, what he did for a living now, and that he was currently single. He'd volunteered that list bit the first night he'd stayed in her house because, in his words, he'd hadn't wanted her to be concerned about his focus being split between her and his responsibilities at home.

He'd never been married, didn't have any children, and wasn't currently involved with anyone. When Archer had revealed his single status, her relief had been grand. But that wasn't the only thing she wanted to know about her mouthwatering bodyguard.

I want to know where he grew up, what made him want to become a Navy SEAL...why he's so certain I'm not a killer.

Oh, who was she kidding? When it came to Archer Knox, Cassie suddenly wanted to know...

Everything.

"Oh!" She cried out with a gasp as a woman accidentally bumped into her, pushing Cassie forward as she walked past.

Torn from her thoughts, she stumbled forward and started to fall. But just as she was seconds away from performing a spectacular, arm-flailing faceplant in front of God and

everyone—a video that would no doubt go viral in minutes—a pair of strong, masculine hands grabbed hold of her hips and pulled.

The abrupt change in motion had her stumbling backward, toward the source of the hands. Before she could keep it from happening, Cassie found her entire backside smacked flat against Archer's front.

The tempting man kept her steady, his grip was unwavering as he made sure she wasn't going to lose her balance once more. His hands felt strong yet gentle as his fingers curled around her in what she could only describe as a protector's hold.

Cassie's heart raced with the rush of adrenaline from the near mishap. Against her back, she felt Archer's beating to a powerful, even staccato. She could also feel the hard lines and curves of his muscular form.

That's not all that's hard.

A low curse reached her ears a breath before Archer jerked back. Putting several inches between his body and hers, he sounded angry when asking, "Are you okay?"

Doing everything in her power to forget what she'd just felt, Cassie gave her head a quick nod. "Yeah." She breathed. Her racing heart began to slow its fast pace. "I'm okay."

"People need to watch where they're going."

The growled statement was loud enough for others to hear, which she suspected, was the man's point.

"It's okay, Archer." She turned, regretting it instantly when his hands fell back to his sides. "It was an accident."

"Not so sure about that." His focus was on something behind her.

Glancing over her shoulder, Cassie realized what he meant.

The woman who'd bumped into her was looking back at them, a snide smirk spread across her Botox-filled lips. With an arched, pencil-thin brow, she slowly turned her hoity-toity self around and continued on her way.

And then she and the two women walking with her began to laugh.

Definitely no accident.

“Ignore them.”

The gruff order pulled her away from the snobby socialites and back to Archer. No longer watching the immature women, his sunglass-covered eyes were staring directly down at her.

Embarrassed, Cassie looked away with a whispered, “Thanks.”

“Look at me.”

Another rough command she followed without question.

Bringing her gaze back to his, she had to force her lungs to work when he reached up and slid those glasses to the top of his handsome head. The browns in his eyes darkened, his expression so intense it sent her heart racing once again.

“Those women are miserable bitches hiding behind too many fillers and their daddy’s money. You can’t let people like that get to you. The minute you do, they win.”

Her chest tightened, and her lower belly tingled. She hadn’t felt even the tiniest amount of interest in men or sex in... forever. Not with Russ or any other man.

Not after everything he’d put her through.

But here she was, standing in a freaking cemetery of all places—a handful of yards away from her husband’s freshly dug grave, no less—and she was more aroused than she’d been in over a year.

I am so going to hell.

“Yeah, we’re good.” Archer spoke to his team through the tiny earpiece he’d told her about earlier. “What about you guys? All good on your end?” There was a long pause, and Cassie knew he was listening to his teammates’ responses. And then, “Copy that. I’ll let you know when we’re on the move.”

Squinting a bit from the sun, she stared up at him in awe. Black suit, tactical sunglasses, an almost indiscernible earwig so he can talk to the team of hidden warriors, watching their backs...

He was seriously like the sexiest, most tempting superspy the world had ever known.

Nash. Archer Nash.

“You ready?” A different but familiar male voice stole the moment away.

Ripped from the spell her mouthwatering guardian had unknowingly cast, Cassie moved her gaze from Archer to the man who’d just joined them.

A man who’d been by her and Russ’s sides from the beginning.

“Eddie.” She opened her arms and pulled her business partner in for a hug. “It’s so good to see you.”

“You, too.” The six-foot blond patted her back.

Her gut began to churn. She’d hugged this man more times than she could remember over the years, and not once...not ever...had it felt as cold and uncaring as it did now.

Cassie pulled back so she could look into his gray-blue eyes. “You were such a good friend to Russ. I’m so sorry for what happened.”

“Me, too.” He refused to make eye contact.

Oh, Eddie.

“Lori told me about the trouble at the firm.” She did her best to make him see she hadn’t forgotten about the business. “I promise I’ll be back in the office as soon as the state lifts the temporary suspension of my license.”

One of many, *many* nasty side-effects of being charged with capital murder.

“Okay.”

“He knows you will,” Lori interjected. Wrapping her arms around Cassie, she gave her a tight squeeze. “I’m sorry to rush off, but we have to run home to let the dog out before heading back to the church.”

A sliver of jealousy threatened to seep into her veins knowing the Montgomerys would welcome the other woman with smiles and kindhearted words. Barb and Alastair loved Lori. They always had.

Then again, her best friend hadn’t been the one to sully the family name. No, that had been her. In their eyes, anyway.

“Of course.” She hugged her only true friend back. “I think we’re just going to go home.” Cassie lowered her voice for Lori’s ears only before adding a hushed, “No sense in poking the bear.”

With a small snort, the other woman chuckled. “Probably smart,” Lori whispered back before dropping her arms and taking a step toward her husband.

“Eddie, I know I can’t technically practice law until this whole mess gets straightened out, but if you need anything... even legal research or someone to help return phone calls, just give me a—”

“I’ve got it handled.” A sharp retort. Then, as if realizing how curt he was being, the man she’d considered a close friend for nearly a decade finally met her gaze. Changing his tone to one that was only slightly friendlier, he said, “From what I’ve been told, the D.A.’s case against you is airtight. So you focus on your defense and leave the rest to me.”

Cassie blinked, having only ever seen this side of her husband’s best friend in court.

The man just lost his best friend, and the business he helped build is being threatened because everyone thinks you’re the reason. It’s no wonder he’s upset.

“I’ll call you.” Lori offered an apologetic smile.

“Okay. I’ll text you my new number.”

“You got a new phone?”

“Cops took mine.” Cassie shrugged as if it were no big deal when really, every reminder of her current situation—no matter how small—was like a jagged knife twisting deep in her gut. “Ellie got me one of those pay-as-you-go phones to use until after the trial. On the plus side, the number isn’t registered, so I haven’t had to deal with harassing calls or texts.”

Archer turned his shaded eyes her way, an almost prideful expression washing over his rugged face. She thought he might be about to say something, but before he could, Lori gave her final goodbye, and she and Eddie turned and walked away.

“What?” Cassie kept her eyes on her friends as she spoke.

Heat from Archer’s sexy-as-sin body radiated to hers as he stood close to her side. “What, what?”

She turned her head in his direction. “You looked like you wanted to say something just now.”

“Not really.” A slight shake of his head.

“But you were thinking something.” She swallowed. “Care to share?”

“Later.” He did a quick check of their surroundings. “I don’t like you being out in the open like this.”

Her chest became heavy from his words. Following his watchful gaze, Cassie noticed the once-thick crowd had vanished. Besides her and Archer, Russ’s parents and another couple they were speaking to were only ones left.

“Yeah, let’s go.” She didn’t wait for him to start walking toward the parking lot.

Archer’s long legs allowed him to catch up to her with ease. Placing a protective hand on her lower back, he kept his body close and his head in constant motion.

They were almost to Archer’s all-black SUV when she heard a man’s angry voice shouting at her from behind.

“How dare you show your face here!”

The furious voice had both Cassie and Archer spinning around. A giant pit filled her stomach when she saw Alistair Montgomery storming angrily toward her.

Walking several feet behind him was his wife, who appeared to be doing her very best to catch up.

“You have no right coming here after what you did!” Fury seemed to fuel the sixty-five-year-old man as he marched his slightly bowed legs across the lot’s smooth pavement. His light gray hair had thinned even more since the last time she’d seen him.

Archer’s entire body turned to stone beside her, but Cassie refused to wilt beneath her father-in-law’s rage. Calling upon her experience in the courtroom, she forced herself to maintain a calm and collected demeanor.

“I didn’t kill Russ, Alistair,” she stated truthfully. “And like it or not, I was still his wife when he died, which means I have *every* right to pay my last respects.”

Alistair’s eyes burned with hatred unlike any she’d ever seen as he brought himself closer. “My son didn’t just die.” The older man seethed. “You *killed* him!”

“No.” A firm shake of her head. “I didn’t.”

“You lying bitch!”

He surged forward, raising a hand high in the air as if his intent was to strike her. Cassie gasped, reflexively lifting her own arm to shield her face as she ducked down to avoid the blow.

“Alistair, no!” Barbara cried out to her husband.

But Cassie couldn’t see the other woman. She was too busy squeezing her eyes shut and bracing herself for the pain she knew would come. Only...it didn’t.

“You’re going to want to think long and hard about what you do next.”

Archer’s lethal tone sent a rush of shivers racing down her. Peeling her eyes open, Cassie lowered her arm and stood tall once again, her wide-eyed gaze taking in the shocking scene.

While she'd been ducking to avoid getting slapped in the face, Archer had put himself between her and the man intent on doing her harm. He held Alistair's forearm steady in a tight, white-knuckled grip.

Towering over Russ's infuriated father, Archer was the epitome of strength and control. And as he kept himself in the protective stance, his tall, muscular form exuded the deadly promise he'd just made.

"I don't know who the hell you are, but you have two seconds to get your hand off me, or I'll—"

"You'll what?" Archer kept that hand right where it was. "Sue me because I kept you from committing first-degree assault on an innocent woman?"

His masculine shoulders shook with a sarcastic huff. "Innocent?" Alistair scoffed. "She doesn't know the meaning of the word. This murdering bitch deserves to—"

Archer yanked on the other man's arm, forcing Alistair to step directly into Archer's personal space. Leaning forward, the former SEAL dropped his tone to a level so deep, so deadly, it scared even her.

"Call her a bitch again and see what happens."

"Wha...y-you...you can't do this. You are holding me against my will, and that's—"

"Me being generous," Archer bit back. "You come at her, call her names, and then try to hit her?" His dark head moved from one side to the other. Slowly. "The only reason you're not lying flat on your back is out of respect for those who are buried on this land. But make no mistake..." He got right in Alistair's face then. "You come at her like that again, you so much as look in her direction, and you'll be the one defending yourself in front of a judge."

"You clearly have no idea who you're speaking to."

"I know exactly who and *what* you are. But you don't know me. And you have no idea the things I'm capable of."

"Is that a threat? Because I could have you arrested for—"

“Oh, it’s no threat.” Archer shook his head again. “That’s a promise I will move heaven and earth to keep.”

“She killed my boy.”

“No, I *didn’t!*” Cassie insisted. Stepping several inches to the right, she craned her neck around Archer to get a better look. She wanted to see the other man’s face. She needed to look her ex-father-in-law square in his angry eyes when she said, “My God, Alistair. How can you possibly think I could do something as horrific as murdering Russ?”

How could he think she was capable of murdering *anyone*?

“Because you wanted to take everything you could from him!” he accused. “The house, the money...the firm he built with *our* family’s money. You wanted it all. And when you realized you weren’t going to get it, you lured him to the house he paid for, and you killed him!”

“You’re wrong.” *You’re so, so wrong.* “I didn’t even know Russ was coming over that night. And the only reason he did was to bring me a copy of the changes he’d insisted his lawyer make to the divorce settlement. All things that benefited me, by the way.”

If Ellie were here, she’d be screaming at Cassie to shut her mouth and walk away. But Cassie was smart, and she knew how to handle herself where the law was concerned.

She hadn’t said anything she hadn’t already told the police. Certainly nothing she wouldn’t say under oath while on the stand. And while she loathed the blood-sucking paparazzi fortifying this moment forever with their pictures and videos, she also knew this was the perfect opportunity to show the public that she *wasn’t* the violent, uncaring person the angry man had tried making her out to be.

“I don’t believe you!” Alistair’s voice rose even higher. The skin covering his forehead and cheeks turned red with fury.

Again Cassie kept her composure like a pro as she calmly stated, “You don’t have to believe me. My lawyer has the papers Russ brought to me that night. Any handwriting expert

worth their salt will be able to prove that the changes that were made are all in Russ's own handwriting."

She took a step forward in an effort to make the man see she was telling him the truth. But in a protective move, Archer shifted his body to the side, purposely blocking her path.

Knowing that was a fight she wouldn't win, Cassie decided to stay where she was as she continued speaking to a man she prayed she'd never have to see again. "Even if I'd wanted to hurt your son—which I *didn't*, there was no reason for me to."

"Bullshit."

"It's not bullshit, Alistair. Russ came by that night to tell me he'd conceded to every offer I'd made." *And then some.* "Don't you see? I was free. Russ and I were *both* finally free to move on with our lives. So you can stand there and call me whatever names you'd like. Run over to those reporters and spread all the lies you want to tell. Hell, you can spend the rest of your life hating me for something I didn't even do, for all I care. But not a single one of those things will bring Russ back, and they sure as hell won't change the fact that I had no idea that wine was poisoned when I handed your son that glass."

Shaking off Archer's hold—which was only possible because Archer had decided to let him—Alistair appeared to have regained a modicum of control. But as the wealthy man took a step back and began smoothing the front of his designer suit and tie, he gave her an ominous warning...

"If you think I'm going to let you get away with murder, you're even dumber than I thought. Rest assured, Cassandra... I won't stop until you've gotten what you deserve."

"Walk away, Montgomery," Archer ordered. "Do it now, before I change my mind and decide to pound your weaselly ass into the pavement."

"Is that another one of your 'promises'?" Alistair's sarcastic comment was accompanied by an angry glare.

She and Barbara watched the two men silently as Archer said, "You bet your ass it is."

“Come on, Alistair.” The man’s wife wrapped her frail fingers around the top of his arm and pulled him back toward her. “Everyone will be waiting for us back at the church.”

Much to her relief, Russ’s father made the smart decision to listen to his wife. The infuriated man let the older woman pull him in the opposite direction, but not before turning those cold, hateful eyes in her direction one final time.

“You know, it’s too bad Washington did away with the death penalty. I would have loved to have watched them shove that needle into your arm.”

The man’s parting words pierced her heart, and Cassie thought she may have gasped. But then Archer was there, wrapping a comforting arm around her shoulders and tossing out his own parting comment...

“Come near her again and it will be the last thing you do.”

Archer reached down and took her hand in his. The undeniable sense of safety and comfort his touch brought forth was instantaneous. The feeling of his warm, callused palm sliding against hers as natural as anything she’d ever known.

Walking in silence, they kept a slow but steady pace as they made their way to Archer’s SUV. Correction, the *team’s* SUV.

They’d stopped earlier at his office on the way to the church to make the trade. Archer’s truck for a Tahoe. But this wasn’t just any Tahoe. No, the SUV he was currently helping her climb into was a freaking beast.

Though it looked like any other tinted SUV, this thing was unlike any vehicle she’d ever ridden in...

Blacked-out beyond the legal limits for civilians, the thing had an armored shell, bullet resistant glass, run-flat tires, and blast protected floors.

When he’d been telling her all the reasons why she was safer riding in this than his truck, Archer had listed off several other impressive features. But those were the ones Cassie could remember off the top of her head.

Probably because those features were what really mattered most.

If someone shot at them, the glass wouldn't shatter, and the armored metal would provide a barrier between the striking bullet and the vehicle's interior. More to the point, they'd keep those bullets from striking *them*.

Even more to the point, let's hope there are no bullets or blasts to begin with!

Okay, so yeah. She had to give that one to her subconscious. No bombs or bullets was definitely her first choice.

"You okay?"

Cassie jumped a little in her seat when Archer's voice suddenly filled enclosed space. "I'm fine," she lied.

Nothing about this day was fine.

Not the fact that Russ was dead or that his family had gone against the wishes she knew he possessed and had his body cremated before she'd ever gotten word. The whispers, sneers, and snickers alone had nearly been enough to drive her right back out the door of that church.

Cassie thought about the woman who'd 'accidentally' bumped into her. She thought about Alistair and his horrible, hateful words...

I would have loved to have watched them shove that needle into your arm.

Her fists curled together in her lap as the altercation between him, her, and Archer replayed over and over again in her mind. Would this nightmare ever end?

She was beginning to think it would go on forever.

If you're convicted like Alistair wants, you'll be stuck in it for the rest of your miserable days.

"Hey." A masculine hand reached over and covered hers. "It's going to be okay."

"I know." Another lie.

She knew nothing of the sort.

Cassie glanced down and studied their joined hands. Twisting one of hers over, she linked her fingers with his and gave him a gentle squeeze.

How nice it would be if they were holding hands for an entirely different reason. If they were a normal couple riding in a normal, non-armored car without having to worry about psycho killers, prison, and angry, mourning fathers accosting them in a cemetery parking lot.

They slowed for a turn, and Cassie blinked. Glancing up, she was surprised to see they'd just pulled into her driveway.

Archer put the SUV in park and tapped the mic in his ear. "We're good. Thanks, guys. I'll touch base later."

He reached for the door, but she stopped him before it opened.

"Thank you," she offered softly. "For what you did back there."

Archer didn't move at first. He just sat there, frozen with his back to her. For a second, Cassie thought she'd somehow angered him. Which didn't make any sense, whatsoever. But then...

Using his left hand, he slid those sunglasses—that were far, *far* sexier than they should've been—onto the top of his head. Leaning back, he released his hold on the door's handle and shifted his body around so he was almost fully facing her.

Dark, intense, carefully controlled anger filled his gorgeous eyes. Moving slowly, almost methodically, they lowered to where she was still holding onto his muscular arm. Cassie released him, fearing he was about to yell at her for touching him.

What he actually said, however...the *way* he said it...the way he looked at her when he said it...left her even more surprised than if he'd yelled.

Surprised.

Delighted.

Confused.

“He was going to hit you.” Each syllable was spoken with low, slow, and perfectly concise speech. “When I saw the look in his eyes...” Archer worked his throat, his swallow audible. “When I saw that fucking hand rise up, I knew he was going to hurt you.”

He rolled his lips inward and gave a slow shake of his head as the hand that had been holding hers pulled itself free. Moving slowly, Archer lifted it up, toward her face. And when he slid his palm against her cheek to cup it, Cassie lost the ability to breathe.

“I will never let anyone hurt you.”

She could *feel* Archer’s resolve as he made the solemn vow. Several seconds passed by as they became as still as statues. Her lost in his heated stare. The fire in Archer’s gaze burning as it remained fixed with hers.

A horn honked in the distance, and in the literal blink of an eye, the moment had passed.

Archer dropped his hand as if she’d just burned him. “Come on.” He reached for his door. “We should get you inside, just in case.”

Just in case.

Right. Because that was really why he was here. Something that, today of all days, she seemed to have forgotten.

Keeping her eyes glued to the sidewalk and her steps, rather than risk glancing at him, Cassie gave herself yet another reminder of just how serious her situation really was.

Someone wants you dead, Cass. That’s about as serious as it gets.

Someone *did* want her dead, which is the only reason Archer was even here. He was hired to do a job. To be her shadow. Protect her from some enemy she never even knew she had.

He wasn't spending time with her so they could sit behind the safety of impenetrable tinted glass and make out like a couple of teenagers. Not that they'd made out. They hadn't even come close.

You came a little bit close.

The start of a growl escaped the base of her throat as she kept her eyes glued to the sidewalk and not him. She hurried and coughed, adding a clearing of her throat for good measure.

“Son of a bitch.”

Archer's sharp expletive—along with his abrupt stop beside her—had her steps faltering to a stop, as well.

“What's wrong?” Her eyes flew directly up to his. But he wasn't looking back at her.

He was staring straight ahead.

Cassie followed his line. When she saw what he was seeing, her hand flew to her gasping mouth. “Oh, my god!”

Her front door and a good portion of the wooden slats leading to it from her steps were covered in red paint. It was everywhere, almost as if someone had flung buckets of the stuff at her home's entrance.

Slow, hesitant steps carried her forward. When they got close enough to see the rest, Archer let out a string of curse words beneath his breath as her stomach filled with a massive ball of dread.

It should have been you.

THOSE WORDS HAD BEEN SLOPPILY PAINTED ACROSS THE otherwise spotless white siding to the door's left. Streaks of red dripping from the letters giving the macabre scene an eerie, terrifying feel.

With a deep scowl, Archer kept his eyes in constant motion as he put an arm around her waist and hustled them both back to the safety of the SUV. Putting his free hand to his ear, he began speaking to his team.

“You guys still there?” He opened the passenger door for her, still scanning their immediate area the entire time. “I need you at Cassie’s house.” He slammed the door shut and moved swiftly around the back bumper. The driver’s door opened as Archer finished rattling off the last part of her address. He shut himself inside and locked the doors. “We’re fine,” he spoke again. There was another, final pause and then, “You’ll see when you get here.”

“Your team’s coming here?”

He gave a sharp nod but remained stoically quiet. She, too, stayed silent as he leaned back in his seat enough to pull his cell from his front pocket. Swiping an angry finger across the screen, he brought the device to life.

Cassie didn’t miss the muscle in his chiseled jaw bulge beneath his dark beard. The man’s anger was palpable, and she was suddenly very glad he was on her side.

Archer held the phone in front of his stone-cold face, waiting for the facial recognition software to unlock the screen. When it did, he began scrolling through what appeared to be his recent calls before tapping on one and putting the phone to his ear.

“W-who are you calling?”

“The police.” A stretch of silence filled the space between them before she heard, “I need to speak to Detective Knox.” He waited. “Tell him it’s Archer Nash with Eagle’s Nest Securities, and I have pertinent information regarding Russell Montgomery’s murder.” Those eyes of his slid to hers. At the same time, he told the person on the other end of the line, “Have him meet me at Cassandra Montgomery’s house. And tell him to hurry.”

Not waiting for a response, Archer ended the call and slid the phone into the cupholder beside him. Rather than meet his steely gaze, Cassie’s eyes were fixed on nothing as she looked past him through the shaded window on his left.

The porch wasn’t visible from where she sat, but Cassie could still see that frightening message as clearly as if she

could.

“They won’t do anything.” Even to her, her voice sounded wooden. “A petty crime like this...vandalizing the home of The Black Widow Lawyer...” She shook her head and brought her emotionless gaze back to his. “The cops think I’m a killer, Archer. Just like everyone else in this damn city.”

“Not everyone.”

She did look at him then. The truth she found staring back at her was the soothing balm her soul desperately needed.

“You really don’t think I killed him, do you?”

He’d said as much back at the cemetery, but she had to be sure. Because if he thought her capable of such a heinous act, then—

“No.” The former SEAL’s jaw clenched tight. “I don’t.”

Archer’s handsome face blurred behind a wall of tears. The rush of emotion was so unexpected, Cassie didn’t have time to catch the tear that had already started to fall.

But Archer...

His hand was there, his thumb caressing the moisture from her cheek in a move so soft, so gentle it felt like a whisper.

“Thank you.” Her voice cracked with the heartfelt sentiment. Clearing the thick emotion from her throat, she told him, “I think you and Lori are the only people on the planet who do.”

Before today, she would’ve been certain Eddie believed her. But one look in his cold, emotionless eyes, and she knew he thought she’d done everything the news stories claimed.

During their first meeting as lawyer and client, Cassie had asked Ellie point blank whether she believed her claims of innocence. She’d given her a toothy smile and said she absolutely did.

But the woman was a stealthy lawyer, and Cassie knew first-hand that Ellie could play the game with the best of them.

“Something I learned during my first deployment as a SEAL...” Archer held her gaze with his. “As long as you have at least one person in your corner, you’re never alone.”

“Are you in my corner, Archer?” She felt her upper body leaning toward him. “Because right now, it feels as if no one else is.”

Those dark eyes of his dropped to her mouth, the browns there turning almost black with desire as he rumbled low, “I’m here, sweetheart.” He brought himself closer. “I’m right... here.”

Before she could determine who had moved first, Cassie found herself sitting behind the safety of impenetrable tinted glass and making out with her bodyguard like a couple of horny teenagers.

And this time when her subconscious tried to be the voice of reason, Cassie ignored the nosey bitch and became lost in Archer’s kiss.

ARCHER STOOD on Cassie's front lawn with his arms crossed tightly at his chest. As he spoke to Detective Travis Knox—while doing his best to ignore the line of reporters standing three houses down behind a line of yellow tape—he couldn't seem to keep his focus from being pulled back to the woman standing several feet away.

I can still taste her.

His tongue swiped across his lips. An unconscious move that brought with it a hint of strawberries and cream.

My new favorite flavor.

He shouldn't have kissed her. She was his client, for fuck's sake. And yet, as he stared at her from across the manicured lawn, there wasn't a single cell in his body that felt remorseful for what he'd done.

Regret should have been at the forefront of his emotions. Instead, Archer found himself replaying the hot, passionate exchange through his mind.

Every tantalizing nibble of her bottom lip. Every hungry, ravishing swipe of her tongue across his. And the way Cassie had melted in his arms...

If Knox and his badge-wielding minions hadn't shown up when they did, we would've done a helluva lot more than kiss.

But no matter how badly Archer wanted to strip the sexy lawyer down and take her in a way that would make her forget every other man before him—there was a part of him that felt grateful for the lights-and-sirens interruption.

Not because he hadn't enjoyed the feel of Cassie's lips and tongue dancing with his. It was the best damn kiss of his entire fucking *life*. He was glad things hadn't moved past first base because it had happened in the front seat of a car.

In the middle of the day.

In the middle of her fucking driveway.

In the company SUV.

Cassie deserves better than to have our first time be in a damn car. She deserves a bed with soft sheets and pillows so fluffy they—

“You said on the phone you have important information regarding Russell Montgomery's murder.” Detective Knox planted his hands low on his hips.

Archer's attention was pulled back to the present. Clearing his throat, he pushed the ill-timed thoughts to the side and slid his gaze back to the man he'd called to the scene.

With a shiny gold badge hanging from a chain around his neck, Knox was dressed in black boots, jeans, and a black puffy jacket over what appeared to be a maroon t-shirt. The perfect-haired bastard looked like every walking, talking T.V. detective come to life.

He also looked annoyed as hell.

“The woman you accused of killing Montgomery was threatened by an unknown source the day of his funeral,” Archer pointed out in a carefully controlled tone. “You don't find that important?”

“I might, if there'd been an actual threat.”

What the fuck did he call the message painted on Cassie's house?

Keeping his expression flat, Archer made a show of turning his head slowly toward the home's vandalized porch. "I mean..." Rather than verbally point out the obvious, he held out a hand, gesturing toward the mess that greeted them upon their return.

"It should have been you." Knox appeared unimpressed as he read the message aloud. "That *could* be seen as a threat." His blue gaze landed back on Archer's. "It could also just be someone's opinion. Can't imagine residents of an upscale neighborhood like this one enjoy the excitement and publicity that comes with living next door to an accused killer."

"I don't give a shit about the neighbors. My only concern is Cassie's safety, which hinges on finding the *real* killer. Not that you or your people seem very interested in uncovering the truth."

Something flashed behind the man's intelligent gaze that made Archer wonder if the guy knew more than he was sharing. Before he could call him on it, Knox blinked it away, his scruff-covered lips curving into a condescending smirk Archer wanted to punch.

"Listen, Mr. Nash." Knox held that smirk steady. "I know what you and your team do for a living. What type of men you are, and who you used to be." His gaze intensified. "While I understand why you might see a threat where there isn't one—"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa." Archer stopped the guy right there. "Who we *used* to be?"

"You're all former Navy SEALs, right?" Knox's gaze slid to the driveway where the rest of his team stood waiting. "At least, that's what it said in the article they wrote about you guys a couple months back. Five former SEALs who went from fighting terrorists overseas to suddenly handing in their walking papers." His light blue stare returned to Archer's. "Now here you are, still fighting the good fight by protecting the citizens of Seattle."

That last line was pretty much a direct quote from the article the prick had referenced.

“You’ve done your homework.”

“Always do. And as I *started* to say, given your background, it’s easy to see how you might see threats that aren’t really there.”

The hell?

Archer took a menacing step forward. “I know you didn’t just imply that the only reason my team and I called you in on this is because we’re fucked in the head from our time in service.”

Cop or no cop, the asshole had better choose his next words very, very carefully.

“That wasn’t meant to an insult.” Knox raised a defensive palm between them, as if that alone would stave off an attack.

No likely, pal.

“Sure as hell sounded like an insult to me,” he growled.

“All I meant was that I’ve seen it before,” the detective explained. “With my brother.”

A shadow fell over the detective at the mention of his sibling, and for the first time since arriving on scene, the guy showed some actual, *real* emotion.

“He serve?”

“Four tours.” Knox gave a nod. “Marines.”

Four tours were a lot for anyone, soldier or SEAL. Archer knew this better than most. And, thanks to Lucky’s cursory research into the man standing before him, he already knew all about Knox and his brother.

But he chose to play dumb...for now.

“I’m guessing things didn’t end well for your brother.”

Knox’s throat worked as a frown dropped his brows into a low V. “Matty, he uh...he was never the same after he got out. He’d do good for a while, and then out of the blue, he’d call

me convinced his neighbors were terrorists and the pizza delivery guy was a spy.”

Archer’s chest tightened at the all-too-familiar story. “He ever get any help?”

Connecting on a more personal level with the man in charge of Cassie’s case would hopefully help in his effort to bring the other man over to their side. Hopefully.

He sees the same things you see.

Yeah, Archer’s gut said the guy sure as hell did. But for some reason, Detective Knox was refusing to acknowledge the fact that Cassie could be in actual danger.

Continuing the conversation, he asked, “Your brother ever get help after he got out?”

“A few times,” Knox confirmed. “But all the therapy, pills, support groups...” The other man shook his head. “They’d help for a while, but none of it ever really stuck. Matty fixed that, though.” The shadow crossing over Knox’s face deepened. “Asshole drove himself out to the county reservoir back where we grew up. Parked his truck, got out his old service pistol, and made sure the ghosts haunting him never came back again.”

Despite having previous knowledge of what the man had just shared, hearing it from the deceased soldier’s brother—seeing the pain still very much present in Knox’s haunted eyes—made the weight of the loss exponentially greater.

“I’m sorry,” Archer offered sincerely.

The two men shared a look only those with intimate knowledge of that same type of sad, senseless story possessed. Waiting a beat, he decided it was time as any to bring the conversation back full circle.

“I know you think Cassie killed her husband, Detective. And I’m sure you probably think my team and I are just out here, grasping at straws. But if you researched us the way I’m guessing you did, then you know we aren’t some sort of fly-by-night P.I. firm looking to make a quick buck. We take cases we believe in based on the evidence presented to us, but we

also follow our instincts. And when it comes to your work, I'm willing to bet you do the same." Archer held the man's gaze. "I know what the evidence says, but I'm telling you...Cassie had nothing to do with Russell Montgomery's death."

The same flash from earlier returned, and this time Archer knew—he *knew*—the other man thought the same damn thing. But before he could call Knox out on it, a man's raised voice tore through the tense air.

Both men turned to see a uniformed officer standing several feet away from the porch, but appeared to have begun speaking louder so the tech taking pictures of the damage could hear him.

Knox blinked, his focus returning to Archer. And just like that, those walls were almost fully back in place.

With his gaze having turned laser-focused, the other man almost looked as if he were trying to get Archer to read between the lines as he said, "I can't go to the D.A. and request he drop the charges against Mrs. Montgomery based solely on your gut feeling, Mr. Nash. So unless your team has actual proof that your client is innocent of the charges that have been brought against her..."

"It's Archer, and no." He gave a curt shake of his head. "We don't have any proof...yet. But rest assured, my team and I *will* uncover the truth."

With or without your help.

Sliding a sideways glance around at the others in attendance, Knox sidestepped him as if he were about to leave.

Just as the two men became shoulder-to-shoulder, Archer told the uncaring prick, "She's an intelligent woman, Knox."

Much to his surprise, the confounding detective humored him by stopping a few feet later and turning back around. "I never doubted her intelligence, Archer. In fact, it was one of the things that drew me to your client as a suspect in the first place. You know, other than the fact that the victim died after drinking a bottle filled with poisoned wine your girlfriend gave him."

Archer shot the man an incredulous look. “See, what you said right there? That doesn’t make a lick of sense.”

“Doesn’t it?” Knox sauntered back his way. “The wife calls nine-one one, frantic because her husband—a man she’d been fighting tooth and nail for over a year to divorce, mind you—had suddenly collapsed in her kitchen. She allegedly performs CPR until the medics arrive, but by then it was too late. Granted the whole ‘it wasn’t mine’ defense where the poison is concerned *is* pretty weak. I mean...” He huffed out a sarcastic chuckle. “Who’s stupid enough to poison a guy in their own home with their own bottle of wine, and then admit to the cops they gave the dead guy the wine, right?”

“Exactly!” Hope began to seep into Archer’s veins. That was the exact fucking point he’d been trying to get across this whole time. But then...

“It’s also easy,” Knox destroyed that hope with a single blow. “Like I said, crying ignorance isn’t a strong defense, yet I’ve heard it on the job more times than I could even begin to count. I’ve also seen criminals hold onto that lie despite hard, undisputable proof that they were guilty staring them back in the face. And since the poor, distraught widow claimed she had no idea how the poison got into the wine, she had no choice but to presume the cyanide was meant for her. Only Cassandra Montgomery isn’t a poor widow at all, is she? In fact, thanks to the ten-million-dollar life insurance policy Russell Montgomery had at the time of his death, your client is now a very, very rich woman.”

Archer stood patiently and waited, refusing to give the man any sort of reaction. None of what he’d said was new information. Cassie had already told him about the hefty life insurance policy.

As a matter of fact, most of his time the last couple of days had been spent sitting, listening, and taking notes while Cassie told him all about her marriage to Russ. The forthcoming woman had recounted happy times, as well as sharing every sordid detail of their nasty divorce.

She'd shown him the copy of the papers Russ had brought over the night he'd died and had even volunteered the part about the impressive payout she still could receive. But that would only happen if the charges against Cassie were dropped, or she was acquitted at trial.

Archer didn't care about the money. He cared about saving an innocent woman from losing her freedom. Or worse, her life.

Thankfully—so far—everything Cassie had told him checked out, and the background Lucky ran on her yielded nothing nefarious or illegal. In fact, the woman's one and only run-in with the law was when she unknowingly killed her soon-to-be-ex.

Russ's background faired very similarly, as well. With the exception of a few parking tickets, and one careless and imprudent driving infraction that was ultimately dropped down to faulty equipment, on paper, the guy looked like a saint.

Minus the two affairs he'd had during his and Cassie's marriage.

Which reminded him...

"What about the affairs?"

"Affairs?" Knox's brows rose with a set of widening eyes. "You telling me your client slept around on the deceased?"

"Not Cassie, dickhead," Archer growled through a set of clenched teeth. "Russ. The guy had at least two separate affairs before they split. From what Russ told Cassie the night he died, he'd just broken the most recent one off the day that very day. Now I don't know about you, but a jilted lover sure sounds plausible to me."

"There was mention about Montgomery's extra-marital activities, but if he was cheating, the guy kept that part of his life zipped tight. Not even his business partner... Eddie Yates? Yeah, even *he* claims to have no knowledge of the affairs. And the guy was Montgomery's best friend since college."

"So either Russ really didn't want Cassie finding out who he was fucking, or Yates is lying," Archer stated bluntly.

“Either way, you and your people have a duty to look into every angle of a case. No matter how much pressure the mayor is putting on the D.A. for a conviction.”

A flash of recognition lit up the other man’s eyes, but he stepped in Archer’s personal space until the two men were damn near nose-to-nose.

“You telling me how to do my job, Nash?”

“Somebody sure as hell needs to.”

A stretch of intense silence passed through them. From his peripheral, Archer could see his teammates watching the interaction very, very closely. But just when he thought Detective Knox was about to clock him—

“The District Attorney believes we’ve caught our killer. So does my sergeant. You know, the man I have to answer to?” The man’s gaze shifted like he was checking for nearby ears before he leaned in with a lowered, “The Mayor is also personal friends with the dead guy’s parents.”

“And?”

“And, that means the pressure to close this one is coming all the way from the top.”

“So you’re choosing politics over justice? Huh...” Archer pretended to huff a casual breath as he watched Knox’s reaction carefully. “I just kinda figured a man who’d fought like hell to get into the service the way you did would have more scruples than to let politics overshadow the truth.”

Because something else Lucky had turned up—this man had done everything he could to get Uncle Sam to deem him fit for duty. Unfortunately for Knox, a previously undetected heart murmur nixed his eligibility with the U.S. military.

So he’d done the next closest thing and became a cop. A damn good one, by all accounts.

“I see you’ve been reading up on me, too.” Knox seemed less than happy about that.

“Did you honestly think I wouldn’t?”

Everyone involved in Cassie's case got a deep dive into their personal, professional, and financial lives. Every. One.

The fact that Knox—a decorated detective with a record-setting close rate since transferring to the S.P.D. two years prior—was willing to look the other way on this one...that he was willing to let an innocent woman go on trial for a murder she didn't commit...

Just like everything else in this case, it doesn't make any damn sense.

“Cassie's never had so much as a speeding ticket,” Archer reminded the other man. “Yes, she married into a wealthy family, but she was also doing just fine on her own. Hell she could be making a ton more money with high-end settlement cases like Russ and Yates fought. Instead, the majority of Cassie's cases have been part of the pro-bono foundation she created and runs through their firm. Damn it, just *look* at her.” Archer turned his gaze in her direction, relieved when Knox did the same. “Does she really look like a cold-blooded killer to you?”

When the man turned back toward him, the expression on his face was unreadable. “You and I both know murderers don't always look like monsters.”

His gut tightened. For a minute there, he could have sworn Knox was finally going to at least entertain the idea that someone other than the beautiful blonde standing yards away was the killer. Realizing that wasn't going to happen, Archer quit wasting his time with the asshole and took a step in Cassie's direction.

I've been away from her long enough.

“Do what you have to, Detective,” Archer offered the parting words. “In the meantime, my team and I will do the same.”

Not waiting for a response before walking away, he made it four long strides before he heard...

“Hey, Nash!”

Archer stopped, his pulse quickening when he turned and faced the man once more. “Yeah?”

Rather than shout for all the world to hear, Knox marched back across the grass toward him. Looking annoyed as fuck, the other man cleared his throat, this time speaking loudly enough for those nearby to hear.

“I’ll make sure the proper department investigates the vandalism done to Mrs. Montgomery’s property. As for the Russell Montgomery murder, that case is officially closed. The decision of whether or not your client is innocent will now be left up to a jury of her peers to decide.” After a moment’s hesitation, the confusing man reached into his back jeans pocket and pulled out a business card. Holding it out, he told Archer, “You think of anything else that may be helpful, give me a call.”

Archer reached for the small, white rectangle, but when he went to take it, the other man pulled it back, just out of Archer’s reach. “My number’s on the card.” Knox’s words came much slower that time. “You want to discuss this case further, call the number on the card.” A pointed look raced across the man’s eyes as he flipped the card over. Handing it to Archer, he offered a parting, “Have a good day, Mr. Nash.”

And then, the thirty-something police detective released the card and away. Glancing down, Archer’s when he saw the note scribbled beneath a handwritten number...

Personal cell. Can’t talk here. Text time and place to set up a meeting.

His eyes flew back up to the other man who was rounding up his troops. Knox had that card, along with the note, ready to go, which meant he *wanted* Archer to set up that meeting.

Was it possible? Did Seattle’s most decorated homicide detective actually think someone other than Cassie killed Russell Montgomery? And if so, why the hell hadn’t he just come right out and say that?

Archer glanced the man’s way once again. Opening the driver’s door to his department-issued vehicle, Travis Knox

paused only long enough to spare Archer a parting glance.

Their gazes locked. The detective gave a single, sharp dip of his chin, and then the man lowered himself into the car.

“WELL THAT SURE looked like an interesting conversation.”

Archer turned toward the source of the deep, rumbled voice as Donovan “Van” Braddock sidled up beside him. Tall—a full two inches above Archer’s own six-four frame—Van’s short dark hair, closely-trimmed beard, black, intense gaze, and muscular build made him appear every bit as lethal as he knew the former SEAL to be.

“That’s one way to put it.” He handed the perpetually stoic man Knox’s card.

“What’s this?”

Archer’s focus slid back to Cassie, who was finally, *finally* heading back his way. His chest tightened when she wrapped her arms protectively around her waist.

It should be my arms wrapped around her. I should be the one holding her. Comforting her.

As if she somehow knew he was thinking about her, Cassie’s crystal blue gaze scanned the area, almost if she was looking for something specific. Satisfaction rushed through him when her stare landed on his...and her presumed search came to an immediate halt.

With careful steps, she moved slowly to avoid letting her heels sink into the soft ground. Like almost everyone else in attendance at today's funeral, Cassie had chosen to wear all black. Only she hadn't looked like everyone else.

Not even close.

Covered in a thin layer of lace, the long-sleeved number had a wide neckline running the length of her delicate collar bones. The material hugged her sensual curves to perfection, stopping just above her knee.

For a widow attending the funeral of her recently deceased spouse, the look was perfectly appropriate. But as Cassie stepped closer to where he and Van waited, Archer's thoughts became anything but.

Fucking gorgeous.

The woman had buried her husband—or, more accurately, his ashes—a couple hours before, yet here he was, unable to tear his eyes from the subtle swaying of her hips as she moved.

“Dude, you're practically drooling.”

Archer blinked, only then remembering his friend was there beside him. “I'm not fucking drooling.” He resisted the urge to wipe his mouth with the back of his hand. “I'm keeping an eye on the woman who hired us to protect her.”

“Watch her any closer, she'll have to physically peel your eyeballs off that sexy as fuck dress.” Van arched a knowing brow. But rather than push the subject, he held up the business card and gave it a subtle wave. “There a reason I'm holding this?”

Ignoring his teammate's remark, Archer continued following Cassie's every move. “Detective Knox gave it to me,” he told the other man. “Check out the back.”

Van flipped over the card and read the last of the written words aloud. “Text time and place to meet?” His laser-focused gaze swung back up to Archer's. “You think he's planning on giving you some inside intel on the case against your girl?”

Refusing to take the bait, Archer answered with a muttered, “Won’t know until I meet up with him.”

“Knox was the arresting officer, right?”

“Yep.”

“So why the hell would the man responsible for putting the Black Widow Lawyer behind bars want to help us prove she didn’t do it?”

Pulling his gaze from hers, Archer finally turned to look at his friend. “Her name’s Cassie,” he bit out harshly. “And I don’t know that Knox *is* going to help us. But after talking to him just now, I got the feeling he’s more on our side than it seems.”

At least, he sure as hell hoped the man was.

“You gonna share this new development with her?” Van motioned toward Cassie, who was now only a few feet away.

“Not yet.” Archer shook his head. “Not until I find out what it is Knox has to say.”

Though he found himself wanting nothing more than to put her mind at ease—with both the case against her and the possible danger lurking about—he wouldn’t get her hopes up without reason.

He’d find a time to meet Detective Knox without her. Once he heard the other man out, then and only then would he decide whether or not he’d fill Cassie in.

She came to a stop in front of him, worry marring the skin beneath her entrancing blue eyes. “Hey.”

“Hey, yourself.” Archer searched her weary gaze. “You okay?”

“Yeah. Just wish I knew why this was happening.”

“We will.” He put a hand to her shoulder, caressing the lace there with his thumb. “Trust me.”

“I do.”

The earnest look in her eyes supported the claim, and damn if his chest didn't fill with a strange sense of warmth so satisfying, he refused to give it a name. The urge to pull her into his arms and promise to make this whole thing go away was so strong, Archer had to shove his fists into his pockets to keep from doing just that.

A slight shift in his peripheral reminded him that they weren't alone.

"This is Donovan Braddock," he finally got his ass in gear and made introductions. "He's the only member you haven't met yet."

Lucky, Chase, and Logan had all spent their fair share of time at Cassie's house since officially taking her on as an Eagle's Nest client. But Van's quick afternoon fix of the security system had spawned a second, three-day job for the same homeowner. This time, at the restaurant the guy owned.

"Nice to meet you, Donovan." Cassie held out her hand and waited.

"Call me Van." The big guy's fist swallowed hers as he gave it a careful shake.

"Okay, then. Van." A small smile lifted the set of lips Archer shouldn't want to taste again. "Thanks for coming so quickly." She looked to the others on the team who had also just walked up. "Thank you all for coming."

"What did the cops say?" Logan asked as he, Chase, and Lucky filled in the stretch of glass between Van and Cassie.

Dropping her hand back to her side, she took the lead and answered the man's question. "They said exactly what I expected. The police will talk to the neighbors, check out the footage from my doorbell camera...put out feelers in the neighborhood. Oh, and they'll call if and when their investigation turns up anything new." Those dainty shoulders of hers fell with a defeated sigh. "So basically, whoever did this will likely get away with it."

All eyes shifted to Chase, who stared back at them with a casual shrug.

“No one’s getting away with shit, Boyer.” Archer pulled his hands from his pockets and faced the youngest member of the team. “We’ll go door-to-door ourselves if that’s what it takes.”

“Nash is right.” Logan nodded. “This stunt may very well turn out to be nothing more than some teenage assholes trying to scare Cassie. But until we know for sure, we’re treating this as a threat.”

“Aye, aye, Captain.” Lucky gave their leader a sloppy salute. “Though they won’t get much from your doorbell feed.” He turned a regretful expression Cassie’s way. “While y’all were chatting it up with the cops, I used my trusty tablet to access the recording from today.”

“And?”

“And...whoever threw the paint was fast and smart.” He turned the tablet in his hands around for them to see.

They watched in silence as an unknown assailant dressed in head-to-toe black approached Cassie’s porch with two pails of red paint and a brush. After writing the nasty message onto her siding, the bastard swung the large can back before tossing its contents onto the front door—as well as the small camera mounted near its frame.

With their view obstructed by the thick, red paint, it was impossible to see the perpetrator tossing the remaining paint onto Cassie’s porch, as well as the bastard’s swift exit.

Come near her or her house again, asshole. It’ll be the very last thing you do.

“As you can tell from the beginning of the footage, they came from between your house and your neighbor’s over here to the north. They kept their head and face completely covered, and even did a damn good job concealing their eyes from the camera.”

Lucky was right. With the man’s sophisticated identification program—not unlike ones the police, FBI, and other law-enforcement organizations use—he’d be able to

determine an estimated height and weight of their suspect. But that would be it.

“Looks like your neighbors over there have a similar system to your old one.” The techie pointed to the house directly across the street from Cassie’s. “Now that the cops have cleared out, I’ll see if I can gain access to their footage. I’ll also try to tap into any others on this street. If we’re lucky, we might be able to catch a glimpse of the asshole before he put on the mask. Or at least a glimpse of the getaway car.”

“I’m going to pretend I didn’t just hear you say that.”

Archer and the others looked down at Cassie, who was shaking her head at Lucky.

“Shit. Sorry,” Lucky quickly apologized. “I keep forgetting you’re a lawyer.” Then, with a tilt of his head, the asshole flashed his signature smirk her way and said, “Probably because you’re so nice.”

Cassie gave a head tilt of her own. “You don’t think lawyers can be nice?”

“You? Yes.” Lucky let that smirk turn full-grin. “The rest of them? Not so much.”

“The cops may be gone”—Archer interrupted with a deep scowl in Lucky’s direction—“but those reporters are still watching. So maybe we save this conversation for until after we get inside?”

His teammate’s brows shot up as his blue eyes widened with surprise. “Geez, man. Who pissed in your cornflakes this morning?”

“I don’t know, Jason. Maybe the person who decided to go all Andy Warhol on Cassie’s front porch.”

“Actually, Warhol was more a visual artist.” A deep rumble. “Something like this would be considered more abstract.”

As if they’d rehearsed it, Archer, Cassie, Logan, Lucky, and Chase all simultaneously turned their focus onto Van.

“What?” the tall fucker growled.

“Since when do you know so much about art?” Chase asked what the rest of them were thinking.

Van’s emotionless expression never changed. “My mom taught high school art.”

“Oh.” Lucky’s tune changed quickly. “Guess you probably picked up a few things along the way, then huh?”

“Guess so.”

“Uh...guys?” Cassie chimed back in. “If you want to finish this up inside, we should probably go through the garage to avoid stepping in the paint.”

Archer’s lips twitched with the urge to smile. He knew what the clever woman was doing, and damn if he didn’t find himself impressed.

She’d been through hell and back with watching a man die to her arrest and subsequent release. Now she’d come home from her late husband’s funeral—after having dealt with the cheating asshole’s prick of a father—only to find her home had been vandalized.

Most women...hell, most *people* he knew would have lost their shit a long damn time ago. But not his Cass.

Yes, she’d gotten upset the other day when they’d walked in to find her house a mess. An understandable reaction given she’d spent the two nights prior to that day in jail for a crime she didn’t commit.

But ever since then—even today, of all days—Cassie had kept herself together and in control. During the funeral, she’d faced the snarky stares and rude as fuck whispers head-on. Even kept her cool when her asshole ex-father-in-law started in with his shit.

The impressive woman had been rightfully upset when they first saw the paint on her house but had seemed to give herself fully to the moment when they’d begun kissing in the SUV.

From the time the cops showed up to now, Archer had kept a close eye on the mouthwatering attorney, watching as Cassie

had stood with her spine straight and her emotions in check while talking with the police. Now here she was, cutting through Van and Chase's conversation with ease, handling herself like a pro with some of the deadliest men he knew.

And damn if her strength and determination didn't make him want her that much more.

Placing a hand on the small of Cassie's back, Archer began guiding them toward the two-car garage. The others fell in line seamlessly, and after Cassie used the newly installed keypad next to the garage door, the small group soon made their way inside.

For the next two-and-a-half hours, the six of them sat in Cassie's living room, going over everything they knew up to this point. She'd joined in the conversation, helping fill in areas where the guys had questions as they went over everything they knew up to that point.

The initial poisoning days earlier to Alistair Montgomery's cemetery outburst, the shotty police work that had shone a light on no one other than Cassie being the killer, today's senseless and hurtful act of vandalism... Lucky's disheartening discovery that every other house on the block—including the one right across the street—had either "lost" or deleted their doorbell systems' video feed within minutes of the attack on Cassie's house.

Every. Single. One.

Her chickenshit neighbors were either too scared to get involved, or they believed the lies the media's been spinning and were on the side of the prosecution where Cassie was concerned. Either way, unless her attorney could get a judge to grant a court order for the neighbors' missing feed, it was going to be virtually impossible to I.D. the vandal.

After that frustrating turn of events, they started going down the list of possible suspects who might have a reason to wish Cassie and/or Russell harm. Her former in-laws, past clients who could be harboring a grudge against her for their own legal troubles...even Lori and Ed Yates made the cut.

Having been friends with the couple for ages, Cassie had been quick to deny the possibility the couple could be involved. Her opinion of the matter was understandable, given how close she and the other woman were. And with Ed having been Russ's best friend and business partner, Cassie had refused to entertain the idea that either one would ever be involved in something so nefarious as murder.

There were, however, a few possibilities when it came to some of Russell's past clients. Since he and Ed took on the bigger, more serious corporate clients, that meant those they'd represented stood to lose a great deal.

Archer had learned a long damn time ago, all roads typically led to money. Unfortunately for them, the names of legal clients Lucky had run also failed to gain any traction toward finding the real killer.

Between digging into the possible suspects' social media accounts, financials, and any other avenue they could think of, each of the heavy hitters involved in this one all seemed to have solid alibies for the night Russell Montgomery was murdered. And thanks to the storms that had blown through during the time leading up to—and including—that night, Cassie's cheap-ass security system had been disconnected, leaving no electronic evidence of who, when, or how the perpetrator gained access into her home.

More dead fucking ends.

More frustrated than he'd felt since helping start Eagle's Nest Securities, Archer looked across the living room to the seat where Cassie had been sitting. Twenty minutes earlier—after having realized they'd come to an infuriating standstill—Cassie had excused herself to go upstairs to change out of a dress that was far more tempting than it should have been.

Presuming the discouraged woman needed to be alone, to try to process the shit week she'd had—and yeah...even the loss of a man she'd once loved—Archer had encouraged her to take her time. When the sound of running water started up a few minutes later, he assumed she'd decided to shower away the day, as well.

That water was *still* running. She was up there right now. Naked. Wet.

Because she's upset, dickhead. What's wrong with you? Stop thinking about how badly you want to drive balls deep inside her and keep your head on the case where it belongs.

Not exactly an easy task after that mind-blowing kiss.

“We should probably head out.” Logan pushed himself to his feet. With his hazel gaze landing on Archer’s, their leader said, “I shot a text to one of the guys I used to work construction with. He’s bringing a couple others over first thing in the morning to clean up the mess on Cassie’s porch.”

Archer’s chest warmed with appreciation for his friend. “Thanks, man. Getting that shit off of there will make her feel a lot better, for sure.”

“No problem.” Logan gave a slight nod. “In the meantime, the guys and I will continue working things from our end while you keep on Cassie. She thinks of another name or anything else that might be of use, give one of us a call.”

Lucky, Van, and Chase also stood.

“I will.” Archer and his trusted team began walking back down the hallway leading to home’s entrance. Turning right, he bypassed the front door, opening the one on his right, instead.

“You’ve got my number,” Van muttered deeply as he walked past to enter the garage. “You or your girl need anything, use it.”

Archer didn’t bother wasting his breath by arguing semantics with his friend. Van wasn’t a stupid man, and neither were the other three. If the tall bastard had picked up on Archer’s ogling Cassie when they’d been standing on her front lawn, chances were Logan, Lucky, or Chase had, as well.

Maybe even all three.

Not that he cared what their opinions were of him and Cassie being together. They *weren’t* together. Not yet, anyway.

But damn if he didn't want her more than he'd ever wanted any other woman.

Fucking. Ever.

And besides, Logan and his wife had first become romantically involved while Logan had been protecting Natalie from a pair of ruthless killers. Granted the two had been friends for years prior to becoming a couple, but still.

Archer and Cassie were two grown, single adults who clearly had an undeniable attraction brewing between them. If that kiss they'd shared was any indication, when he finally did get the enticing blonde into his bed, there was no doubt in his mind it would be anything less than incredible.

"Same goes for me," Chase piggybacked off of Van's comment to reach out if the need arose. "I'm only a few minutes' drive from here, so anything else happens..."

The skilled sniper didn't finish the sentence because he didn't have to. Chase, Logan, Lucky, Van...they weren't just Archer's teammates. They were his brothers.

If one needed help, the rest were right there, ready and willing to do whatever it took to have their backs.

"Thanks, man. Appreciate it." Archer slapped Chase on the back after pressing the button to open the wide door to the two-car space. The motor's low humming filled the air as the door slowly began to rise.

As Lucky stepped out of the garage and onto the driveway, he turned to Archer and said, "You know, I have to admit. When you first came to us about taking Cassie on as a client, I was worried. I mean, the evidence against her is pretty fucking stacked."

"And now?"

"Now..." The computer guru paused. "The more I get to know her, the more I'm thinking your gut was spot on with this one."

"Agreed." Logan nodded as he stood beside Lucky.

“I’m with them.” Chase flashed a boyish grin. “I mean, evidence or not, I’ve never really gotten the whole femme fatale vibe from her.”

Neither had he, which was why he’d been so adamant about taking her case. And while Van remained silent in his opinion, the slight nod the dark-haired man gave was all the confirmation Archer needed.

“Once you get the meeting set up with Knox, let us know when and where,” Logan instructed. “We’ll be there.”

“Copy that.” Archer shook his team leader’s hand. “Thanks for coming.”

“Never have to thank us for that, Nash.” Logan frowned. “Wasn’t that long ago you guys came through for Nat and me? If not for you, she would’ve been...”

The other man’s voice thickened with emotion, and Archer knew Logan was thinking of the moment Natalie was seconds away from losing her life. Thankfully the team was there, and the sweet CPA was alive and well, the newlyweds both deliriously happy.

Now *he* was the one needing their help. He was the one protecting a woman he feared he was already falling for. Only...

I’m not afraid.

And *that* should have scared the ever-loving shit out of him. But it didn’t.

“I’ll let you know once the meeting is set,” he told the others.

Following another round of parting handshakes, the other men left. After securing the garage door once more, Archer went back inside.

The atmosphere seemed much quieter than before, and it took him a second to realize why. *No water.*

The muffled sound of running water had ceased to exist, which meant Cassie was no longer in the shower. His urge to go upstairs and make sure she was okay was strong, but

Archer bypassed his own personal desires to give her the space she clearly needed.

Walking past the stairs, he continued on, not stopping until he was outside on the home's back deck. Archer pulled his phone from his pocket, retrieving the card with Knox's number on it, as well. Ignoring the gorgeous, sunny view of Elliot Bay, he stood at the deck's railing and began typing out the message he wanted to send.

The address to the small warehouse where he hoped to meet with Knox was one the team had purchased in anticipation of confidential meetings such as this. Their war room back at the office was great for their team-only conversations. But a meeting like this required a different level of confidentiality.

If Detective Knox really did plan to share inside intel on Cassie's case, he wouldn't want to risk doing it here or at the E.N.S. office. He'd need a location that was private. One with little to no chance of them being spotted by the press—or anyone else—that could cause the law enforcement official trouble.

Archer's thumbs flew over the phone's smooth screen as he messaged Knox with the address and a meeting time of noon tomorrow.

He would've preferred to talk to the guy now, rather than wait. Especially if the guy had intel that could help Cassie's case. But he'd seen how weary the woman had begun to look as they all realized they weren't any closer to uncovering the truth than when she'd first stepped foot inside his office days before.

As much as he wanted to know what Knox had to share, Archer wanted to make sure Cassie had some time to rest and decompress before setting her up for what very well may be another disappointing dead end.

Hours earlier, during their drive from the cemetery to here, she'd mentioned needing to go into her firm's office first thing in the morning to take care of a few things she hadn't gotten to before her arrest. Not wanting her out in public any more than

was necessary, Archer had initially begun to protest. But when Cassie informed him Ed had closed the offices for a few days—to give himself and their staff time to process the unexpected upheaval of their workplace—he'd finally given in.

Knox's response came through with a ding. Glancing down at the screen, Archer saw the man had simply sent a thumbs-up emoji and nothing else.

With that taken care of, he shot off a second text, this time to the group feed he and the others shared. After letting them know of tomorrow's plans, he slid the phone into the back pocket of his black dress pants and leaned his elbows on the deck's wooden railing.

An unseasonably warm breeze blew past, the soft wind blowing the subtle waves of Archer's bangs into his eyes. Raking a hand through his thick hair, he cleared his vision and looked out over the water.

What the fuck am I going to do?

He ran a palm over his closely-shaven beard, his fist clutching his jaw as he considered the big, messy picture...

His client had been charged with murdering her estranged husband. She'd willingly admitted to giving the man a glass of wine laced with poison, the police had no other suspects, nor were they bothering to *look* for any, and the woman's father-in-law seemed hell bent on seeing to it Cassie spent the rest of her life behind bars.

Someone had vandalized her property—had threatened her, as far as Archer was concerned—and her piece-of-shit neighbors had already proven themselves too selfish to be of any use. The trial date had yet to be set, but he knew it was only a matter of time.

That phone call could come tomorrow, and if it did, Cassie would be well and thoroughly fucked.

I'm failing her.

His heart physically hurt from that knowledge, because damn it...he'd *promised* to make things right where Cassie's

future was concerned. Archer had looked her square in those gorgeous baby blues, and he'd vowed to find the person responsible for completely upending her life.

And he still had no fucking clue who the bastard was.

Pushing himself off the railing, a frustrated Archer turned and marched back inside. With more force than was necessary, he pulled the massive accordion-style doors shut before making his way past the round kitchen table and into the living room.

Filled with nervous energy, he began to pace. Back and forth across the expensive flooring, Archer's boots covered several steps without any real destination in mind.

A strange sound interrupted his motions, and he stopped mid-stride to listen. At first, he didn't hear anything more, but then...

There it is again.

Okay, he'd definitely heard it that time. The sound was muffled, but it was there. And whatever it was, it hadn't come from upstairs, where Cassie would be. No, this came someplace near the front of the house.

Reaching his right hand around to his back, Archer freed the Glock 19 from the small leather holster on his hip. He pulled back the slide, double-checking that there was a live round in the chamber.

An old habit that had been instilled in him long ago, and one he'd most likely never break.

With silent steps he'd been trained to use, he held the gun up and at the ready as he made his way down the hall and back toward the foyer. The beating of his heart grew stronger. The muscles in his forearms locking up tight as he closed the distance between him and the ongoing noise.

As he neared the home's front entrance, Archer was able to determine the source was coming from inside the garage. The same garage he and his team had just been in.

A space that, aside from a few neatly kept shelves and Cassie's car, had been otherwise empty.

He reached the door he'd only recently walked through. Adjusting the grip on his weapon, he held it steady with his right hand while turning the metal knob with his left.

The veins in his forearms bulged beneath the rolled-up sleeves of his white dress shirt, and just as he began to pull the door open, a loud bang came from the other side.

Stealth forgotten, Archer swung open the door. Though the space was dark, he spotted a shadow moving near a shelf positioned along the wall opposite from where he stood.

With the lights off, and Cassie's car partially obstructing his view, it was impossible to see the person's face, or even their head. But as Archer slowly made his way down the two concrete steps and onto the smooth garage floor, he could tell the bastard had his back to him.

And when he'd made it halfway around the car's front bumper, he realized the uninvited guest was bent over, putting stuff back inside what appeared to be a fallen box.

Archer stopped where he was, having enough of a clear shot from there, if he needed one. Using the car as partial cover for himself, he told the intruder, "Move another fucking muscle, asshole, and *my* next move will be to pull this trigger."

The person froze but kept their head down.

Good choice. "Drop whatever's in your hands and raise them into the air. Then I want you to stand up very slowly."

Again, they did exactly as he'd instructed. Feeling hopeful the situation would be handled without incident or injury, Archer kept his gaze locked on the intruder as they kept their hands up and began to stand.

But when they did, a flash of blonde hair caught his eye, and that was when he realized his mistake.

"Cassie?"

She turned slowly, stopping only when she was facing him straight on. Keeping those damn hands high in the air, the

woman said nothing. But one look at the expression on her face told Archer everything he needed to know.

Thanks to the shower, her skin had been washed free of makeup, and her hair was still damp. The flawless skin covering her cheeks was flushed, either from the heat of the water or her obvious frustration.

Maybe both.

The black yoga pants and matching crewneck accentuated the shadows still marring the skin beneath her eyes. Her weary gaze was red and a bit puffy, as if she'd recently been crying.

And that, above all else, tore at Archer's heart with such strength, he could barely stand it.

"Jesus." dropped his weapon and returned it to its holster. "What the hell are you doing out here?" He frowned. "I thought you were upstairs."

"I was." She lowered her hands to her sides and looked down at the mess by her feet. "Then I came out here."

He followed her gaze, noting the slew of cleaning supplies both inside and out of the box. "Why?"

"Because someone thought it would be a good idea to throw red paint all over my front porch." Not waiting for his permission, the clearly frustrated woman squatted back down, returning to her previous task.

"And you, what..." He stepped closer. "Thought you were going to go wash it off?"

"I was going to try," she answered with a stubborn, determined tone. "Only I can't find the paint thinner, even though I know for a *fact* I had some out here."

With rough, angry movements, she began slamming the remaining supplies back into the box. She sounded off. Almost infuriated by the fact that she couldn't find what she'd been searching for.

It's not about the paint thinner. Everything is finally starting to hit her.

Archer had seen it happen on more than one occasion. With his teammates, both back in their SEAL days and beyond. Within himself...

There was only so much stress a person could endure before they reached their emotional boiling point. From the bristled resonance of her voice to Cassie's harsh, agitated movements, it was pretty damn clear she'd finally reached hers.

"You don't need to worry about the front door," he told her. Having softened his tone, Archer took another, hesitant step closer.

"I can't leave it looking like that, Archer." She lifted the box and stood to return it to its spot on the shelf to his right. Struggling only just slightly she managed to slide it back into place with a light, feminine grunt. "It's bad enough my neighbors already think I'm the murderer they're apparently intent on helping with their so-called deleted security footage. I still can't believe they did that."

Archer studied Cassie with a watchful eye as she began digging through another box.

"They should be charged with obstruction of justice," she bit out harshly. "Every single one of them. Because that's what they're doing, you know? They've erased pertinent evidence that could potentially solve this whole thing, but do you think the cops are going to go after them for it? Hell no." She was rambling now. "And the D.A. isn't any better. All he cares about is getting re-elected, and what better way to do that than to be the man behind the conviction of The Black Widow Lawyer? I mean..." A humorless laugh filled the tense air. "Why am I even trying, at this point?"

"Because you can't give up."

"Why not? Everyone else has."

"That's not true." His booted feet brought him even closer to where she stood. "My team and I haven't given up. And we won't."

“You say that now.” Those hands of hers continued their frantic search. “But as it stands, my trial will happen. Sooner, rather than later, if what Ellie said about it being fast-tracked is true. And since there’s no reason for her to lie—”

“Cassie.”

“—I’m sure that rumor isn’t a rumor at all.” She kept on as if he hadn’t spoken. “I know the man quite well, and there’s no way he’s going to pass up the chance to win a case as publicized as mine. And I know you and your team have been working non-stop to try to solve this thing, but the truth of the matter is, we may never know the name of the person responsible for all of this.”

“Cassie,” Archer tried—and failed—to gain her attention again.

“And even if Detective Knox does turn out to be some sort of double agent who’s willing to risk his career by handing over...whatever it is he thinks can help...it’s fruit from the poisonous tree. So while it may help lead us in the right direction, nothing he shares with us will be admissible in a court of law, and therefore it will negate any chances of prosecution for the real killer. So either way, I’m fu—”

“Cassandra, stop!” He laid a gentle hand over hers, effectively bringing the woman’s panicky movements to a halt. “Logan already put a call into a guy he used to work construction with. He’s got a crew coming first thing in the morning to take care of the porch. By this time tomorrow, you’ll never even know that paint was there.”

Emotion filled her baby blues, that gorgeous gaze of hers glistening behind a wall of unshed tears. “What am I going to do, Archer?” Cassie’s whisper was thick, the question followed by a desperate plea. “Please.” She blinked, setting free twin tears that raced simultaneously down both cheeks. Her chin quivered, her words breaking apart as she implored him to, “T-tell me w-what to do.”

10

Lifting both hands slowly toward her, Archer framed her beautiful, worried face and stared deep into her stunning gaze. “Trust me.” He used his thumbs to brush her tears away. “That’s all you have to do, sweetheart. Just...trust me.”

“I do trust you, Archer.” She gave a quick, nervous lick of her lips that drove him wild with the urge to kiss her. “But I’m...scared.”

“I know you are, sweetheart.” Archer leaned in close, pressing his lips to her forehead before resting his there. “I know you’re scared, but I’ve got you. I’m here, and I’ve got you.”

Wrapping his arms around her, he prayed she could feel the promise to keep her safe in his warm embrace. Cassie returned the gesture, even giving him a tight squeeze as she rested her cheek against his chest.

As he stood there, hugging a woman who was only supposed to be a client, Archer was filled with a sense of homecoming that should have terrified him but didn’t. And when she lifted her head from his chest and brought her gaze

back up to his, he no longer saw the tension and fear he'd so easily recognized minutes before.

What Archer found instead was...

Desire.

Pure. Unadulterated. Desire.

Despite the day's tumultuous events, there was an unmistakable hunger darkening within those incredible swirls of blue. A feracious need perfectly matching the same one filling his veins—and his eager dick—this very second.

“Cassie...” Her name was a warning.

“Yes?”

A quick blink preceded a look so innocent...so fucking *pure*...it sent a rush of arousal straight to his aching crotch. Lowering his hands to her narrow hips, his grip strained beneath the pressure of the war raging deep within.

“I'm trying to do the right thing, here.” He really, *really* was.

“The right thing?”

“I shouldn't be touching you.” And yet, he couldn't seem to stop. “You hired me to protect you. We shouldn't—”

“You touched me earlier, in the car.”

Not nearly enough.

“That was...” He couldn't bring himself to say the kiss they'd shared was a mistake. Because damn it, it hadn't felt like a fucking mistake. It had felt...

Hot.

Wet.

Passionate.

Right.

Archer wouldn't call the intimate moment a mistake, because it hadn't felt like one. Not in his gut or his heart. Rather than speak an untruth, he told her, “It was highly

unprofessional. And I know it probably sounds like a line, but I swear to you, I've never done anything like that with a client."

"Not ever?"

"No." A truthful shake of his head. "Not even once."

"You ever come close?"

"Nope."

A look of satisfaction sparkled behind her eyes as Cassie took a few seconds to briefly consider his claim. With a slight tilt of her head, she asked, "So why me?"

He should probably lie. Give her some lame excuse about being caught up in the moment or using the kiss to ease the pain of her disturbing situation. But that wasn't the type of man Archer was.

From day one, he'd promised to always be open and honest with her. And while that promise had been made in reference to her case, he'd meant what he'd said. So rather than going back on his word and blowing smoke up her ass, Archer told her the God's honest truth.

"You walk into a room, and I'm filled with need." His throat worked with a hard swallow. "I see you and I want. You pass by me in the hallway or the kitchen, and I become intoxicated by your scent. And now that I've tasted you"—he licked his lips, which had suddenly become desert dry—"I want even more."

"More?" Her long lashes fluttered with surprise, and it was easy to see that wasn't the answer she'd expected to hear.

"I want everything, Cassie." He leaned in, even as the voice in his head was shouting at him to stop. "I want...*you*." A slight pause. "But—"

"But?"

"You're my client."

"And you don't date clients."

He shook his head at the reiterated statement, but said nothing.

“Well then.” Cassie placed a palm over his racing heart, her touch electric even with the barrier his clothes provided. “I guess it’s a good thing dating isn’t what I had in mind.”

“Cassandra...” Another warning. “We can’t.”

But God, do I wish we could.

“Why not? Because it’s against company policy?” A sly smirk lifted one corner of her luscious mouth. “How about this?” She removed the hand from his chest and held it up so that her palm faced him. “I promise not to sue.”

His lips twitched, and this time Archer couldn’t contain his own crooked grin. “A lawyer who tells lawyer jokes, huh?”

“If you can’t laugh at yourself every once in a while...” Her sweet voice trailed off as a sliver of the same fear and sadness from earlier returned. “I need to laugh, Archer.” Cassie’s expression turned serious. “I need to laugh, and joke, and kiss, and touch, and make love to you with everything I have so that I can forget because I just want to...” Her shoulders fell with a sigh. “God, Archer, I just want to *forget*. And I-I know this is crazy, and you’re probably going to fire me as a client, and right now, I don’t even care.”

Dropping her as a client was the furthest thing from his mind. There was no fucking way he was walking away from her. Not until he found the person who tried to kill her. Not until he knew she was well and truly safe.

Maybe not even then.

Archer opened his mouth to tell her those exact thoughts, but Cassie had gotten herself so worked up, her frantic rambling was starting to spin out of control...

“It’s not that I don’t have confidence in your team’s abilities,” she rushed to affirm. “I know you’re the best chance I’ve got. But let’s face it, Archer.” The damp strands of her blonde hair stuck to her shoulders as she gave a confident shake of her head. “No matter how many hours you and your team put into this thing, it’s not going to be enough. I’m going

to go on trial for the murder of a man who was days away from becoming my ex, and...given the prosecutor's evidence, I *will* be convicted and sent to prison for the rest of my life. So trust me when I say, I'm not asking for more than this. Here. Now. Tonight." Her voice cracked even as those incredible eyes continued pulling him in. "That's all I want. I just want to lose myself for one night. To escape from this whole ridiculous nightmare that's become my life. The reporters and cops and assholes who think it's okay to paint someone else's house...I need to forget about it all, and just—"

Fuck it.

Archer slammed his mouth to hers in a kiss so hungry, so powerful, it was as if time itself stood still. He hadn't taken her into his arms to stop her rambling. He wasn't feasting on her sweet taste to calm her down or give her panicked thoughts a hard reset.

This kiss—*this* moment—had nothing to do with any of that. It was about a man who couldn't stand by another fucking second listening as the woman he was starting to fall for continued listing off countless reasons why she needed this escape.

Reasons why she needed *him*.

So yeah, he was saying fuck it to the rules. Written or otherwise. And he was going to spend however long it took... use everything in his power...to make the woman in his arms forget.

11

I'LL NEVER FORGET.

Of all the things Cassie wished would vanish from her memories forever, this moment—this *man*—was not one of them. And as he pulled her into his arms and parted her lips with his tongue, she finally became...

Lost.

She lost herself in Archer's touch. His spicy male scent. His taste.

He bent forward, hoisting her into the air as if she weighed nothing. Cassie squeaked with surprise, reflexively wrapping her arms and legs around him to keep herself from falling.

The hem of her dress slid up, and if someone were standing behind her, they'd be getting quite a show. Black. Lacey. Cheeky. But there was no one else there.

Only them.

"Don't worry," Archer breathed the words even as his mouth continued ravishing hers. "I've got you."

And as he carried her through the garage and back into the house with ease, Cassie knew deep down, he really did.

He started for the stairs, but in their frenzied embrace, the toe of his boot caught the rounded edge of the first step, and the two started to go down. In a lightning-fast move, Archer reached out with one hand, using his tight grip on the banister to prevent a hard—and most likely painful—fall.

Cassie chuckled as he lowered her gently to the small landing separating the first small section of steps from the remaining incline leading to the second floor.

“Damn.” Archer hovered over her with a chagrined smirk. “Thought that was going to end up being romantic as hell.”

Another soft laugh escaped as she smiled up at the most enticing man she’d ever known. “It was,” Cassie told him truthfully. And then, “It still is.”

She reached up, filling a fist with the front of his stark white dress shirt. With one hard pull, she brought his mouth back to hers.

The soft whiskers of his short, dark beard tickled as his lips and tongue worked hers in a hard, hungry, devouring kiss. A deep, male grunt sounded at the base of Archer’s throat, their tongues swirling, licking, and tasting with primal need.

Releasing the hold she had on his shirt, Cassie’s hands began to frantically work the tiny white buttons keeping it in place. She needed the shirt gone. Needed every stitch of his clothes gone. She needed...

“Archer.” His name came out all breathy and panted, as if she were desperately needing him to take her. Which made perfect sense, seeing that she *was* desperate, and she *did* need him.

Right here. Right now.

“I’ve got you,” he growled the same words as before. Only this time, they seemed to have taken on a whole different meaning.

Archer went wild then. Together they worked to rid each other of their clothes until soon those items were flying every which way through the air.

His shirt. Her shoes. His pants. Her dress. His shoes and socks...

In back of her mind, Cassie had the fleeting thought that she was damn glad the stairs weren't visible from the outside. The last thing she needed was one of those jerky reporters capturing the private moment between two lovers and selling the images to the highest bidder.

She looked up, breath catching in the base of her throat as the most incredible specimen of the male form stared down at her. Laying still, Cassie took in every tempting curve and shadow that outlined Archer's powerful, tanned muscles. Broad shoulders. Well-defined biceps and pecs. Taut, sinewy forearms dusted with a touch of dark, masculine hair.

A dark, delectable crevice dividing the first eight-pack Cassie had ever seen in real life.

Lord have mercy.

Her gaze followed that line lower, landing on the thin trail of dark hair that vanished beneath the waistband of his black boxer briefs. And when she caught sight of the steely bulge stretching the material between his thighs, her sex grew heavy and began to ache with need.

Archer started to reach around her back, his fingers brushing against the clasp of her black lacy bra. But then...he froze.

He's stopping? Now?

"Archer?"

The browns of his eyes turned onyx as he stared down at her. "This isn't right." His Adam's apple bobbed up and down as he frowned. "We shouldn't—"

"So help me, if you say we shouldn't do this because I'm your client, or I'm too emotional to know what I really want, so help me..."

Something happened then. Something magical and amazing and so spectacularly wonderful, Cassie found herself struck speechless...

Archer Nash smiled.

It wasn't some tiny, barely-there smirk or a half-crooked grin either. Archer's entire mouth had lifted into a smile so big—so *wide*—it lit up his ruggedly handsome face.

And as she lay on the small wooden landing separating her perfect, shiny staircase, Cassie realized she was staring up at the most beautiful man she'd ever seen. A man she'd trusted with her life.

A man with the power to change her life forever.

In more ways than one.

"I was going to say we shouldn't be doing this *here*." Archer leaned in for a quick, playful kiss. "You deserve to be in a bed, sweetheart. And here I am, practically attacking you in the middle of the fucking stairs."

Oh. Well, if that's all he's worried about...

"Pretty sure I made the first move, so if anyone's the attacker in this scenario, it's me." She grinned. "And while I appreciate your chivalry, I don't want to wait long enough to make it up to my bed." Cassie grabbed the nape of his neck and lifted herself up to nibble his bottom lip. "It's been too long, Archer. Please." Another playful bite. "Please don't make me wait."

She knew how desperate she sounded. Pathetic even. And there wasn't even a tiny part of her that cared.

Life was short. A lesson she'd learned all too well this past week. And the hourglass on *her* life was losing more and more of its sand with each second that passed.

Most people never had the slightest clue of when their last time doing something was upon them. Lord knows, Cassie never did.

Not until those rare moments where she stopped long enough to put it to conscious thought. Only then—as she

looked back on the timeline leading up to whatever moment or event she'd been pondering—did it even hit her that she'd never do...fill in the blank...again.

By then, no matter how much she found herself wishing she could go back to those times and appreciate them in the actual moment they'd happened, it was too late. Those precious moments had come and gone, and there was never any going back.

Until a few days ago, Cassie was still that person. The type who walked through life as if the next five or six decades of her existence were a guarantee.

Then she gave Russ a glass of wine and killed him.

Knowing the wine had been meant for her—knowing how close *she'd* come to sudden death, and that the person responsible was still out there somewhere—she finally understood just how precious and fleeting life truly was.

That's why she wanted this. Yes, what she'd told Archer about wanting to forget for a little while was true. But the other truth was simply that she wanted him. And after all she'd been through, from dealing with Russ, his family, and his lawyers all through the divorce to today, Cassie had decided it was her turn for a change.

Her turn to finally take what she wanted. And right now, in this moment, what she wanted more than anything else in the entire freaking world was...

Him.

Archer cupped her cheeks with his warm, calloused hands, his gaze becoming fixed on hers. "You've had a helluva week. And after what happened today with the funeral and then the house..." He shook his handsome head. "I don't want to be someone else you regret."

Raking her fingers through the soft, thick waves covering the nape of his neck, Cassie locked her gaze with his and said, "I can assure you I'm of sound mind and...body." She ground her lace-clad hips against his, inwardly smiling when his lids fell shut and his hard, swollen shaft pressed against her heated

core. “I know exactly what I’m doing and who I’m doing it with. But I mean...if you’ve changed *your* mind—”

His lips were back on hers before she could even finish the facetious comment. Archer guided her down to the landing’s smooth surface.

This time, when he reached behind her back, there wasn’t the slightest hesitation as his fingers deftly released her bra’s clasp. Nor did he so much as pause before sliding the thin straps down her arms before tossing it over to the side.

Archer’s heated gaze became fixed on her mostly naked form. No longer staring into her eyes, he remained silent as he took his fill. And Cassie, well...

She let him.

Laying perfectly still, she smiled up at him with her hands resting loosely above her head. His focus shifted, first to one breast, and then the other. The lick of his lips that followed came slowly, as if he were imagining himself leaning down and taking a taste.

Cassie’s inner muscles clenched tightly, and she could tell her panties were already soaked. She was surprised at how arousing it was, watching him as his hungry gaze watched her. The man hadn’t even really touched her yet, and she already felt close to the edge.

It’s been over a year since you were with a man. It’s no wonder you’re ready to explode.

It was true, she hadn’t been with a man in well over a year. She and Russ had grown distant even before she discovered Russ’s most recent affair. Of course, distance might not have happened if her dearly departed would have kept it in his pants.

The affair wasn’t the problem. It was merely a side effect.

Her inner voice was spot on yet again, but Cassie shoved all thoughts of cheating spouses, murders, and vandals out of her mind. Refusing to let her past ruin the present, she let *everything* slip away.

Everything except her...and Archer.

The captivating man leaned down, his intent clear as he took the peak of one of her breasts between his hot, molten lips. Cassie gasped, her back arching on reflex, as if her body was instinctively trying to get even closer.

As if her body were begging him for more.

Archer's moan was deep. Masculine. And filled with a primal satisfaction that made her lower belly tingle with need.

Reaching blindly, Cassie filled her hands with his soft, silky hair. With a flick of his tongue, Archer teased and taunted a nipple she was certain was hard enough to cut glass. She cried out softly, her head falling to the side as she lost herself in the moment.

He brought a hand up and began kneading her moldable flesh while the man's talented mouth continued its slow, tantalizing torture.

"Perfect." The low rumble traveled through the sexually charged air. "Fucking...perfect."

Archer moved to the other breast, offering it the same glorious, unhurried attention that drove her positively mad with need. Part of her wanted to tell him to hurry. That she didn't need foreplay to work her body into a frenzy in order to prepare for the inviting intrusion she couldn't wait to feel.

I'm already there.

But Cassie chose to listen to other parts. The ones that had been denied this same type of primitive, fundamental necessity every human being possessed.

Only this wasn't the same type of sex she was used to. This was hot. Passionate. And greedy in the very best of ways.

"Archer!" Cassie cried out his name, her pelvis lifting toward him as she felt the slight tug he'd just given her distended nipple.

The pleasurable pain sent an electric shock straight to her core as if that part of her body somehow had a direct connection that ran straight from her breast to her clit. Another

part of her that was swollen and hard. Aching for the anticipated explosion of pleasure she knew would come.

Another satisfied moan bubbled up from the base of his throat, and before Cassie realized his intent, she felt that talented mouth of his begin to move lower. Soft, fiery kisses left a shiver of desire in their wake as he followed an invisible trail from her breasts to the edge of her delicate panties.

His fingertips dipped between the skin at her hips and the lacy elastic at her hips. Cassie's lids fluttered open, her breath catching when she found him staring up at her from between her thighs.

Not a word was spoken between them, yet the smoldering looks they shared said everything.

Cassie lifted her pelvis from the wooden floor beneath her. Archer wasted no time pulling the dainty material down over her hips. He didn't stop until the tiny black scrap was fully removed and dangling from his fist.

She watched, unable to tear his eyes away from his as he brought the balled-up panties to his face for a deep inhale.

Oh. My. God.

Movies and television. Those were the only two places she'd ever seen a man do that. Seeing it in real life, watching this man's eyes close with a second deep inhale of her most intimate scent...

A heated flush began filling her neck and cheeks, and Cassie started to look away. But all traces of embarrassment faded with the tantalizing smile forming across his lips.

"Fucking incredible." Archer's deep rasp reached her ears.

The sound was one that would forever remind her of sex.

Her legs fell open in an invitation as old as time itself. His gaze lowered to her full, aching sex, and if she had any doubt the man wanted her as much as she did him, it would have vanished in that very instant.

"Please, Archer." Cassie stared up at him hungrily.

Archer dropped those panties, letting them fall onto the steps behind him. Leaning forward, he placed a single, sweet kiss on the inside of one thigh before repeating the move with the other. And then...

“Oh!” She cried out as he took her in his mouth.

She was already soaked with desire for this man. Had been damn near since the first time she'd laid eyes on him. But the feel of his scorching lips and tongue on her most intimate parts flooded her core with a rush of arousal so intense Cassie wasn't sure she would even survive.

“Mmm...” Archer moaned as if he were tasting the world's most delicious dessert.

The vibrating sound—along with the friction from the soft hair framing his lips—only intensified the sensations filling her already sensitive flesh. And right there, in the middle of the stairs, Cassie closed her eyes and gave herself over to him.

Time stood still, the world around them disappearing as the sounds of sensual moans filled the open space. Archer licked and laved to his heart's content, her body reacting to every touch of his tongue...every kiss of his lips.

Her pulse raced, her inner muscles clenching as they silently begged for more. Cassie felt his body shift a beat before his hand joined his mouth, and the combination of the two working her sex in tandem was nothing short of masterful.

Archer brought his mouth to her swollen clit, the bundle of nerves aching painfully in search of release. With his hand, he began tracing her drenched slit with his fingers, and when he eased one of the digits inside her core and began to pump in and out of her slowly, Cassie was sure she'd died and gone to Heaven.

“Oh, yeah!” she breathed. “God, that feels so good.”

Another moan reverberated from his lips to her clit, the sensation causing her to cry out as she reached the verge of implosion.

“I'm close, Archer,” Cassie panted the announcement. Why she felt the need to tell him she wasn't sure.

A man who knew how to make love to a woman's body the way he was could surely sense when his partner was about to reach their climax. But Cassie wanted to make sure he was aware. She *needed* him to know that what he was doing to her felt so good—so, *so* good—that even though they'd only just gotten started, he'd already brought her precariously close to the edge.

Rather than slow his pace or pull away, Archer moved his hand faster. Adding a second finger, he filled her core even more as he worked her from the inside out.

Opening her eyes, Cassie glanced down to watch as he continued pushing his fingers in and out of her sex as his mouth and tongue gave homage to her painfully swollen clit. He pumped harder. Licked faster. The erotic sight of his dark head between her thighs one she never, *ever* wanted to forget.

And just when she thought she'd die from the magnificent, mounting pleasure, Cassie's entire being detonated with a release so strong—so intense—her entire body twisted and writhed from its force.

“Archer!” she cried out for him as the most powerful orgasm of her entire life rushed through her.

Waves of release washed over her as he continued using his hand and mouth to draw out the pleasure he'd created. Never before had she felt such intense satisfaction from a single act of sex. But as Cassie continued to lose herself in the moment, she knew deep down she'd never feel this way with any other man but him.

Only him.

Only Archer.

As if sensing the overwhelming sensations were becoming too much to bear, she felt him slowly begin to pull himself away. The look on his face was pure male pride as he made his way up the length of her body.

“Jesus, that was incredible.” He placed several kisses along the side of her neck. “Seeing you come apart like that

for me..." More kisses. "That was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

Remnants of the best orgasm of her life started to fade away, and Cassie couldn't help but smile. "I've never...that was..." Her chest heaved up and down as her lungs worked to return to their normal, steady pace. "I'm pretty sure I blacked out there, for a second."

The man's deep chuckle made her smile grow even more. "Better watch out for that, I suppose." He brought his lips to hers. "Especially since we're just getting started."

Yes. Yes, we are.

Cassie started to reach between their bodies with the intent of bringing him the same sort of pleasure he'd just selflessly given to her but was stopped by a gentle hand to her wrist.

"But..." Archer continued with a wry smirk that sent her heart fluttering. "As much as I love how you look all spread out on your stairs, I'm thinking we're gonna need an actual bed for this next part."

Oh, how she couldn't *wait* for the next part.

Her lower belly tingled, and the sensitive flesh of her core clenched with a greedy desire. Despite the fact that every cell in her body was still reeling from her very recent climax, Cassie had only one thought rolling through her mind...

More.

In the past, she'd always been a one-and-done kind of girl. But for reasons unbeknownst to her, this man made her feel so alive, so *wanted* Cassie realized once with Archer Nash would never be enough.

12

ARCHER'S DICK was so fucking hard it physically hurt. Regardless he couldn't bring himself to rush the moment. Unable to tear his eyes away from the woman lying naked on the bed, he soaked up every last frame of the breathtaking scene.

Toned curves, full, perky breasts, taut, rosy nipples begging for another touch...and a smooth, bare sex he could still taste on his tongue, Cassie was every man's fantasy come to life.

But she wasn't offering herself to just any man. She was only waiting for him.

Only me.

He tossed the condom he'd pulled from his wallet minutes earlier onto the mattress beside her, but still, he couldn't quit staring. With her long, blonde hair splayed out on the fluffy white comforter beneath her, she looked like his personal angel. A celestial being who'd been put on this earth for the sole purpose of bringing him pleasure.

Archer wasn't narcissistic enough to truly believe that was the case, but damn if it hadn't felt that way minutes earlier. When they'd been on those stairs, he'd nearly drowned himself in her intoxicating essence.

He drew his bottom lip between his teeth while admiring the apex of her thighs. She still glistened with her release. A climax that had sent her flying with ecstasy.

The vision before him sent a rush of animalistic pride coursing through his veins. The primal sense of accomplishment had him fighting the urge to pound his fists against his chest and howl like a fucking caveman.

I did that.

His gaze remained fixed on her as he continued to stand there and stare. Seeing that sated look on Cassie's face—cheeks and lips flushed with sex, and knowing *he* was the one who'd caused it—Archer only had one thought...

I want to do it again.

And again.

And again.

Unable to wait any longer, he brought his hands to the elastic waistband of his boxer briefs and slowly pushed them down over his hips and thighs. His dick sprung free, bobbing slightly as the constraint of his boxers disappeared.

Pointing straight out toward her, it was as if Cassie were a majestic beacon shining bright in the dark of night...his eager cock the ship she was guiding safely home.

Her captivating gaze lowered, those widening oceanic eyes filling with a yearning so strong, so real, Archer could feel it radiating from her body to his.

He reached for the condom, using his teeth to help rip open the small foil square. That stunning stare found his once more, the crystal blue inferno there raging hot despite her recent release. And as he began rolling the protection over his steely, weeping erection, another unexpected notion passed through his lust-filled brain...

I want to put that same look on your gorgeous face every fucking day for the rest of my life.

Him. Not some other man. Only him.

Only me.

It should have been a *what the fuck* moment. After all, men like him—with dangerous jobs like his—had no business entertaining the whimsical conception of happily ever after.

The wife, the house in the suburbs, white picket fence and two point four kids...

Those weren't in the cards for Navy SEALs or private investigators. Or so Archer had always allowed himself to believe.

But after witnessing the love Logan and his new bride shared had quickly changed his way of thinking. Even after everything they went through, the couple were happier and more in love than ever.

Not that Archer was in love with Cassie. That would be pure madness. He'd only known her a handful of days, for Christ's sake.

Yet, as he secured the condom in place and crawled onto the bed where she still patiently lay, an unexplainable sense of peace fell over him. As if this was exactly where he was meant to be, and she was the only woman he was meant to be with.

Only me. Only her.

He settled himself between her welcoming thighs. Reaching between them, he lined his throbbing tip to her hot, wet entrance. His cock twitched in his fist, and it took every ounce of strength Archer had not to drive himself balls-deep inside her right then. Instead, he waited, pausing to give her the chance to change her mind.

The look on her face told him she wouldn't, and he silently prayed that was the case. But regardless of the erotic moment they'd already shared on the stairs minutes before, this too important not to be sure.

Protectively balancing his weight with his other arm, Archer kept his gaze locked with Cassie's while also fighting the urge to push his hips forward. "You can still back out, you know."

Even to him, his voice sounded rough.

"I know." The blonde vixen pressed her lower body against his and smiled.

Well if that's not a green-light answer...

"I haven't been with anyone in a long damn time." Since well before he'd moved to Seattle.

That smile grew wider, and Archer knew the admission had been the right call.

"I haven't been with anyone since Russ, and he and I had been sleeping in separate rooms for a while before that."

Something she'd shared during one of many conversations they'd had those first couple of days. But damn if it didn't make him feel like a fucking king hearing it again.

Two lovers. It still amazed him that a woman as smart and beautiful as Cassie had only been with two other guys.

Two or twenty, Archer didn't care. After tonight, she was going to forget all about her time spent in bed with anyone other than him.

Only me.

Leaning down, he brought his mouth to hers. The kiss was slow. Sensual. Possessive in nature. And as their tongues danced lazily with one another's he realized the rest didn't matter.

The scandal and rumors surrounding her arrest. That fucking nickname the bastards on T.V. had given her. The money she stood to gain...

None of that shit mattered to Archer. All he cared about was that Cassie was right here, lost in this moment, with him.

Only me.

Those words became his own personal mantra as he finally, *finally* allowed himself to move. Not wanting to hurt her—he'd just as soon cut off his own dick than to ever cause her pain—he entered her welcoming heat inch by agonizing inch.

Only me.

Archer moaned, his eyes falling shut when he got his first feel of her velvety core. He already knew she was tight from earlier, but the way her inviting sheath surrounded him now was like the best kind of torture known to man.

Fuuuuck.

He lost control then. Unable to keep from it, Archer gave one final thrust forward, becoming fully seated in what he could only describe as Heaven. And when Cassie's head fell back onto the mattress with a gasp—when he felt the tips of her manicured nails digging into the skin at his shoulders—there was only one word flashing through his lust-drunk mind.

One with the power to erase them all...

Mine.

Cassie's soft moan joined his, the sound filling the otherwise silent room. Archer's body stretched hers as he moved in and out of her slowly, their bodies moving as one with steady, even thrusts.

Easing himself almost completely out of her sex, he moved forward once more. Another moan—he was pretty sure it came from him—sounded, and for the next several moments, they continued on just like that.

His body sliding in and out of hers. Cassie meeting him thrust for masterful thrust. Keeping the rhythm of their sensual dance steady, Archer kissed and licked and savored as much of her incredible body as he could.

When he sensed she needed more, he picked up the pace. Their breaths came in short, loud bursts. Painfully swollen, Archer increased the speed of his movements.

His thrusts came faster. His hips slamming against hers even harder. The sounds of sex surrounded them, and when Cassie's body began to quiver beneath his, he knew she was close once again.

More!

In several abrupt, succinct movements, Archer slid himself free, flipped her over onto her stomach, and pulled her hips off the mattress and into the air.

Realigning his body with hers, Archer's cock disappeared within her drenched folds. He didn't go slow this time. Didn't move inch by agonizing inch. Instead he entered her greedy core in one, long thrust.

"Ah!" Cassie threw her head back, her long, golden waves creating a waterfall that ended at the small of her back.

At first, Archer feared he might have hurt her. A beat later, she pushed her delectable heart-shaped ass against him, and he knew she was begging for more.

More.

He was right there with her, but even as he began taking her with rough, powerful thrusts from behind, Archer knew he could spend the rest of his days just like this...and he'd still never *ever* get his fill of this woman.

Fucking ever.

"Oh...god!" Cassie moaned and then, "Archer..."

She said his name as if it were a prayer. A plea for the release he knew exactly how to give.

Archer reached around to Cassie's front, his hand finding her swollen clit begging for his touch. Though his view was blocked by her mouthwatering backside, he knew exactly where to put his hand...and what to do with his fingers.

He pressed the pads of his fingertips against the taut bud. Moving in small, tight circles, he rubbed the bundle of nerves just as he had with his tongue. Her body jerked beneath his, another cry of pleasure releasing into the air.

From this vantage point, Archer could see when Cassie's fists filled with the plush comforter below. A low keening sound built up from the base of her throat, and when he pressed his fingers a little harder...when he stroked her most sensitive spot a little faster...he knew he'd just pushed her off that glorious ledge.

Cassie's entire body stiffened in his hold. Her movements grew jerky and uneven as her second orgasm of the afternoon struck. Her inner muscles clamped down onto his dick like a hot, wet, velvety smooth vise.

She cried out his name, a flood of the woman's fiery, hot essence covered him as she came. And when her body flexed and quivered around him, Archer let go of the final thread of control, and he plummeted right along with her.

"Cassie!" he growled as the most powerful orgasm he'd ever experienced shot through him.

Lower spine-tingling with a million tiny, pleasurable needles, he kept her hips steady with a gentle-yet-firm grip. Archer rocked against her over and over again as he spilled himself into the tip of the condom.

Bright white dots filled his vision, and the electrified tendrils of their shared passion nearly spun him into an unconscious bliss. Eyes wide, he blinked several times, physically shaking his head from side to side in an effort to avoid blacking out altogether.

Holy. Fuck.

Still behind her, still *in* her, Archer's knees trembled as he struggled to keep his balance. Cassie, however, all but collapsed onto the mattress below.

After ensuring the condom remained in place, Archer gently slid himself free and fell back onto the bed. His chest heaved up and down with rough, ragged breaths as his lungs worked to return to their normal, steady pace.

"Holy...shit." His chest heaved up and down with several rough, ragged breaths. "That was..."

The sentiment trailed off when he couldn't think of a word worthy of what had just transpired.

Incredible.

Amazing.

The best sex he'd ever had.

“Unexpected.”

Archer blinked, his hair swooshing against the comforter's soft material as he turned and stared at the woman beside him. Lying flat on her stomach, Cassie had her arms curled adorably beneath her chest. Her eyes were closed, hair disheveled, and even in the darkening shadows of the burgeoning night, her skin appeared more flushed than before.

“Unexpected?” He smirked, arching a brow and hoping like hell this was headed in a positive direction.

Long lashes fluttered open, and when that beautiful blue stare met his, it was as if they stole a part of his soul. Her gaze glittered as that smile of hers lifted at the corners.

“It's never been...” Cassie started, giving a slight shake of her head. “I mean, I never realized...” A quick lick of her lips. “I didn't know sex could be like that.”

She didn't know...

Wondering what the hell kind of asshole lovers the two men before him had been, Archer felt another rush of male pride from knowing it had been a chart-topping experience for her, too.

“Me neither, sweetheart.” He brought a hand to her face, gently tucking some wayward waves behind her ear.

“I hope you aren't going to quit now.” Her expression grew serious. “What if your team finds out? Will you get into trouble? Because the last thing I would ever want is for you to lose your job because of m—”

Archer pressed his mouth to hers before she could finish. Her concern was understandable but completely unnecessary.

“The guys and I are all equal partners in the firm.” His lips feathering against hers with the explanation. “It would take a majority vote to kick one of us to the curb, and trust me when I say, that’s not going to happen.”

“Tell me about them.” She shifted back just enough to look him in the eyes. “I read that you all served on the same SEAL team, but the article never really went into much detail about why you and your friends left the Navy.”

Archer’s gut tightened, a familiar pain settling deep inside his chest. With the exception of his team, Logan’s wife, and their former Commander, he didn’t discuss what had happened with anyone.

Not ever.

But as he looked back at Cassie, Archer realized he’d give this woman the moon if she asked.

“Give me a minute to clean up.” He gave her another quick peck on the lip. “Be right back.”

After a quick trip into the master bathroom to dispose of the condom and washing himself off, Archer returned to the bedroom to find Cassie snuggled cozily under the blankets while she waited.

With a smile, he climbed in with her. She turned, wrapping an arm around his middle and resting her head against his chest.

Running his hand up and down her arm, he slowly traced an invisible line along the length of her arm as he spoke. “It was our final mission.” Archer began a story he never shared. “We were only supposed to run surveillance. A quick in-and-out op. We make a positive I.D., relay that to an awaiting strike team, and then make our way to the chopper that would fly us back out.”

Quick in-and-out, my ass.

“What happened?” Cassie asked against his beating heart.

“We were ambushed by the very group we were hunting.” The memory stilted his movements, feeling as fresh as if it

were yesterday. “The five of us made it out, but Hunter...he, uh...” His throat worked to swallow the haunting grief that still lived within him. “He didn’t make it.”

“Oh, Archer.” She looked up and caught his gaze. “I’m so sorry.”

“Thanks.” He kissed the top of her head before laying his own back down onto the pillow. “Anyway, between failing to achieve our mission goal and losing Hunt, the powers that be decided it was our fault and they kicked our asses out.”

“Are you serious?” Her eyes grew wide. A second later, a deep scowl creased her perfect skin. “Please tell me you fought it.”

“Oh, we fought it.” Archer scoffed. *Tooth and fucking nail.* “Our old commander even went to bat for us, but it didn’t matter. The higher-ups had already decided to make us the fall guys before our planes ever touched back down in the States.”

Scooting up to rest her weight on one elbow, Cassie brushed some hair from her face and said, “But someone *had* to have tipped off the bad guys. That’s the only way they would’ve known you’d be there. Right?”

“You’re preachin’ to the choir, sweetheart.” Archer pushed himself into a sitting position. Moving the pillow between his back and Cassie’s headboard, he pulled the covers up to his waist and blew out a breath. “Someone ratted us out, for sure. Problem is we never could I.D. the traitor. So the Navy gave us a choice...take an honorable discharge and leave the military in good standing, or risk being court martialed for the death of our friend and fellow SEAL.”

“That’s not a choice,” she spat out. “That’s...*wrong.*”

That she was angry on his behalf warmed his heart.

“Is the Navy still looking into it?” Cassie asked with genuine interest. “Because if they’re not, you and the guys should—”

“We are.”

The deep rumble seemed to echo throughout the silent space. Archer didn't elaborate, and from the tiny nod Cassie gave, there was no need for further explanations.

“Good.” She leaned her head on his shoulder and covered his hand with hers. Several seconds passed before she told him, “Whoever it is, I hope you guys find the bastard and make him pay.”

“We're trying, sweetheart.” Archer lifted their joined hands and pressed his lips to the back of hers. “But first, we have to find the bastard who tried to hurt *you*.”

And when we do, I will make damn sure the son of a bitch pays.

Cassie stiffened slightly beneath his touch, making him want to kick his own ass for reminding her of her own shitty situation. Knowing reality would return with the rising sun, Archer quickly changed the subject back to him.

Not because he loved hearing himself talk, but by shifting the topic of conversation back to him, Cassie would be granted a temporary respite from her own troubled life. With their focus having been solely on her case for the entirety of their time knowing each other, Archer hadn't had much time to share...well...*anything* about himself.

So for the next few hours, the two of them did nothing but talk. While curled up in each other's arms, Archer spilled it all. That he'd grown up in California, and that his parents were also lawyers.

Cassie had been so surprised by that, but when he told her they were entertainment lawyers to the stars, she grew quiet. Understanding why, Archer quickly assured her his parents were *nothing* like Alastair and Barbara Montgomery. In fact, other than their nice clothes, giant beach house, and luxury sedans, you'd never know their net worth reached well into the millions.

He'd been lucky in that way. Yes, he'd grown up in a big house with a cook and a maid and a driver who took him

anywhere his parents told him to. But Archer had also been raised by a set of parents most kids would dream to have.

Parents who always cared enough to carve time out of their busy days for him. A dad who played catch and helped coach his little league baseball team. And his mom...

Archer had always had a special bond with his mom. And as fate would have it, she also did a lot of pro-bono work on the side for those in need of a good attorney but little financial support to cover the cost.

He didn't spend time pondering what Freud would say about how similar Cassie was to his mom. Because this wasn't about some twisted psychoanalytical mumbo jumbo.

This was about him choosing a woman he wanted to be with. A woman who felt right, and who made him feel... *whole*.

That's how he'd felt while losing himself inside Cassie. It's how he still felt while snuggling in bed while further bonding through meaningful conversation.

And later, after another round of soul-reaching sex, Archer lay with her wrapped up in his arms, watching with a smile as she drifted off to sleep.

God, she truly was a magnificent creature. One he'd been charged with protecting. But now that he'd had her...now that he knew exactly what he'd be missing if he lost her...

My life for yours, sweetheart. If that's what it takes to keep you safe, so be it.

Dramatic or not—certifiably insane or not—Archer made the silent vow without hesitation. Somehow, some way, in only a few short days, the woman beside him had gone from being his client to so much more.

As far as he was concerned, Cassie was his. And anyone stupid enough to come after her would pay for that mistake with their lives.

13

THE NEXT MORNING...

CASSIE HUMMED AS SHE SIFTED THROUGH THE STACK OF manilla folders in an office she hadn't been to in nearly two weeks. Between the conference she'd attended and then her arrest shortly after, she felt almost out of place in a firm she'd helped to build.

But here she was...back in a place where she no longer felt welcomed doing work for another attorney whose license *wasn't* suspended pending a murder trial. And she was still smiling like a giddy teenager with her very first crush.

Gee, I wonder what's so different about today.

There wasn't a lot, really. Russ was still dead. The cops still thought she did it. She was momentarily out of a job, and the real killer was still out there somewhere, probably waiting for their chance to strike again.

So yeah, her life was still a mess, and there was a very good chance she was going to prison. But there was also a possibility that the man who'd given her multiple orgasms

only a few hours before would figure out a way to prove her innocence before that happened.

Albeit a small chance, but still. After last night, Cassie was banking on Archer and his team to save her ass.

She slid one of the thick folders free and sat down at her desk, doing her best to ignore the welcomed soreness between her legs. They only had a couple of hours before their meeting with Detective Knox, and there were several files to get through.

“You hungry?”

The rumbled words brought her focus from the papers in front of her to the man filling her office doorway. Muscles that should be more than satisfied by now clenched at the sight, and when his dark, knowing gaze stared deep into hers, Cassie realized she was in big, big trouble.

I could stare into those eyes forever.

“Cass?”

“Huh?” She blinked, having forgotten he’d asked her a question. “Oh, food. Right. Um...yeah, I could eat.” A quick nod.

“Figured I should probably order some take-out now, since we don’t know how long the meeting with Knox is going to take.”

“Good idea.” She smiled up at him.

It was such a strange feeling, talking with him about normal, every-day things like ordering lunch. Because it *didn’t* feel strange in the least. It felt natural, just like nearly every other conversation they’d had.

Whether discussing her case, his past, his work, her work...it didn’t matter what the topic of conversation was. Or if they were simply sitting in the same room without talking at all.

Being with Archer—in bed or out—simply felt right. As if she’d known him her whole life.

“You sure you’re okay?” Concern flashed across his ruggedly handsome face.

Get it together, woman!

“I’m fine.” Cassie pushed herself to her feet and went to him. “A little tired, and—”

“Sore?”

She blushed at the wry smirk lifting one corner of his mouth. “And sore.” Her palm flattened against his leather jacket. “But in a good way.”

“Yeah?”

An unhurried nod. “Definitely.”

“Good to know.” Archer leaned in for a kiss, but his phone peeled to life before their lips could meet.

Muttering a curse she couldn’t quite make out, he pulled back and retrieved his phone from the front pocket of his jeans before answering the call. “Hey, Logan. What’s up?” Archer listened to whatever his teammate was saying before telling the other man, “Okay. She’s right here. Hang on a sec.” Pulling the phone from his ear Archer told her, “The construction guys are at the house now. Logan’s going to stay and help until it’s time to meet up with Knox. Said it’ll be good as new by the time we get back home.”

“Oh, good.” She didn’t bother hiding her relief. “Please tell him I said ‘Thank you’.”

“I will. Oh, and hey...how’s pizza sound for lunch?”

“Throw in some wings, and you’ve got a deal.” She smiled. “And I’m not picky at all on my pizza, so just get whatever you want.”

His gaze smoldered as he lowered his voice and said, “Pizza and wings. Knew you were my kind of lady.”

Oh, how I wish I was your lady.

After last night...and the way he’d been with her today... Cassie sure felt as if she was. And Archer, well...

I want him to be mine.

Cheeks hot with a blush she knew he could see, she fought the urge to kiss him and instead responded with, “Tell Logan I’m happy to pay whatever I need to for the work those guys are putting in. I can give him a check when we see him.”

Waiving away her offer to pay, Archer sent her a wink and a sexy, sideways grin before pointing toward the hallway as if to say he was going to go somewhere else to finish his conversation.

Cassie nodded so he’d know she understood. With a quick wink of her own, she went back to the work still piled on her desk while he disappeared somewhere down the hall.

Minutes later, while she was scanning the first of several case files needing reviewed, her phone dinged with an incoming text. She picked up the phone, smiling when she saw Archer’s name and a message letting her know the pizza place was really busy, and the food wouldn’t be there for about another hour.

After sending him a quick text letting him know she’d be fine waiting an hour to eat, Cassie set about making notes for Ellie, who would be handling her cases while she was temporarily out of commission.

Please, God...please let this be temporary.

For as long as she could remember, Cassie had wanted to be a lawyer. To help people who found themselves in need of a good, honest defense. Now she was the one in need of defending, and as she spent the next several minutes combing through a few of her client’s files, Cassie had to admit she saw them and their situations in a whole new light.

She’d always fought for them the best way she knew how. Had been, in her eyes, anyway, the best damn defense lawyer her clients could have found.

But now, as she sat at a desk she wasn’t sure she’d ever use again, Cassie found a renewed appreciation for the career she’d chosen. And if she somehow managed to get out of this

whole mess, she vowed to continue giving her clients everything she had.

Because that's what they deserved. It's what *she* deserved. Which reminded her...

She grabbed her phone again and dialed a number she knew by heart. After several rings and an automated response, Cassie left a quick voicemail for Ellie letting her know she'd have the files boxed up and waiting for her at the front desk so she could pick them up in the morning.

Once that was handled, she took a minute to make another call. She dialed and waited...the recipient picking up after the third ring.

"Hey, you!" Lori's greeting was cheery. "That's so funny, I was just about to call you."

Settling back in her plush leather chair, Cassie smiled at the sound of her friend's voice. "Yeah? What's up?"

"I just heard about what happened at your house." Concern oozed through the phone's tiny speaker. "I can't believe someone did that. Are you okay?"

She considered the question a moment before answering. Was she okay? Not really. Not in the sense most would attribute to that particular description. But thanks to Archer's protective presence, she was a whole lot better than she would've been.

Yes, because the sexy beast of a man's protective nature is what's got you squirming in your seat.

Cassie stopped moving, realizing she had, indeed, been squirming. A sly grin spread across her face, and she was thankful Lori wasn't there in person to see it.

"I'm good," she finally answered her friend. "I mean, as good as one can be in my situation." After last night, Cassie was fairly confident she was much, *much* better than most would be in her situation. "One of Archer's teammates called in a favor, and there's a crew at my house right now cleaning it all up while I take care of a few things here at the office."

“Wait, you’re at the firm? What are you doing there?”

“Just getting my pro-bono case files ready for Ellie to pick up in the morning.”

“Oh, that’s right. I remember Eddie mentioning she was going to take care of those for you while you’re...” An awkward silence ensued before Lori shifted directions. “Anyway I’m so glad to hear you’re doing okay. How’s the bodyguard? He and his team find any new leads?”

“Not yet, but they’ve been working on it.”

“Well I hope they work fast. One of Eddie’s golfing buddies works closely with the mayor. From what he said, the mayor’s still pushing for a speedy trial.”

“Yeah, I know.” Cassie swallowed hard. “Wouldn’t want to drag this out on the taxpayers’ dime, right?”

“Right, because that man actually gives a shit about the taxes we pay.” Lori snorted but grew quieter when she added, “I still can’t believe any of this is happening. Losing Russ like that...”

The cracking of the other woman’s voice was like a fist to Cassie’s heart. She and Russ may not have been compatible as husband and wife, and the guy may have been immune to monogamy, but he wasn’t a bad person. Not really.

And while Cassie had been busy trying to save her own ass, she’d nearly forgotten that Lori was probably still reeling from the loss of her friend.

“I know,” she offered the other woman sincerely. “This whole situation is insane. I mean, you know me. I wouldn’t kill a bird, let alone a man I’d married. Granted I was trying very hard to *un*marry him, but still.”

“That’s what I’ve been telling everyone when they bring it up. I know you aren’t capable of doing the things they’re saying on the news, Cassie. Of course, I know that. I just hope that mouthwatering man watching your back can prove it before it’s too late.”

“You and me both, sister. Hey, listen...I hate to cut this short, especially since we’ve had like no time to talk lately, but I only have three hours to spend here before I have to leave.”

“Why the short timeframe?”

“Archer has a meeting scheduled for noon to touch base with the guys.”

It was more of a misleading truth than a flat-out lie. After all, the other four members of Eagle’s Nest *were* planning to attend the meeting with Detective Knox.

Way to justify deceiving your best friend.

Guilt assaulted her, but Cassie didn’t have a choice. Knox was supposedly putting his career—possibly his own life—on the line to pass along information that could possibly help her case. There was no way she’d divulge that to anyone.

Not even Lori.

“Gotcha.” The other woman seemed to buy the excuse. “Okay, then. I only have one more question before you hang up.”

“Shoot.”

“The other guys on Archer’s team...are they as smokin’ hot as the one watching over your sexy ass?”

“Lori!” Cassie feigned a shocked gasp, chastising her friend with a grin. “Shame on you. You are a married woman, young lady.”

“Yes, but the ring on my finger has nothing to do with my eyesight.”

With a full belly laugh, Cassie said, “I’m hanging up now.”

“You know I love my husband but *dayum*. A girl would have to be blind not to notice the hunk of muscle you’ve got sleeping under your roof. Speaking of...does he stick to your side at night, too?”

“Okay, now I really am hanging up!” Cassie’s lower belly tingled from the answer she refused to give. “I love you, and I will hopefully see you soon.”

“Ah, come on!” Lori pleaded. “You’ve gotta give a girl a little something...”

“Goodbye, Lori.”

A disappointed sigh preceded a pouty sounding, “Fine. I love you, too.”

“See you later.”

“Later.”

Cassie ended the call and got back to work. Putting aside her own personal troubles—and the most amazing lover she’d ever had—out of her head, she focused solely on the task at hand. Because that was what her clients deserved.

Nearly an hour later, Archer popped his head in to check on her. After reassuring him she was good, he left her alone again so she could do her thing.

He was back ten minutes later.

“Sorry to interrupt, but the app says our food was delivered five minutes ago.” His bearded face looked annoyed. “No one’s come to the door and I looked out front, but didn’t see anything. I called the place, and they said their system is showing it as being delivered, too. They tried calling the driver, but he didn’t pick up, so I’m going to do a quick perimeter check to make sure the dumbass didn’t just leave it out on the sidewalk somewhere.”

It was a well-known problem in the city. She’d even experienced the frustration herself. Lately it seemed as if the world had become filled with shoddy delivery drivers who were too lazy to walk the remaining few feet to the front door.

Food or other items, it didn’t seem to matter. Even Cassie had come out of her home on more than one occasion to discover packages had been left haphazardly in the middle of her driveway...or even her front lawn.

What ever happened to taking pride in your work?

“It’s probably sitting in front of the building next door.” She rolled her eyes. “We’ve had that happen a few times, as

well. No worries, though. I'll just be here...working and waiting."

"I know you will, because you're going to keep that sweet ass of yours right here, in this office."

He thought her ass was sweet?

"And if I don't?" Cassie smirked.

Archer's expression grew serious. "Not playing, sweetheart. I know it's only a few minutes, but I need to know you're in here, where it's safe."

Her gut tightened, remembering he was on the clock, and not in her bed. "I'll stay in here." She raised her right hand. "Promise. In fact..." Cassie pushed herself to her feet and crossed the room. "I'll even lock my door behind you after you leave for good measure."

The relief in his dark gaze made her realize he'd truly been worried about leaving her in the building alone.

"Thank you." He leaned down and kissed her forehead. "I'll be right back."

"I'll be right here...waiting."

A low growl bubbled up from the base of his throat, and before she even realized he was moving, Archer had her wrapped up in his arms, and his lips pressed against hers. After kissing her slowly, deeply, the insatiable man turned and walked away.

As promised, Cassie locked the door behind him, letting her back fall against the smooth wood a second later. Yep, she was definitely in trouble. Big, *big* trouble. But as she walked back over to her desk with that same smile permanently etched across her face, she told herself Archer Nash was the best kind of trouble a girl could find.

Cassie was still smiling a few minutes later when a sound pulled her from her work. Looking up, she noticed the locked doorknob jostling as if someone were trying to get in. Having given Archer the key to the office earlier—so he could clear

the space prior to her entering—she was certain he'd returned with the food.

“Hang on, I'm coming!” She hopped up and hurried to the door. With a playful, “Who is it?” she refrained from unlocking it until she'd confirmed his identity.

A muffled, “It's Archer” reached her ears from the hallway. It sounded like Archer, only the words had been a bit jumbled as if there was something in the man's mouth.

Figuring it was the bag of napkins and red pepper flakes every pizza place in town seemed to automatically give, Cassie began talking before she'd even pulled the door open all the way.

“So where'd they leave it?” she asked. “By the back door or at the building next—”

She cried out in surprise as the door flew inward with a hard shove from the other side. The force was enough to send Cassie stumbling backward.

By the time she'd steadied her footing, the man in the black ski mask had shut the door and locked himself inside the office with her. Like the person they'd captured on her doorbell security footage, he was dressed in black, including the ski mask.

Her frightened gaze dropped to his hands, her heart nearly stopping when she saw the long, thick rope fisted tightly in his gloved fists.

Oh, god!

Fear left Cassie frozen in place, her thoughts racing as she tried to come up with the best course of action. He was blocking the door, so that option was out. There was a window centered on the wall to her left, but it wasn't the type that opened.

Phone! Get your phone and call Archer!

She slid a sideways glance toward her desk. The phone was visible from where she stood, and though it wasn't a great plan, her gut told her it was her best shot.

The cops won't get here in time. Call. Archer!

Feeling as if she were moving in slow motion, Cassie looked back down at the rope in the man's hands. He was still twisting it with his fists, tightening it in a way that conjured up all kinds of horrible, terrifying images.

Move. Your. Ass!

Cassie took off in a dead sprint toward her desk. From her peripheral, she could see the man running after her. Drawing in the deepest breath she could muster, she screamed Archer's name as loudly as she could.

Her hip smacked the edge of the desk, but she ignored the pain and reached for her phone. A leather-clad hand slammed down on top of hers before wrapping its meaty fingers around her wrist and jerking her arm away.

No!

Cassie struggled to get free, but the asshole was strong. Her wrist burned and ached as he squeezed harder. So hard, she was certain he'd snap her wrist in two.

Another ear-piercing scream left her throat burning from its efforts, and she began fighting like a wild woman against a man who clearly meant her harm.

"Let me go!" she demanded.

Of course, the man in the mask refused to comply.

From the corner of her eye, Cassie spotted something shiny. Risking a quick glance away from her attacker, she realized it was exactly what she needed to escape.

With her right arm still trapped in the man's tight grip, she flung out her left hand toward the ornate silver letter opener that had been a gift from Russ. He'd surprised her with it the day she'd gotten word she'd passed the Bar.

Even in the midst of the fight of her life—literally—Cassie had the fleeting thought that she was damn glad she'd decided to use it for its intended purpose, rather than keep it on display as she'd initially considered.

Her left arm flailed to the side as she reached for the makeshift weapon. The tips of her fingers brushed against the decorative handle, but her attacker noticed her intent and pulled her farther away.

“No!” Cassie yelled out in denial.

Yanking on the arm still held in his painful grip, she called upon all her strength and jerked that same arm toward her. Not expecting the move, her assailant stumbled forward a step, but when she tried reaching for the opener again, Cassie discovered she was still a few inches shy of being able to grab it.

“Bitch!”

The menacing growl reached her ears half-a-second before she felt herself being spun around. Feeling disoriented from the sudden change in direction, she didn’t see the balled-up fist flying toward her face until it was too late.

Pain exploded as the man’s leather-clad knuckles slammed against the left side of her face. The powerful blow sent her flying to the floor, white, flashing stars filling her vision as she landed with a painful thud.

Nearly rendered unconscious, Cassie fought to keep her eyes open. As she lay there, struggling to recoup from the unprovoked attack, she prayed with all she had for Archer’s return.

Please come back, Archer. Please. I need you. Please come ba—

Rough hands grabbed her shoulder and flung her onto her back. Thanks to her unfocused sight—and the hair that had fallen across her face—Cassie could no longer see the man as clearly as before.

But she could see enough.

His dark silhouette stood over her. That rope was still there, dangling from one of his hands. A moment of clarity broke through the fog, and she realized the trouble she was in now was real. Very, *very* real. And if Archer didn’t come back soon...

Archer.

He should have been back by now. Archer had only gone outside to look for their food. He wouldn't have stayed away this long. Not unless something had happened. And he absolutely would've locked the door behind him as he left.

This man shouldn't be here. Archer would have locked the door. This asshole shouldn't have been able to get inside the building.

Cassie had faith in that as surely as she was still breathing. Her sweet, sexy protector would never have stepped foot outside the office if he wasn't confident she'd be safe. And yet...

The man dressed in black straddled her jean-clad legs and dropped to his knees. Using the strength of his own legs, he squeezed her thighs together to keep them still.

No!

A floodgate of panic opened, and Cassie felt as if she were drowning in her fear. Twisting and thrusting her hips as hard as she could, she continued to fight with all she had. But her efforts were in vain.

Even if her movements weren't still sluggish from being struck, the attacker was nearly a foot taller, and weighed at least a hundred pounds more. There was no way she'd come out on top in a physical match. And with her phone—and the only sort-of weapon she had—out of reach, she'd run out of all her options.

The man wrapped the rope around her throat. Twisting it behind her head, at the base of her neck, he stared down at her with a set of cold, blue, uncaring eyes.

Familiar eyes. Or so Cassie thought. But then he began to pull on that rope, and that was when she knew...

He's going to kill me.

She began to fight again. Pointless or not, she was not going to lay there and just let this man steal her life.

Cassie brought her hands to her throat, her nails scratching against her own skin as she desperately tried prying the rope away. Intense pressure filled her aching head, and her legs involuntarily kicked as the man pulled that damn rope even tighter.

She couldn't breathe. Her eyes felt as if they were going to pop clear free of their sockets. A low humming filled her ears, and every sound in the room—including the macabre noises sporadically escaping the base of her throat—vanished.

The man and everything around her grew dim as Cassie battled pure evil to stay alive. Her eyelids fluttered and started to close, and as the inevitable unconsciousness began to pull her under, there was only one face filling her terrified mind.

I'm sorry, Archer. I thought he was you.

She closed her eyes. A tear fell down across the same temple her killer had struck. And just as Cassie started to accept her pathetically twisted fate, Archer's voice broke through when nothing else could.

“Get the fuck off her!”

Loud. Furious. Deadly.

Her savior's words came, and a heartbeat later, her attacker—and the pressure around her neck—was gone.

On reflex, Cassie immediately began gasping in search of the air her burning lungs desperately needed. The precious organs rose and fell in rough, uneven breaths. As a struggle she couldn't see took place a few feet away, she continued her fight to bring life-saving oxygen back into to her bloodstream.

“You son of a bitch!” The sound of skin hitting skin came from somewhere behind her. “You don't hurt her!” Archer's fierce growl, followed by another punch. “Not.” Punch. “Her!”

Cassie rolled over, her breathing finally, *finally* starting to return to normal. Opening her eyes, she was struck by the stark difference between the man she saw now and the one she'd invited into her bed.

Hovering above her attacker, Archer's fist came down in yet another powerful strike. The man in black was limp, now. He wasn't fighting back, and after several clearing blinks, Cassie understood why.

The man who'd tried to kill her wasn't trying to save himself from Archer's murderous wrath. Because he couldn't.

He was already out cold.

Pushing herself to her knees, Cassie took a moment to make sure she wouldn't topple over before going any further. Still feeling severely lightheaded, she reached out to her left, her hand fumbling as she used the desk's top edge to bring herself the rest of the way to her feet.

"Archer," she croaked his name.

Her voice sounded rough and unfamiliar, but when she saw him hit the unconscious man again, she knew she had to intervene.

"Archer...s-stop," she rasped, stumbling over to where he stood. "G-going to...k-kill...him."

He froze mid-punch when she put a trembling hand to his shoulder. Swinging his head her way, she nearly dropped that hand when she saw the look in his dark brown eyes.

Lethal.

It was the first word that came to mind as Archer's wild gaze met hers. The skin on his knuckles had busted open, his blood seeping from the wounds he'd suffered while literally saving her life.

And as he stood there—holding her attacker's limp body with a fisted hand at the front of the bastard's shirt while preparing to land another knuckle-busting blow—Cassie warred to reconcile this man with the same one who'd made sweet, tender love to her a few hours before.

"You...g-got...him." She winced with a painful swallow. "It's...over."

That fist he had raised lowered slowly to his side. Looking away, he glanced at the man he was still holding, waiting a

heartbeat before releasing his shirt, and letting him fall to the floor.

Cassie studied the man's swollen lids and bloodied brows. She reached down, ready to finally see who hated her so much they were willing to risk their own lives to see her dead. But Archer stopped her.

“Don't.”

She paused, looking up at him from over her shoulder. Normally she would follow his command without question. Not this time.

“I want to...see his...face.” God, it hurt to talk.

Archer's cold, deadly gaze searched hers a moment longer before he gave a single, curt nod of his head. Ignoring the fear and pain that threatened to take over, Cassie rushed to yank the ski mask up over the unmoving man's face.

Her jaw fell with shock. Her legs started to give way. A low curse reached her ears as a set of strong, comforting arms prevented her from falling back to the floor.

“No.” She shook her head with disbelief. “It can't be.”

But it is.

Cassie wanted to look away. More than anything, in that one unbelievably gut-wrenching moment, she wanted look *away*.

Blood poured from a nose that was obviously broken. Smears of the stuff covered most of the man's swollen face.

She wanted to forget what she was seeing. To pretend she wasn't looking down at someone she actually knew.

As she stood there, staring down at a man who, unbeknownst to her, had been planning her death, Cassie wished like hell she would've listened to Archer when he'd first tried to stop her.

Because now...now it was too late. Now she knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, she'd never, ever forget.

“Jesus, baby!” She felt herself being pulled into Archer’s arms. “Are you okay? How bad are you hurt?”

Before she could answer, Cassie was gently pushed away to assess her injuries. The browns of his eyes turned black with fury when he spotted the swelling in her left cheek and what she could only assume were obvious bruises on her neck.

“I’ll fucking kill him.” Archer started for the man on the floor, but once again, Cassie intervened.

“No!” She threw herself back into his arms. With hers wrapped tightly around his chiseled waist, she begged him, “Please, don’t. He’s not worth it.”

His entire body remained locked in place, muscles stiff as steel from the rage she knew was brewing within him. Seconds later, she felt Archer’s lips press against the top of her head. His tortured apology tearing at her heart.

“I’m so sorry, baby.” His voice was thick with emotion. “I’m so fucking sorry.”

“This wasn’t your fault, Archer.”

“Yes.” He put some distance between them. “It fucking was.”

“No, it—”

“I never should’ve left you.”

Cassie begged him with her eyes to believe her when she said, “There was no way on God’s green earth you could’ve known he was planning something like this. Hell, you didn’t even know until yesterday that I was going to come here today.”

A muscle in Archer’s strong jaw bulged as he stared down at her attacker and shook his head. “He was waiting for me.”

“*What?*”

“I went outside. Looked up and down the sidewalk. I saw our food sitting by the curb, and when I went to get it, I was hit hard on the back of the head.”

“Oh my god! Are you okay?” Cassie did her own assessment then, noticing for the first time the drops of fresh blood that had soaked into the collar of his white t-shirt. “Archer, you’re bleeding!”

She tried to reach for him, to check the severity of his injury. But once again, the gentlest of hands halted the well-intended movement.

“I’m fine. Son of a bitch must’ve been hiding around the corner.” Another tight clench of his jaw. “There was a chunk of concrete with blood on it lying near me when I came to, and I knew that’s what he’d used to knock me out.” Regret and fear filled his gaze. “I knew he was in here. With you.”

“I’m okay.” At least she was pretty sure that was the truth.

“I didn’t know how long I’d been out,” Archer continued. “I got here as fast as I could, but I didn’t...” His voice broke and he cleared it before finishing. “I didn’t think I would get to you in time.”

“But you did,” Cassie reminded him. “Archer, you saved my *life*.”

For the next several seconds, his stare remained fixed with hers. Though she tried like hell, she couldn’t get a read on what he was thinking. And when he finally did speak again, it was to someone else, altogether.

Pulling his phone from his pocket, he dialed a number and putting it to his ear. When they answered, Archer’s deep voice filled the air around her as he spoke to the person on the other end of the call.

“It’s Nash. I need you come to Cassie’s law firm. And bring your cuffs and a fucking ambulance.” There was a slight pause before he responded with, “Because Cassie was just attacked here in her office, that’s why!” Another pause stretched between his words before he hissed out a low, “Yes, I’m fucking sure.” Archer’s handsome face twisted with seething rage as he told the other person, “Because I just walked in and found Edward Yates trying to strangle her to death with a goddamn rope!”

His voice boomed off the walls, the anger there enough to pull her focus away from Eddie's unconscious form. Glancing up, she expected to find him staring down at the man he'd nearly killed. Only he wasn't looking at Eddie.

He's looking at me.

"I'll keep his ass secured." Those brown eyes burned into hers. "You just get yours here. And bring your best people. There can't be any fuck-ups on this." Not waiting for the other person to respond, Archer ended the call and pulled her back into his trembling arms.

"That was Detective Knox. The medics are on his way. It's going to be okay. You're safe, now."

But as Cassie stood in the warmth and protection of Archer's arms, she wondered if anyone was ever truly safe.

14

I WANT to fucking end him.

Archer looked away from his side of the interrogation room's two-way mirror to steal another indiscernible glance in Cassie's direction. She'd been checked out by the medics on scene and then again by a doctor in the E.R. across town.

That last one had been upon his insistence.

After throwing a handful of staples in his scalp, the doc there had also wanted to run all kinds of tests on him to make sure there was no fracture or internal bleeding. But Archer had nixed that plan right in the bud.

He'd suffered far worse during his time as a SEAL and had come out the other side just fine. He was fine. But Cassie...

I almost lost her.

Archer didn't care what she said. What happened to her today was on hundred percent on him. He knew better than to let his guard down like that. He was a trained operative, for fuck's sake.

But he had let his guard down because she'd also been right. There was no way they could've known Yates was the man behind it all. That fact still hadn't been proven in a court of law, but he'd literally caught the prick in the act of attempted murder.

Fancy lawyer or not, no way the asshole would walk on those charges.

He'll die before I ever let that happen.

The thought probably should've given him pause. Archer had killed, but he wasn't a *killer*.

Every life he and his team had taken was the life of someone intent on doing them or someone else harm. Evil beings whose sole existence hinged on their reign of terror.

As a SEAL, it had been their jobs to put that reign to an end. But to kill someone out of pure anger or revenge...

There had only been two times in his life he'd felt that kind of uncontrollable rage. One was today when he'd burst into Cassie's office. Seeing a masked man there, on top of her...*strangling* her...

Oh hell, yeah. He was more than ready to kill.

The other time Archer had been angry enough to commit murder had been the day they'd lost Hunter. Over two years later, he and the others were *still* trying to find the person or people responsible for their friend's death. And their military demise.

But even that sort of vengeance-fueled anger felt different than what he was experiencing now.

It didn't matter that Cassie was still alive and standing right beside him. The fact that, minus some bruising, swelling, and a tender-as-fuck throat, she was going to be okay did little to appease the need for revenge against Edward Yates. Even knowing the bastard was no longer a free man didn't matter.

There was an unprecedented darkness brewing within him, and Archer feared, this time, he might not be able to keep it contained.

He tried to take her from me.

Archer turned and looked at Cassie again, this time not bothering to be sly or indiscrete. His chest tightened as he took in the shades of blues and purples that had already formed below her left eye and across her cheekbone. And when his gaze lowered to the raw, angry marks marring the delicate skin at her neck, his fists twitched with the need to break through that goddamn glass and finish what he'd started back in her office.

Cassie doesn't need you to go all caveman on her, dipshit. She needs security and comfort. She needs...you.

He studied her closely as she stood silently beside him. With her arms wrapped tightly around her own waist, those sad, tortured eyes hadn't left that glass since Knox had first escorted them into the room.

On the other side, in the room adjacent to the one they were in, Edward Yates sat cuffed to a bar permanently mounted on the table before him. The man's face was swollen and bruised all to shit, and Archer felt a modicum of satisfaction knowing his fist was the one responsible for the damage.

"You don't have to be here, you know," he spoke with a gentle tone. "Knox has our statements, and you made a positive I.D. of your attacker at the scene. Your job's done, sweetheart. Why don't you let me take you home?"

"No." She started to shake her head but reconsidered when the move caused her to wince. "I want to hear what he has to say."

Her voice was rough. Damaged.

Yates should die for that alone. "It doesn't matter what the son of a bitch says."

"It matters to me." Cassie finally turned to face him.

Sadness and betrayal dulled the blues of her eyes, and a well of unshed tears made them glisten in the room's low light. The pain, confusion, and sorrow he found staring back at him

ripped his heart to shreds, and suddenly Archer wanted nothing more than to make it go away.

For her.

For Cassie.

For the woman he was pretty sure he'd fallen in love with.

Archer knew how crazy that sounded, given the short amount of time they'd known one another. But in the last few days, he'd begun to feel as though she was the one he'd been searching for all along.

I didn't even know I was looking.

After everything he'd witnessed in his thirty-six years—the violence, death, and acts he could only describe as pure evil—Archer understood better than most how short life truly was.

His team had been walking along, joking and laughing when Hunter was killed by a terrorist's bullet. The man had been talking mid-sentence when the ambush occurred, and minutes later, one of the best men Archer had ever known was dead.

Just that fast, Hunter lost his life and Natalie her husband. And those left behind...him, Logan, Lucky, Chase, Van... Nat...their lives had been forever changed in an instant.

It was only by the grace of God that he'd regained consciousness when he did today. If he hadn't...

“Stop.”

The soft, husky order left him blinking. “Stop what?”

“You're still blaming yourself for what happened. I can see it in your eyes.” Another wince twisted her gorgeous, battered face as she swallowed. “I'm banged up and sound like shit, and...yeah, I was terrified and thought I was going to die. But I didn't, thanks to you.”

“Yates never would have touched you if it hadn't been for me.”

“Maybe.” She closed the distance between them. “Or maybe he just would have waited for another time. A time when you wouldn’t have been around to save me.”

“I’ll always save you, sweetheart.”

“That’s sweet, but you and I both know that’s not a promise you can keep. I mean, it’s not like you can be with me twenty-four-seven for the rest of your life.” Cassie’s tongue snuck out for a nervous lick before the incredible woman added an even quieter, “No matter how much I wish you could.”

Archer *did* pull her into his arms then. Because damn it, he couldn’t be this close to her and not. Not now. Not when he knew she was hurting.

Physically. Emotionally.

The physical wounds would soon vanish. But the betrayal he knew she had to be feeling, knowing a man she’d considered a close family friend had, for reasons they still didn’t know, gone into that office today with the plan and intent of killing her.

That would send anyone reeling with countless *what-the-fuck* thoughts and emotions. Knowing this woman was being forced to deal with that shit...

I never want to see pain in her eyes again.

“I’m here as long as you want me, Cass.” He kissed the top of her head just because he could.

“You don’t really mean that.”

Her muffled denial had him giving her shoulders a light push so he could look her square in the eyes. He needed her to see that he meant what he’d said. Needed her to see the intent behind his declaration and to take this moment to heart.

“I meant every fucking word of what I just said. And I mean this, too.” Nerves danced in his belly, but he ignored them—and the fact that they were in the middle of a damn police station—and told her exactly how he was feeling. “I know this isn’t the time or place for this conversation, but after

what happened...” Nope. He was *not* going back there. Not now. “Today was just one example of how quickly our lives can change. And I know it sounds crazy, and I may be totally misreading things here, but I’ve never felt this way about anyone else before. From the moment I first saw you on T.V., I knew there was something special about you. And when you showed up at my office, those big blue eyes of yours filled with fear and begging for my help...there was no way I was going to say no.”

“Archer—”

“Please, Cass. I need to say this before I talk myself out of it.”

Her lips twitched as if she were fighting a smile, but Cassie simply gave him a slight nod letting him know he could continue.

Shit.

Now that he had her full attention, he started to wonder if he was making a massive mistake. But as quickly as the second-guessing began so did the feeling that this was right. That she was right. That she was...

The One.

Archer didn’t figure she was ready to hear that particular bit of news just yet. But he did want her to know...

“I want to be a part of your life, Cassandra. Not as your bodyguard or someone to come to when you need protection. I will protect you every way I know how, but not out of professional obligation.”

He lifted a hand toward her face, purposely moving slowly due to the trauma she’d recently suffered. Cupping the uninjured side of her face, Archer caressed her flawless cheek with a gentle pass of his thumb as he lost himself in those incredible eyes.

“I want to be with you, sweetheart.” He continued the unplanned confession. “Only you. But if you don’t feel the same...if I’m alone in this...tell me now, and I will back away and we can go back to keeping things professional.”

Go back, like hell. No way you'll ever be able to look at this woman and not want her.

His subconscious was spot on in that assessment. But what he'd told her was the truth.

If Cassie said she didn't feel the same about him, Archer would do the right thing, and, once he was sure she was no longer in danger, he'd walk away and never look back.

It would be the hardest thing he'd ever had to do. But for her...for Cassie...he'd find the strength to do it.

"You're not alone in this, Archer." Even with the sandpaper sound of the woman's strained voice, those words rang clear. "I've been struggling with my feelings for you from the very start, too. And talk about shit timing...I'm still on the hook for Russ's murder, my friend and business partner just tried to kill me...and I'm standing in a police interrogation room telling you I think I love you." *Wait. Did she just say...* "Oh, God." Cassie's eyes grew wide. "I'm sorry. I-I shouldn't have said that."

Uh...yes. You absolutely should have said it. In fact...

"Say it again."

"What?"

With a hand carefully gripping her hip, Archer pulled her body flush with his. Police station or not, he wanted—no he *needed*—to be sure he hadn't misunderstood.

His stare became fixed with hers. He searched the sea of blue staring back at him, and with a barely controlled voice, he demanded that she...

"Say. It. Again."

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SAY. It. Again.

Archer's order had been sharp. Enunciated. Commanding. And if Cassie wasn't mistaken, that was a sliver of uncertainty shining behind his unwavering stare.

"I said I think..." She braced herself before swallowing against the fiery dryness of her traumatized throat. "I think I'm...falling in love with you." When he didn't immediately respond, Cassie began a rushed and desperate backtrack. "But you're right. That's crazy, right?"

She was crazy.

Crazy in love with a man she barely knew. An American hero who'd had the unfortunate luck to be the one in-office the day she'd walked into Eagle's Nest desperate for help. A man she'd only known a few days but felt as if she'd known him forever.

A man who was currently staring back at her with more emotion than she'd seen on Russ's face the entirety of their marriage. Including their wedding day.

"Cassie, I lo—"

“People don’t fall in love in less than a week.” She cut him off on purpose. “That’s the stuff of Hollywood.”

Isn’t it?

“Pretty sure if my grandparents were still alive, they’d wholeheartedly disagree with you.

“They would?”

He nodded. “My mom told me the story when I was about ten. She said her dad and his buddy were walking down the street one day, and he looked over and saw two women walking in the opposite direction on the sidewalk across the street. A redhead and a brunette. My grandpa pointed to the tiny brunette and said, ‘I’m gonna marry that girl.’” That smirk grew a little more. “Three months later, they stood in front of a preacher and a church full of their closest family and friends. They’d been married sixty-two years when my grandma passed away. And my grandma was just as in love with him then as the day they said their vows.”

Cassie’s heart thumped hard inside her chest. “Did you just make that up?”

“I could have.” He smiled. “But no. I mean, yeah...when my mom first told me the story, I thought she was full of shit. But I asked my grandpa about it, one day, a few years later, totally expecting him to laugh and tell me the story was just a creation of my mom’s hopeless romantic imagination. But nope.” A small chuckle. “Grandpa confirmed Mom’s story. Even added a few details in there for good measure.”

Sixty-two years. That was nothing short of amazing.

“That’s an amazing story, Archer. But that was a different time. A different world.”

“Love is love, sweetheart. No amount of time is going to change that.”

Pulling herself free from his hold, Cassie put some much-needed distance between them. After a long, awkward stretch, Archer finally broke the uncomfortable silence.

“Cassie?” He took a step toward her.

“I still may go to prison, Archer.”

“You won’t.”

“But I *might*. And you...” Cassie shook her head. “You have to prepare yourself for the possibility.”

“You’re not going to fucking prison, Cass. *He* is.” He pointed to the man on the other side of the glass.

“You’re right. Eddie will end up behind bars.” There was no way the man was going to walk out of here after what he did. “But what happened to us today and Russ’s murder are two separate cases. So unless Yates confesses, which he’s never going to do, the evidence the cops have in Russ’s case still points to me. Not Eddie.”

God. She still couldn’t wrap her mind around the fact that Eddie—Eddie—had actually tried to kill her. Or that Russ was dead or that she’d been arrested for his murder.

In what universe was *that* her reality?

And then there was Archer. Sweet. Sexy. Unbelievable Archer. A man who’d all but admitted he loved her, too.

If she wasn’t still struggling with nearly losing her life hours before, the insanity of the situation would be laughable. But as the man still wearing his black leather jacket and that blood-stained shirt took two long strides toward her, Cassie wanted nothing more than to throw herself at him and beg him to take her home.

To make her forget the rest of the world around them, just like he had the night before.

But rather than go to him, she raised her palm to stop him from coming any closer. She couldn’t let him touch her. Not right now. Not until she’d said this next part.

Archer stopped, the question in his eyes as clear as if he’d said the words aloud.

“You have to promise me something.”

“Name it.”

“I’m serious, Archer.”

“So am I.”

Oh. Okay, then. Here it goes...

“If something happens, and I’m convicted, you have to promise you’ll forget about me and move on.”

“Impossible.”

“I’m serious.”

He ignored her motion to stop and continued forward. When he reached her outstretched hand, Archer took it in his and moved in so close, the tips of their shoes nearly touched. “Told you before I’ve never felt this way about another woman, and I meant it. So if you think I could ever forget about you...” Another slow shake of his head. “You’re not going to prison, Cass. But if you did, I’d spend the rest of my life fighting to set you free. Because I love you, too.”

“Archer...”

He leaned in close, his hot breath hitting her chin as he brought his lips to hers. She didn’t want him going anywhere. Was a breath away from telling him that very thing, but the forceful clearing of a man’s deep voice cut her short.

“Don’t worry, Nash.” Detective Knox let the door swing shut behind him as he entered the room. “Looks like the only one going to prison is our boy in there.” He motioned toward the glass.

Not wanting to put Archer in a position that could cause him professional harm, Cassie took a step to the side with the intent of separating herself. But much to her surprise, Archer reached down and linked his fingers with hers, keeping her right by his side.

Right where I belong.

Putting that part of her life on hold for now, she looked across the room at the handsome detective with an inquisitive frown. “What do you mean ‘the only one’?”

“Just what I said.” He dropped a small evidence bag on the table to her left.

“What’s that?” Archer asked before she could.

“*That* is a sandwich bag full of dried Morello cherry pits,” Knox announced. “Upon his arrest, we were granted a search warrant for Yates’ home, office, and vehicle.” He pointed at the bag.

Cassie’s stomach dropped as the other man confirmed her fears.

“Eddie put the crushed-up pits in my wine, didn’t he?” It shouldn’t have surprised her after his earlier attack. But it did. “I...I don’t understand.” Tears filled her eyes, but she brushed them angrily away. “Why?” Her gaze lifted to Archer’s as if he had all the answers. “Why would he want me dead?”

“I don’t know, sweetheart.” He released her hand but only so he could wrap the same arm around her shoulders and pull her close. Apparently he didn’t care that they had an audience of one.

Guess if he doesn’t care, I shouldn’t either.

Cassie let herself lean into the comfort of his embrace as Knox turned back to the glass and crossed his arms.

“Hopefully we’re about to find out the answer to that very question.”

Both she and Archer followed the other man’s gaze, their focus landing on the person who’d just walked into the other room. Tall. Brunette. Pretty.

The woman looked to be about Cassie’s age, and as she walked further into the room, her movements and stance exuded a confident intelligence. Setting the manilla folder and legal sized notepad she’d been carrying onto the table’s shiny surface, the other woman pulled out the chair across from Eddie and sat down.

“Mr. Yates, I’m Detective Hubel Brandt.” Her hands were clasped in front of her. “Before we begin, I understand you’ve waived your right to counsel, is that correct?”

He’d *what?*

“That can’t be right,” Cassie muttered more to herself than anyone else.

Eddie wouldn’t be that stupid. Not with all his schooling and experience. He knew better than to—

Eddie nodded.

“I’m going to need a verbal confirmation, Mr. Yates,” Detective Brandt stated bluntly.

“Yes, I’ve waived my right to counsel.” Eddie’s voice sounded cold. Wooden.

Just like at the cemetery.

The detective opened the folder to reveal something but from where Cassie stood, she couldn’t see its contents.

“Do you know what these are?”

Eddie’s gaze lowered to the folder then away. “Morello cherry pits.”

“And do you know where my crime scene techs found these?”

As if completely void of emotion, a man she clearly never new said, “Well since your people found them, I’m guessing they told you they were in the trunk of my car.”

“As a matter of fact, they did.” The attractive detective made an abrupt change in topic. “Tell me why you tried to kill Cassandra Montgomery today.”

Cassie held her breath and waited on pins and needles to hear the man’s answer. Never, not in a million years, would she ever have guessed the conversation that followed...

“Because.” Eddie shook his head in disgust. “She ruined everything.”

“My god.” Cassie was too stunned by what she was hearing to pay any attention to the incessant headache still pounding throughout her skull. “He’s not even trying to deny it.”

“How did she ruin everything, Edward?” Brandt dropped the formalities.

Eddie shifted in his seat, the sound of metal clanking unsettling as his cuffs slid against the pipe. “If she’d been a better wife to Russ, he wouldn’t have had to look elsewhere. And if Russ hadn’t been looking...”

“Fucking bastard.” Archer’s low growl preceded an even harsher, “Russ cheats on you, and this asshole’s blaming you?”

Yes, that was an unpleasant turn of events, for sure. But Cassie was still hung up on how her and Russ’s marital problems had affected Eddie enough to make him risk everything just to get rid of her.

Then he began to talk. *Really* talk. And what he revealed would stay with her for the rest of her days...

“About two months ago, I came home early from work. Wasn’t feeling well.”

“I remember that day.” Cassie looked at the two men beside her. “It stuck with me because Eddie never went home early or called in sick. But he’d spent more time hugging the toilet that morning than in his office, and I finally talked him into going home and getting some rest.”

“What happened when you got home?” Detective Brandt asked calmly.

“I found my wife in bed with Russell Montgomery.”

Cassie stared blindly, her brain struggling to process the man’s answer. “Wha...what did he just say?”

“Your wife...that would be this woman, correct? I believe her name is Lori?” Brandt slapped another photo down onto the table.

She didn’t have to see the picture to envision the woman’s face. Lori was Cassie’s best friend, after all. And Eddie had just claimed...

“So you’re saying this woman, your wife, was having a sexual relationship with your business partner and friend?”

The nod of Eddie's head sent Cassie's world spinning.

"Neither denied it. Of course, the bastard's dick was still inside my wife's vagina at the time, so..."

"Kind of hard to talk your way out of that one," Knox muttered beneath his breath.

"He's lying." Cassie refused to believe Lori would do that to her. "Lori's my best friend. She would never—"

"Lori swore to me she was going to break it off."

"And did she?"

Eddie shook his head. "She said she did, but she lied."

"And how do you know this?"

"I had her followed."

"By whom?"

"Private Investigator."

"I need his name." She pushed the pad of paper and a pen toward Yates.

Eddie's cuffs sounded unnaturally loud again as he scribbled something on the pad and shoved it and the pen back across the table. "Simon Curtis. He works out of an office on the south end of town."

"I appreciate the cooperation. Now back to the cherry pits. Were those leftover from when you broke into Cassie Montgomery's home and poisoned her wine?"

There was only a slight hesitation before Eddie said, "Yes."

Her sharp intake of air filled the tiny room. "Oh my god."

It really was him.

Eddie really was the one who'd tried killing her—twice—but had ended up murdering Russ, instead.

Archer held Cassie close, both astounded as the shocking confession continued.

“I knew Cassie was out of town on business. I waited for the storm to take out the power, and then I used the security code Russ had given me once to enter through the basement door. I put the pits in the wine and left.”

“Why the wine?”

“I’d heard her and Lori talking once about how they both liked having a glass of wine before bed. And since the bottle had already been opened, I figured it was the best choice.”

“Swear to Christ, if this guy wasn’t already in police custody...”

Archer’s seething comment trailed off, but Cassie knew how that sentence would have ended. Because she was thinking the same damn thing. Almost.

Despite all he’d done to her, Cassie didn’t want to see Eddie dead. She wanted him behind bars, where he belonged. Archer, however...

She glanced up at him.

Oh yeah. He wants Eddie dead.

“So you’re upset that your wife and business partner—who was also your best friend, from what I’ve been told—continued to sleep together, so you decided to kill your friend’s wife? Help me out here, Eddie, because that doesn’t make a whole lot of sense to me.”

“Cassie should have been a better wife!” Eddie’s outburst was accompanied by his fists slamming against the table. “If she was, Russ never would have turned to *my* wife! He never would have made *my* wife want him instead of me, and he never would have made her fall in *love* with him!”

If a pen had dropped in either room, they all would have been able to hear it.

Cassie’s stomach churned with nausea from all that she was hearing. Not only was Eddie claiming Lori and Russ had been having an affair, but he was blaming *her* for it?

“What was your plan, Eddie?” Detective Brandt asked. “I mean, I could understand you wanting to get rid of Russ. But

Cassie?” She shook her pretty head. “That’s where I’m lost. You kill her, what’s to stop Russ from going all-in with your wife? And also, Russ is dead, so he’s no longer in the running for your wife’s attention. So why go after Cassie, now? Today? And why the rope?”

“Like I said. She ruined everything.”

“Come on, Eddie. If you want me to tell the D.A. you were fully cooperative, you’re gonna have to give me a little more than that.”

“I didn’t mean to kill Russ.” Eddie admitted. “It wasn’t supposed to be him. It should have been her.”

It should have been you.

“Interesting choice of words. Pretty close, in fact, to words that were painted on Cassie’s house while she was at her husband’s funeral yesterday.” Another photo revealed. “But you attended that funeral, right? So how did you manage to vandalize Cassie’s house and be at a funeral at the same time?”

“I was late.”

“I’m sorry?”

“To the funeral.” Eddie was beginning to sound agitated. “I was late because I was at Cassie’s house doing *that*.” He pointed to the picture Cassie couldn’t see.

Cassie remembered seeing Eddie slip in through the church’s side door after the services had started, but she’d just assumed he’d gotten hung up with work or trying to find a parking spot or something.

“Jesus. I never knew him at all,” she whispered.

Archer gave her a little squeeze. “At least we finally have the truth about what really happened.”

A small comfort given the fact that her best friend had betrayed her in the worst of ways, and her other friend had literally tried to freaking *murder* her.

“So even though Russ was dead, you still felt angry toward Cassie,” Brandt commented. “But angry enough to kill her? Or

was this more about getting your two business partners out of the way so you could have the law firm all to yourself?”

“What? No.” Eddie shook his head with a frown. “I wanted Cassie dead, but when Russ drank the wine instead, and she was blamed for his death, our clients started dropping like flies.”

“I see. So you’re already pissed enough to kill her over the affair, and then when that plan went sideways, you decided to get rid of her because the news of her arrest was ruining your business. That sound about right?”

He started to nod but then corrected the response with a verbal, “Yes. That’s right.”

“So why the rope this time? Why not go with the tried and true cherry pits?”

“I was going to make it look like a suicide,” Eddie revealed. “I was going to strangle her and then make it look like she’d hung herself.”

“And the cherry pits in your trunk? What were your plans for those?”

“I was going to plant them in her home. Someplace the cops hadn’t looked during their previous search. But I...” Embarrassment filled the man’s cheeks. “I forgot to grab them when I got out of the car.”

“What a dumbass.” Knox snorted from Archer’s other side.

“So Russ is out of the way; you’re thinking you’ll play off Cassie’s murder as a suicide...what about Archer Nash?”

“Who?”

“The man you hit over the head with the chunk of concrete we found near the sidewalk.”

“Oh. He, uh...he doesn’t fit in anywhere. He was just...”

“In your way?”

Eddie nodded. “I overheard Lori on the phone with Cassie an hour earlier. I heard her say Cassie was at the firm. I knew

the place would be closed, so I made an excuse to go out, and I changed my clothes and waited. When I saw the kid pull up with the pizza, I paid him extra to leave the food with me.”

“Why would he do that?”

“Did you not just hear what I said? I paid him extra. Like two-hundred dollars extra. That kid was barely eighteen, if that. He took the cash, handed me the food, and took off.”

“So you’re the one who left the food out on the sidewalk, not the delivery driver?”

“Yes.”

“And when you realized Cassie’s hired bodyguard was still keeping watch, you decided to hit him over the head with the concrete?”

“What more do you need to know, Detective? I went there with the plan to kill Cassie. I bribed the kid with the food, smashed a big rock against the Nash guy’s head, and then I tried to strangle Cassie to death. Clearly my plan failed, since I’m here...in these.” He raised his hands up as far as his cuffs would allow. “So now you know everything, and I’m done talking.”

“You’re done when I say you’re done.”

“Not if I change my mind and ask for my attorney.”

“Do you want your attorney, Eddie?”

“I do if you want to continue this conversation.”

“Fine.” Detective Brandt pushed herself to her feet. “I have enough to ensure you never see the light of day again, anyway. I do appreciate your cooperation, Eddie. I’ll be sure to pass that along to the D.A.”

Grabbing the folder, notepad, and pen from the table, she pushed in her chair and walked right out the door.

“She’s pretty good, isn’t she?” Knox’s tone filled with pride.

“She is,” Archer agreed. “Of course, it helps when the accused makes a full, uncoerced confession.”

“That’s fair.” Turning to her, the detective who’d arrested Cassie days earlier uttered the best words she’d heard since Archer’s surprising declaration of love. “I’m going to go straight to my office to call the D.A. It’ll take a bit for the paperwork to be pushed through, but given what we’ve just heard, the charges against you should be dropped within the hour.”

“Don’t you think you owe her a little more than that?” Archer shot the other man a look.

“Like what?”

“How about a fucking apology, for starters?”

“An apology? For doing my damn job?”

“No, jackass. For putting her in jail for something she didn’t do.”

“It’s okay, Archer.” It wasn’t, but she could also see things from Knox’s perspective. “If I were him, given the evidence at the time, I would’ve arrested me, too.”

Knox’s blue gaze slid to hers. And with his offered nod of appreciation, the two put the unfortunate situation behind them.

“I’ll keep you posted on what’s happening with Yates,” the handsome detective offered.

“Do you think he’ll get life in prison, or will his cooperation weigh heavily enough to show him leniency?”

“Given the pressure the Mayor’s been putting on everyone to close this one, I’m thinking our boy in there will be old and gray if and when he ever gets out.”

“Speaking of the Mayor and his heavy hand...what was it you were wanting to meet about?”

That’s right. The meeting.

With everything that had happened, it had completely slipped Cassie’s mind.

“Ironically, I was going to suggest you look at the wife.”

“Lori?” Cassie frowned. “She’s my best friend. She’d never—”

She cut herself off, because she realized...

I never really knew her either.

“Why Lori?” Archer asked Knox as the detective stopped just shy of opening the door.

“The more I thought about it; the more it made sense. The secret affair with a woman Russ refused to identify...no sign of forced entry into Cassie’s house...the killer knowing Cassie’s habit of having wine before bed...It all seemed to fit.”

Hearing him lay it all out like that, Cassie had to agree with almost every part of it fit. Everything except the part where Lori was supposed to be her friend.

“That’s it?” Archer stared back at Knox with an incredulous expression.

“Dude, I wasn’t even supposed to be investigating the case anymore. As far as the higher-ups were concerned, this case was closed. And no, that wasn’t all. I was also planning on handing over a copy of the full case file.”

“Why would you do that?” Cassie had to ask.

Those blue eyes turned her way, regret filling them as they became locked with hers. “Because like your boyfriend, I never truly thought you were guilty. I couldn’t show it to you...to anyone.” A quick glance in Archer’s direction. “But while I have the utmost respect for the system, I’m also not naïve enough to think it isn’t flawed. And when you throw politics and money into the mix...” Knox blew out a breath. “Let’s just say I knew you weren’t getting a fair shake. And believe it or not, I couldn’t just stand by and watch an innocent woman get sent away for something she didn’t do.”

“Thank you, Detective.”

“Your welcome. And...you can call me Travis. My mother does.”

With a quick flash of a grin, Travis turned and opened the door. Pointing down the hallway to his left, he said, “Just go

back down that way and take a left. That will lead you back to the main lobby.”

“Thanks, Travis.” Archer shook the other man’s hand. “Appreciate all your help.”

Knox returned the gesture. “Just doing my job.”

With a slight scoff, Archer took her hand in his, and as the two of them went left, Detective Knox turned right. They were almost to the precinct’s main entrance when Cassie stopped dead in her tracks.

“Cassie?” Archer looked down at her. “What’s the matter?”

She couldn’t speak. She could barely breathe. And as she stared at the woman who was *really* to blame for this whole mess, Cassie realized her entire vision was starting to turn red.

“Cassie?” Lori rushed across the lobby toward her. “Oh my god! What are you doing here? Have you seen Eddie? Is he okay? The officer who called wouldn’t tell me anything other than he’d been arrested. They wouldn’t even tell me why!”

“I’ll tell you.” Cassie’s voice sounded cold, even to her. “The police arrested your husband because he did this to me less than an hour after you and I spoke on the phone.” She jutted her chin and pointed to the painful marks on her neck.”

“What?” Lori chuckled nervously. “That’s...that’s ridiculous. Eddie would never—”

“He put a rope around my neck and tried to kill me, Lori!” Cassie yelled loud enough for those around them to stop and stare.

But for once, she welcomed the looky-loos and the recordings being taken from people’s phones. Because finally, after all the lies and gossip that had been spread about her, everyone was finally going to learn the truth.

“Do you want to know *why* Eddie nearly murdered me today, Lori?” Cassie didn’t give her ex-friend time to answer. “Because he blamed me for the fact that you were fucking my

husband!” Several gasps came from their unexpected audience, and she was glad as hell others had heard what she’d just said.”

“Wha...what? Cassie, I don’t know what Eddie said, but Russ and I never—”

“Stop!” she shouted again. Then, in a lower, calmer voice, Cassie begged the other woman to, “Just...stop. Stop with the lies, Lori. I know Eddie found you and Russ in bed the day he went home sick. And I know Russ broke things off with you the night he came over to my house.” The night he died. “Of course, at the time, I had no idea you were the woman he was sleeping with. But hey...at least now, thanks to your husband’s confession, everyone will know I’m not a killer. No, no...that would be Eddie.”

The color drained from Lori’s lying face. “Y-you know I love you like a sister. I would never, ever intentionally do anything to hurt you. What happened between Russ and me... we didn’t plan it. It just sort of...happened.”

“Just sort of happened?” A humorless laugh echoed throughout the marble tiled space. “Like what, my husband slipped and fell, and his dick just happened to find its way inside you?”

“Cassie, please.” Tears fell freely from Lori’s guilt-ridden eyes as she begged for forgiveness.

Not in this lifetime, you lying, backstabbing bitch.

“Save it.” She started to march past but stopped long enough to say, “You were like a sister to me.” Her own eyes filled at that, but Cassie refused to let a single tear fall. “I confided in you...Jesus, how many nights did we stay up on your couch while I went on and on about Russ’s sleazy sidepieces. And all that time, you were the sleazy sidepiece. God, you must have had some good laughs at my expense.”

“No.” Lori shook her head vehemently. “I never laughed at you. I felt awful for what I’d done.”

“Yet, you kept right on doing it. And you would have *kept* doing it...doing *him*...if he hadn’t decided to break it off right

before he died.”

Real, raw emotion had Lori’s face crumbling beneath its pressure. “I don’t blame you for hating me.”

“I wouldn’t care if you did. Now as much fun as this little heart-to-heart has been, I can’t stand to look at you another second longer. Go find your husband, Lori. Trust me. He needs you a hell of a lot more than I ever will.”

Refusing to waste another breath on a woman she’d loved like a sister, Cassie looked to Archer who guided her through the remainder of the lobby and out the entrance doors. She made it all the way to the passenger seat of Archer’s company vehicle before giving in to the overwhelming pain and sorrow.

Locked safely inside the armored SUV, she broke down into a blubbering mess. That entire time, the waterfall of tears and hiccuping sobs, Archer simply held her close, comforting her when she needed it most.

And when he took her to bed that night, the amazing man soothed her in a much different way. One that, once again, offered her an escape. A way she could forget.

Cassie did forget, too. While Archer made slow, sensual love to her, she forgot all about the lies, betrayal, and the fact that she’d almost died. Again.

But later, when she woke with silent, painful screams, her nightmares reminded her she couldn’t stay lost forever.

16

SIX DAYS LATER...

“ARE YOU SURE YOU’RE GOING TO BE OKAY THERE ALONE?”

Cassie held the phone close to her ear and smiled. A *real* smile, too. Not one of those forced ones she’d worn in the first days following her discovery of both Lori’s and Eddie’s betrayals.

Her best friend had been sleeping with Russ, and Russ’s best friend had killed him while trying to kill Cassie. It was like a really bad, really cheesy made for T.V. movie.

And I’m the star of the show.

But thankfully, it seemed as if the final scene on that terrifying chapter in her life had thankfully come to an end.

It’s over. Eddie confessed. Your safe.

“I’ll be just fine,” she promised her personal protector, knowing those words rang true. She *was* fine. Or at least, she would be now that the country no longer thought she was a cold-hearted killer.

“This meeting shouldn’t take long. An hour or two at the most. But the guys all understand if I need to come home sooner.”

Home.

She wondered if he’d even realized what he’d said. It probably didn’t mean anything. He only meant he could come to *her* home if she needed him.

I’ll always need him.

The sweet, overprotective man hadn’t left her side in almost a week. And if it wasn’t for him, she didn’t know how she would have survived.

The attack or the nights that had followed.

But she hadn’t woken up in a cold sweat, last night. There’d been no nightmares that left her already tender throat raw with her screams. It was the first time in six days she’d slept through the night, and yet the poor man she’d woken all those times was still more concerned about her than himself.

“You have a job, Archer. Responsibilities other than having to deal with me and my drama. So please, stop worrying about me.”

“Okay, first of all...I never have to *deal* with you, and the drama surrounding you was not of your doing. And two, you *are* my responsibility, now. Isn’t that how this whole relationship thing’s supposed to work? We support each other, no matter what?”

Cassie’s heart swelled with the love she felt for this man. “I suppose you’re right.”

“And three,” he continued, “You’re mine now, sweetheart. Which means I will always worry about you.”

I’m his.

Her chest warmed, and her smile grew even wider, knowing he meant everything he’d just said. “I worry about you, too. Which is why you need to be there, at work.”

“I’d rather be there. With you.”

She chuckled softly. “I can’t argue with you there, sailor. But Logan called this meeting for a reason, so I’m betting he’d like the entire team present. Besides, Natalie will be here any minute.”

“You could always call her and reschedule lunch for another day.”

“Archer...” Cassie drug out the playful warning.

“Fine, fine. Have it your way. I’ll stay here at work, staring at my teammate’s ugly mugs while you and your new friend do...whatever it is women do while having lunch.”

“We eat, Archer.” She bit back a snort. “We eat, and we talk. That’s pretty much all we do.”

“Yeah, but it’s *what* you talk about that has me worried.”

Okay, he had her there. “If you’re thinking we’re going to sit around here and trade stories about our men, then...you’d probably be right.”

“I knew it!” he teased. “That’s it. I’m coming back there right now.”

Shoulders shaking, Cassie was about to tell him to keep his sexy ass put when her phone dinged with a notification from her security camera out front.

“Oh, hang one a sec.” She tapped the phone’s screen to be sure before returning to the man on the other end of the line. “Too late. Natalie just pulled up.”

“Damn.” He pretended to pout. “Okay, fine. But we’re still on for dinner, later. Right?”

Excitement built deep within her belly. It was silly, really. The man had slept in her bed every night for the past two weeks. He’d given her so many wonderful, electrifying orgasms, she couldn’t possibly keep track.

And yet, the thought of making him a nice dinner for their first “official” date made her as giddy as a schoolgirl going to her very first dance.

This, Cass. This is what true love is supposed to feel like.

Exciting. Passionate. Selfless. Equal.

Russ hadn't been a horrible human being, but he'd been a pretty bad husband. But not Archer. Oh, he wasn't her husband. It was much too early to be thinking about that. But someday...

Be it with her or someone else, Cassie had no doubt in her mind that he'd be a wonderful, caring, devoted spouse. Because she'd learned that about him. In the short time she'd known him, she'd learned a lot about the kind of man Archer Nash was. And one thing she'd noticed right off the bat...

When he was in, the man was *all* in.

"I've got the chicken brining, the veggies chopped, and dessert just went into the oven," she confirmed their plans. "I figured I'd start cooking around four-thirty so it would all be ready by six. Is that okay?"

"That's perfect. I should be out of here by two at the latest, but if anything changes, I'll let you know."

"Sounds good. And don't think you have to rush back here." She thought about how that might have sounded and rushed to add, "Not that I don't want you here. I just meant I'm really doing okay, today. Promise."

If she'd said that seventy-two hours ago, it would have been a lie. But today...today was better. She was better. And deep down, Cassie knew that, with time, she would continue to heal.

With Archer's support—and her own inner strength—she even suspected there'd come a day when she'd look back on everything that had happened and see it as a sort of blessing in disguise. Not Russ's death, of course. Never that.

As for the rest...

Yes, she'd lost her only remaining business partner. But given the disturbed man Eddie had turned out to be, she was damn glad she didn't have to work by his side on a daily basis.

The scandal had all but destroyed the firm's previously stellar reputation. Not hers. No, she'd been repainted in the

news and across social media as the pretty, sympathetic widow who'd been wrongfully accused.

Now instead of reporters spewing accusations and writing hateful headlines, they now begged her for a chance to tell her side of the story.

Screw that.

They hadn't given a damn about what she had to say before Eddie nearly strangled her to death, so they didn't deserve a single second of her precious time, now. And time *was* precious.

Hers.

Archer's.

Everyone's.

Time wasn't guaranteed. Not for anyone. But it was a gift from God. One that came with an expiration date.

Cassie thought she'd reached hers in her office that day. She'd been lying there, struggling for air while Eddie did his damndest to choke the life out of her, and she'd known she was seconds away from dying.

But then he was there. Her guardian angel. Her savior.

My man.

"You're amazing, you know that?"

Archer's sentiment brought her back to the present. Speaking of her man...

"So are you." He really was. "Hey, Natalie's almost to the door. I'll see you in a couple hours?"

"Count on it." Archer's smile came through the phone.

Cassie ended the call and slid her phone into her back pocket. Punching in the security code, she disarmed the alarm and opened the door. Natalie Hayes—Logan's wife—greeted her with a smile.

"Hi, Cassie! Oh, I love that sweater!"

“Thanks.” She stepped to the side so her new friend could enter. “I got it at that cute little thrift store downtown a while back.”

It was baby blue cashmere, and she’d gotten it for a steal.

“Oh my gosh, I love thrifting!” The pretty brunette hung her coat and purse on one of the coat and umbrella rack’s open metal hooks. “We should totally plan a day to go together.”

“Deal.” Cassie smiled.

She’d first met Natalie the day after the attack. Logan and his wife had stopped by to check on her and Archer, and despite the emotional struggles Cassie had been facing, she and the other woman had hit it off, right from the start.

“Are you ready to eat now, or do you want to wait a bit?”

“I’m down for whatever.” Natalie flashed her a friendly smile.

“Maybe a cup of coffee first and then lunch?”

“Sounds perfect to me.”

Cassie led the other woman into kitchen where she set about fixing their drinks. With their mugs in hand, they went into the living room. Natalie chose one of the two overstuffed chairs while Cassie sat at one end of the couch.

“You truly have a gorgeous home.” The other woman’s big brown eyes took in the parts of the house they could see.

“Thanks.” Cassie took a sip of her steaming brew. “I’m selling it, if you and Logan are in the market.”

“Actually Logan and I are in the process of building. We bought some land up north, just outside city limits.”

“Nice.”

“It will be, once it’s finished.” Natalie swallowed the drink she’d just taken before adding, “We’re going to have a small housewarming party when it’s done. You’ll have to come.”

“I will,” Cassie promised. “I mean, as long as Archer and I are still—”

“Girl, please. That man one hundred percent head-over-boots for you. Trust me, he isn’t going anywhere.”

“You really think so?”

He’d said the words. Had shown her through his protection...his lovemaking. But knowing someone on the outside saw it too...

“Oh, yeah.” Natalie put her mug on the coaster nearest her. “I’ve known Arch a long, long time. And I can honestly say I have never seen him like this.”

“What do you mean?”

“Happy.” The other woman grinned. “In *love*.”

“He told me he loved me.” A whispered confession. “But you don’t think it’s too soon?”

“Do you?”

“I thought I would, but...” Cassie shook her head. “No. I mean, it is crazy fast, but at the same time, it feels almost like—”

“You’ve been together forever?”

She met the other woman’s chocolate gaze. “Exactly.”

“I know the feeling. Of course, Logan and I had been friends long before anything romantic ever transpired between us.”

“Archer told me the story. About your late husband and how you and Logan got together. I’m really sorry you had to go through all that.”

“Thanks.” A bittersweet smile lifted Natalie’s rosy lips. “It took a long time for me to realize it was possible to have two great loves in one lifetime. My time with Hunter is something I will treasure. Always. But now Logan is here, and he makes me so happy...and I know that’s all Hunter really wanted for me.”

“I guess you and I are sort of like kindred spirits. Only it sounds as if Hunter was much more devoted than Russ.”

“He was.” There was no doubt in the other woman’s response. “But I truly believe everything happens for a reason. And as awful as it was, if you hadn’t gone through what you did, you and Archer may never have met.” A slight shrug of her delicate shoulder. “That’s how I have to look at things, you know? It’s the only way to make sense of the bad that, ultimately, has also brought me so much good.”

Cassie hadn’t really thought of it like that, but Natalie was right. If not for Eddie’s first attempt on her life, she never would have gone to Eagle’s Nest Securities. Which meant she and Archer never would have happened.

“It’s crazy to feel grateful for something so heinous.”

“Give it time.” Natalie picked up her mug and took another sip. “I mean, I still have my days where a memory from the past will hit me out of nowhere. But with the help of my therapist and Logan’s support, for the most part, I’ve been able to put it all behind me. It’s time to focus on the future, you know?”

She did know. Better now, than before.

“Your therapist...” Cassie hesitated to ask this next question. “Do you know if he’s taking new clients?”

“She.” Natalie pulled her phone from her pocket and unlocked the screen. “And I’m not sure. I’ll send you the number to Sloane’s office so you can call to see.”

Rattling off the number, Cassie waited for her phone to chime with the incoming text. When it did, she immediately saved the therapist named Sloane in her list of contacts.

“Thanks.” She sat her phone down onto the cushion beside her.

“Of course. Sloane is fabulous. I mean, I never pictured myself as the therapy type, but after Hunter was killed, and then nearly being shot to death in my own living room, I quickly changed that tune.”

The women continued talking. While Cassie pulled the cherry pie out of the oven to cool. Through lunch...and for a long while after.

They talked and laughed. Even shed a tear...or three. And before either knew it, time had slipped away from them both.

“Holy crap. Is that really the time?” Natalie glanced at the clock mounted high on Cassie’s wall.

Cassie followed the other woman’s gaze. Eyes widening, she realized just how late it had gotten. “It’s already two?”

Archer had said he’d be home around two, and she still had some work in her office to tend to before she had to start dinner in a couple more hours.

“I’ll walk you out.”

“So Archer told Logan you decided to close the firm. Is that true?”

“I did.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. Really.” Another blessing-in-disguise. “There was just too much dirty laundry attached to that place.”

“What are you going to do now?”

“Actually I decided to open another firm. A non-profit that will offer free and reduced-cost legal aid to those in need of a good defense.”

“So like what you did at your old firm?”

Cassie nodded. “But instead of there just being me working those kinds of cases, I’ll have an entire staff of lawyers available to our clients.” Ironically she’d decided to use some of Russ’s hefty life insurance policy to make that dream possible. “And, as much as I hate to admit it, since my charges were dropped, I’ve had people crawling out of the woodwork to send me their CV’s.”

“That’s great! You know, if that doesn’t work out, Eagle’s Nest could always use a good lawyer in our corner.”

Part of the conversation they’d shared entailed Natalie’s explanation of how she’d helped Logan and the others start their private protection firm.

Maybe we are kindred spirits, after all.

“Thanks.” Cassie offered the other woman a smile. “But I think I’m going to stick with keeping my personal and professional lives separate from now on.”

With a chuckle, Natalie slid on her coat and hung her purse from one shoulder. “I don’t blame you. Although I got very lucky with my crew.”

Yes, it seemed as if she had.

“So.” Natalie stood inside the open doorway. “About our thrifting date.”

“Let me look at my calendar and I’ll text you the date’s I’m free.” Because starting tomorrow, she was putting herself back to work.

It wasn’t an easy task, building a non-profit organization from scratch. But with a renewed sense of purpose, she truly couldn’t wait to get started.

“I can’t wait.” Natalie pulled her in for a hug. “Thanks again for lunch. We should make this a regular thing. But next time, it’s on me.”

“Deal.”

With a parting smile and shared waves, the two women said their goodbyes.

Cassie closed her door and reentered the code before heading into her office. She’d barely sat down when her system notified her of another vehicle arriving in her driveway.

Assuming it was Archer coming back from his meeting, she continued reading the documents outlining all the steps needed to get her new firm up and running. When the doorbell rang, Cassie started a bit from the unexpected sound.

Archer wouldn’t ring the doorbell. Not unless his hands were full.

Still paranoid from all that had happened, she opened the security system’s app on her laptop, stunned to see the face of

the woman standing on her porch.

What the hell does she want?

With a growl, Cassie pushed herself to her feet and marched toward the home's entrance. She'd had a lovely afternoon with her new friend, and her evening was looking to be even better. She did not need this woman showing up and ruining her perfectly good mood.

So don't let her.

Her inner voice was right. She couldn't control anyone else's actions or choices, but she could control her own.

With that in mind—and two very long, very cleansing deep breaths—Cassie disarmed the alarm once again and opened the door.

“Hello, Cassie.” Barbara Montgomery greeted her with a tight, thin smile.

“Barbara?” She automatically began looking to see if her asshole husband had joined her. Thankfully it looked as if her former mother-in-law had come alone. “What are you doing here?”

“I was hoping maybe we could talk.”

Cassie blinked. You want to...talk. With me.” It wasn't a question. More like a statement overflowing with confusion.

“I won't take up much of your time. I just thought...” The older woman's lip-sticked mouth pursed into a straight line. “I wanted to apologize.”

If she hadn't been holding the door's wooden edge, Cassie was pretty sure she would have fallen right over. In all the years she'd known Barb, the woman had never, ever apologized to her.

Not. Once.

“Thank you, Barb, but that's really not necessary.” Mainly because Cassie didn't really care about this woman's apology. A year ago, maybe. But now...

“Please. I...I know it probably doesn't mean anything to you, now, but I...I wanted you to know that I truly do feel badly about the way Alastair and I have treated you.”

“You mean now that you know I didn't kill your son?”

A flash of pain filled the woman's wrinkled face, and despite the anguish Barb had caused her over the years, Cassie couldn't help but feel bad for the snippy comment.

“I'm sorry,” she offered sincerely. “I know you loved Russ dearly, and that's a loss I can't begin to understand.”

“Thank you.” Barbara rewarded her with a small smile. “You know, after he caused that awful scene at the cemetery that day, I told Alistair I wanted a divorce.”

And the surprises just keep on coming.

“You...did? Why?”

“Come now, Cassandra. You've always been an intelligent woman. Do you really think my Russ was the first Montgomery man to have a wandering eye?”

“Alastair?”

“He's had several affairs over the years. And unlike you, I wasn't strong enough to walk away.”

“So what changed?” Cassie couldn't imagine one outburst by a man known for them would do the trick.

Another dark, haunted shadow crossed over her once more. “I lost my son.” Her voice became thick with emotion. “I know it seems silly at my age, but when I learned Russ had been killed, I realized just how tired I really was. Tired of the lies. The keeping up with appearances. The women.” Barbara shook her silver head. “Russell was the one bright spot in my life, and with him gone, I realized I had nothing left. Oh, I had money and notoriety, of course. But without my boy, those things just don't seem as important as before.”

I guess wonders really do never cease.

Adding to the surprising turn of events, Cassie actually heard herself say, “Would you like to come inside where it's

warm? I have some coffee that's still fairly fresh."

The first real smile the woman had ever given her spread across her grieving face. "Actually, I was hoping maybe we could take a ride."

"A ride?"

"Oh, I know it's silly of me, but I thought..." She blushed and looked away. "Oh, never mind. I'm just being that crazy old lady I used to laugh at as a child."

"Where were you wanting to go, Barbara?"

Because if this was real...the apology and sudden clarity where Cassie was concerned...she would accept the offered apology. After all, for her and Russ's entire relationship, all Cassie had ever wanted was for his family to accept her. To welcome her with smiles and open arms like they had with Lori and Eddie.

A flash of pain filled her chest, the fresh betrayal from both so-called friends still very much present.

But this wasn't about Lori or her rope-wielding psycho husband. This was about Cassie and the strained relationship with her former mother-in-law. And since she'd decided to take a new lease on life and do her best to let go of the past, she figured mending what she could of her relationship—if you could call it that—with the woman standing before her would be a start.

Barbara's hopeful gaze met hers. "I was thinking...well, I was hoping, anyway...if this little conversation of ours went well, then maybe..." She paused again, looking almost embarrassed by what she was about to propose. "I know it's silly, but I was wondering if you'd like to ride with me to the cemetery."

"The cemetery?" Cassie frowned.

Now?

"I thought, if you and I could find a way to make amends, then we could visit Russ's grave. Together. As family."

Family.

This woman would never be her family. It was much too late for that. But a quick trip to the cemetery wouldn't kill her. Out of respect for Russ.

"Let me get my coat."

"Excellent." Barbara's aged face lit up. "I'll wait for you in the car."

Closing the door to stave off letting even more cold air inside, Cassie donned her coat and grabbed her purse. After shooting a quick text to Archer letting him know of the plan, she ended the message with a promise to be back in plenty of time to make dinner...and a stern order to keep out of the cherry pie.

With a wry grin spread across her face, she buttoned her coat and opened the door. Cassie's footsteps faltered when she realized Barbara was in the passenger seat of her BMW, rather than sitting behind the wheel.

"If you don't mind, I thought you could drive," the other woman explained when Cassie opened the door and slid into the empty seat. "I don't do well driving when I get emotional. Too much distraction rolling around in this old brain of mine, I suppose."

"I don't mind." She pushed the button to fire up the car's ignition.

The awkward drive was filled with more small talk, but at least they weren't at each other's throats. Taking it as a win, Cassie continued on with the pleasant, albeit odd, conversation.

Before long, the two women were standing side-by-side at Russ's grave. The mound of dirt was still fresh, his headstone shiny and new.

"I can't believe he's really gone."

"I know." Cassie risked a gentle pat of Barbara's shoulder. "Me, neither."

"It's all your fault, you know."

Low. Flat. Menacing.

What the..

The unexpected words—along with the drastic change in the other woman’s tone of voice—had Cassie’s eyes flying from Russ’s grave to his mother.

“What did you just—”

Her entire body stiffened, her heart nearly stopping when she saw the gun in Barbara’s hand. Its small black barrel was pointed straight at Cassie’s side, and with their close proximity, there was no way she could run away without getting hit.

Oh my god!

“Barbara, what are you—”

“It should have been you!” The woman screamed. Facing her fully, Barbara kept that gun surprisingly steady as she revealed her true purpose for bringing Cassie here. “That poison was meant for you. Not my baby boy!”

The poison...

“I know.” Cassie nodded slowly. “I was there when Eddie confessed. He told the cops all about how he put the poison in the wine with the intent of killing me. Not Russ.”

“Eddie.” Barbara scoffed. “Like that man would be smart enough to pull off something like that.”

“What?”

“It wasn’t Eddie, you idiot! It was me! I’m the one who put those pits into your wine. Not Eddie.”

No. That couldn’t be right. This woman was clearly delusional with grief.

“Barbara, Eddie confessed. He confessed to it all.”

“Him trying to strangle you, that was all him. But the other.” Her ex-mother-in-law shook her head. “That was me.”

Cassie stumbled a bit from the bomb the woman had just dropped. “I-I don’t understand. If you were the one trying to kill me, then why would Eddie—”

“That man is so in love with his pathetic wife despite her screwing my son on the side, he’d do anything for her. Including confessing to a murder he thought she had committed.”

“Wha...what?” Feeling as though she’d stepped into an alternate reality, Cassie’s mind raced to understand what was happening.

“See? This is exactly why Alastair and I tried to talk Russ out of marrying you. Not only do you not fit in our world, you’re an idiot to boot!” With a loud exhale, Barbara went on to explain. “After I received a phone call from Detective Knox telling me Edward had confessed, I immediately sent my lawyer to the jail to speak to him. As a show of representation and support, you see. But really—”

“Your lawyer was there to spy for you.”

A slow, evil smile spread across the woman’s cold, uncaring face. “Maybe you aren’t as stupid as I thought.”

“So what did your spy have to say?”

“That Eddie had confessed because he thought Lori had been the one to kill Russ. They were each other’s alibis for that night, you see. Each said they were with the other, but really...Lori was with my Russ, and Eddie was home alone.”

“And since Eddie knew about the affair, and Lori wasn’t home the night the power went out and the poison was put into the bottle, Eddie assumed Lori was the killer.”

“Ding, ding, ding! Look at you being smart for a change.”

I’ll show you smart, you crazy bitch. Just keep talking long enough, and I’ll get my chance to show you exactly what I’m capable of.

“So Eddie confesses to cover for Lori, when really it was you all along.”

“Imagine my surprise when he said he did it. I mean, it couldn’t have worked out more perfectly than that. And when he actually did try to kill you, well...” Barbara chuckled. “That was icing on the cake.”

“I don’t suppose you had anything to do with that?”

“I may have mentioned your name a time or two during recent conversations. Might have gone as far as to suggest you were the one to blame for the whole entire mess.”

“And Eddie being Eddie, he bought your bullshit hook, line, and sinker.”

“It was a perfect plan, you know. I even paid him a hefty sum to put that paint on your house. I couldn’t be late to my own son’s funeral, of course. But his friend...I mean, things happen, right?”

Jesus, she was absolutely certifiable.

“So you convinced him he needed to kill me for real? Is that it?”

“That was all on him. Like I said, I put the bug in his ear, but what he did with that...” Barbara sighed. “Of course, if he’d succeeded in killing you with that damn rope, and then strung you up, like I suggested your death would’ve been ruled a suicide, and all that money you took from my son’s insurance policy would be mine.”

“Money?” Anger overshadowed Cassie’s fear. “Is that all you care about? Money? Your son is dead, Barbara! You killed him!”

“It wasn’t supposed to be him!” The woman’s wild gaze filled with unshed tears. “It was supposed to be you! *It should have been you!*”

She raised the gun in the air. Kept it pointed straight at Cassie. And then...she pulled the trigger.

Cassie didn’t feel the pain at first. She hadn’t even felt the bullet piercing through her flesh. Just a sudden, powerful pressure followed by an unfamiliar heat spreading deep inside her gut.

She looked down. Put her hand over the single hole that had been burned straight through her beige coat. And when she pressed her palm against the fire that had begun to rage within her there, her fingers became coated with blood.

“B-Barb...” Cassie stumbled back several steps. She raised her shock-filled gaze to the woman still holding the gun. A woman who wasn’t showing even a sliver of remorse for having just shot her at point-blank range.

Her legs gave out, and Cassie fell to her knees beside Russ’s grave. “W-why?”

“Because.” The evil bitch raised that gun again. “It should have been you.”

“You won’t get away with this!” Cassie shouted. “Archer knows I’m with you. He knows you’re the one I came here with. They’re going to know it was you. There’s no way you’ll be able to cover this one up.”

“Ah, you see...that’s the beauty of it all.” Her finger slid to the trigger. “I don’t plan to cover anything up. Not anymore.”

Like before, Cassie didn’t feel the strike of the second bullet, either. And as her eyes fell shut, she realized...

I can’t feel anything anymore.

No pain. No fire. Just an overwhelming sadness knowing she’d never get to see Archer’s gorgeous face ever again.

I’m sorry, Archer. I loved you. I really, really did.

17

ARCHER DROVE SLOWLY around the paved cemetery roads. Cassie had texted him earlier to say she was riding here with Barbara Montgomery. He'd been sitting in the team's war room, shocked as hell when he'd read the name. But before he could write back asking for an explanation, Cassie had sent a second text letting him know it was a long story, and she'd explain later.

That was nearly ninety minutes ago.

His two-hour meeting had turned into three, and since he'd known he had some time before dinner, he'd stopped at a florists' shop to pick up Cassie some flowers. First real date, and all.

He'd wanted to do things right.

But when he'd gotten to her house, he'd found it empty. Cassie's car was still in the garage, but her coat and purse were gone. And the dinner she'd promised to start half an hour ago still sat uncooked and prepped in glass containers inside the fridge.

Something's wrong. I can fucking feel it.

Archer had immediately tried calling, but each time he'd tried, it had gone to voicemail.

As a precaution, he'd installed a shared location app on her phone the first night he'd stayed with her, which was how he knew she was still here. But she'd been gone a long damn time just to stand around a cemetery—especially in the chilly afternoon air—so Archer had jumped in his truck and headed straight here.

“Any sign of her?” Lucky's voice came through the truck's speakers.

He'd called him while leaving the house, just to fill him in.

“I'm coming up on the turn to Montgomery's grave now.” Peering out into the distance, he spotted a black BMW parked near the man's final resting place. “I see a car I'm assuming is the mother-in-law's.” He scanned the area. “But I don't see any sign of Cassie or the other woman anywhere.”

His gut tightened with a sense of dread he couldn't shake.

“I'm headed that way.”

“That's okay.” Archer shook his head. “You don't have to do that.”

“Dude, I'm already almost there.”

“You are?”

“I got into my car the minute you called.”

Despite the worry rolling through him, Archer smiled. “You're a good friend, Lucky.”

“Well duh. Tell me something I don't already know.”

Rolling his eyes, he was about to tell the other man about his plans where Cassie was concerned. That was definitely something Lucky didn't know.

No one knew. Not his team. Not even his parents. Only Archer.

Only just as he opened his mouth to reveal his grand romantic plan, he spotted something in the grass next to

Montgomery's grave.

"What the hell?"

"What is it?"

"I don't know." Archer sped up to cover the remaining distance a little faster. The closer he got, the clearer the heap on the ground became. And when he pulled up behind the BMW to park, he realized it wasn't a heap at all.

Cassie!

"No!" He shoved the truck into park, not waiting for the damn thing to stop rocking before shoving open his door and jumping out. He took off in a dead sprint toward who he now realized was the woman he loved.

She was on the ground. Eyes closed. The front of her coat covered in blood.

Oh, god!

Lucky's frantic voice barely registered as it hollered at him through his truck's speakers, but Archer didn't dare stop. He was too busy racing to Cassie. Too busy praying with all he had that she was still alive.

That he wasn't too late.

Please, God. Please let her still be with me! I just found her. You can't take her from me. Please!

As he ran, he noticed another motionless body lying on the other side of Montgomery's mounded grave. Barbara Montgomery was lying next to her son's headstone with a fresh gunshot wound at the side of her head.

A small pistol lay in the dirt mere inches from the dead woman's limp, open hand.

Ah, Christ.

Archer finally, *finally* reached Cassie. Dropping to his knees in the grass beside her, he did the quickest triage of his fucking life.

“Ah, god.” Archer groaned as an indescribable pain grabbed hold of his frantically beating heart and squeezed.

There was so much blood. So much, it took him precious seconds to even find the source. When he did, his entire soul threatened to implode.

She’d been shot. Cassie had been shot. Twice. Once in the lower left abdomen, and again in the soft flesh just below her left clavicle.

Her heart. That Montgomery bitch had taken that second shot because she’d been aiming at Cassie’s heart.

It was one of the biggest, most generous and loving hearts he’d ever known. And as Archer pressed his hand to the side of Cassie’s neck, he held his breath and waited, praying that same amazing, beautiful heart was still beating.

Tires squealed in the distance, but Archer leaned in closer in his effort to concentrate. At first, he was certain he’d lost her. And for that one brief moment in time, Archer wanted to die, too. But then...

There!

Hope seared through his tortured veins as he felt the slight pattering of slow, erratic beat.

She’s still alive!

But for how long was the question.

“How bad?”

He spared a glance toward where he’d parked, and when he saw Lucky’s frantic face racing toward him, he hollered back, “Two gun shot wounds to the torso! One upper, one lower.”

“Fuck!” Lucky immediately got on the phone to call for help.

But Cassie didn’t have time to wait for an ambulance.

“Help me get her in the truck!” He stood and gently scooped her into his arms.

“You don’t want to wait for an—”

“No time!”

The two men raced as fast as they could across the cool grass. Lucky pulled open Archer’s truck’s back passenger door and helped him ease her limp form onto the smooth leather seat.

“You drive!” He shouted while rounding the truck. Climbing into the back seat with Cassie, Archer slammed the door shut before carefully cradling her in his arms.

While Lucky drove like a bat out of hell, he called Logan to let him know what had happened. After that, the other man made another call. This one to Detective Knox.

Archer didn’t listen to the conversation filling his truck’s speakers. He was too busy pushing down on Cassie’s wounds to try to help stop the bleeding.

She was cold. So fucking cold. But thanks to his medical background, Archer knew that wasn’t necessarily a bad thing. Given the day’s cool weather, and the fact that she’d been lying on the cold winter ground, the lower temps my very well be the thing that saves her life.

“Stay with me, Cassie,” he begged. “You’ve come too far to give up now. You hear me? You keep fighting!” Her image blurred behind a wall of tears. “You don’t die on me, you got it? Not today. You’re not dying, today!”

They reached the hospital in record time, and what happened next seemed like a dream. A horrible, terrifying dream he wanted desperately to wake up from.

He and Lucky rushed Cassie into the E.R. Staff immediately took action, getting her a gurney so they could start their own triage. Archer laid her gently onto the thin mattress, trying like hell to ignore the massive amounts of blood still escaping the wounds in her precious body.

Having filled in as medic for their SEAL unit a time or two, he knew the stats the doctors and nurses would need to know. Just as he had in the field, Archer began listing off everything he knew about her physical state.

And when he was done, the team of medical professionals raced away with the woman he loved, disappearing behind a set of swinging doors.

Minutes turned into hours as he waited on pins and needles to learn Cassie's fate. His entire team was there. By his side.

Ready to have his back.

But if his worst fears rang true...if he lost her...Archer knew there'd be nothing his team could do.

"She'll be okay, Arch." Lucky gave his shoulder a tight squeeze. "She's as tough as they come."

"I never should have left her."

Twice. Fucking *twice*, she'd been hurt and all because he hadn't been there.

"Knock that shit off." Van's surly face appeared in Archer's vision. "We all thought the danger was over when that asshat Yates confessed."

"I should've been there."

"Van's right." Chase stood with his back pressed against the hallway's opposite wall. "It's not like you can be with her twenty-four-seven."

"Even if that's all you want to do."

That comment came from Logan, who understood all too well what it was like to fear losing the woman he loved. But he hadn't lost Natalie. She was standing right here, beside her husband.

Husband.

That had been his big plan. To propose. Not right away, of course. But soon.

The way Archer had looked at it, they'd gone the unconventional route from the start. So why wait to start their lives together until enough time has passed to be deemed socially acceptable?

That had been his thought. It was why he'd already bought the ring. A ring Cassie may never get the chance to wear.

You'll wear it, sweetheart. One way or the other, that diamond will be on your left hand.

He just prayed she was still alive when he slid it on her finger.

"I assume you're all here for Cassandra Montgomery?"

Archer and the others perked up when a petite nurse with a round face and a friendly smile appeared through those swinging doors.

"We are." He rushed toward her. "I'm...her fiancé." The need to see her superseded any guilt he may have felt from lying. Besides if Cassie made it...if she survived being shot twice at point-blank range...he would be her fiancé.

As long as she'd still have him.

"Come with me."

"Wait!" Archer stopped the woman before she could turn away. "Cassie. Is she..."

"She made it through surgery with flying colors." The woman smiled wide. "I'm sure the doctor will explain it in more detail when you see him, but the bullets managed to miss any major organs or arteries."

Was she saying what he thought she was saying?

"So she's going to be okay?"

"Barring any unforeseen complications, your fiancée should make a full and complete recovery. She's very lucky, you know."

The woman was wrong about that. Something Archer knew beyond a shadow of a doubt the second he stepped foot into her quiet room and saw his beautiful, blonde angel asleep beneath the stark white blankets.

Cassie was still alive. He hadn't lost her, after all. She was alive and breathing, and as he pulled the hard plastic chair near

the head of the bed and took her warm, limp hand in his, he knew...

I'm the luckiest bastard in the world.

ARCHER WOKE TO SOMETHING CRAWLING ON HIS HEAD. No, not crawling. Raking. Like someone running their fingers through his...

His eyes flew open, and his head shot up from the bed Cassie lay in. His heart filled with so much emotion he could hardly stand it when he saw those gorgeous, foggy blue eyes staring back into his.

“Hey!” He leaned up and brushed some hair from her forehead. “How are you feeling?”

“Like I’ve been shot by a crazy, gun-wielding psycho.”

Her words were soft and a bit slurred from the drugs, but the fact that she’d just made a smartass comment did more for his aching heart than she’d ever know.

“I’m so sorry, Cassie.” His throat closed tight. “I should have been there.”

“No.” She shook her head against the stiff pillow. “You don’t get to do that. Not this time.”

“It’s my job to protect you.”

“Your job is to love me.” She cleared the huskiness from her throat. “Just like I love you.”

“I do.” He pressed his lips gently against hers. “God, baby. I love you so fucking much.” He rested his forehead against hers and squeezed his eyes shut. “When I saw you lying there, covered in all that blood, I thought...” His voice cracked but he cleared it and kept on. “I thought I’d lost you. You were so still. So cold, and I thought...I thought you were gone.”

She placed a loving hand on his arm. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Archer lifted his head so he could meet her gaze, once more. “Do you mean that?”

“Of course, I do.”

“Good. Because as soon as you’re all healed up, I’m going to marry you.”

The fog seemed to instantly vanish from her widening eyes. “You’re...what?”

Shit. He hadn’t intended to say that to her. Not here. Not now.

This wasn’t part of the plan. He was going to spend the next few weeks wining and dining her. Treating her the way a woman like her deserved. And then, when the time was right, he’d planned to enlist Natalie’s help in designing the best, most unexpected proposal of all time.

But now...

“I’m sorry. I’m screwing this whole thing up. This isn’t how...I didn’t plan to do this here—”

“But you did plan to do it?”

Hearing the hope lifting Cassie’s strained voice, Archer felt a sliver of his own. “I, uh...” *Fuck it.* “Yeah. Yes.” He needed her to understand he was serious. “I was going to wait a few weeks. Treat you right. Date you first. You know, buy you flowers and take you to dinner. Maybe go dancing...”

“That’s sweet, but I don’t need all that, Archer.” Cassie shook her head and smiled. “I only need you.”

Archer searched her gaze for even the slightest hint of doubt. When he realized it wasn’t there, he knew what he needed to do.

“I have a ring,” he told her. “Not here, but I have one.”

“I don’t need the ring.” She smiled up at him.

I only need you.

“Marry me, Cassandra,” he whispered. “After you’re healed, of course. But soon.”

“Yes.”

“And we can have any wedding you want. Big, small, it doesn’t matter. As long as—” Archer cut himself short when

her answer finally registered. “Wait. Did you just say...yes?”

“I said yes.”

And just like that, his world righted itself again.

Over the next few days while Cassie remained in the hospital under her doctor’s care, she filled him and the others—including Detective Knox—in on what had transpired the day Barbara Montgomery came to see her.

Under the ruse of wanting to make amends, the crazy bitch had lured Cassie out to the cemetery. Once there, she’d gone forward with her plan.

Murder-suicide.

Archer had already understood that to be the case when he’d first arrived on scene. But the suicide note Barbara had left in the glovebox of her car confirmed it.

The woman had initially tried killing Cassie because she blamed her for all of Russ’s problems and thought she was a gold digger who was only after a huge divorce settlement. When that plan failed, and Barbara instead ended up killing her own son, instead, she’d blamed Cassie for that, too.

Knowing Edward Yates was in a low, emotional state, the Montgomery matriarch had taken advantage of that by slyly convincing him Cassie was the root of all their problems. And since Yates already blamed Cassie for his failing marriage—and their business—it hadn’t taken much to drive him into a murderous state of mind.

Barbara’s suicide note cleared Montgomery of Russ’s death, but the man was still going away for a long damn time for attempting to murder Cassie that day in her office.

As for Lori, the woman got exactly what she deserved. No husband. No best friend. And the best part of all...

No money.

Between her husband’s legal fees—he’d lawyered up really quick when he got word of Barbara’s postmortem confession—good old Eddie couldn’t change his tune fast

enough. Recanting everything he'd told Detective Brandt the day he'd been arrested.

Everything except his plan to murder Cassie with the rope and then try to cover it up by hanging her body from the rafters hiding by the dropped ceiling in Cassie's office.

The whole thing played out like some sort of fantastical, sordid soap opera. One he was damn glad was behind them.

As for he and Cassie...they were focused entirely on the future. Their future. And Archer couldn't wait to see what came next.

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