

CHAPTER FOUR

TRENTON

I WAITED OUTSIDE THE DOOR, listening to Camille trying not to cry. Every month was an endless cycle of hope and devastation, and almost eight years into our marriage, she was getting desperate.

The lights were dim. She liked it dark when her soul felt black, so I'd pulled the curtains when the three minutes was up, and she didn't say anything. Now, nothing was left to do but wait, listen, and hold her.

We lived in a small two-bedroom, just six blocks from Dad and Olive. The bedroom, like the rest of the house, was bright and minimally decorated with interesting art or my drawings. We'd repainted and laid new carpet, but the house was older than we were. Even though at the time of purchase it was a steal, the fixer-upper had turned into a money pit. The central heat and much of the plumbing system were new. At one point, we had to peel back the new—but wet—carpet to jackhammer the foundation to get to the pipes and replace them. The last ten years had been a long haul, but now we lived in a like-new home, even if we did have to deplete our savings four times to do it. We were in a good place, finally, and neither of us knew what to do with it but move to the next step. Infertility wasn't something we could fix, and that made Camille feel broken.

"Baby," I said, tapping on the door with my knuckles. "Let me come in."

"Just ... just give me a second," she said, sniffing.

I leaned my forehead against the door. "You can't keep doing this to yourself. I think maybe it's ..."

"I'm not giving up!" she snapped.

"No. Maybe try a different avenue."

"We can't afford a different avenue," she said. Her voice was even quieter than it had been. She didn't want to make me feel worse than I already did.

"I'll figure something out."

After a few moments of silence, the door clicked, and Camille opened the door. Her red-rimmed eyes were glossed over, and red blotches dotted her face. She was never more beautiful, and all I wanted to do was hold her, but she wouldn't let me. She would pretend her heart wasn't broken to keep me from hurting as she always did—no matter how many times I'd told her it was okay to cry.

I touched her cheek, but she pulled away, her painted smile fading just long enough to kiss my palm. "I know you will. I just needed to grieve."

“You can grieve out here, baby doll.”

She shook her head. “No, I can’t. I needed to take a moment for myself.”

“Because otherwise, you’re worried about me,” I scolded.

She shrugged, her feigned smile turning into a real one. “I’ve tried to change. I can’t.”

I brought her into my chest, holding her tight. “I wouldn’t want you to. I love my wife just the way she is.”

“Camille?” Olive said, holding one side of the doorjamb. Her waist-length, platinum blond hair cascaded in waves from her center part down each side of her face, making her sadness seem to weigh her down even more. Her round, green eyes glistened, feeling every disappointment, every setback as deeply as we did because she was family, too. By chance and by blood, whether she knew it or not.

As I watched her lean the delicate features of her oval face against the wooden trim, I remembered being blown away by the truth: Olive, my neighbor and little buddy since she could walk, was adopted, and somehow, her biological mother had fallen in love with my older brother Taylor almost a thousand miles away in Colorado Springs. By chance, I’d helped raise my niece—involved in her life even more than my brother or sister-in-law.

Camille looked at Olive and breathed out a small laugh, pulling away from me while simultaneously licking her thumbs and then wiping away the smudged mascara from beneath her eyes. Her hair was longer than it had been since she was a girl, grazing the middle of her back and the same hue as Olive’s, with a shaved patch just above her ear to keep it ‘edgy.’ I’d just redone the tat on her fingers—the first tattoo I’d ever done for her, and her first tattoo ever. It read Baby Doll, the nickname I’d given her early in our relationship, and it had somehow stuck. As hard as she tried not to fit in, Camille was a classic beauty. The name fit her then just as it did now.

“I’m okay,” Camille said, following with a cleansing sigh. “We’re okay.”

She walked over to the doorway to give Olive a quick hug and then tightened the folded navy blue handkerchief she was using as a headband. She sniffed, the pain visibly fading away and disappearing. My wife was a badass.

“Cami,” I began.

“I’m good. We’ll try again next month. How’s Dad?”

“He’s good. Talking my ear off. It’s getting harder to get him to come out with me. Tommy and Liis are bringing the new baby ...” I trailed off, waiting for the inevitable hurt in Camille’s eyes.

She walked over, cupped my cheeks, and then kissed me. “Why are you looking at me like that? Do you really think it bothers me?”

“Maybe ... maybe if you’d married him ... you’d have one of your own by now.”

“I don’t want one of my own. I want our baby. Yours and mine. If not that, then nothing.”

I smiled, feeling a lump rise in my throat. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” She smiled, her voice sounding relaxed and happy. She still had hope.

I touched the small scar at her hairline, the one that never let me forget just how close I was to losing her. She closed her eyes, and I kissed the jagged white line.

My phone rang, so I left her long enough to grab my cell phone from the nightstand. “Hey, Dad.”

“Did you hear?” he asked, his voice a bit hoarse.

“What? That you sound like hell? Did you get sick within the last two hours?”

He cleared his throat a few times then chuckled. “No, no ... every inch of me is just older than dirt. How’s Cami? Pregnant?”

“No,” I said, rubbing the back of my neck.

“Yet. It’ll happen. Why don’t you two come over for dinner? Bring Olive.”

I looked at my girls, and they were already nodding their heads. “Yeah. We’d love to, Dad. Thanks.”

“Fried chicken tonight.”

“Tell him not to start without me,” Camille said.

“Dad—”

“I heard her. I’ll just get ‘em battered and seasoned and get the potatoes in the oven.”

Camille made a face.

“Okay. We’ll be over in a bit.”

Camille rushed around, trying to get out the door to beat Dad to the oven. He’d left the stove on more than once, fallen more than once, and didn’t seem fazed when he did. Camille spent nearly all of her spare time trying to help him avoid accidents.

“Can I drive?” Olive asked.

I cringed.

She smiled mischievously. I groaned, already knowing what she was about to say.

“Pwease, Twent?” she whined.

I winced. I’d promised Olive when she first got her license that I’d let her drive me when she turned eighteen, and her birthday was months ago. It was second nature to say no. I’d never had an accident, even as a teen. The two I’d been involved in were horrific, and both were with women I deeply cared about behind the wheel.

“Goddammit, fine,” I swore.

Camille held out her fist, and Olive bumped it with hers.

“Did you bring your license?” Camille asked.

Olive answered by holding up a small brown leather wristlet. “My new Eastern State student ID is in there, too.”

“Yay!” Camille said, clapping. “How exciting!” She looked at me with a fake apology in her eyes. “You promised.”

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you,” I grumbled, tossing Olive the keys.

Olive clasped the metal in both hands and then giggled, running for the door and out to the driveway where Camille’s truck sat. As I walked down the flagstone walkway, I noticed Olive hop in and pull the seatbelt across her chest, buckling in and grabbing the wheel with both hands.

“Oh, stop. You’re not bad luck.” Camille opened the passenger door of her Toyota Tacoma quad cab and then pulled open the backward-facing rear door. She clicked her seat belt as I sat next to Olive. She immediately connected the Bluetooth on her phone to the truck, carefully choosing a song. Once the music began to play, Olive twisted the ignition and backed up. A new energy settled all around us. Camille rubbed my shoulders for a second to the beat thumping through the speakers.

“Maybe we should turn off the noise and let Olive concentrate,” I said.

Camille’s massage turned into a playful karate chop. “Noise?”

If I hadn’t experienced it, I would have never known she was crying in our bathroom ten minutes before. She was recovering quicker each time, but part of me wondered if it was real, or if she was just getting better at hiding it.

Just as we pulled into Dad’s drive, I noticed thunderheads building in the sky just west of town. Thomas and Liis were flying in with their new baby sometime

soon, so I checked my phone for the seven-day forecast—something that wouldn't have occurred to me to do ten years ago. Funny how time and experience completely rewired your brain to think about something other than yourself.

Dad wasn't waiting on the porch as he usually was, prompting Camille to curse.

"Damn it, Jim Maddox!" she said, gesturing that she was in a rush for me to open the door. She scrambled out onto the grass, ran all the way to the porch, jumped the stairs, and yanked open the rickety screen door.

Olive parked and tossed me the keys, waving. "Going next door to tell Mom I'm having dinner with Papa!"

I nodded, feeling a small lump in my throat. All the grandkids called Dad Papa, and I loved that Olive did, too, even though she didn't know how right she was.

I followed Camille into the house, wondering what we would find. The paint on the porch was peeling, and I made a mental note to bring over my sander. The screen door was barely hanging on, so I added that to the list, too. Mom and Dad bought the house when they first married, and it was nearly impossible to get him to let us make changes or updates. The furniture and carpet were the same, even the paint. Mom had decorated, and he wasn't about to let anyone go against her wishes, even if she'd been gone for almost thirty years. Like Dad, the house was getting so old that it was becoming unhealthy and, in some cases, dangerous, so in the last few months, Camille and I had decided to start fixing things without asking.

Just as the hallway opened up into the kitchen, I saw Camille running toward Dad, her hands held out in front of her.

He was bent over, just putting the aluminum-covered potatoes into the oven.

"Dad!" Camille shrieked. "Let me do that!"

He slipped them in and closed the door, standing and turning to face us with a smile.

Camille pulled a pair of oven mitts out of the drawer, shoving them at him. "Why don't you use the mitts that I bought you?" She walked over, inspecting his bandaged hands.

He kissed her knuckles. "I'm fine, kiddo."

"You burned them so badly last time," she said, wiggling out of his grip to further inspect the wounds under his bandages. "Please use the mitts."

"Okay," he said, patting her hand. "Okay, sis. I'll use the mitts."

Camille began opening cabinet doors to find the oil, seeing that the drumsticks had already been dipped in Dad's special flour mixture and were sitting on paper towels next to the pan on the stove.

She waved us away. "Go on. I've got this. Yes, Dad, I'm sure," she said, just as Dad opened his mouth to ask.

He chuckled. "All right, then. Dominoes, it is."

"Aren't you sick of losing? We played dominoes for two hours this afternoon."

"Did we?" he asked. He shook his head. "I can't remember to wipe my own ass most days."

I blinked, surprised he didn't remember, but he didn't seem concerned.

"Cards, then?" he asked.

"No, we can play dominoes. I owe you a rematch, anyway."

Thunder rolled in the distance as we sat down at the table. The front door opened and closed, and then Olive appeared at the end of the hall, holding her hands out to each side, dripping wet. "Oh. My. God."

I burst into laughter. "Ever heard of an umbrella, Ew?"

She rolled her eyes, stomping over to sit on the dining chair next to me. "Will you ever stop calling me that? No one gets it."

"You get it," I said. "How hard can it be? Your initials are O.O. Together, they make the sound ew. Like moo. And too." My gaze drifted up to the ceiling. "Shoo. Boo. Coo. Goo. Poo. I could go on."

"Please don't," she said, grabbing a domino and turning it over in her thin fingers. It was getting harder and harder to impress her. She used to think I was god.

"Oh! Damn!" Camille yelped from the kitchen.

I pushed out my chair, standing halfway. "You okay, baby?"

"Yeah!" she called back, appearing with her jacket and her keys in hand. "Out of oil."

"But I just bought him some last Friday," I said, looking at Dad.

"Oh. That's right. I knocked it over Sunday."

I frowned. "We had sandwiches for lunch and pizza for dinner Sunday. You didn't make chicken."

He mirrored my expression. "Well, damn it, one of those days."

"I'm going to run to the store. You need anything else?" Camille asked.

"Cami, it's pouring," I said, unhappy.

"I'm aware," she said, kissing at me before heading out the door.

Dad brought down the dominoes from the shelf, and we made small talk. He asked me a few of the same questions he'd asked me earlier, and I began to wonder if he'd been forgetful all along and I was just noticing it, or if his memory was getting worse. He had a doctor's appointment that Friday. I'd bring it up then.

My cell phone buzzed. I pressed the receiver against my ear. "Hey, cunt puddle!"

"They just keep getting better," Thomas said on the other end of the line, unimpressed.

"Christ on a bicycle, Trenton," Dad fumed, nodding toward Olive.

I winked at him. Shocking him with my insults had become a sport.

"How are Mom and baby?" I asked.

"We're headed home," Thomas replied. "I think ... I think we're going to head that way earlier than expected."

"Everything okay?" I asked, noting that Dad's interest was piqued. I waved him away, assuring him nothing was wrong.

"Yeah ... yeah. Have you heard from Trav?" Thomas asked.

"No. Why?"

Thomas had been an enigma since I could remember, and the questions only multiplied when he became an adult.

Dad was staring at me, both patiently and impatiently waiting for an explanation. I held up my finger.

"Just curious."

"You're going to put a newborn on a plane? I knew you were brave, big brother, but hell."

"We thought Dad might like to meet her."

"He would. Dad would love to meet ..." My mind drew a blank.

"Stella," Olive whispered.

"Stella!" I repeated. "Dad would love to meet Stella." Dad popped me on the back of my head. "Ow! What'd I say?"

“So we’ll be in tomorrow,” Thomas said, ignoring the circus on the other end of the line.

“Tomorrow?” I said, looking at Dad. “That quick, huh?”

“Yeah. Tell Dad not to worry. We’ll get the room ready when we get there.”

“Cami has been keeping the guest room ready. She knew you’d be over some time with the baby. She even got a pack ‘n whatever.”

“She purchased a Pack ‘n Play for Stella? Really?” Thomas asked. “That was nice of her. How is sh ... that was nice of her.”

“Yeah,” I said, suddenly feeling awkward. “We’ll see you tomorrow, I guess.”

“Tell Dad I love him,” Thomas said.

“Will do, shit pouch.”

Thomas hung up, and I shot Dad a wide grin. The two lines between his eyes deepened.

“I should have spanked you more,” Dad said.

“Yes, you should have.” I looked down at the dominoes. “Well? They’re not going to shuffle themselves.”

I settled on a dining chair, the golden brown leather making fart noises under my jeans. Even though I’d moved out, Camille and I visited Dad at least once a day, usually more. Travis visited when he wasn’t traveling for work. I glanced up at the shelf that ran just below the ceiling, filled with dusty poker memorabilia and signed pictures of our favorite players. A few cobwebs had formed. I need to get up there and dust. Don’t want the old man falling and breaking a hip.

“Cami didn’t say anything about the test today,” Dad said, moving the dominoes around in a circle on the table.

“Yeah,” I said, staring at the white rectangular tiles as they slowly circulated around, under Dad’s hands, moving in and out of the pack. “It’s a monthly thing now. I think she’s tired of talking about it.”

“Understandable,” Dad said. He gave a side-glance to Olive, and I knew he was choosing his next words carefully. “Have you been to the doc?”

“Gross,” Olive said, disgusted despite his efforts. She wasn’t a little girl anymore.

“Not yet. I think she’s afraid to hear it’s something permanent. Honestly, so am I. At least now, we have hope.”

“There’s still hope. Even the worst circumstances have a silver lining. Life isn’t linear, son. Each choice we make or every influence branches off the line we’re currently on, and at the end of that branch is another branch. It’s just a series of blank slates, even after a disaster.”

I peeked up at him. “Is that how you felt after Mom died?”

Olive let out a tiny gasp.

Dad tensed, waiting a moment before speaking. “A while after Mom died. I think we all know I didn’t do much of anything right after.”

I touched his arm, and the tiles stopped spinning. “You did exactly what you could. If I lost Cami ...” I trailed off, the thought making me feel sick to my stomach. “I’m not sure how you survived it, Dad, much less got yourself together to raise five boys. And you did, you know. You got yourself together. You are a great dad.”

Dad cleared his throat, and the tiles began turning again. He paused just long enough to wipe a tear from beneath his glasses. “Well, I’m glad. You deserve it. You’re a great son.”

I patted his shoulder, and then we picked our bones from the boneyard and set them on their sides, facing away from each other. I had a shit hand.

“Really, Dad? Really?”

“Oh, quit your whining and play,” he said. He tried to sound stern, but his small grin betrayed him. “Wanna play, Olive?”

Olive shook her head. “No thank you, Papa,” she said, returning her attention to her phone.

“She’s probably playing dominoes on that thing,” Dad teased.

“Poker,” Olive snapped back.

Dad smiled.

I turned to look up at our last family portrait, taken just before Mom found out she was sick. Travis was barely three. “Do you still miss her? I mean ... like before?”

“Every day,” he said without hesitation.

“Remember when she used to do the tickle monster?” I asked.

The corners of Dad’s mouth turned up, and then his body began to shake with uncontrollable chuckles. “It was ridiculous. She wasn’t sure if she was an alien or a gorilla.”

“She was both,” I said.

“Chasing all five of you around the house, hunched over like a primate and making her hands into alien suction cups.”

“Then she’d catch us and eat our armpits.”

“Now, that’s love. You boys smelled like rotting carcasses on a good day.”

I laughed out loud. “It was the one time we could jump on the furniture and not get our asses beat.”

Dad scoffed. “She didn’t have to spank you. The look was enough.”

“Oh,” I said, remembering. “The look.” I shivered.

“Yeah. She made it look easy, but she had to put a healthy amount of fear into you first. She knew you were all going to be bigger than her one day.”

“Am I?” I asked. “Bigger than she was?”

“She was a bitty thing. Abby’s size. Maybe not even that tall.”

“Where did Travis’s gigantism come from, then? You and Uncle Jack are bloated chipmunks.”

Dad howled. His belly bobbled, making the table jiggle. My dominoes fell over, and I spat out a laugh, too, unable to hold it in. Olive covered her mouth, her shoulders shaking. Just as I began setting the dominoes back onto their edges, a car pulled into the drive. The gravel in the driveway crunched under a set of tires, and the engine shut off. A minute later, someone knocked on the door.

“I’ll get it,” Olive said, pushing her chair back.

“Oops,” I said, standing. “Cami’s back. Better help her with the groceries.”

“Atta boy,” Dad said with a nod and a wink.

I walked into the hall and froze. Olive was holding open the door, staring at me with a pale, worried expression. Behind her on the porch were two men in suits and soggy trench coats.

“Dad?” I called to the dining room.

“Actually,” one of the men said. “Are you Trenton Maddox?”

I swallowed. “Yeah?” Before either of them could speak, all the blood rushed from my face. I stumbled back. “Dad?” I called, this time frantic.

Dad put his hand on my shoulder. “What’s this?”

“Mr. Maddox,” one of the men said, nodding. “I’m Agent Blevins.”

“Agent?” I asked.

He continued. “We came with some unfortunate news.”

I lost my balance, falling with my back flat against the paneled wall. I slid down slowly. Olive went down with me, grabbing both my hands and bracing us for an alternate, painful reality. She held tight, anchoring me to the present, the moment in time just before everything would fall apart. I’d known in the pit of my stomach not to let Camille drive in the rain. I’d been feeling off for several days, knowing something bad was looming. “Don’t fucking say it,” I groaned.

Dad slowly kneeled at my side, placing his hand on my knee. “Now, hold on. Let’s hear what they have to say.” He looked up. “Is she okay?”

The agents didn’t answer, so I looked up, too. They had the same expression as Olive. My head fell forward. An explosion boiled inside me.

A sack fell and glass broke. “Oh, my God!”

“Cami!” Olive cried, releasing my hands.

I stared at her in disbelief, scrambling to my knees just before throwing my arms around her waist. Dad breathed out a sigh of relief.

“Is he okay?” Camille asked. She pulled away from me to look me over. “What happened?”

Olive stood and held on to Dad.

“I thought you ... they ...” I trailed off, still unable to complete a coherent sentence.

“You thought I what?” Camille asked, grabbing each side of my face. She looked at Dad and Olive.

“He thought they were here to inform us you’d ...” Dad peered at the agents. “What in the Sam Hill are you here for, then? What’s the unfortunate news?”

The agents glanced at each other, finally understanding my reaction. “We’re so sorry, sir. We’ve come to inform you about your brother. Agent Lindy requested the news be brought straight to you.”

“Agent Lindy?” I asked. “You mean Liis? What about my brother?”

Dad’s eyebrows pulled in. “Trenton ... call the twins home. Do it now.”

CHAPTER FIVE

TRAVIS

ABBY WAS STANDING AT A WINDOW near the front door of our French Provincial home, peeking out from behind the gray sheer curtains she'd picked five years before to replace the old ones she'd picked three years before that. So much more than just the curtains had changed in the last eleven years. Weddings, births, deaths, milestones, and truths.

We'd rejoiced in the birth of our twins and mourned Toto's death. He was the twins' personal bodyguard, following them everywhere and sleeping on the rug between first, their cribs and then, their toddler beds. The hair around his eyes began to gray, and then it was becoming harder for him to keep up. His was the second funeral I'd ever attended. We buried him in our backyard, the Bradford pear his headstone.

Just a few months before, on our eleventh anniversary, Abby had confessed to knowing I worked for the FBI. Swollen with our third child, she'd handed me a manila envelope full of dates, times, and other pertinent information between her father, Mick, and Benny, the mafia boss I'd just shot in the face for threatening my family.

Abby's SUV usually sat parked in front of my silver Dodge truck, but it was notably missing, and my wife wasn't happy about it. We'd traded in the Camry years ago for the black Toyota 4Runner Abby drove to her teaching job. She'd always been good at numbers, and she'd begun teaching the math lab for sixth grade almost right after graduation.

College seemed like a week ago. Instead of dorms and apartments, we had a mortgage against a two-story, four-bedroom home and two car payments. The Harley had been sold to a good home before the twins arrived. Life had happened when I wasn't looking, and suddenly, we were adults making decisions instead of living with someone else's.

Abby put a hand on her round middle, rocking back and forth to relieve some of the aching in her pelvis. "It's going to rain."

"Looks like it."

"You just washed the truck."

"I'll take yours." I smirked.

She glared at me. "Mine is totaled."

I pressed my lips together, trying to suppress a smile. My shoulder burned from where a bullet had grazed me and drove through my seat, and my head was

pounding from slamming into a tree on the side of the highway. I'd just begun to heal from the beating I'd taken beneath the streets of Vegas by Benny's men, and now, I had a fresh black eye and a one-inch vertical cut through my left eyebrow. I just happened to be driving Abby's SUV to pick up some ice cream, being a model husband while also using that time to get an update on Thomas from Val. The Carlisis thought I was in California, so they went there first, but Val said it was only a matter of time before they arrived in Eakins. That was when the first bullets shattered the passenger side window.

Abby was pissed, but she chose to be angry about the truck because she couldn't be mad about the situation. Anger was easier than fear. Even after I'd already eliminated the threat, I wanted to empty my clip into every single one of them when I saw the photos in the vehicle that had run me off the road. They had pictures of my wife, my kids, my nieces and nephews, my brothers and their wives. Even Shepley, America, their sons, and my aunt and uncle. They were planning to wipe out the Maddox family.

They chose the wrong family.

"They'll replace it," I said, trying to mask my growing anger.

"They can't replace you," she said, turning with her arms crossed and resting on her belly. "Are you going?"

"To meet Liis when she lands?"

"You should. She'll need to see your black eye and the cut on your eyebrow, to see the danger is real and has extended to the rest of the family," Abby said.

"I can't leave you here alone, Pidge." I sighed. "I didn't realize how much we'd used Lena until she left."

Abby shot me a knowing grin. "You miss her, don't you? She's the little sister you never had."

I smiled but didn't answer. Abby already knew that I did. Lena was a tiny thing, shorter than Abby. She was an exotic beauty, as deadly as she was stunning, handpicked by the Bureau to protect our children before they were born. Because my undercover position was atypical in that Benny knew who I was, where I lived, and that I had a family, the Bureau took extra precautions. Lena quickly fit in and was a huge help to a new mother with twin infants, especially when I was gone. She was like a little sister to Abby and me, and she loved to gang up on me with Abby. Like an aunt to the kids, she accompanied them to parks, nature walks, playing cars and Barbies, and teaching them Portuguese and Italian. She even taught them how to defend themselves, which we learned wasn't the best idea for

Jessica. I should've known no daughter of mine would be afraid to use her new knowledge if someone picked on her brother at school.

Eighteen months ago, Agent John Wren replaced Lena. Suddenly reassigned, we didn't know where she was going, just that she was nervous as she packed her things and was devastated that she didn't have time to say goodbye to the children.

"I'm not alone," Abby said, snapping me to the present. She gestured over her shoulder to the window.

I didn't need visual confirmation to know that Agent Wren was outside in a black car, along with two more agents in undisclosed locations. Now that we knew our entire family was a target, we had to be vigilant. The Carlisis weren't known for their patience; they typically attacked at the smallest sign of weakness.

Lena's sudden departure deeply affected the children. James began experiencing nightmares, and Jessica was depressed for months. Abby insisted we not put James and Jessica through that kind of anguish again, so the Bureau sent an agent we thought the kids wouldn't become attached to. The twins were old enough that it was unnecessary for our new security to be handpicked because of his rapport with children; rather, he was chosen for the fact he was classified as hyper lethal. To date, Wren was the only agent I'd met with that classification.

"I still feel bad that he has to sit outside in this heat," Abby said.

"His car is air conditioned, and you were right. The kids were getting attached ... and so was he."

As aloof as Wren was, the kids had grown on him. We were just as surprised as he was the first time Jessica nearly knocked him over with a hug. They beamed every day when they saw him sitting outside their school, and as each day passed, their acceptance of and love for him broke down his walls. As it turned out, that only made Wren more determined to keep them alive, a positive side-effect none of us saw coming. Abby wasn't happy about their growing attachment, though, so the rules changed. He had to keep his distance, and for a second time, the kids were heartbroken.

Abby nodded and turned away from the window, walking over to join me. She looked down at her stomach. "What do you think about Sutton?"

"You're talking names now? Sutton for a boy?" I asked, trying to keep my expression neutral. Pregnancy made my wife even more unpredictable than usual, but I just rolled with it. Pointing it out just made her cranky. Abby's gray eyes brightened, relishing in the truth I couldn't hide. "You don't like it? I know it doesn't start with a J like the twins, and that's kind of the Maddox thing, but ..."

My nose wrinkled. "It's not a Maddox thing."

"Taylor's are Hollis and Hadley," she said. "Shepley's: Ezra, Eli, Emerson. The T's? Diane and Deana? James and Jack? You're really going to deny it?"

"It's a regional thing."

"Your mom and aunt grew up in Oklahoma."

"See?" I said. "Regional."

Abby pressed her fingers into her back, waddling to the couch. She negotiated the space and her body, keeping the right balance as she lowered herself to the cushions. "Get this thing out of me," she groaned.

"Definitely not naming him this thing," I teased.

"Well," she began, breathing heavily. "We're going to have to name him something."

I thought for a moment. We'd been through four baby books twice. "Why not Carter?"

"Your middle name? I was actually trying to think of first names to go with Carter. If we made it his first name, what will his middle name be?"

I shrugged. "Travis."

"Carter Travis Maddox," she said, pausing to get comfortable. Even moving made her breathe hard. "You don't think that would be confusing to have a Travis Carter and a Carter Travis in the house?"

"No. Well, possibly, but I still like it."

"Me too."

"Yeah?" I beamed.

"Kind of goes along with our theme of naming the kids after us ... sort of. James after your dad. Jessica after me ... ish."

Jessica James was the name on Abby's fake ID. It was how she got into bars when we were freshman, but more importantly, how she gambled in Vegas. I remembered watching her in awe as she went head to head with gambling legends, hustling them for thousands, all to save her dad from being killed over an unpaid debt to Benny Carlisi. That trip to Vegas, fighting for the balance of what Abby didn't make, and the fire at Keaton Hall was the cosmic trifecta that landed us in our present situation. I was investigated for my involvement in a fire that had broken out on campus, resulting in the deaths of dozens of my classmates, and my brother just happened to be investigating Benny. When he learned my girlfriend was the daughter of a washed-up Vegas gambler who had ties to the Carlisi family,

I was brought into the federal fold in exchange for immunity from prosecution for the fire.

I was relieved that when Abby had figured out I'd been drafted into the FBI for most of our marriage and had lied to her about it, she'd helped me bring the Carlisi case closer to a conclusion instead of leaving me. I was able to hand over years of bank account statements, emails, letters, and text messages Abby had gathered by hacking into her father's email account and phone, all tying Carlisi members to various felonious crimes.

Abby thought that would mean I'd be home more. Instead, the Bureau was going a hundred miles per hour trying to close the case. Now that Benny was dead and they were hell-bent on vengeance, we were all racing against the clock.

Abby smiled, resting her head against the couch cushions. Her hair was shorter than it was in college. Her caramel locks now just grazed her shoulders. She combed back what she called side-swept bangs with her fingers, but they fell right back into her eye. Abby would turn thirty in September. As wise as she was at nineteen, she was nearly clairvoyant now. I was sure that only made her more dangerous, but she was on my side—thank Christ. Her gentle curves filled her maternity jeans, her cleavage bursting from her bright tank top, and I chuckled thinking about how many times I'd begged her to have another baby—shamelessly enjoying the changes her body went through to carry our sons and daughter.

"What?" she said, catching me staring at her tits ... again. Would I ever grow up? If it meant I had to stop appreciating how sexy my wife was, I hoped not.

I cleared my throat. "I'd like to meet Liis at the airport, but"—I looked at my watch—"you'll be leaving soon to pick up the kids."

"You should go." She sighed, struggling to lift her chest to get a full breath.

"No," I said, shaking my head.

"I can get the kids from school," she said. "Wren is here. He can drive us if you're nervous."

I frowned. "This needs to be over."

"And it will be," Abby said, standing. She walked over to me, sliding her hands under my biceps and locking them at the small of my back. She had to bend over slightly to nuzzle her head under my chin, pressing her cheek against my chest, but even her sweet touch couldn't cheer me up. We both knew the end of one case only meant the start of another. Abby was responsible for the break in her father's case. Mick Abernathy was a washed-up gambler who had an in with the Vegas mob. She had found out I was working for the Bureau and only wanted to help end a case that kept me away too much. Since handing over information that would put her

father and the underboss away, she was asked to be an occasional consultant for the FBI. They were still waiting for her answer, and so was I.

Her tip had allowed me to climb the ranks quickly. No legal employment in Eakins would pay what I was making with the Bureau. If Abby took the consultant job, she would be able to stay at home with the kids. Either way, we'd made a good life here.

"Dad is excited," Abby said, "to see Stella."

"It never gets old, I guess. No matter how many kids his sons keep spitting out, there's nothing like holdin' a grandbaby for the first time."

Abby wasn't amused. "I believe it's the daughter-in-laws who do the spitting."

I kissed her on the forehead. "Touché."

"You should go to the airport, Travis. I'll pick up the kids from school with Wren and meet you at Dad's. Thomas would have wanted you to."

My brows pulled together. Hearing Thomas's name in past tense was unsettling. "Make sure Wren stays out of sight. Dad already knows something's up."

"He knows, Trav. He's known. I'm pretty sure since the beginning. He knows about the twins, too."

"What about the twins?" I asked.

Abby simply giggled, shaking her head. "You Maddox boys are terrible liars."

My face twisted in disgust. "No one's lying." "Omission is lying," she insisted. "Making up cover stories is lying."

When I was recruited into the FBI at just twenty, I was also obligated to keep it from my wife. Unfortunately for the Bureau, Abby was too smart and stubborn to remain oblivious. Unfortunately for me, Dad was equally as sharp, and it was a full-time job to keep it from him. I wasn't sure how Thomas had been able to do it for over a decade. According to Abby, he hadn't. She was sure my father had known the entire time, too.

I kissed Abby's soft cheek, still smelling faintly of chocolate from the cocoa butter she slathered all over her skin the moment she'd started to show. That prompted me to kiss her again before heading out to my truck.

I used the small radio clipped to the lapel of my sports jacket to call Agent Wren. "Heading to the regional airport for pickup."

"I'm sure Agent Lindy will be happy to see a familiar face, sir." I sighed. "Maybe. Maybe not." I slipped behind the wheel, taking in a deep breath before twisting the key in the ignition. Liis had traveled halfway across the country with a

newborn. A funeral was the only reason she would risk it, especially knowing the mafia were committed to punishing her by targeting the only weakness Liis Lindy had: the people she loved. It wasn't enough anymore that she was surrounded by the Bureau. She needed the Maddox family now. She knew we would keep Stella safe.

I kept a tight grip on the steering wheel until the gates of the regional airport were in sight. No one had followed me. The security guard at the gate seemed alert but relaxed. I showed my ID, and he allowed me to continue. It was unlikely anyone in Vegas could have found out Liis was heading home to Illinois in enough time to beat her here.

As I pulled up to the terminal, I could see the Bureau's jet already parked near a county hangar. It was swarming with suits: men and women clearly armed and dangerous. The moment my truck rounded the corner, they were focused, ordering me to slow down, park my vehicle, and show my hands.

I did as they commanded, holding up my badge. Most of them knew who I was the moment I stepped onto the tarmac.

"Travis!" Liis called from behind a wall of men.

I jogged over to her, pushing agents to the side to get to my sister-in-law. Her red-rimmed eyes were puffy and tired. "Oh my God, your face," she said, gently touching my purple, swollen skin. Liis wasn't the most affectionate person, but she immediately melted into my arms. "You came," she said softly.

I placed my hand on the back of her long, dark hair and kissed the top of her head. "Damn right, I did."

"Abby?" she asked, looking up at me. "Everyone's all right? Nothing suspicious?"

"Everything is good. They're all waiting to help you with the baby."

"I haven't slept in three days," Liis said, her almond-shaped eyes staring up at me.

"I know," I said, holding her to my side as we walked toward the truck. "I know."