

## A Beautiful Funeral

### CHAPTER ONE

#### THOMAS

I SAT ON THE SMALL, cold loveseat in Liis's hospital room. The brown and blue color-blocked walls and minimalist décor reminded me more of an Aloft hotel than a maternity ward. My future wife looked cozy and beautiful, holding Stella's tiny, curled body against her chest in the same bed she'd birthed our daughter. For the first time in seventeen hours, I rested. My shoulders sagged, and I blew out a long puff of air. Little to no sleep had never bothered me, but watching the woman I loved more than anything suffer so much pain for that long had taken its toll.

Liis was visibly exhausted. I could see the purple half-moons under her eyes, and although she was the most beautiful I'd seen her, I felt torn between offering to take Stella and waiting for her to request it.

Stella was sleeping in her mother's arms just feet away. Seeing them serenely holding each other was both comforting and jarring. Stella was a new life that we'd created, a perfect combination of two people who had once been strangers. Now, she would have her own thoughts, feelings, and—because she's our daughter—strong opinions. I wondered about her entire life as she lay sleepily suckling at Liis's breast.

Finally, my impatience won out. "Liis," I began.

As if she knew, Stella stopped nursing, and her head fell back, her mouth open. Liis smiled and carefully positioned the baby onto her shoulder.

"I can do it," I said.

Liis smiled, patting Stella's tiny back gently and rubbing after every third tap or so. Stella's body jerked as an almost inaudible burp broke the silence of the dark hospital room.

My shoulders fell. Liis smiled, breathed out a quiet laugh, and then touched her lips to the dark, soft wisps of hair on Stella's head.

"You've got to give her up sometime," I said softly. I had held my daughter for just a few short minutes before they took her away to record her weight, measurements, and footprints. After that, they returned her to Liis for another half-hour before whisking her away for her first bath.

"It'll get easier, right? To share?" Liis asked, only half kidding.

"I hope not," I said with a tired grin. "I realize you just got her back, but I can change her and rock her back to sleep."

Liis thought about my offer and then nodded. Always the negotiator.

I stood up again, walking across the room to reclaim my daughter. As I carried our daughter to her clear bassinet, Liis's breathing evened out. Even her FBI personnel file had stated she'd always had a knack for grabbing shut-eye when she could, especially just a few hours before a raid. Her head fell to the side. She had sunk into oblivion just seconds after she'd finally agreed to let me take over.

Liis was most comfortable when in control, but as hard as she resisted, I knew she trusted me. I was the only one she would trust with her heart, especially now that it was living outside of her

body in the form of the perfect being who'd just completed our family. It had taken nearly ten years of hints and coaxing to get her to agree to even consider a proposal. Liis had been happily married to the Bureau, and until she learned Stella was on the way, she wasn't open to infidelity.

Stella gazed up at me, her blue eyes watching me with wonder. She'd woken up when I'd lifted her into my arms, and she scanned my face with curiosity while I cleaned her up and wrapped her in a dry diaper. Trying not to wrinkle my nose, I spoke to her tenderly while I swaddled her in a soft, ivory blanket, telling her how glad we were that she'd finally arrived. For a perfect being, Stella could certainly leave a disgusting mess.

She stretched her neck, and I smiled, cradling her in my bare arms. My sports jacket, white button-down, and tie were hanging over the recliner. A white undershirt and slacks weren't appropriate for the office, but taking care of someone smaller than I was made me feel eleven years old again, wiping faces and asses and everything in between, barely able to keep my own T-shirt and holey jeans clean. I couldn't wait to get home to shower and snuggle with my two favorite women in the world, wearing three days of scruff, gray sweatpants, and my favorite Rolling Stones T-shirt.

In the hall, I heard a short scuffle, and then a light commotion just outside the door. Whispered voices hissed, unhappy and persistent. I took a step to stand between Liis and the door and then turned, positioning my body between whoever was outside and my daughter.

A nurse pushed through, looking disheveled and a bit shaken.

"Everything okay?" I asked, remaining alert. From the corner of my eye, I could see that Liis was awake and ready to react.

"Um, sure," the nurse said, pausing when she noticed our posture. "Is everything okay in here?" "What was the noise outside?" Liis asked.

"Oh," the nurse said, pulling on a pair of gloves as she stood by Liis's bedside. "It's a fight to get into your room. Those agents outside don't play around."

Liis relaxed, and I walked over to the rocking recliner just a few feet away from her, pulling back Stella's blanket to check that she was fine.

"The director just wants me back at work ASAP," Liis said, settling back against her pillow.

"Not happening," I said.

In truth, if the director had his way, Liis would have given birth at the office. We were at the end of our largest case, and Liis was the most trusted translator and analyst at Quantico. I'd been the case lead for eleven years, which was more than half of my time in the Bureau. My youngest brother, Travis, had been undercover, but when the shit hit the fan and his wife was threatened, Travis executed Benny and a few of his men. Abby handed over all the info she had on her father, Mick—another one of Benny's pawns—getting us closer than we had ever been to finally wrapping up the case. Benny's underboss and eldest son, Angelo Carlisi, was just about to go down, and everyone wanted the investigation locked down tight.

Liis and I had spent hours in the director's office explaining to him our position on our new family. The risk was so much higher, making us all the more eager for a conclusion.

"I'll just bring her to work. The director can change diapers," Liis joked.

"He might take you up on that," I said with a smirk.

The nurse wasn't amused. "Is there a chance the agents could ... I don't know ... look at my face and remember it an hour later? The pat downs are getting old."

Liis and I traded glances but didn't respond. We understood her frustration, but more than just the director knew that Liis and I were responsible for bringing half of the Vegas organized crime families to justice. Benny's death had made everyone nervous. We were the FBI's top agents on the case with a baby on the way, and one of Benny's men was in custody and very close to testifying. They had already targeted us twice, so the Bureau wasn't taking any chances. We'd had agents shadowing our every move as soon as Liis's baby bump became prominent.

"Stella might as well get used to having two special agents for parents," I said, pushing off my toes. The rocker swept back and then forward, a gentle motion highlighted by something creaking with sleepy rhythm in the base of the chair. Memories of rocking Travis when he was a toddler, still in diapers, came to the forefront of my mind. His shaggy hair, chicken legs, and the sticky ring around his mouth—a telltale sign Grandpa had been over. He'd bring over five suckers in his pocket and always leave with one. Children ate candy, and Dad was passed out drunk in the bedroom while I was keeping the boys from playing in traffic. I'd stopped being a child when Mom died.

The nurse nodded, but I could see by her expression she still didn't understand. Before leaving, she glanced at Stella with pity reflecting in her eyes. I planted my feet on the floor, stopping the chair. Stella fussed, and I patted her back while deep in thought. Stella was loved before she was even born, a shiny new nursery and a full bookshelf waiting for her at home. That someone would feel sympathy for our daughter had never crossed my mind. We were fully capable of surviving whatever the Bureau put in our paths, but now I wondered how it would affect Stella.

"Did you call your dad?" Liis asked.

"Earlier."

"Everybody else?"

"I asked Dad to give it a day. I don't want to spend all day on the phone."

Liis sat back and closed her eyes. "I guess as an only child, I don't think about things like that," she murmured before drifting off.

I draped a thick cloth over my shoulder and then supported Stella's head while I positioned her against my chest. I pushed off on my feet again, and the recliner swayed back and forth. The rhythmic squeaking made my eyes feel heavier, and I noticed Liis breathing more deeply.

I touched my cheek to Stella's soft hair. She was so innocent and vulnerable, and Liis knew as well as I did just how much evil was in the world we'd brought her in to. It was our responsibility to keep her safe.

I looked over at my sleeping girlfriend and then over at my sports jacket that covered my shoulder holster. Two standard-issue Sig Sauer 9mms were snugly hidden away, ready for anything. I knew Liis had one tucked into Stella's baby bag, too. I swayed back and forth, resting my head and trying to let the tight muscles in my neck relax. Even after Stella had settled down and I had lain her in the bassinet, I couldn't stop my ears from cataloging every sound from the hall—the soda machine, the elevators, the nurses checking on patients in the other rooms. Babies crying, the agents murmuring, and the vent kicking on. Unlike Liis, even when I wanted to sleep, I couldn't.

I reached for Liis's pitcher of water and poured myself a cup. I would sleep when she woke. Too much was at stake. Not even the agents outside would protect Stella as fiercely, so one of us had to be awake at all times.

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Raindrops spattered against the window as I triple checked the baby's bag and readied the car seat while Liis signed the discharge papers. The nurse watched us with careful curiosity, likely hearing gossip about the armed agents standing guard outside our room all night and the fresh pair of agents assigned to escort us home that morning.

Liis cradled Stella in one arm while signing the various documents. She'd been a mother for less than forty-eight hours and was already an expert. I smiled at her until she motioned for me to take Stella. I walked over, trying not to show my excitement at my turn to hold the tiny, soft human we'd created.

I lifted Stella into my arms and then walked the few steps to the car seat that sat on the floor. "Shit," I hissed, trying to maneuver the baby under the handlebar and into the small space like a puzzle piece. Stella didn't stir while I struggled with the five-point harness and fussed over the padding that covered the shoulder straps and the pillow around her head.

"Thomas," Liis said with a small laugh. "It's perfect. If she wasn't comfortable, she would tell you."

"You sure?" I asked, glancing back at Liis. With every milestone of our relationship, I continued to be in awe that just when I thought she couldn't be more beautiful, she was. The day we moved in together in San Diego, the day she told me we were having Stella, the day I finally moved to Virginia, and every day I noticed her belly was a little bit rounder and her cheeks a little fuller—I felt like a con for somehow misleading her into marrying me. While she labored, and then when she gave birth, and now, sitting up and looking tired but gloriously happy in the morning sun, the mother of my child was once again the most beautiful I'd ever seen her.

Liis breathed out a laugh. "What?"

"You know what." I stood, carefully bringing the car seat with me. "Ready?"

Once Liis nodded, the nurse pushed the wheelchair next to her bed. Liis stood, unhappy about being fussed over while she moved over to her next mode of transport, but it was hospital policy, and Liis had always liked to pick her battles.

Wearing a blue button-down and gray maternity pants, Liis let the nurse push her toward the door. I opened it and nodded to the agents, Brubaker and Hyde.

Liis couldn't restrain her smug smile, recognizing both agents were female. "You know what I'm thinking, right?" she asked me.

"That women are better drivers and better with a gun, so you're happy about our escorts?"

"Correct," Liis said.

Brubaker smiled too.

After I secured Stella into her car seat and helped Liis into the backseat of our Suburban, I slid behind the wheel, signaling to the agents to move forward. Brubaker was ahead of us in a black

Tahoe, and Hyde was behind in an identical vehicle. I rolled my eyes. “Are they trying to announce our exit, or do they think the mafia is stupid?”

“I don’t know,” Liis said, leaning forward to see into the side mirror.

“All clear?” I asked.

“So far.”

“What is it?” I asked, seeing the concern in Liis’s eyes.

“I don’t know that yet, either.”

I reached back to pat her knee. “It’s going to be okay, Mommy.”

She craned her neck. “Please let’s not be that couple who calls each other Daddy and Mommy.”

I frowned. “How else will Stella learn what to call us?”

Liis sighed, a rare concession. “Fine. Just ... only do it around her, but not in public.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said with an amused grin.

Liis leaned back, appearing relaxed, but I knew better. She continued to periodically lean over to glance in the rearview mirror and then down at Stella.

“How’s she doing?” I asked.

“We need one of those mirrors that sits above the car seat so you can see her in the rearview,” Liis said. “What if one of us is in the car with her alone? We’ll need some way to check on her.”

“Making a mental note now,” I assured her.

She closed her eyes for half a second before they popped open again to look at the side mirror. She gave it a second glance and instantly metamorphosed from tired new mother to FBI agent. “White sedan, four back. Left lane.”

I glanced back. “Got it.” I touched the radio on my lapel. “We’ve got a tail. White sedan. Left lane.”

“Copy that,” Hyde said.

Brubaker radioed in, and we barely drove two miles before receiving word that more vehicles were on the way. Just before they arrived on-scene, the sedan took an exit.

“Make sure someone follows,” Liis said.

“Don’t worry,” I said, trying to remain calm. “They’re all over it.”

Liis swallowed, struggling to keep her cool. Being parents was an added security issue we couldn’t plan for. I knew part of her wanted to follow the sedan, to catch them and question them, and lock them away from our fragile new family. As urgent as her commitment was to being an agent, her need to protect our daughter was stronger.

We drove the remaining fifteen minutes home without event but were unable to enjoy our trip with our new addition as other new parents would. As we unhitched the car seat, the agents stood guard. Hyde and Brubaker glanced around, occasionally speaking into the small radios in their ears while Liis and I took our daughter to the porch. We waved to the neighbors and then walked

up the stairs to the front door. Under the shade of the porch, I dug for my keys and then touched one to the lock.

Hyde gently touched my forearm. "Sir, I'd like to take a look around first, if you don't mind."

"Of course," I said, stepping aside.

Just two days ago, I would have been the one to sweep the house. I would have left Liis with the agents while I checked each room, closet, behind every door, and under every bed before I let my pregnant girlfriend enter. But now, my place was to stand next to her, protecting our daughter. Everything had changed in less than forty-eight hours.

Hyde unlocked the door and then drew her weapon. She held her Glock like it was an extension of her arm, walking through the front room so stealthily I couldn't hear her footsteps.

"Was I that good?" Liis asked.

"Better," I said.

"Don't bullshit me, Maddox."

"Never, Agent Lindy."

After a few minutes, Hyde returned, holstering her sidearm. "All clear, sir."

"Thank you," I said, following Liis inside.

Liis took a deep breath as she crossed the threshold, already feeling more at ease. I carried Stella's car seat into the nursery, setting it gently on the floor. Liis had decorated in grays, blue-grays, tans, and coral with not a bow or ballerina in sight. Liis was determined to keep Stella as gender-neutral as possible, even before she was born. An ivory upholstered rocking chair was in the corner next to the crib, a square pillow of a fox outlined in blue in the center.

I unbuckled Stella, lifted her limp body into my arms, and then lay her on her back in the crib. She looked so tiny within the walls of her brand-new bed.

Everything was new—the carpet, the Santa Fe-style rug, the five-by-seven portrait of a cartoon fox on the side table, the curtains, the paint on the walls. Until that moment, the room had been beautiful and pristine but empty. Now, it was filled with our love for the brand-new baby for whom the room belonged.

After staring at Stella for a moment, Liis and I traded glances.

"Now what?" she whispered.

I adjusted the nursery camera and signaled for Liis to follow me out into the hall. I shrugged.

She shrugged too. "What does"—she shrugged again—"this mean?"

"It means I don't know. I was expecting chaos and crying when we got home. You know ... all the horrible things you see in the movies."

Liis smiled and leaned against the doorjamb. "She's perfect, isn't she?"

"I'll reserve judgment until two o'clock this morning, or the first time she shits in my hand."

Liis playfully elbowed me. I kissed her temple.

"I think I'll lie down for a bit," Liis said, reaching for the monitor.

I swiped it off the dresser first. "I've got it. You rest."

She pushed up on the balls of her feet, kissed the corner of my mouth, and then touched my cheek. "I'm so happy, Thomas. I never thought I could feel like this. It's hard to explain."

I smiled down at her. "You don't have to. I know just how you feel."

Liis ambled down the hall to our bedroom, leaving the door cracked open about three inches.

I chuckled to myself as I headed to the kitchen, opening the dishwasher to unload the dishes Liis had just started when her water broke.

My cell phone buzzed in my pants pocket, and I fished it out, holding it to my ear. "Maddox." I listened, walked over to the window, and moved the curtains to the side. My heart sank.

"You're not serious," I said. I listened as the director gave me instructions that made my blood run cold. "The plan is to let them shoot at me?"

"They've already taken a shot at Travis."

"What? Is he okay?" I asked, the hairs on the back of my neck standing on end.

"Just grazed his shoulder and he's a little banged up. They ran his car off the road." The director cleared his throat, uncomfortable having to say his next words. "It was meant for Abby."

I swallowed the bile that rose in my throat. "How do you know?"

"Travis was driving her SUV. Surveillance of all soft targets was in the shooter's vehicle, including Abby."

"By soft targets, you mean ..."

"The members of your family, Thomas. I'm very sorry."

I blew out a breath, trying to remain calm. If they had surveillance photos, the Carlisis had Travis figured out for a while. They'd been watching my family; close enough to photograph. That explained Travis's interrogation in Vegas. What we thought was Travis somehow blowing his cover leading to an impromptu kidnapping and beating while they tried to get more intel was actually planned. "Have they been located?"

The director paused. "Travis's SUV hit a tree at a high rate of speed. They came back to finish it, but they didn't walk away. The Carlisi family is now three made men down. Bobby the Fish. Nikko the Mule. Vito Carlisi."

"Benny's son. That means the Carlisis only have two possible successors left." Benny had seven children but only three sons. The oldest, Angelo, was the underboss, with the other two in line for the job. Benny was old school, and he'd passed onto his children and his crime family that only men could inherit his illicit empire. I was hopeful that if their attempts left them without a Carlisi underboss, everything Benny built would fall apart.

"Travis took care of it," the director said.

"Of course, he did." My muscles relaxed. What could have been a huge clusterfuck was actually falling in our favor. I should have known. Once someone takes a swing at Travis, he always made sure they wouldn't do it again. Even if they were three of the Carlisi family's best hitmen.

“The youngest of the Carlisi boys, Vincenzo, and two soldiers have been traced to a silver Nissan Altima. They’re headed your way now. They are likely aware of Vito’s death by now.”

“Coming here? Now?” I asked, looking back toward Stella’s nursery. “What about stray bullets? Ricochets? We’re going to let them do a drive-by in front of my home with my wife and daughter inside? This seems sloppy, sir.”

“Can you think of another plan in the next eight minutes?”

I frowned. “No, sir.”

“Hyde will have Liis and Stella secured in the back of the home with vests. This is our one chance. It’s up to you, of course, but—”

“Understood, sir.”

“You’re sure?”

“You’re right. It has to happen this way. It’ll buy us time.”

“Thank you, Agent Maddox.”

“Thank you, Director.”

The bedroom door cracked open, and from my peripheral, I could see Liis leaning against the doorjamb, holding her cell phone to her ear. They had called her, too.

“But we just ... they can’t possibly know—” She sighed. “I understand. Of course, and I agree, but ... yes, sir. I understand, sir.” She looked at me with tears in her eyes, clearing her throat before speaking again. “Consider it done, sir.”

The phone fell from her hand to the floor, and her eyes lost focus. I rushed across the room to cradle her in my arms. I meant to be gentle, but I knew I was holding her too tight.

“I can’t believe this is happening,” she said, her voice muffled against my chest. Her fingers dug into my back.

“If there was any other way,” I began.

“Travis is okay?” she asked. She had already been briefed, I was sure, but she needed to hear it from me. I wouldn’t sugarcoat it just because she was a new mother, and she knew it.

“He’s a little banged up. They’re three goons short.”

She breathed out a laugh and then lifted her chin, her eyes wide and glossing over with realization. “I’m going to have to tell them, aren’t I? It will have to be me.”

I hesitated, conflicted feelings swirling inside me. I didn’t want to put her through that. My eyebrows pulled in. “The Carlisis will just send more, Liis. I know it’s a long shot ... but you have to.”

She shook her head. “I can’t. I ...”

I clenched my teeth, trying to keep it together and stay strong for her. I cupped her jaw in my hands. “It’ll be okay. You can do it.”

Her chest caved, and she puffed out a breath. “How can I do that to them?” She touched her forehead, shaking her head in disbelief.



“We do what we have to do. Like we always have.”

Liis glanced back toward the nursery. “But this time, even more is at stake.”

I checked my watch and sighed. “I have to pack and make some calls.”

She pressed her lips together and nodded. “I’ll help you.”

Stella began to fuss, and I nearly lost it. “This is too much. This isn’t right, leaving you alone with her. She’s barely a day old, and you here, alone ...”

She hugged me. “I won’t be alone.”

I squeezed my arms around her, breathing in her hair, memorizing the softness of her skin. “I can’t ... I can’t tell her goodbye,” I said. I’d had my heart broken more than once, but this was torture. I was already in love with the tiny girl in the crib, and leaving her would be the hardest thing I would ever do.

“So don’t.”

I nodded and then crept into the nursery, watching Stella breathe easily, swaddled and happily dreaming of whatever newborns dreamed of—Liis’s heartbeat; my muffled voice. I leaned down and pressed my lips to her thick, dark hair. “I’ll see you soon, my love. Daddy loves you.”

I walked across the room and reached down for my vest, slipping it on as she watched with a pained expression, then I stuffed some clothes and toiletries into a bag and raised my phone, tapping out Trenton’s number. I tried to keep my voice casual while telling him to expect us sooner than originally planned. In less than five minutes, I’d done everything I could do to prepare.

“Who’s out there?” Liis asked when I hung up with Trenton.

“Dustin Johns and Canton,” I said, putting on a light jacket.

“Brent Canton?” she confirmed. When I nodded, she sighed, relieved. They were the best snipers in the Bureau.

“They’d better not miss,” she snapped.

“They won’t,” I said. I hoped not. I was putting my life in their hands. I took Liis into my arms, holding her tight, and then pressed my lips against hers, hoping it wasn’t for the last time. “I’m going to ask you to marry me when we see each other again, and this time, you’re going to say yes.”

“Make sure we see each other again,” she said.

Hyde opened the front door. “Thirty seconds, sir.”

I nodded to her, grabbed my car keys, and glanced back at Liis, taking one last look before closing the door behind me.