

CHAPTER SIX

SHEPLEY

I HELD OUT MY HANDS in front of me. “Stop! No! Don’t do it!”

My sons stared back at me with their mom’s no-bullshit, round, sapphire eyes, ice cream cones in hand. Ezra, Eli, and Emerson were all standing on our porch, their faces as filthy as their shirts. Their mom would freak if they went inside like that, and they knew it. I’d taken them out in the first place to give her some quiet time to clean the house the way she wanted without one of our little monsters messing it up behind her. If I let them in covered in milky, sticky goo, America would kill us all.

“Guys,” I said, still holding up my hands, “I’m getting the hose. Don’t. Move. Mom is in there. Do you know what she’ll do if you step foot inside the house?”

Eli looked at Emerson with his trademark evil grin.

“I mean it,” I said, pointing at them. They giggled as I took the three steps from the porch to the sidewalk and then veered off into the grass toward the side yard to find the spigot.

America and I were both only children, and we knew we wanted more than one, and close together. By the time we’d had Emerson, we’d decided we were in way over our heads. Ezra was just a month older than Travis and Abby’s twins. Eli came two years later. Emerson two more after that. Unlike Travis and Taylor’s sons, mine were all quick to throw a punch, taller than every kid in their perspective grades, and unmistakably Maddox mean. Good thing I’d had some experience with that.

I grabbed the nozzle and pulled it from the retractable hose reel, unraveling it as I walked toward the porch. As soon as I rounded the corner, I dropped the hose and ran. The door was wide open, and the boys were gone.

“Damn it!” I growled, running toward the sound of America’s shrieking.

She was in the kitchen, already moving at warp speed. Emerson was sitting on the counter with his bare feet in the sink under running water while she was temporarily blinding Eli by yanking a shirt over his head. She was already threatening Ezra.

“If you move, so help me God!” she warned.

“Yes, ma’am,” Ezra said, standing uncharacteristically still next to the refrigerator.

The boys weren’t great at listening to me, but none of them dared to test their momma when she’d had enough. She wasn’t afraid to let us know when we were close to crossing that line, either.

“I’m sorry, honey,” I said, grabbing several rags from a drawer.

America was in the zone, far away from me. There was no time for meaningless apologies—or her acceptance of them. She was concentrating on the next thing that had to be done. By the time we’d wiped the last of the melted white mess from their mouths and hands, the boys were already running at turbo speed to their rooms, and America was sitting on the floor looking spent.

“God bless Diane for keeping your cousins alive for as long as she did,” America said.

I sat beside her, resting my forearms on my bent knees. “House looks good.”

“For the moment,” she said, leaning over to kiss me. “Still questioning our decision to remodel before they leave for college.”

I chuckled, but that faded as I pushed up to stand, bringing my wife with me. We both groaned, our aging bones just beginning to show signs of three decades of wear and tear. We’d spent a lot of time on that kitchen floor, making meals, making babies, and then on our hands and knees replacing the linoleum with updated tile. The popcorn ceilings scraped, granite countertops and new carpeting or tile installed throughout, every room but the boys’ painted Tony Taupe, lighting updated, and hardware replaced. The only things untouched were the oak wood cabinets and trim. Our house was nearly as old as we were, but America liked character and turning old into new rather than living in a space that didn’t need us.

Emerson ran in and hugged America. “Love you, Mom.” He darted off just as fast as he’d appeared, and she held out her shirt, revealing a white smear.

“We missed a spot,” she said, exasperated. “I wonder how many more spots we missed. We should do a second sweep.”

“He loves you, Mom. They all do.”

America’s eyes softened as she looked to me. “That’s why I let them live.”

From the moment two lines appeared on the pregnancy test, America was in love: more than she loved her parents, more than she loved Abby — more than she loved me. She made no apologies for putting the boys first, even before herself. When America took it upon herself to help me wrangle my roommate and cousin, Travis, neither one of us knew she was practicing to be a Maddox boys’ mother herself. The way she commanded their respect and retained her soft maternal side reminded me of my Aunt Diane almost daily.

“Summer camp?” I asked. I was a football scout for the Chicago Bears and traveled for a good chunk of the year. America was a saint. She never complained and never resented me for being on the road, or continuing in a job I loved, even if it meant a lot of lonely nights and solo parenting. Even if she had, I’d still think she was a saint. Sometimes, I wished that she would.

“Oh, yes. Fishing, camping, and starting fires. They can’t wait. We still have insurance, right?”

“Right.”

America sighed, intertwining her fingers in mine. Covered in cleaner, fingers pruney, and with a dust bunny hanging from her blond ponytail, she was stunningly beautiful. I felt a pang in the pit of my stomach. “I love you,” she said, and I fell in love all over again.

I opened my mouth to respond, but my phone rang. I rolled my eyes and then used my index finger and thumb like tweezers to pull it from the front pocket of my khaki pants. “Hello?”

“Hey, Shep. It’s, uh ... it’s Trent. Are you home?”

“We’re home. What’s up?”

“You should come over.”

I paused, not expecting his answer. “N-now?”

“Now,” Trenton said without hesitation.

I shifted my weight from one foot to the other, already uneasy. “Is it Jim?” As expected, my question caught America’s attention. “Is he okay?”

“He’s okay. We just need you to come over.”

“Sure,” I said, trying to keep the worry from my voice. I knew Jim had been off lately, and I imagined that he might have gotten bad news from the doctor. “We’ll be there in twenty.”

“Thanks, Shep,” Trenton said before hanging up the phone.

“Jim?” America asked.

I put my phone away and shrugged. “I don’t know. They want us to come over.”

“Sounds urgent,” she said, watching my face for clues.

“I honestly don’t know, honey. Let’s just herd the boys toward the car. Twenty minutes is optimistic by anyone’s standards.”

“I can do it,” she said, walking toward the hall. “Boys! Car! Now!”

I watched her disappear into Eli and Emerson’s room and then searched for my keys and phone for a full minute before realizing they were both in my pockets. I cursed under my breath all the way to Ezra’s room, and then encouraged him to put on his Chuck Taylors so we could go. I knew for a fact America had started cleaning their rooms before even thinking about the rest of the house, and Ezra’s floor was already covered with clothes, toys, and ...

“Rocks? Really?” I asked.

“Got them from James. He won them in a poker game.”

I subdued a smile, knowing exactly where James got his hustling skills from. “Tie your laces. C’mon, buddy, we gotta go.”

“Where?” Ezra asked in his mini-man voice. He reminded me of Thomas, always needing to know the details.

“To Papa Jim’s,” I said.

Travis and Abby’s twins had come a little early, making James and Jessica just a month younger than Ezra. Even without the influence of Travis’s kids referring to him as Papa, my kids would’ve still considered Jim their other grandpa.

“Yessss!” Ezra hissed, slipping on his Chucks without tying them and running for the door.

“Tie your shoes, Ezra! Ezra!” I called after him.

America was already standing next to the car just inside the open back door, reaching over Eli to buckle Emerson into his car seat. Ezra slid in on the other side, his laces dangling. America simply nodded to his feet, and his knee was bent, following orders.

“How?” I said, walking to my side.

“They know exactly what they can get away with,” she said, pulling open the passenger side door. She clicked her seat belt and then leaned back, taking the precious few minutes we had in the car with the kids strapped down to relax. I barely heard her next words over the engine igniting. “Every kid has a currency, love. They also know I will annihilate theirs.”

I chuckled, knowing full well she was serious. I’d seen many a toy plane and racecar bagged up and taken to charity or stored until the boys earned it back. America was militant at times, but she was right. One day, they would be bigger than she was, and it was important for her to establish respect before that happened. As I drove to Jim’s, I thought about what it would be like if Diane had been around to raise my cousins. Everything America did as a mother was exactly the way I pictured my aunt. I wasn’t sure how an only daughter kept a handle on a brood of rowdy Maddox boys, but from the moment she pushed Ezra into the world, she somehow always knew when to be soft and when to be tough.

I pushed down the blinker, waiting for oncoming traffic before turning left into Jim’s drive. The two gravel slits on each side of a runway of freshly mowed grass sat on the left side of Jim’s house and ran deep, past the backside of the house. So many cars were already parked, the ass of my minivan hung out into the street more than two feet. Good thing the parked car in front of Jim’s house would keep the flow of traffic away from the van.

“What the hell?” America said.

“Mom,” Ezra scolded. “Don’t say hell.”

“You don’t say hell,” America said back.

“You first.”

She turned slowly, shooting him a death glare. He sank back into his seat, already afraid for his life.

No one was waiting for us on the porch. Something was wrong. I unfastened Eli and Emerson and kept pace with America as she led Ezra by the hand to the front door. I knocked twice and then opened the screen door, making a mental note to come by and fix it before it fell off its hinges. Trenton and Camille had been busy trying to get pregnant, and Travis had just come home from working out of town. I pitched in to help when and where I could.

America took my hand, just as wary about what we were walking into as I was. Except for quiet murmuring in the kitchen, the house was quiet — strange with that many people in the house.

“Hey,” I said when Trenton came into view. He looked like shit, and I could see that both he and Camille had been crying. Travis and Abby were leaning against the counters next to the fridge, watching Trenton tell me whatever news I’d come to learn. “Where’s Jim?” I asked.

He hugged me quickly. “Thanks for coming so fast.”

“Trenton,” I said. “Tell me what’s going on.”

“It’s Tommy,” he said, his voice ragged.

“Oh, God. The baby?” America asked.

My stomach sank. Stella was only a couple of days old.

“No” — Trenton shook his head — “no, she’s fine. Super healthy.” He looked down at the boys. “James and Jess are upstairs. Why don’t you guys go find ‘em?”

All three boys took off, and America grabbed my arm with both hands, bracing us both for what Trenton might say.

“Tommy was shot outside his house earlier. Just after they brought Stella home.”

“Shot?” I said, feeling dizzy. All the air had been sucked out of the room while I tried to process his words. “But he’s okay?”

Trenton’s face fell. “It’s bad, Shep.”

I was getting angry, and I wasn’t sure why. “Like a drive-by or ...?”

“We’re not exactly sure. The agents have been instructed to wait for Liis before giving any more info,” Trenton said.

America’s nose wrinkled. “Agents?”

Trenton gestured over his shoulder to the men in suits sitting at the dining table. “FBI.”

I leaned over to get a better look and then stood back upright. “What are FBI agents doing here?”

“We’re not sure about that, either. I think it has something to do with who shot Tommy. Maybe they’re on the Ten Most Wanted or something.”

“But why wouldn’t they give you more information? Have they asked you any questions?” America asked.

“No,” Trenton said.

America approached Abby, whose entire body looked swollen, even her nose. “You don’t find this situation odd? Where’s Travis?”

Abby touched America’s arm, giving her an unspoken signal to be patient.

“It’s going to be okay, Mare,” Abby said. “He went to pick up Liis from the airport.”

“Liis is here? Why isn’t she with Thomas?” I asked.

Before Abby could answer, Jim hobbled in from the living room.

“Uncle Jim,” I said, hugging him.

He patted my back. “Just waiting to hear something.” When he pulled away, he looked weary and heartbroken, as if he already knew what was coming.

“Can I get you something, Dad?” Abby asked.

“Just getting some coffee,” Jim said.

“I’ll get it,” Camille said. “You should both be resting.” She meant Abby and Jim, but I felt like sitting down myself.

“She’s right. Put your feet up,” America said.

As America walked past me, leading Abby to the living room by the hand, I noticed the absence of the same fear and devastation that was weighing down the faces of everyone else in the room—everyone but Abby. Normally, she would be interrogating those agents until she got answers.

America nodded, a glimmer of understanding in her eyes. I wondered what she knew that I didn’t. The boys screamed, and America rushed to the bottom of the stairs, looking up as she yelled, “Any blood?”

“No ma’am!” all three called back in unison.

Camille smiled and filled a glass with ice and water, handing it to Dad before escorting him back to his chair.

“This doesn’t look like coffee,” Dad said with a smirk.

“I know,” Camille said.

America and I joined everyone but Trenton in the living room. He was in the hall on the phone, trying to reach the twins in Colorado. America sat on the couch, and I settled in on the floor between her legs, trying not to groan when she began rubbing her thumbs in circles over my shoulders.

Trenton walked in, holding his phone in the air. “Twins got a flight for the morning. I’ll pick them up.”

“I’ll follow you in the van,” I said.

America’s fingers pressed into my sore muscles even further. “When do we find out more about Thomas?” she asked.

“Soon,” Abby said.

America shot her a look. Something was up, and my wife never appreciated being kept out of the loop. I thought that when Travis and Abby eloped, America would strangle them both. Apparently, they hadn’t learned their lesson.

The front door opened and closed, and Travis walked around the corner, loosening his tie. He’d gotten a job with Thomas’s advertising firm. It was based in California, and the story was that he was taking over for Thomas since he’d moved out to manage their East Coast office, but Travis somehow managed to stay in Eakins. None of it made much sense, but I hadn’t thought to question them until now. America and I had been busy with our own family. It’d been far too easy to overlook things.

I stood, hugging Travis. “You okay? Is that a fresh black eye?”

Travis grimaced. “I totaled the SUV.”

“Where’s Liis?” I asked.

“Her friend Val took her to get diapers and such,” he said, looking tired.

“Can someone answer the fucking question?” America blurted out. “Why is Liis here without her husband?”

“Mare,” Abby warned.

Camille brought Dad a steaming mug, and his eyes lit up for a few seconds.

“Decaf,” Camille said.

“Why are we here, Abby?” America demanded.

“To keep you safe,” she blurted out. “To keep us all safe.”

“From what?” I asked.

Travis shifted. “From whoever shot Thomas.”

I looked up at my wife. Her mouth hung open a bit, and she’d stopped rubbing my shoulders.

“What the fuck does that mean?” Trenton asked, reaching for Camille’s hand. She took it, looking just as stunned and worried as America did.

“It means ...” Jim began, taking a deep breath. “The FBI are here, and they seem to think whatever happened to Thomas wasn’t an accident. Now ... everyone, just calm down. You’re safe here. The kids are safe. When Taylor and Tyler get here, they’ll be safe too.”

“So that’s the plan?” Camille asked. “To hole up here like a safe house?”

“Do they really think someone is targeting our family?” Trenton asked. “Why?”

Travis seemed irritated with each question. “It’s possible.”

“The whole family?” Trenton asked.

“Possibly,” Travis responded.

“Olive,” Trenton said, running down the hall and out the door.

CHAPTER SEVEN

LIIS

24 HOURS EARLIER ...

I SAT IN A SEEDY HOTEL ROOM, judging the peeling white paint and outdated furniture. I’d stayed in a lot of shithole places during my time with the FBI but never with a newborn. I’d been holding her since we’d arrived, too nervous to set her down before scouring the room with a black light.

After a short knock, Agent Hyde cracked open the door. “It’s me.”

“Come in,” I said, half relieved, half annoyed. She’d come emptyhanded when I’d specifically asked for clean sheets, pillows, blankets—not from the motel—rags, and Lysol—and a lot of it.

"I know what you're thinking," Hyde said. Her dishwater blond hair was pulled back and secured at the nape of her neck. She was Quantico's top female agent after me. I was glad she was there, but she wasn't exactly the warm and fuzzy type. I wanted to be tough, buttoned-down, and unfazed, too, but it was hard to keep up that persona with my nursing bra unsnapped and smelling of baby vomit.

"You don't have a clue what I'm thinking," I said.

"It's all on its way."

Maybe she does. "It'd better be. He knows I hate D.C., and this motel is atrocious."

"Talking about taking one for the team." When Hyde saw my expression, she swallowed. "Sorry, Agent Lindy. Bad joke. But after what happened to Salvatore Cattone in the nineties, the mob isn't going to come anywhere near D.C. This is the safest place for you."

"A bacteria breeding semen storage facility?" I asked. Hyde wasn't fazed, and she didn't respond. I looked up and sighed. "How is he?"

She only offered one word. "Sore."

I looked down, angry that my hormone levels were changing too dramatically to control. Tears streamed down the bridge of my nose, dripping from the tip onto Stella's pink and brown polka-dotted footie pajamas. Just a few days before, the crying had been foreign to me. Now, it was all I could seem to do.

The Bureau had just fifteen minutes' warning that the Carlisis had split up and were closing in. They had traveled with the intention of assassinating Thomas and Travis. One small group had been traced to Quantico, the other to California. Travis's hitmen had bad intel, something that had been planted and circulated back in his undercover days when he was just an ad exec to the rest of the world, but it was only a matter of time until they tracked him to Illinois.

Fifteen minutes to form the plan that Thomas would risk being assassinated in our front lawn. Snipers were in place when the car came screeching down the road. As they sprayed the front of our house with bullets, one sniper blew the back of the rented Nissan Altima's tire, and another targeted Thomas's vest. My husband went down, and he stayed there until the ambulance arrived. The Nissan sped away, caught after a twenty-minute car chase. The agents in pursuit finally tackled them after they'd fled on foot. Vito Carlisi pulled a gun, and he was shot and killed. The others were arrested. Thomas couldn't have executed a more perfect plan.

I could still feel his lips on mine from just before he walked out the front door. I'd kissed him goodbye, not knowing if it was real or not, or for how long. Possibly forever. But Benny was dead, and we'd finally cornered one of his men to testify against the remaining Carlisis: a washed-up Vegas gambler who was now shaking down small-time strip clubs for Benny, who happened to be Abby Maddox's estranged father. Mick Abernathy was now in custody. Abby had handed over a six-inch stack of intel on her own father, giving him no choice but to testify against the remaining Carlisis. We knew they wouldn't stop without blood. It was our hope that Benny's men would believe Thomas's death would serve as a warning and keep Travis or me from testifying.

I could have planned a lifetime and still never prepared myself to see the father of my child gunned down in our front lawn. That moment was when the tears began to fall, and they hadn't stopped.

After a specific knock on the door, Hyde did a quick check, sidearm ready, and then let in another agent in plain clothes, holding large plastic bags. "Afternoon, Agent Hawkins."

He nodded to Hyde and then me. "Agent Maddox."

"Lindy," Hyde corrected him. "She's still Lindy."

"I'm so sorry," he said, stuttering over his words. "I thought ..."

I could only shake my head, feeling tears pool in my eyes again. It made me angrier each time. Where was that phenomenon people always talked about? Being cried out?

Thomas had proposed to me several times, but that wasn't in the plans, and I always stuck to the plan. The day Stella came into the world, plans changed, and I decided it might not be so bad after all. The next time I saw Thomas again, he'd promised to propose. No airplanes writing in the sky, no flowers, no Eiffel Tower or any other theatrics, but we had a new plan. I just had to make sure I would see him again.

Agent Hawkins laid out a thin blanket and began unpacking the plastic bags. "The queen size sheets and comforter you requested. The crib sheets, pillow, rags, and Lysol. The sheets have all been laundered. The crib sheets with the detergent you requested."

"Thank you," I said, watching as he excused himself.

Hyde was already wiping down the crib as I turned to place Stella on the thin blanket. I unfolded her crib sheet and smelled it to confirm it had been laundered in mild baby soap. I breathed in deep, remembering how much Thomas loved this smell as we readied the nursery. A nursery we weren't using.

I made Stella's bed and then picked her off the thin blanket to place her tiny body in the center of the crib. She flailed and cried while I changed her diaper and then settled down as I dabbed her shrinking umbilical cord with alcohol and buttoned her PJs back up from ankle to chest. I placed a pacifier in her mouth, and she suckled on it until she stilled and fell asleep. She looked so small in that filthy motel-issued crib. She had a brand-new, breathtaking nursery at home, and she'd barely seen it. She didn't deserve this germ-infested room.

My throat tightened, and the tears flowed again.

Hyde held out a tissue, her expression emotionless.

"You must think I'm nuts," I said, wiping my eyes.

"No. My sister's had kids. It doesn't last forever."

"I didn't know you were an aunt. Nieces or nephews?"

"Both," Hyde said. She was trying to hide a smile. "Hunter is five. Liz is three. Noah is eight months."

"Wow," I said, breathing out a laugh.

Agent Hyde's expression softened. "You've been through a lot, Lindy. Cut yourself some slack."

I thought about her words, and she was right. I would never be so harsh to anyone else in my situation. I nodded, wiping the tip of my nose. "Thank you. I will." I cleared my throat, trying my best to think and feel like the agent I once was. "Any new information on Maddox?"

"He's alive," she said.

I swallowed down an urge to cry. "And the Carlisis?"

"In custody. One dead."

"Which one?" I asked.

"Vito," Hyde reported.

I rubbed the tension from my neck. The stress and the baby were taking a toll, and I could barely keep my eyes open. "Benny's favorite. That's going to hit them all hard."

"Don't discount Giada. She's unstable."

Hyde was right. The Carlisi's matriarch could be considered even more dangerous than Benny was. She stayed in the background, but she had ordered many of the hits, via whisperings in her husband's ear. "It will either break her or resolve her to finish this." I nodded, reaching for my phone.

"Agent Lindy," Hyde said, taking a step forward. When I froze, she continued. "I can contact the director if you'd like to notify him of Giada."

"Oh, right," I said, setting down my phone. The Carlisis thought I was a grieving widow. If there was a trace or mole or any other intel being given to the Carlisis — which we could only assume since they'd known Thomas's exact location, and later found out Travis's — I had to be careful. Only a small handful of people knew that Thomas was alive. It made sense to have protection and to be moved from our home to a safe location, but if I was making calls to the director about anything other than my anger over what had happened to Thomas, it could tip them off.

"We need to find who or what they're using for the info," I said.

"We're on it."

"Do we have a lead?"

"Agent Lindy, the baby is sleeping. My sister always naps when the baby is sleeping. It's about the only time she —"

"Okay," I said. "You're right."

Hyde seemed surprised at my response but quickly recovered, stripping the bed and remaking it with the clean sheets, pillow, and blanket in the time it took me to take a shower. I plodded to the bed in house shoes, unwilling for my bare feet to touch the crusty carpet.

I lay down, smelling the slightest hint of lavender. Hyde noticed me looking around and sniffing.

Hyde shifted her weight, and her face flushed. She was noticeably uncomfortable with my unasked question. "I asked Hawkins to track down a couple of air freshener plug-ins. Your home

smells a little like lavender, so I thought it'd make you feel more at ease. Just a couple. If it's too much for the baby ..."

"No," I said with an appreciative smile. "No, that was very thoughtful of you."

"It was Agent Taber who suggested them."

"Val," I said with a smile, but then my eyes began leaking again.

"She'll be on the first flight. She insisted on accompanying you to Illinois."

"Thank you," I said, already feeling desperate to see my closest friend.

Hyde didn't smile or show much of a response, but even that made me feel comforted because I was used to that with my mother. She showed her love in what she did for me. My father was the affectionate and animated one. Maybe that was why the director had chosen Hyde as my personal security. Besides being one of the Bureau's best drivers and best with a pistol, she was also somehow maternal.

I rested my head against the pillow. It also smelled a bit like lavender, and I had to wonder if Hyde had spritzed it to further help me relax. I wouldn't ask. I didn't want to embarrass her again.

I watched Stella breathe, the buttons on her footie pajamas rising and falling. She looked so peaceful. I wondered if she missed Thomas's voice, or if she knew this wasn't where we belonged. I didn't realize I was crying again until the pillowcase felt wet, and I closed my eyes, begging myself to relax enough to get some rest. Stella would be awake soon, and I couldn't take care of her if I didn't take care of myself. We were leaving for a different location in the morning, and Eakins the morning after that. I would need all of my strength to break over a dozen hearts.

"Hyde? Will you be there tomorrow? In Eakins?"

"Where you go, I go, Agent Lindy."

"Can you tell whoever you need to tell to call Thomas? Tell him I love him?"

"I will."

I felt my muscles melt into the mattress, but as hard as I tried, I couldn't sleep.