

D.F. JONES

*Happily Ever
After, Again*

A NOVEL 

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Acknowledgments

Writing *Happily Ever After, Again* kept me sane during the last months of my mother's life. After a long-term battle with Alzheimer's, mom passed away on April 14, 2018, in her home surrounded by her family.

Alzheimer's is a devastating disease not only for the patient but for family and caregivers. It's a long goodbye which took place over a period of years.

My mother and I had a special bond. She was my best friend, and my biggest cheerleader. Her praise boosted me until the very end of her life. I will miss my mother for the rest of my life, but her unconditional love lives on in me, my family, and in my characters.

Happily Ever After, Again is the first book that I've written that she didn't read. So, it is bittersweet to share my latest labor of love.

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Hugs!

D. F. Jones

Chapter 1

Everpine Cemetery

Eagle Creek, Tennessee

Lauren closed her eyes for a moment as the minister performed the graveside service. She couldn't register the words from the sermon or the sympathetic stares from the somber crowd of family and friends.

All she could do was stare at the dark cherry casket covered with a wildflower pall. Behind the coffin, rows of granite headstones and obelisks shimmered in the glaring sunlight, the overpowering scent of floral sprays mixed with freshly mowed grass made her nauseous.

Agonizing grief filled her soul with the permanence of death. Her physical body numb along with an ache deep in her heart that had fractured into millions of pieces. Pieces that Lauren couldn't fathom ever putting back together again.

A warm September breeze swept through her hair. She reached up and brushed the strands from her face.

The covered tent flapped against the metal poles creating a constant pinging.

It was surreal that less than a week ago, Lauren had been ecstatically happy with the love of her life. She had met Bratten at Bellamy's for their anniversary dinner. She remembered every vivid detail of the evening—etched in her memory forever.

Last week

Eagle Creek, Tennessee

Lauren entered the revolving door of Bellamy's and walked over to the hostess desk.

"I'm Lauren Drake. My husband has a reservation for two at eight."

"Oh, Ms. Drake, he's here. Follow me." The perky brunette's short hair was slicked back behind her ears. She wore a crisp white collared shirt with black slacks. Her high heels clipped on the red brick tile floor.

The recessed lighting accentuated the dark green walls and wood trim. Crystal vases of white lilies and peonies sat on white linen-draped tables accessorized with silver and black tea lights. A long mahogany well-stocked bar lined one wall of the cozy dining room.

Around the corner, Bratten sat in a booth near the fireplace. His face lit with a smile, he rose to greet her with a kiss. "Happy Anniversary, gorgeous."

"Happy Anniversary, darling. Have you been waiting long?"

"Nope, just long enough to order a bottle of champagne. Hard day at work?"

"Not too bad. You?"

Bratten's crystal blue eyes gleamed with excitement as he raised a brow. "I took the afternoon off, and I have a surprise for you after dinner."

Lauren's fingers tented in prayer mode. "Oh, I love your surprises. What do you have up your sleeve?"

A slow smile crept across his lips. "I might be persuaded to give you a hint if you kiss me again like no one's watching."

“Aw, you’re a little devil.” She pushed away from the table and sat on his lap then cupped his face with her hands and kissed him.

The waiter coughed as he approached their table.

Lauren went to get up, but Bratten held her tightly. He looked at the waiter and said, “To start, we’ll have the beef strip loin with truffles, and wild mushrooms in the Bordelaise sauce and the au gratin potatoes. Oh, and we’ll have the dessert first. The chocolate fondant with cream. It’s an anniversary tradition.”

“Excellent choices, sir. Shall I pour the champagne?”

“Please,” Bratten replied.

Lauren’s cheeks flushed with embarrassment. “Bratten, please let me go. People are staring.”

“So, what. Let them. It’s not every day we celebrate another year of marriage. The only thing that could top this is you telling me that we’re having a baby.”

She sighed, “Not yet,” picking up the champagne flute and touching it to the rim of his glass. “But here’s to another year of trying.”

“Oh, I like the way my baby thinks.” He looked at the waiter and winked.

The waiter grinned and retreated from the table.

Returning to her chair, Lauren sipped the fruity champagne, and the bubbles tickled her nose. Placing the flute on the table, she said, “So, I sat on your lap and gave you a pretty spectacular kiss; what’s my after-dinner surprise?”

He drummed his fingertips on the tabletop. With a sly grin, he said, “Hm. Well, first, we’re going for a ride on the company jet. There’s a supermoon tonight, and my new pilot is waiting for our arrival. That should take us, oh, about an hour. Then I booked the honeymoon

suite at The Hamilton overlooking the Cumberland River. And I have all sorts of goodies lined up for the rest of the night.” He rubbed his hands together in glee. “I took off tomorrow and called your boss, so you have the day off too. It’ll be just the two of us, and we can get into all kinds of trouble.”

He placed his right hand over her left one. “I can’t imagine my life without you, Lauren. You took a chance on me, on us and changed my life for the better.”

Lauren kissed his knuckles, then pressed the back of his hand against her cheek. “Well, you were kind of intimidating and beautiful women always surrounded you. I almost didn’t go out with you after my sister told me that you’d only end up breaking my heart.”

With dramatic flair, she pressed her hand to her chest. “Me, a mere graphic artist, and you, the owner of a highly successful business in real estate development. We didn’t exactly run in the same circles.”

“You may be exaggerating a bit.” He leaned back in the chair and said, “I’m a visible person because I’m an involved citizen. Most of the girls you’re referring to jumped in the photos to get their faces in the society magazines or social media. Rarely did I have actual dates.” He chuckled. “Well, except maybe with Alex.” Alex Charland was Bratten’s best friend, his old college roommate, and their attorney.

Bratten shifted in his seat crossing one of his long muscular legs over the other. “I remember seeing you for the first time. I stopped by Smart Media to look at our new logo and collaterals and was blown away. I had to meet the designer. Seems like yesterday, when you sat behind your desk with an enormous Mac, biting your bottom lip, engrossed in thought. You looked up at me with beautiful brown eyes that had my insides doing backflips.”

She giggled. “I froze when our eyes met. I couldn’t breathe, but I did imagine running my fingers through your thick brown hair. We just stared at each other for what seemed like an hour, and you said...”

““Will you go to dinner with me?””

Lauren smiled. “I said, ‘I don’t date clients.’ And you said...”

““It’s about time for you to break that rule. No strings attached. Just dinner or drinks.””

“I hesitated for about ten seconds then agreed. It was something about the way you looked at me that I instinctively knew we...”

“Had a connection.”

She laughed again. “And you’re still completing my sentences.”

Lauren’s senses heightened as the wait staff served mouth-watering desserts, followed by the delectable main courses, and they topped off the dinner with two crème de cacaos.

She and Bratten talked incessantly about everything and nothing. Their innermost thoughts seemed to mirror each other.

After paying the bill, Bratten held her hand as they walked out the door. “Leave your car in the overnight parking, and we’ll pick it up tomorrow.”

“I already did.” She placed her hand in the crook of his arm and leaned against his shoulder.

Bratten opened the passenger door to his black AMG GLE Coupe and kissed the top of her head. “Fasten up, sweetheart,” he said with his best imitation of Humphrey Bogart.

Bratten was the most romantic man she knew and funny too. “I haven’t flown in the jet in a while. Who’s the new pilot? And what happened to Zachary?”

“Zachary retired. Mason hired a relatively young man, Dennis Kelton. He took over Zachary’s duties last month. I thought I told you.” He shrugged. “Oh, well. Zachary and his wife moved to Cozumel. She has family there.”

“Nice. I went to Cozumel with my family when I was in high school. I loved it.”

“Have you been to Cabo San Lucas? One of my favs.” He turned onto the highway leading toward his private runway.

Frowning, she said, “I don’t want to hear about Cabo if you were with another female.”

He threw his head back and laughed. “No, babe. I went with my software development team several years ago. Do you want to go sometime? Or we could change plans and fly out tonight.”

She twisted in her seat to face him. “I have a deadline due Monday. But I have vacation saved up for a ten-day stint somewhere. Just give me the dates, and I’ll request time off.”

“I wish you’d quit your job, but I respect your decision to stay.”

“Hmm. Someday maybe.”

Bratten pulled the car into the parking spot of the hangar at Eagle Creek Airport. The new pilot had the steps down waiting for them on the platform with a steward.

Bratten allowed Lauren to climb the stairs first. He shouted over her head, “Thanks for having her ready, Dennis.”

They boarded the jet, and in minutes, millions of flickering stars dotted along the black velvet sky. The luminous supermoon looked so close Lauren could almost touch it. Below, the Cumberland River rippled and glistened against the backdrop of the twinkling city lights of Eagle Creek.

Bratten brushed her hair away from her shoulder and pressed a kiss to her neck sending shivers up her spine. “Breathtaking.”

Lauren turned and kissed him softly on the lips. “It is breathtaking. A night that I’ll never forget.”

He chuckled. “I was talking about you.”

She lowered her eyelashes before gazing into the deep blue pools of his eyes with so much love it made her dizzy.

He leaned in and traced his fingers over the curve of her cheek, staring so intently as if memorizing every line of her face. He lifted her chin and slanted his mouth over hers in a mind-blowing kiss that made her toes curl.

She moaned. “You are perfect, Bratten Drake.”

He continued kissing her without interruption, then flashed her a brilliant smile. “Only one perfect man in human history and they crucified him. I’ll take darn good any time of the week.”

Bratten brushed his soft lips against hers. His tongue licked the seams of her mouth, tasting; then he tugged on her bottom lip. He whispered, “I knew from the first night that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with you. I want you to be the mother of my kids. You’re everything to me.”

He looked up and pointed. “See that patch of land on the hill with the spotlight?”

She nodded and leaned back against his chest as he wrapped his arms around her.

“That’s where you and I are going to make a family. We flew to my hometown, Wycliffe. I closed the deal yesterday on one thousand acres of prime land. Wycliffe is only forty minutes from Eagle Creek, and ten by helicopter if you want to keep working. I grew up in Wycliffe, and

the small town is like something out of a Norman Rockwell painting. If you want, we can still keep the house in Eagle Creek too.”

He pressed his cheek next to hers. “I envision us with three kids, two girls and one boy, two dogs and maybe one cat. A sprawling country house with acres of land to create our slice of heaven right here on earth. Great schools too.”

Lauren placed her hands over his and leaned her head back against his shoulder, tilting her gaze to meet his. “How can you be so cosmopolitan and old-fashioned at the same time?”

He gave her a boyish grin and shrugged. “I won’t deny that a part of me wishes you’d become a full-time mom, but it’s your choice. I won’t push my luck. It’s just that my mom made my childhood special before her life got cut short. I guess I want my kids to have a close relationship with both of us.”

She said, “I’ll make you a promise. If I become pregnant, I’ll devote myself to being a good mom and wife. I’ll never place my work before my family, but that’s a two-way street, Bratten Drake. You must do the same. I can work anywhere that I have a computer. It may be time to think of branching out with my own design company.”

“That’s why I want to move to Wycliffe. I want to start over. I’m setting up a sole proprietorship in Wycliffe. There’s a couple of buildings on the square that I’m looking into buying to set up shop. So, I promise always to put you and the kids first, and I love the idea of you starting a company too.”

He winked and pulled her back into his arms while she stared out the window. He said, “Oh, and by the way, you know Rose, my assistant?”

“Yes, I know Rose.”

“Mason has been acting erratically, and last week he yelled at Rose in front of coworkers. He threw a stapler at her, for crying out loud. I can’t have that kind of liability in the office.”

She frowned, somewhat confused. “That doesn’t seem like Mason.”

He softly traced her arm with his fingers before linking her hand to his. “I know, right? I talked to him, and he denied it. I told Mason that I’m dissolving our LLC in Eagle Creek. He wasn’t happy, but in the long run, he’ll be better off too. I wished I’d never agreed to go into business with him, but live and learn.”

Changing subjects, Bratten brightened and said, “I want to take you to the cottage where I grew up.”

“You promised to drive me to your aunt’s house someday. I know you miss her, and I’d love to see it.”

“How about tomorrow afternoon we drive up to the plot of land for the new house for a firsthand look-see and then we’ll stop by the cottage?”

“Sounds like fun.”

His hand rested on her thigh. “A new bypass is supposed to go in on the back side of the acreage. I’m talking to the mayor of Wycliffe about developing a corridor that’ll feature a golf course, condos, and homes, greenway trails, office space that’ll complement Wycliffe’s rich character with a new kind of community. I want to keep that small town feel but with big city convenience. It’ll help reduce if not eliminate the city’s tax deficit and increase the incomes of everyone that lives in the town.”

Taking his chin, she pulled his face closer to hers. “You’re a visionary, Bratten Drake.”

He grinned and said, “Tomorrow night, we can spend the night at Wycliffe Cottage. I keep the house maintained year-round. My Aunt Lynda, God rest her soul, had the best gardens in the county. I love the old place, and you will too.”

He nibbled on her ear, whispering, “I love you,” as the plane circled back toward the Eagle Creek Airport.

The Hamilton at Eagle Creek

After a twenty-minute drive, Bratten and Lauren checked into the hotel. Inside the elevator, he scooped Lauren into his arms, and she wrapped her arms around his neck. In a matter of moments, Lauren scanned the hotel card, and they entered the honeymoon suite boasting eighteenth-century furnishings, a luxurious bedroom sanctuary with an Italian marble bathroom complete with Jacuzzi. An assortment of fruit displayed on a silver tray and champagne on ice sat on the foyer’s table.

Lauren wiggled out of his arms and ran over to the tall window to check out the fantastic view of the river. “Oh, Bratten, you come up with the best surprises.”

“I packed a change of clothes for us and brought toiletries from the house.” He threw his keys on the side table, then popped the champagne cork. The liquid effervescence hissed and gushed into the crystal glasses. “The room has a terrace. Do you want to sit outside?”

She ran over and jumped into his arms, kissing him all over his face. He laughed again. “So, I take that as a no.”

She grinned. "We have all night."

Bratten enjoyed Lauren's lack of pretense, and her inner light was a powerful magnetic force. He moved in silence knitting his fingers with hers and bringing her over to the bed.

They sat for the longest time just holding hands not talking, which spoke volumes to their level of intimacy. He'd never thought in a million years he'd find his equal. But thank God, he did.

The golden specks in her brown eyes flickered as her laughter filled the room.

He and Lauren rolled onto the massive bed, and he kissed her so deeply it was hard to breathe.

He'd lived a life without love until he met Lauren. Oh, he dated other women, beautiful women that saw only dollars signs and security. None of them had ever seen him.

Except, Lauren.

True love played a song of romance. A song of life-altering awareness that one person could affect another one so profoundly. A song of such happiness his heart soared and fluttered, skipping more than one beat.

Lauren was stunningly beautiful in appearance, but it was her soul that kindled the spark of desire lighting a fire of undying adoration and infinite love.

His eyes remained locked on hers as they continued playing their love song. A song given to them by the heavens struck with beautiful chords lingering in the charged air.

Lauren held his heart in her hands. Her eyes searched his eyes, so full of love and wonder. He made love to Lauren on and off throughout most of the night, and the hours stretched into the early morning.

He'd been given God's greatest gift, the gift of love, and Bratten had no intention of squandering it. He intended to cherish Lauren for the rest of his life.

The light from the full moon streamed through the tall hotel windows as Lauren stretched languorously across the bed with a smile on her face. She reached up to kiss Bratten and panicked.

Bratten was gasping for breath.

His lips were blue.

His skin was cold and clammy.

Lauren scrambled off the bed onto the floor and clutched her hand to her chest and let out a blood-curdling scream. Then she quickly grabbed the phone and hit the concierge button.

“How may I assist—”

She cut the operator off. “My husband can't breathe. Call 911 now. If you have a doctor on staff, send him to our room at once.”

She took Bratten's pulse. She didn't know if she felt one or maybe it was her blood thundering through her veins. She slipped on her robe and waited on the bed, holding onto Bratten for what seemed like an eternity when the door burst open with the hotel doctor, paramedics and a couple of police officers.

One of the police officers whisked her to the side of the room while the paramedics continued to work on Bratten.

The officer said, “The paramedics will take Mr. Drake to General Hospital. It’s the closest. You may ride in the ambulance if you wish.”

Hyperventilating, she gasped, “Is he breathing?”

“Mrs. Drake, please take a breath in and let it out slowly. You may want to get dressed.”

He pointed to the paramedics loading Bratten on the gurney.

“Yes, I’ll hurry.” Lauren ran to the bathroom and threw on her clothes.

Minutes later, she caught up with the paramedics at the ambulance. Her thoughts spiraled out of control.

Even though Bratten couldn’t speak, maybe he could hear her. “Honey, I love you. You promised me a family. You promised me a lifetime of adventures. I’m holding you to your promises, Bratten. Do you hear me? Please, baby, open your eyes and talk to me.”

In minutes, they arrived at the hospital, and everything became one gigantic blur. Lauren’s brain tried to process the fact that the hospital staff rushed Bratten into the O.R. for emergency surgery.

Lauren called her family, and Bratten’s best friend, Alex. They stayed with her in the intensive care unit waiting room.

She wouldn’t cry.

Lauren stared aimlessly across the room.

Bratten needed her.

Lauren’s sister, Angeline, handed her a cup of coffee, but she heaved from the smell. “No, Angeline. I’m not thirsty. I’m not hungry. I want to know what’s going on with Bratten. Please, stop hovering over me.”

Angeline nodded and sat by her with her hands in her lap.

It seemed like hours passed before the surgeon stepped into the waiting room and called out Bratten's name. He led Lauren with her family and Alex to a separate private room and proceeded to tell her what transpired during Bratten's surgery.

"Mrs. Drake, your husband had a massive heart attack. But we suspect he may have been poisoned too, so I called in our toxicologist."

Lauren clutched her throat. With a shrill voice, she said, "Poisoned? How? When? I don't understand." She looked frantically at Alex then back to the doctor. "Is Bratten okay?"

The surgeon glanced at the floor slowly shaking his head. He met her gaze and said, "No, Mrs. Drake. He is not okay. Our toxicologist found traces of barbiturates, pancuronium bromide, and potassium chloride in his bloodstream."

Raking her fingers through her hair, she asked, "How is that possible?"

The surgeon continued, "Did he vomit or have any nausea?"

"Bratten was fine when we fell asleep. He was fine. Is there an antidote for the poison?"

Then the doctor changed her world.

"Mrs. Drake, your husband suffered a cardiac arrest and died. We notified the authorities. I am sorry."

She became hysterical and shouted, "What are you saying, Doctor?"

"Mr. Drake is gone."

Lauren fell to her knees and wailed. "Please, Jesus, no. Oh, please, Jesus. Please don't take him."

Alex stormed in front of the surgeon with a scowl on his face. “You have the bedside manner of a toad. I’m Mrs. Drake’s attorney, Alex Charland, as well as Mr. Drake’s. I will officially request all documentation that transpired in your hospital. Also, we request an official autopsy. I am aware how hospitals bury their mistakes. Lauren would like to see her husband.”

Alex lifted Lauren from the floor.

“No. No. Bratten can’t be dead. He can’t be,” Lauren screamed.

Alex wrapped his arms around Lauren tightly until her sobs subsided. He carried her to the small couch in the room and sat her down.

The surgeon stiffened and said, “Of course Mrs. Drake may see her husband. You may follow me or check in with the nurses’ station when Mrs. Drake is under control.”

“Under control?” Angeline shook her finger at the surgeon. “You igmo, her husband just died.”

Alex didn’t know if Lauren was up to seeing Bratten, but she needed to see him, and so did he. Alex couldn’t believe that his best friend for the last twenty years was dead. He neared a panic attack but focused on remaining calm with his breathing.

He lifted Lauren’s chin with his forefinger. “Are you ready see Bratten?”

Lauren’s face paled, and she whimpered, “I can’t do this alone. Will you go with me, Alex?”

He nodded and held out his hand which she took.

At the nurses’ station, Alex gave them his and Lauren’s names requesting to see Bratten.

The nurse looked up. “I’ll buzz you in. Nurse Moorehead, will you take Mrs. Drake to Bratten Drake’s room?”

The nurse held an iPad in her hand and nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

Alex and Lauren walked down the hospital corridor following Nurse Moorehead.

Each passing second surreal.

Everything around Alex seemed more vivid, like the chatter from the nurses and technicians running to and fro checking on patients, the flickering fluorescent lighting, the beeping of the patients’ monitoring equipment, and the scent of disinfectant.

As he entered Bratten’s room, a cold whoosh of air hit Alex, and he wondered if it was Bratten’s soul or spirit. He swallowed hard as he and Lauren went to Bratten’s bedside.

His best friend looked pale with a tinge of blue.

Alex had the urge to vomit and swayed with dizziness, but Lauren needed him. He gripped the bed rail, white-knuckled.

He knew the real Bratten was gone and only his shell remained.

Alex shook from head to toe, fighting back his tears when Lauren fell apart.

“Baby, my sweet man. Ohhh, my darling.” She bent over Bratten and kissed his lips, then laid her head on his chest and wept.

Alex stepped back giving her time with Bratten. He watched the clock on the wall like watching paint dry. After a while, he went over and gently tapped her shoulder. “Lauren, we need to make arrangements for Bratten. I know some of this information may not register, but because of the poison found in his system, the Eagle Creek Police will want to question you. I won’t leave your side. Whatever you need, I’m here for you.”

Lauren fell into his arms crying. “He can’t be dead, Alex. Who would want to kill him?” She stilled, and her eyes widened as she placed her hand over her mouth. “Bratten and Mason

argued about Rose. He told me that he was dissolving Drake Properties LLC with Mason. We were making plans to move to Wycliffe. Do you think...”

“That Mason had something to do with this?” He shrugged and replied, “I’ve known Mason for a couple of years. Maybe. I don’t know. I knew Bratten wanted to move to Wycliffe. I handled the transactions for the new land and filed his sole proprietorship with the City of Wycliffe. You’ll need to try and remember everything Bratten told you about Mason. Put it in your notes on your phone, even if you don’t think it’s important. Let’s go, Lauren.”

She looked back over her shoulder at Bratten and sobbed again, then gripped Alex around his waist, pressing her face into his chest.

Alex wrapped his arm around her shoulders and guided her out of the patient room.

In the waiting room, a detective approached Lauren, flashing his credentials.

Alex stepped forward, reached into his coat pocket, and handed the detective a business card. “I represent Mrs. Drake. She has information which may be useful regarding Bratten’s death.”

He said, “I’m Detective Ray Stone. Our crime investigative team is gathering evidence at the hotel. Mrs. Drake, I can’t imagine, what you must be feeling, but would you mind answering a few questions at the station?”

She nodded but stared blankly at the detective in apparent shock.

Alex said, “I’ll bring her in. Would you mind if she goes home and takes a shower and changes clothes?”

“Sure thing.” Detective Stone looked at Lauren. “Mrs. Drake, I knew your husband. Met him several times at charity fundraisers. He was a fine man.” He turned and walked out of the room.

The last few hours had been excruciatingly hard for Alex, so he couldn't imagine the roller coaster of emotions Lauren must be experiencing.

Losing Bratten and watching Lauren spiral out took a toll on Alex.

He remembered the first time Bratten introduced Lauren to him. That day, he'd stared at Lauren longer than he should have, gazing into her doe-shaped eyes. He was bewitched by her beauty, feisty spirit and genuine soul.

But Bratten was more than just a best friend, he was like a brother to him.

After a whirlwind romance, Bratten married Lauren. The day of their wedding he made Alex promise to take care of Lauren if anything ever happened to him. Alex intended on making good on his promise.

Now, Alex had the task of picking up the pieces of Lauren's broken heart.

He drove Lauren home and waited while she showered and changed.

Later in the day, Alex sat with Lauren while Detective Stone questioned her in the station's interview room. She barely talked except to reply yes or no.

Detective Stone pulled Alex off to the side. "I have no probable cause to hold Mrs. Drake. But as the last person to see the victim alive, she remains under suspicion. If she remembers anything else, day or night, please call."

Alex asked, "Have you questioned Bratten's partner, Mason Williams? Bratten was in the process of dissolving his business with him."

Detective Stone placed his hand in his jacket pocket. "I'm in the process of interviewing Drake Properties employees. So, Mr. Williams is on my list. Oh, and Alex, we'll need to schedule a time for your questioning too. Mrs. Drake mentioned you as the POA of Bratten's and her affairs, is that correct?"

Alex nodded. "Yes, I am. I'll be here at eight in the morning. Will that work for you?"

Detective Stone replied, "Yeah, that's good for me too."

Alex escorted Lauren out of the precinct, then drove her home.

What a freaking mess.

Lauren's sister, Angeline, waited at the door. She wrapped her arm around Lauren and ushered her inside.

Alex said, "I have to make a few calls. I'll be inside in a few minutes."

She nodded and closed the door.

Alex withdrew his cell and hit up Private Investigator Logan Clarkson. He had met Logan at a chamber event last year, and used him on several occasions, but nothing like this. Nothing like murder. He filled Logan in on the details. "I need surveillance at Bratten's office and his house. I want to know Mason's every move over the last few months, and we need to put a tail on him. I want you to find out every person Bratten had contact with over the last six months."

He paused, closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Clarkson? We need the same on Lauren." He hated to think Lauren had anything to do with Bratten's death, but as far as Alex was concerned in this homicide case, everyone was guilty until proven innocent.

Present day

Everpine Cemetery, Eagle Creek

Someone tapped Lauren's shoulder, and she blinked several times before realizing most of the people had left the cemetery.

Angeline grabbed her hand and tugged. "Come on, sweetie. Let's go to your house."

While Lauren replayed the night of their anniversary, the cemetery's maintenance crew buried her husband. She sat watching unable to breathe, choked with emotion.

Angeline pulled her from the chair and held Lauren in her arms. "Honey, I'm so sorry. I wish I could do something to help, just know I'm here for you anytime day or night."

Lauren just stared. She had no reply but allowed her sister to take her home.

Inside the house, family, friends, along with coworkers and Bratten's employees expressed their condolences. Some were compassionate: *I don't have the right words, but know I am here for you if you need me.* One of Bratten's employees mentioned one of his favorite memories. But the worst response was, *I know how you feel.*

Um, no one understood how she felt because every person grieved differently.

An older matronly woman dared to mention something to the effect that since she and Bratten had only been married a couple of years, she could start over again, like not being married long lessened the pain of such a devastating loss.

One of Lauren's church members squeezed her hand. "Darling, there's a reason for everything. He's in a better place. Be strong."

At that point, Lauren wanted to scream.

I don't need patronizing condolences. I want to know why someone took the life of such a kind soul.

After a while, Lauren found herself offering automatic responses like an actor in a play, nodding and agreeing with each person just not to deal with any conversation that required work.

Bratten's partner, Mason Williams, sat down on the sofa next to her. He reached over and placed her hand in his hands. "You don't have to worry about Drake Properties. I'll make sure the business runs smoothly. Bratten was more than a partner—he was my friend. I am sorry for his death."

She'd temporarily forgotten about Bratten's business. "Thank you, Mason. I appreciate it."

As the evening wore long, most of the people left except her family and Alex.

Lauren caught Alex staring at her through the service and the wake. He had helped her so much since Bratten's death. They had a common link with the love of one person, Bratten.

Loathed to admit it, something kept nagging at her. What if Alex had something to do with Bratten's death? He had control over all of Bratten's accounts.

What if it was Mason? Bratten told her he wanted to dissolve Drake Properties and move to Wycliffe.

Oh, God, her head hurt.

A terrible thought washed over her.

Whoever killed Bratten could kill her too.

Lauren couldn't trust anyone except her immediate family.

Her heart raced, and the blood pounded in her ears.

Beset with anguish.

Dizzy with a sense of betrayal and deception.

Someone she knew killed Bratten.

Her face went into her hands, and she rubbed vigorously, then went into the kitchen where Angeline and her mom, Carol, washed dishes.

She started to help, and Carol said, “Darling, we’ll take care of the clean-up. Do you want something to eat?”

“No, Mom. I want to sleep. I’m so bone tired that I can barely hold my head up.”

Angeline dried her hands on a dish towel. “Eron’s taking the kids home, and I’m spending the night. Why don’t you take a long soak in the tub, and I’ll bring you a glass of wine?”

Lauren sighed. “You don’t have to spend the night. I’m not suicidal.” *Or was she?* “I don’t want to take a bath or drink.”

“I’m still staying. I can’t stand thinking of you alone tonight.”

“Suit yourself.” She stopped and turned to her mom and sister. “I don’t mean to be rude. Thanks for being with me and for helping me arrange everything. I don’t think I could’ve managed without you and Alex.”

Lauren went into the master bedroom. She had cried so much over the last several days that she was cried out. She took off her black dress and threw it over one of the two chairs, grabbed one of Bratten’s shirts and sniffed his cologne, then pulled it on and crawled into bed.

Alone.

Alone.

So very alone.

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