

Protecting Love

by

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Chapter 1

The horror of what happened was visible on the façade of Nate's Delilah Reyes couldn't distinguish any individual sounds, as she watched the noon sun bounce off the glass raining down on top of her. Each piece creating an individual kaleidoscope of colors amongst the chaos of the seemingly endless sound of gun fire. Warm liquid ran down her right arm, she knew that she should be alarmed by it, but all she could think of was to get to Bobby.

She had just finished buckling her five-year old son into his car seat, turned to speak with her ex-husband Nate, when the silence of the col-de-sac seemed to explode in an instant. Her instincts had taken over, telling her to get as low as possible. Delilah could thank her rough upbringing for her preparedness, but nothing could truly prepare someone for the icy fear that gripped the heart of a mother who could not reach her son. As the continual shots rang in the air, she knew that if she got up, she was as good as dead.

The second the eerie hush fell over the neighborhood, replacing the chaotic roar, Delilah was on her feet and rushing to the back seat of her sedan. Bobby's screams piercing her heart, stealing the breath from her lungs.

God, he has to be alright! Please, lord, not my baby!

Delilah flung herself to the door, registering that it was still intact and without gun holes.

That is a good sign.

She tried uselessly to comfort the worry that was threatening to paralyze her.

“Mommy!” No sound had ever sounded sweeter. It brought the air back into her aching lungs and cleared the terror filled cloud that had deluded her mind. She grabbed for the handle of the car door; it was slippery with blood. Delilah froze in place, why would there be blood on the car? She felt the throbbing in her arm at the same time that she realized that the blood was hers. “Mommy!” Bobby second scream forced her to ignore the pain, using her other arm she finally succeeded in gripping the slick handle and yanking the door open.

Relief hit her like a tidal wave, sweeping away the fear that her son had been hurt. Bobby sat in his car seat, buckled in, tears streaming down his freckled face. His doe brown eyes were the roundest she had ever seen them, as he stared at her, with his small arms reaching out. Besides being scared to death, her son was fine.

She quickly undid the buckle on his seat, which was the only thing holding him back from leaping into her arms. The pain that shot through her arm was hard to ignore, but the wholeness she felt at having her son safe in her arms was a powerful pain suppressant. “Shhhh, baby, it’s okay. Mommy is here, sweetheart. You’re okay.” Delilah cooed to her son in her most soothing voice. Wanting desperately to take away his terror and comfort him.

The blood in her veins turned to ice, threatening to freeze her heart dead in her chest, as she saw a car turning around in the col-de-sac. Nate's house was three houses down a rather long col-de-sac. It registered to her as soon as she saw the metallic blue car coming down the street, that whoever had shot at them, would have to turn around.

That is just the fear talking. I am seeing danger where there is none.

Delilah tried to reassure herself that it was her hyped-up imagination that was terror stricken and working over-time, but it was not exactly the type of car that soccer moms drove around. It was some sort of classic lowered to the ground, the glare from the sun bouncing off from the chrome that seemed to be everywhere on the car. She didn't want to assume, but she knew a gang bangers car when she saw one. The two Hispanic men, in the front of the car, also seemed to fit the bill. The older looking one, pointed at something on the lawn. She was terrified that at any moment he would look at them next.

Shit! I need to get Bobby out of here before they see us.

Even if the car wasn't the one that had shot at them, she decided to err on the side of trying to stay alive. As she grabbed Bobby out of the car and ran for all that she was worth into the front door of Nate's house. She sent up a silent thanks, that he had left it open when they had done their weekly exchange of their son.

A shot was fired, sending wooden splinters from the offended door frame, just above her head. Delilah dove onto the floor, trying to fall so that she would absorb most

of the impact with her own body, protecting Bobby's more fragile frame.

She lay cradling her son when another shot rang out. The glass that rained down from the shattered window, was the only way she knew where the bullet had hit.

Delilah felt like the torrent of bullets would never end, she wrapped her body around her sons and prayed for it to be over.

The sharp sweet sound of a police siren pierced the air. She had not allowed herself to cry up to this point, but she could no longer hold the tears back. The screech of tires burning up the road, was another indication that the shooters car was gone. Delilah released some of the pressure that she been holding Bobby with. Her fear had turned her embrace into a vice grip, that she hoped hadn't hurt him.

"Help is here sweet boy. It's over." Delilah stroked her son's dark brown hair.

He looked like a mini version of his father, besides the freckles that were splattered on his soft cheeks, those were from her.

Oh, God! Where was Nate?!

She racked her brain to try and remember the moment the shooting had started. Nate had been standing between them and the front door. Delilah had asked him to wait a minute, she wanted to ask him if they could switch weekends. The following weekend was Mother's Day, but it was his scheduled weekend to have Bobby. Usually, Nate was a good sport about working with her on

special occasions, but she wanted to ask him and not just assume that he would be fine with it.

Delilah thought she could remember him hitting the ground, similar to how she had, but she wasn't sure.

During her race to the house, her mind had been too focused on getting to safety to look around her. She shifted to a sitting position, just as an officer, entered the broken door with his gun drawn.

"Ma'am, I'm officer Porter. Are you hurt?" His voice sounded concerned and he looked at her with kind blue eyes.

"No, my son and I are fine. But my ex-husband, Nate, is he okay? He was outside too, when the shooting started." Delilah rambled on. She could hear how unsteady her words sounded.

"I'm sorry ma'am, but I don't think you're okay. Is that your blood, or the child's?" He approached them cautiously, like someone would creep up to a skittish animal. Afraid to startle it or cause it to bolt in fear.

What he was saying finally dawned on her, he was right she had been hurt. As if her acknowledging the wound on her arm was all it needed to remind her of its presence, the pain sharpened so badly it made her wince.

"Yes, that's right, I was shot, I think." She felt faint as she spoke about what happened out loud, almost like it wasn't real until it was voiced.

I have been shot. Someone shot at me, and Bobby, and Nate. Why?

She heard Officer Porter say something into his radio, but her mind was whirling with the unreal situation.

“Ma’am did you hear me?” Officer Porter asked her, appearing even more concerned than before.

“What?” She looked up at the officer, trying to focus. “No, I’m sorry, I didn’t.” Delilah was known as a virtual chatter box, apparently trauma put a lid on her verbal outpouring.

“I said that the ambulance is here. The paramedics are going to help you up and get you on the stretcher.” She looked around the room at the group of people, how had so many people walked in without her noticing?

“Bobby, we have to get up sweetheart.” His head was tucked into the space between her arm and her body, she didn’t have to see his face to know that his thumb was in his mouth. They had worked over a year to get him to stop sucking his thumb, but right now she couldn’t blame her son.

He looked up at her with his doe eyes filled with uncertainty. She could see that he was fighting back a fresh batch of tears, thumb still in his mouth, he shook his head in agreement.

She tried to stand while still holding her precious son, something that usually wouldn’t tax her in the least, but a wave of dizziness forced her to sit back down.

“Careful there,” an EMT had come to stand beside her, the woman placed her hand under Delilah’s arm. “Let me help you up.” Without waiting for her to agree, the EMT started to help lift her to her feet. She was forced to

leave Bobby on the floor, he quickly got to his feet and wrapped his arms around her leg.

“Bobby, my name is Officer Porter, your mommy needs to go with the EMT. Do you want to come with me, while they make sure she is okay?” Despite the officer’s attempt at trying to get Bobby to let go of her leg; he did not move an inch.

Her instinct was to keep Bobby with her, but she knew that she needed medical help, as she swayed trying to stay standing.

“Sweetheart, I’m not going anywhere, but I need them to look at my arm. Can you be my brave little man and go with Officer Porter, just for now?” It tore at her heart to see the fear that was so apparent on his little face. She swelled with pride as he bravely undid his death grip on her and put his small hand into the officer’s much larger one.

“Come on champ, they are going to take your mom to the hospital, but you can ride along with me.” Bobby’s eyes widened as tears spilled down his cheeks, the idea of them separating wasn’t any more pleasant to her.

“Bobby, you get to ride in a real-life police car, wait until you tell Dylan.” Dylan was Bobby’s best friend, and conveniently the son of her own best friend, Sarah Moore. “Maybe you will even get to play with the siren.” At the mention of being in charge of the loud noise making vehicle, her son’s face lit up a fraction.

The officer gave her a grateful smile as he walked out to his car holding hands with Bobby. She needed minimal help getting on the stretcher, not being able to put any weight on her right arm at all. Once she was strapped

in place, they started moving her out of the ruined front door.

beautiful Tudor house, it was pocked with bullet holes. It was a miracle that they had survived, now that Bobby was safe and she was getting help, her thoughts flew to Nate. The officer had not answered her earlier, she needed to know he was okay. That he could take care of Bobby, while she was at the hospital.

She looked up at the woman that was wheeling her to the ambulance, "My ex-husband, is he hurt?"

Delilah watched the pretty blond woman's face contort slightly with pity and sadness. "I'm sorry, there was nothing that we could do to save him."

"Nate is dead?" The words rang falsely in her ears, it was not possible. "No, he can't be."

The woman was saying something, but Delilah didn't hear her. Her world started to spin out of control, Nate was gone. Oh, God, Bobby! How would she tell him that his father was dead? It was more than her body could handle, between the blood loss and the trauma of the shooting, she felt her mind drift into blackness. She welcomed the reprieve from reality, as she slipped into unconsciousness.

Chapter 2

"This way, sir."

Seriously? A British butler, were the clients also British?

Sebastian Rockmiller could hardly believe his eyes as he walked down the marble ensconced hallway of the mansion. He had worked for some truly loaded people before, but these people might top the list. Though there was that Count with his villa in Tuscany, that had been pretty impressive. That had probably been his easiest job since starting his private security company. The Count's threats were all in his mind, so the job had required no risk of life and beautiful views to boot.

His client liaison Candy Wilson had informed him that in the case of this client there had already been a drive by shooting. So, he knew this one would be dangerous, which suited him just fine. Seb was no stranger to dangerous situation.

The almost comically stiff butler stopped in front of an open door, apparently, he would go no further. Seb shook his head at the ridiculous formality that some people felt was necessary in life.

Seb walked into a formal sitting room, there were fresh flowers on several side tables. The walls were covered in stripes of several different varieties of beige. The floor yet a different shade of beige, topped off with three antique couches that he could only assume represented the only other variation of beige. If not for the

burst of color from the floral arrangements, the room would be the visual equivalent of a yawn.

“Mr. Rockmiller, please feel free to sit down. Mr. and Mrs. Hawthorne will be right with you.” Came the British voice once again.

Looking at the antique couches Seb couldn't help but cringe.

How much coin is it going to set me back, if I break one of these fragile looking things?

Seb was not a huge man, but at 6'2' and his affinity for taking any stress out at the gym, well he knew that his presence was hard to miss. With a silent prayer, Seb sat on the surprisingly soft couch, it held.

He managed to wipe the relief from his face before the couple that matched this house walked through the door.

Mr. Hawthorne was not a tall man, maybe 5'8" at the most, he had a ring of white hair that started just above his ears and wrapped around his head. The man had a stony face with a square jaw, his brown eyes seemed to be looking over Seb with extreme attention to detail. His wife was obviously distraught, around her piercing green eyes, the skin was puffy and red. Seb saw a slight shake in her hands, as they introduced themselves. Whether it stemmed from something medical or emotional, he didn't know. But he leaned toward the latter based on the fact that her son had just been killed.

“Thank you for coming so quickly, Mr. Rockmiller.” Mr. Hawthorne had a strong dry baritone. Not British then.

“Of course, with these types of situations there is rarely time to waste.” Seb tried to give them the reassurance that he had handled this type of thing before and that he took it very seriously. When in truth this was brand new for him, he was used to protecting rich women in danger of their own making. Maybe the occasional man that made a deal with the wrong type of scumbag and needed someone to watch his back for a while afterward. But that was not what the Hawthorne’s had in mind.

“I must admit. I don’t quite understand why we had to meet before you could begin protecting Bobby.” Mr. Hawthorne’s voice was laced with barely controlled impatience.

“It will not take long to go through the preliminaries, I promise.” Seb could tell already that working with the couple would be tedious. “In my experience it helps to hear the situation from someone other than the victim, who is usually not up to recounting the story after a trauma.”

“No offense implied, but what exactly is your experience?” It was the first thing that Mrs. Hawthorne had said, her words wavered with emotion.

He hated it when people did that, hired him, and then decided he needed to defend his capabilities to them. Seb felt it showed little to no forethought on the parts of his clients.

“No offense ma’am, but you decided to hire my company and asked for me specifically. These do not seem like the actions of someone that is unsure of what they are getting.” Seb tried to curb the anger that was boiling under the surface of his skin. “So, if you don’t mind, I would rather be spending this time discussing your

grandson and what you know. Instead of discussing my illustrious career.”

As he spoke, he watched the Hawthornes closely to make sure that he wasn't crossing over a line that he couldn't come back from. Even though his company was doing well, it could not afford bad word of mouth from people this powerful. His partner Cody West would be royally pissed at him if he lost this client due to his temper. To his relief, the only reaction to his words that he saw, were Mr. Hawthorne raising his eyebrows and Mrs. Hawthorne looking down at her still shaking hands.

“Fair enough Mr. Rockwell. Unfortunately, we know precious little of our son's tragedy. His ex-wife was there, along with our grandson Bobby, when our son Nathaniel was gunned down in front of his home. From what the police have told us, it is a miracle that Bobby survived the ordeal.” Mr. Hawthorne stated the facts in a pragmatic way. Seb had to give it to him, if he was hurting, he was hiding it well.

“Tell me about the break-up of the marriage.” Seb told them more than asked.

“For heaven's sake why?” Mrs. Hawthorne's outraged question sent off alarm bells in Seb's head, he had obviously touched on something she doesn't want to talk about.

“Miriam, please, we are wasting time. If Mr. Rockmiller needs to know then we will tell him.” She looked back down at her hands, but not before Seb saw a tear streak down her cheek. “Nathaniel met Delilah when he was in college, she would not have been our first choice, or even our tenth choice for that matter. But maybe that is part of the reason he married her, to rebel

against his strict up-bringing. We will never really know, because at the time he swore that he loved her. After they graduated, they moved to the Vallejo area. My son worked with at risk children, he was an excellent attorney, he could have had a very lucrative career."

"When did they get a divorce?" Seb knew that was the part that they were holding back on.

Mr. Hawthorne sighed deeply. "It was four years ago, right after Bobby turned one. I might as well tell you because I have no doubt Delilah will throw Nathaniel under the bus as soon as possible. Nathaniel strayed from their marriage, while she was pregnant with Bobby, I don't know any of the details."

Holy shit! What a scumbag! To cheat on your wife while she is pregnant with your child takes a certain level of low life, as far as Seb was concerned. He hoped that his disgust with their son didn't show on his face, he relied on his training to hide his emotions.

"She was not a wife to him. He would complain to me about her constantly." Mrs. Hawthorne vehemently defended her son.

"Okay, so it is safe to say the divorce was messy?" Seb was trying to determine if the ex-wife would be receptive to having her ex-in-laws help to protect her son. If she won't be it will make his job considerably harder.

"No, not at all, actually. Delilah left him and she has never asked for anything. As far as we know they have, excuse me, had an exceptionally good co-parenting relationship. My son had seemed happy the last couple of years, maybe a little overtaxed this last couple of months, but other than that, happy." Mr. Hawthorne explained.

“Why was he stressed out the last couple of months?” Seb hated that he had to pull information out of some people, he much preferred working with people who were open books.

“He wouldn’t or couldn’t talk about it in any kind of detail. All I know is that he was defending someone in a big case, he was unusually frazzled about the possible outcome. Like I said earlier he was excellent at his job, he usually had things well at hand.” Mr. Hawthorne was finally showing signs that this conversation was wearing thin with him. Seb couldn’t blame him; he had just lost his son after all.

“Just so I am clear, we are being hired to secure the safety of only your grandson. Or are we to protect this Delilah woman as well?” Seb felt like he knew the answer before they spoke, but he had to make sure.

To his surprise it was Mrs. Hawthorne who answered his question. “We are in no way concerned about the well fare of Delilah Reyes. Your job is to protect Bobby, at all costs.”

It was by far the most emotion that she had shown since Seb had arrived. Clearly, the woman disliked her ex-daughter in-law. It wasn’t really his job to figure out why, but it did make him curious.

He spent the next fifteen minutes going over the details, of how often he would be checking in with them and for how long his services would be needed. As he expected the couple had no idea how long they would need him for, because they did not know what they were up against yet.

If it were just a random drive-by then his job would virtually be over before it even started, but from what they said regarding their son's behavior weeks before his death. Seb had a sinking feeling that there was more to this situation.

Seb pulled up to the apartment building. The address that the Hawthornes had given him was not in the worst part of town, but he wouldn't let his sister live there. He laughed at himself, as he let the thought of trying to stop his strong-willed sister from doing anything she set her mind to sink in. His sister Melanie was three years younger than his own 32, but she had a tendency to act like a mother hen with him. Which included rarely taking his advice because she always thought she knew better.

Walking up to the plain looking stucco covered three story building, he noticed that at the very least it was well maintained. It might not be fancy, but it wasn't falling down and dilapidated. He searched for any sort of security system that he might be able to hack into, which would make his job a little easier.

He sighed. No such luck, I guess it is the old fashion way this time.

Either that or he would hide a couple of his own, which was technically illegal, but only if he got caught. The priority was protecting his client, if he needed to skirt the edge of the law to do that, he would.

He was relieved to see that there was at least a buzzer system on the front door, it would hardly be a deterrent for anyone motivated to get inside the building. But he knew that sometimes in life threatening situations

the difference between survival and death was a matter of seconds. Seb's years of service as an Army Ranger had taught him that lesson several times over.

Seb searched for Reyes on the box with the buzzers, after finding it he pressed firmly and waited for the reply.

"Yes?" Came a naturally sultry voice. Visions of what this woman would look like based on her voice raced through his head.

"Hello ma'am, my name is Seb Rockmiller, and I was hired by the Hawthornes. Can I meet with you?" Seb had little to no hope that this meeting would go smoothly. It was an unusual situation, his company had been hired to protect a child before, but it was usually by the parents. And Seb never took those cases, but this time he was asked for specifically and it was too much money to pass up. So, here he was, attempting to protect a child with a possible unwilling parent in the picture. It was going to be a complete shit show.

"Okay." Her voice was reluctant, but at least she was willing to speak with him.

The apartment was on the second floor, which was decidedly better than it being on the first. He knew that he hadn't spoken with Ms. Reyes yet, but his mind was already on the job.

Standing in the doorway was a woman that matched the voice to a T, she was tall and shapely. Long dark curls framed her flawless face, striking grey eyes, were assessing him. He usually preferred blondes, but he had to admit this woman was a complete knock out.

“Come in, but please be quiet, the boys are napping.” She motioned for him to come in with her hand, boys? As in more than one? He decided to side bar that question for now.

He strode into a living room that did not match the elegant woman. It looked like a crayon box had exploded, landing on the furniture in no particular order. The couch was an unpleasant orange color that was so ugly it almost physically hurt to look at. Even the walls were painted a bright yellow, while the rug that covered the floor was a swirl of purple and green. If he had to guess a general theme for the room, it would have to be circus vomit. The whole place made him want to cringe and have the owner’s sanity tested.

He looked at the gorgeous woman that sat on a dark blue velvet chair that was across from the couch he sat on; well, no one is perfect. God had gifted this woman with a bombshell body and the decorating skills of a blind person.

“I know this may not be a welcome surprise, but the Hawthornes are very concerned about Bobby’s safety. After the tragic death of his father. They have hired my company to make sure that during the investigation into the death of his father, Bobby is kept safe.” Seb tried to ease into the idea that he was going to be hanging around whether she liked it or not.

The woman’s face lit up, making her even more beautiful. “That is such a relief to hear, I have been worried sick. The last two days I have hardly been able to sleep, not to mention the nightmares that Bobby has been having. But now that you are here, maybe it will give us all a little piece of mind.”

He was shocked at how open and welcoming she was to the idea of having a personal security person that was hired by people who clearly did not think much of her.

“It doesn’t bother you that I was hired by the Hawthornes?” Seb knew that he should leave well enough alone, but he couldn’t hold back his curiosity.

“I don’t give a hoot who hired you.” Her sincerity was evident, then she hesitated a bit. It was the first sign of reluctance he had seen on the woman. “We only have one problem that I can see.”

Here it comes, I knew it couldn’t be that easy.

“And what is that?” Seb asked, running possible scenarios through his mind of what her argument could be.

“We will need to convince Delilah.” The words floored him, if she isn’t Delilah Reyes, then who the hell is this woman? And where is Delilah?

Chapter 3

The last thing she needed, the absolute last freaking thing!

Delilah's hands shook with anger, as she rode in her brother's car. He had shocked her by showing up yesterday at the hospital, but she guessed she shouldn't have been. After their parents had died in a car crash, Max and Delilah were all the family that each other had. She could imagine that if someone called her and told her that something happened to Max, she would be there in a blink of an eye. But Max had a very secretive government job, she always joked with him that he was a spy. He would just roll his eyes and tell her that if he told her, he would have to kill her. Total spy thing to say!

"You need to calm down." Max looked at her, as he pulled into her apartment building.

"I don't need to do anything but get some security douchebag out of my apartment and away from my son." Delilah said. Wanting to cross her arms over her chest in defiance, but something told her that if she tried it with only one arm, it would look ridiculous. Her right arm was in a sling, the bullet had been a through and through. They told her at the hospital that she had been very lucky, the pain that radiated from her shoulder begged to differ.

"Nice language there, sis." Max rolled his eyes at her; he did that a lot.

"Oh, shut up, you know that you were the one born with the pretty manners. I was the one born with an affinity for blunt honesty and a colorful vocabulary, at least

when I'm not around Bobby." She tried her best to control her wayward tongue, when in front of her impressionable child.

"It's good to know that even you have boundaries." Max grinned as he teased her.

"Come on, the sooner I pick this guy up and toss him out the better." She didn't wait for his reply as she hopped out of the car, the best she could with only one arm. Delilah was right-handed, so only having her left to do everything with was embarrassingly debilitating.

After fumbling with the keys, she heard her brother say something under his breath and grab for them and unlock the door. He entered first like he owned the place, which under normal circumstances would have peeved her off, but she was too distracted to really care.

"Hello, my name is Seb Rockmiller and I'm here..." She had to step around her tall brother to see the man connected to the rich raspy baritone.

"Oh, I know exactly why you are here. You are here because the Hawthornes think that there is no issue that you can't throw money at, and then watch the problem go away. If you think for even a split second that I am going to have some stranger hanging around my son, you are out of your mind." Delilah had only barely finished her tirade, when she let the appearance of the man standing in her living room really sink in.

He was as tall as her brother, but much wider, his shoulders were massive. Delilah was expecting anything besides the beautifully silver hair that was styled in a short military like haircut. But the most arresting part of the man was the intense emerald-green eyes that were drilling

a hole into her. He wore grey cargo pants, and a black polo shirt that was tight enough to show off the contours of his sculpted chest. She tried to shake off the fact that the man was ridiculously good looking and remind herself that she wanted him gone, the sooner the better.

“Now is your chance sis, pick him up and throw him out.” Max grinned down at her, amusement twinkling in his dark blue eyes, that were the same color as her own.

“Excuse me?” Mr. Rockmiller looked from her brother to her and back again, trying to figure out what Max was talking about.

“Shut up Max you’re not helping.” She glared at her brother for all that she was worth.

“Is he ever trying to be helpful?” Delilah turned her attention to the stunning woman that had just walked into the room. Her best friend and childhood confidant, Sarah Moore. She knew where all Delilah’s skeletons were buried, and she trusted the gorgeous woman more than anyone else. Unfortunately, mixing Max and Sarah was similar to combining lighter fluid and a match, it had always been that way.

“I will have you know that I am very helpful when I want to be.” Max stared at Sarah very intently while he spoke.

“I don’t want to interrupt, whatever this is, but I do need to speak with you Ms. Reyes.” Mr. Rockmiller’s voice snapped her mind away from the tension between Max and Sarah and brought it back to her real problem.

Before she could reply, two balls of energy charged into the room at full speed. Her son hugged her legs with

such force that it pushed her back against her brother. He instinctively grabbed her shoulders to stabilize her, making pain shoot in her arm as she released a hiss from her mouth.

“Sorry sis.” Max sounded frustrated at himself, for not being more careful.

“Mommy, are you hurt bad?” Bobby leaned back enough to look at her with his deep brown eyes. Emotion threatened to overwhelm her as she hugged her son with her left arm, she had missed him so much.

“No, it is like a bad scratch. The doctor is making me where this thing just to make sure I don’t use my arm until it heals. But it is nothing to worry about sweetheart.” She felt her heart warm as she saw the relief in his little face.

“Bobby, Dylan, how would you two like to walk down to the park with Uncle Max and I?” Her brother shot Sarah a look that said he was not in agreement with her. She brushed him off, like she usually did.

“And mommy?” She watched as her son registered that there was a stranger in the room. “Who are you?”

“Bobby don’t be rude.” She ignored the snort that Max let out when she scolded her son’s manners. “This gentleman is a friend of your grandmother and grandfather.”

“Why does he have old man hair?” She felt heat rise to her cheeks, embarrassed by her son’s borderline rude question.

“Bobby...” She started to correct him again, but Mr. Rockmiller cut her off.

“That’s okay, he is right. I do have old man hair. You know that was actually my nickname in basic training. Everyone used to call me Old Man, because of my hair.” As he spoke to Bobby, his face softened, and his green eyes seemed to light from within. Her words died in her throat, she was unable to do anything other than stare at the sexy man in her living room, who was being so kind to her son.

“Can I call you old man?” Bobby asked smiling.

“Sure.” “Absolutely not.” She and Mr. Rockmiller answered simultaneously.

He chuckled a little then amended his response. “Not if your mom says no, buddy.”

“Okay, come on Bobby, your mommy has boring things to talk over with Mr. Rockmiller. Let’s go play on the new play-set at the park.” Sarah suggested, winning her another glare from Max.

The boys whooped with excitement, and she watched as Max’s resolve melted away. When it came to his nephew, he was nothing but a huge softy.

“I don’t know if going to the park without me is a good idea.” She had not expected Mr. Rockmiller to speak up, but he did.

“I will watch out for him.” Max spoke with an edge to his voice; one she had never heard from him before. The two men were locked in some sort of male appraisal

ritual, after which they both nodded their heads as if something had been decided. Men are idiots!

The four of them walked out of the apartment, with Max toting one boy on each of his shoulders. She had to smile at the sight of the people she loved most in the world, going to enjoy the park. The smile faded quickly as she turned back to find Mr. Rockmiller staring at her, his gaze completely unreadable. All she wanted was to soak in a nice lavender scented bath and then collapse into bed, and now she had to deal with the Hawthorne's lap dog.

The woman that curled her small legs under her on the couch he had just vacated, fit this room perfectly. She was clad in tie-dye short overalls, underneath that she appeared almost naked, which had made his eyes bulge when he had first seen her. At least until he recognized that she in fact wore a pink tube top under the colorful clothing. It didn't do much to slow his initial reaction to the woman though, she had come through the door like a lit firecracker.

Her almost sapphire blue eyes were shining with anger as she stepped into him with both feet, speaking her mind with a soft feminine voice. To top it all off, she had a thick ponytail of dark red curls, several of which had worked their way out of the restraint and curled around her lightly freckled face. He probably wouldn't have had to work so hard to control his libido if it hadn't been for her mouth. She had a perfect full heart shaped mouth; it was the type of mouth that begged to be sampled. Which is what his body urged him to do when she first walked in.

“So, Mr. Rockmiller, what do I need to do to get you to leave?” Delilah’s question pulled his attention back to the subject at hand and away from his lusty thoughts.

“Nothing at all.” Seb could see that this was going to be a battle of wills.

Her perfectly shaped eyebrow arched. “Then you will just leave?”

“Absolutely not, I will protect your son. Just like I was hired to do, whether you like it or not.” Seb had to work hard to keep his face a blank mask, the look on her face was adorably funny.

Good lord she is fired up!

“I realize that you are just trying to do your job Mr. Rockmiller...” He could tell she was trying to remain calm, and on the verge of failing.

“Please, call me Seb, we will be spending a lot of time together.” Seb was not prepared for the furious blush that lit her cheeks, as her gem-colored eyes widened.

“You are mistaken, Mr...” He wanted to laugh at how impossibly stubborn she was being.

“Seb.” He intervened, he heard her say what sounded like profanity under her breath.

“Like I was trying to say, your services are not needed here. Period, end of story.” The fire in her eyes, daring him to argue. Seb loved a good fight.

“So, you were not in a drive-by shooting in which your ex-husband died? One in which you and your son

were lucky to survive?" Seb tried to remind her of the severity of her situation.

He saw her reluctance to answer his question, probably already guessing where he was going with it.

"You know damn well that I was." The fire inside this woman awoke something primal inside of Seb. She had enough fight in her for three women, twice her size. Delilah reminded him of a vicious Polly Pocket, and he would be damned if he did not find it sexy as hell.

"Okay, so please explain to me, why you do not need protection for your son?" Seb drove his point home.

"Because whether the shooting was a freak happening or they were after Nate, either way they were not after my son or myself. So, there is no reason for us to have protection. This is all just the Hawthornes trying to obtain some control over Bobby now that Nate is dead." The fire within her faded, replaced with a sorrowful look, that made him want to hold her and give her comfort.

He shook his head to clear his thoughts, he did not hug clients! And he would do well to remind his male instincts that this woman was nothing more than a client. Period!

"That may be the Hawthornes intention." Seb sucked in his breath as her big blue eyes shot up, looking at him, her eyes filled with the raw emotion that only loss can bring. She must have really loved her ex-husband. He forced himself to continue. "But it is not mine. My only intention is to make sure what happened to your ex-husband does not happen to your son."

A picture of the small boy forced its way into Seb's mind, the big doe brown eyes staring up at him. When he first saw her son Bobby, he was transported back in time, to a place he tried not to think of. To a different little boy with almost identical brown eyes, a boy that he had failed. He had failed to protect him from the violent world that surrounded him. Seb swallowed back the emotions that were building in his throat, knowing that it would soon cause his stomach to ache. It didn't matter, the pain was a reminder, a reminder of what happened when you let your guard down and let yourself care.

"Are you alright, Mr. Roc.... Seb?" Delilah was seated on the couch by him, he had no idea how she had gotten there, but he tried not to appear surprised. What would she think, if she knew he had gotten lost in memories and not even noticed her movement? Would she ever trust that he could take care of her son?

"Yes, I'm fine." Seb tried to sound as nonchalant as possible.

"You didn't look fine. You went white as a sheet. It looked like you saw a ghost." Delilah's voice was soft and soothing, it was a struggle to remain professional.

"Don't try to change the subject, we were discussing your situation." Seb was satisfied when he saw the flame reignite inside her eyes.

Good stay mad at me, do not care about me!

She surprised him by rising from the couch and walking to the front door. He tried not to watch as her shapely bottom trounced across the room, but he failed miserably. Seb was caught in the rhythm of her sway as she turned to confront him. He almost wanted this job to

be done before it started, between the woman and the son, this would be an assignment that threatened all of his weaknesses.

“Our discussion is done; you are leaving, and I am going to try and pick up the pieces of my life.” Delilah opened the door as she spoke, sending him a message that he was no longer welcome in her apartment.

He knew that he would make no more head way today, but if she thought he was giving up, she was crazier than her living room indicated she was.

“I will leave,” Seb waited until he saw relief wash over her frustrated features. “For now, but let me ask you this first. Did you see who killed your ex-husband? The car, license, make, model, any detail that could be used to identify the shooters?”

She refused to meet his eyes, and her silence told him that the answer to at least one of his questions was yes. Which meant that this woman and her son, were still in danger and in need of protection.

“That is what I thought. I will be back first thing in the morning to begin my protection detail. In the meantime, I suggest you think about whether maintaining your privacy and refusing help from the Hawthornes, is worth your son’s life.” He walked out of the door, feeling like a piece of shit for being so harsh with Delilah. Seb tried to tell himself that he had no choice, he had to convince her that she needed him.

Chapter 4

Delilah slumped against the door that she had slammed behind the infuriating man that had left so calmly. His parting words stabbed her as sharply as knives. She had not let herself admit how much trouble she was possibly in. The idea that her son might still be in danger, it terrified her.

She knew that she had not seen the men's faces clearly, or the license number, but she had seen the car and it had been rather unique. She didn't think that there were many metallic-blue vintage El Caminos, with black racing stripes down the center, driving around town. She had told the cops all that she saw but had fooled herself into believing that she hadn't seen enough to put them in danger. Obviously, Seb disagreed with her, and his words sank like stones in her belly.

If he was right, then they were still in danger and in need of help, but she didn't trust her ex-in-laws. She knew that they had fought with Nate, urging him to try and get full custody of Bobby. Delilah had always been grateful to Nate for refusing their pleas. If he had sided with them and forced the issue, she might have lost her son. They had so much money compared to her meager counselor's paycheck. Between her wages and Nate's help she got by, but the Hawthornes could provide a whole different world for Bobby. Private schools, country clubs, not to mention the fact that their house is a full out mansion.

Her instincts told her that the Hawthornes, well most specifically Miriam Hawthorne, would love any excuse to take her son from her. The woman had hated her since Nate had brought her home their junior year of college.

Delilah had not known to hold back her amazement at their immense wealth, she had oohed and awed at it. Which had made Miriam paint her as a low-class gold digger, she had never even given Delilah a chance.

Now here she was, possibly in need of help that only money could buy, but without the resources to purchase it on her own. The police hadn't offered her any sort of protection. They hadn't even ruled out the shooting being completely coincidental.

Delilah knew that Nate had been very strained lately, he had told her that the case he had landed was not an easy one. When Nate said that it usually meant that he knew his client was guilty as sin and he hated to defend them, but he was too good of a lawyer to not do his job. It had always been the part of his job that had made her blood run cold, when he got a criminal off, who should be in jail. The night after a case like that Nate would lose himself in alcohol, and she would try to stay clear of him.

She started sliding forward, it took her a moment to realize someone was trying to get into the apartment. Fear gripped her heart like a vice, her gaze raked over her apartment for anything that could be used as a weapon.

Shit! Why do all of my possessions look disappointingly non-lethal?

"Are you standing in front of the door, Pippy? Max's use of her childhood nickname melted her fear away. Replaced by the usual anger she felt when he called her Pippy. Her mother dressed her up as Pippy Longstockings one Halloween, and boom, she was as good as branded for life.