

EXCERPT FROM:

WHAT'S NOT TRUE

Chapter 1

Say Cheese

We should've stayed in Venice. For once, Kassie kept her thoughts to herself and planted both feet on the bottom of the private water taxi Chris had arranged to take them to Marco Polo Airport. Quite the balancing act for a woman with a reputation for opening her mouth and inserting her foot without much forethought.

The challenge of booking a hotel room should've been the first clue that going to Paris in July was a bad idea. The second should have been how difficult it was to get there in the first place. Kassie suggested they take a Thello night train, but trains from Venice to Paris at any hour that Saturday were filled to overcapacity. When she checked flights, she stumbled on two seats on a late morning flight that would land them midafternoon. Perfect timing. The goal was to get to the hotel by dark. They had fireworks on their minds.

"*Sei fortunato. La domando ha guidato l'offerta,*" the fellow at the airline ticket counter said.

Kassie's eyes begged Chris to translate.

"We're fortunate. Demand drove supply." Chris fed her the words, as usual. "They've added flights." When he smiled at her, she melted as she did in their early years.

After landing at Charles de Gaulle Airport, they grabbed their carry-ons and found the Uber driver Chris had scheduled. That was the easy part. The ride into the center of the city was ten times as tedious as normal as the driver meandered through the narrow cobblestoned alleyways, avoiding as much as possible the gridlocked thoroughfares and army of traffic cops, who battled to instill calm among chaos.

"What a cluster," Kassie said under her breath not wanting to annoy the Frenchman, be branded an ugly American, or have Chris accidentally hear what she'd said and interpret it for what she really meant.

If he had, she'd blame the sea of raucous Parisians and wine-fueled tourists that swarmed the boulevards and sidewalks or the rank smell of diesel fuel and car exhaust as the final proof that Paris wasn't always the best idea.

"*Vous êtes courageux,*" the driver said. "*Coupe du monde demain!*"

"World Cup tomorrow!" Kassie and Chris shouted in unison. That explained it. Had they been so into each other the night before they'd forgotten what else was happening in the world? Seemed so.

In any normal year, Paris in July was mayhem but manageable, with the Tour de France and Bastille Day celebrations. Add France playing in the World Cup finals? *Mon Dieu.*

Chris wrapped his arm around Kassie's shoulder. "I don't know, I think being fortunate and brave in one day is a good thing." He leaned in and kissed her cheek. "A sign, wouldn't you

say?”

“Perhaps you were fortunate to have found me alone last night,” Kassie said with a slight shove of her shoulder into his chest.

“And you’re the brave one to take another chance on me,” Chris whispered in her ear.

Kassie turned and gazed out the car window. The squabble that ensued between her heart and her mind prevented her from noticing the quaint and bustling neighborhood bars, cafés, bookstores, and wine shops they passed. Preoccupied, she wondered whether their time in Paris would launch Kassie and Chris 2.0, or would it be a summer pilot that would be cancelled once they returned to Boston and their attempt at reconciliation became a reality shitshow.

Paris was easy. Three thousand four hundred and thirty-five miles away from home, they were free to take up where they’d left off a year ago with no ramifications. Lovers, albeit with a past. A past they’d swept aside the night before in her hotel room in Venice. But second chance? Not so sure. Not so fast.

Chris had caught her off guard. She’d had no time to assess the situation, to make a list of the pros and cons of going round two with him. He didn’t even ask. She didn’t say no. Would she have if he had?

Once the driver pulled up to Hotel de Fais de Beaux Rêves, Chris jumped out and ran to open the car door for her. She interlaced her fingers with his, as she had in bed last night, and stepped out of her comfort zone and into unforeseen territory. Before her trip to Venice, she’d taken the year to demonstrate her total commitment to the company, to her boss, and to the board. No more distractions, she’d promised herself. Achieving the gold ring at the top of the corporate ladder had replaced the possibility of a lifetime with Chris.

And then he showed up uninvited. In St. Mark’s Square of all places. Pandemonium exploded inside of her. Maybe if she hadn’t been sitting in the same café where she’d met him six years before, she would’ve had the strength to rebuff him. Flashbacks blurred her ability to think logically. His piercing blue eyes fixed on hers dismantled any strength she had to tell him *this*, whatever *this* was, would not be a good idea. She feared if she blinked he’d be gone. And truth was, she didn’t want it to be a dream and had touched his hand, almost pinching him.

Kassie thought she’d buried the memories. Damn it. Where was Bad Kassie when she needed her alter ego to stand firm, or sit firm as it were, and reject the game Chris and her best friend, Annie, conspired to play?

“Let it be,” he’d said. So she gave in, letting the magic of Venice reawaken her desire and longing for him.

Last night under the covers, Chris had suggested moving their reunion from Venice to Paris. A fresh start, he proclaimed. Kassie agreed, though sensing she was losing control. Fast. Of herself and the situation. She’d surrendered to Chris, to Annie—coconspirators at the top of their game—when her plan was to be on top of hers.

That’s how she found herself in Paris.

As Chris grabbed their roller bags and slapped the driver on the back, Kassie stood like a statue gawking at the faded green splintered doorway and sorrowful facade of the hotel.

“Doesn’t look like they’ve painted since the Revolution.” Kassie bit her lip.

“Beggars can’t be choosers.” Chris nudged her toward the entryway.

“Less than twenty-fours?”

“What’s less than—”

“Spouting proverbs already?”

“That’s your gig, Kassie, not mine. Just saying, we’re lucky again. Lucky, we’ve snagged a place to stay at all. If it doesn’t work, we’ll try somewhere else.”

Kassie had called her assistant, Vicki, late Friday night and didn’t have to beg her for help finding a place to stay in Paris. Always the resourceful one, Vicki phoned her counterpart in the local office of Calibri Marketing Group. Didn’t matter it was in the middle of the night, global partners ignored time zones. Vicki’s contact found a room for them at a centrally located Saint-Germain hotel.

Vicki peppered Kassie with questions about the change in her vacation plans.

“You’re with Chris? How’d that happen?”

“A setup. Between him and Annie. What are friends for?”

“You okay with that?”

“What? Their grand plan, or being here with Chris?”

“Either. Both.”

“They gave me no choice. It is what it is.”

“A new beginning maybe? And Paris, the City of Love, Kassie. Ooo la la!”

“We’ll see. Nothing’s changed. I’m just taking one day at a time.”

“Is Chris?”

“Ciao,” Kassie said.

“It’ll be au revoir in France. Don’t be confused. Think before you speak. Remember where you are.”

Kassie signed off knowing exactly where she was. And who she was. Neither time nor country would change the past. Twenty-four hours ago, a future with Chris appeared inconceivable. Now, that impossibility faded like the doorway of the Sweet Dreams Hotel.

“This is a first, you know?” Kassie said turning toward Chris.

“For what?”

“We’ve never checked into a hotel together as a couple before,” Kassie whispered as her eyes widened, yet blind to the vaulted ceiling and rich antique interior of the lobby.

“Passports, si’l vous plaît.”

The clerk opened their passports and announced *Kassandra O’Callaghan, Christopher Gaines* aloud.

Kassie swiped her damp forehead and tapped her fingers on the mahogany reception desk. *Oh, God.* They weren’t married. Would that be a problem?

“We’re in France. Relax,” Chris mumbled, standing to her left and giving her a reassuring squeeze around her waist.

I’m having an affair with my husband’s son, and he’s telling me to relax. Kassie hoped

the clerk wasn't a mind reader.

She reached for the gondola necklace Chris had a jeweler craft for her more than a year ago, pressing her lips together as she remembered she'd left it home, swapping it for her Moissanite solitaire pendant when the gondola came to symbolize a wish she'd assumed would never come true.

I'm having an affair with my husband's son. Kassie continued praying the clerk didn't have Superman powers and couldn't see the invisible crown of thorns she'd worn for more than a year bearing those words. A mere scarlet letter would've fallen far short of describing what she had done. And what letter would it be? A for adulteress? C for cougar? S for stepmother?

Oh, no. The clerk looked at her and then at her passport. Had she said the words out loud?

"Is something wrong?" The saliva in Kassie's mouth vanished like the onset of a tsunami. She tried to lick her lips. Nothing. She rummaged in her purse for ChapStick.

"No, no, Madame. Or is it Mademoiselle?"

"Madame," Chris interjected, saving Kassie from having to answer.

When Kassie's eyes hit the floor she noticed the exquisite Persian rug she'd been standing on, shifting from one foot to the other.

"We have a message for you, Madame. An envelope." The clerk disappeared.

"What's wrong?" Chris said.

"You have to ask? What if he knows?" She gulped.

"Knows what?"

"Who you are. Who we are. I don't even know if I'm a mademoiselle or a madame."

"Standing here you're madame, upstairs you're my mademoiselle." He winked.

The clerk handed Kassie a light green envelope. She stared at it and stuffed it in her purse.

"Aren't you going to open it?" Chris accepted the room key from the clerk and led Kassie to the stairs.

"Later. Probably a snarky welcome note from Vicki. She's the only one who knows I'm here."

"Or Annie."

"How's that?"

"I emailed her. She wanted to know about Venice. If the flamingo had landed."

"Really? You two have become rather chummy."

"I needed someone to talk to. You don't have a problem with that, do you?"

"I'll think about it. But a flamingo? Am I a code word now?"

"It's her idea. She feared someone had kidnapped Bad Kassie. Have you been keeping your head in the sand lately?"

"Don't believe everything you hear. Bad Kassie is on hiatus. Keeping her head down, but not out. She'll be back when the time is right."

They gasped for breath and laughed as they reached the fifth floor, neither willing to

admit how they'd struggled to get there.

"Wow. If this is the last room they had available, I'd like to see the others," Chris said.

Kassie flipped on the antique chandelier, tossed her purse on the floral slipcovered Queen Anne chair, and twirled. "It's beautiful."

She flung open a door to a modern full-size bathroom. "Look! A shower and a tub. Imagine that!"

"But is there a toilet?"

"Ah, yes! And toilet paper, too!"

Chris ran his hand across the light blue French provincial drop-leaf desk in the far corner of the room.

"Don't get any ideas. No work while we're here, you hear?" Kassie walked up behind Chris and wrapped her arms around him.

"You're right. This week is about you and me. No distractions from me, I promise." Chris turned and kissed her forehead.

"We have a great view. Look." Kassie pulled away, opened the French doors, and walked onto a small deck with a round wrought iron table and two chairs. The aroma of freshly baked bread wrestled with the box of pink, purple, and white geraniums on the railing of the deck. The bread won.

"I'm starved."

"Me too, Mademoiselle."

An hour later, Kassie was sure she'd died and gone to heaven. The boulangerie across the street, not Chris, was the source of her desire. Confident Kassie was onto something before they were otherwise occupied, they followed her nose and discovered croissants of every variety imaginable. Baguettes to die for. And melt-in-your-mouth chocolate bread, reminding her of the bread she and Annie pigged out on every day when they'd vacationed in Saint-Martin.

A few doors down, the distinctive smell of fresh cheese was too delicious to ignore. A quick stop at the fromagerie and then the wine shop was all they needed for the perfect late lunch on the intimate porch off their hotel room.

Chris found a corkscrew in the desk and poured the chardonnay in wine glasses also provided by the hotel.

"To us," he said. "May today be the first day of the rest of our lives. Together."

"To us."

Kassie sliced the brie and fed Chris, followed by a kiss.

"Reminds me of Meg Ryan in *French Kiss*."

"Hope not. We have plans for the night." Chris laughed.

"Hold that thought." Kassie went inside to find her purse. "Time for a selfie." She returned with her iPhone and the light green envelope the clerk had given her.

She sat on Chris's lap, took a picture and a sip of her wine. "It's not Italian, but it'll do." She giggled and settled in her chair.

Kassie delicately unsealed the envelope, planning to add it to her cherished souvenir box at home. Her eyes widened and her cheeks flushed as she read it to herself.

“What’s French for oh, crap?” She covered her mouth.

She handed the letter to Chris. He read it aloud.

Kassie, Sorry to intrude on your vacation, but your timing couldn’t be better. I need you to swing by the Paris office. Since you’re in town, Mimi wants to bounce an idea off you. She’s expecting you Tuesday at 10. I know I can count on you. Merci et bonne chance, Tom.

“Maybe we should’ve stayed in Venice,” Chris said.

Chapter 2

Mommy Dearest

The crowds in Boston that July weren’t as insane as they were in Paris. But the sports mania was, and the craziness would last more than one day or one month. On that Friday the thirteenth, the Red Sox entered the weekend with a ten-day winning streak. They were in position for a winning season if they could hold off the Yankees, who everyone knew sucked.

With Patriots training camp opening in two weeks, proverbial paranoid purveyors of any and all things related to Boston sports were already down in the mouth coming to grips with Julian Edelman’s four-game suspension and the continual undercurrent of a Brady-Belichick-Kraft feud lingering from a disappointing end to last season. Nevertheless, the mid-80s, low-humidity weather kept the mood of Beantown sports fans pumped.

Karen could care less about the Boston sports world. She had her own competition to contend with. Nor did she care she’d be late for work that morning. She was the boss’s girlfriend, and he was the reason she was running behind her usual morning schedule.

“Get in here, doll face,” Mike shouted from the bedroom as she’d stepped out of the shower and the glass door clanged shut. She knew what that meant. Wasn’t last night enough?

With her frosted blonde hair dripping down her shoulders and onto the carpet, Karen stood next to the waterbed, wrapped in one of the new yellow waffle towels she’d bought with his Nordstrom’ card, refusing to use any of the plush white towels his soon-to-be ex-wife had left in the hall linen closet. She wanted nothing associated with Kassie O’Callaghan to touch her skin, except for Michael Ricci, of course.

“Shouldn’t you be getting ready?”

“I am ready.” Mike raised his eyebrows and drew back the new 600 thread count blue Egyptian cotton sheets, also from Nordstrom, displaying just how ready he was.

“We’ll be late.” She dropped her cover and stroked her fingers over the two-inch scar below her naval, reminding him not for the first time what she did for love.

It was nearly ten fifteen when Karen pulled into her son’s reserved space in the Ricci and Son parking lot in her shiny new silver Lexus hybrid sedan. She’d sold her two-year-old Ford F-150

the year before she relocated to Boston from Elephant Butte, New Mexico, leaving part of her past behind before donating another part of herself to Mike.

“New son. New city. New wheels.” Karen had rationalized the expense to Chris when she had him drive her to the dealer to pick up the car.

“But a Lexus? A little over the top for a receptionist’s salary, don’t you think, Karen?”

“Karen? When will you start calling me Mom or Mother? Either would work,” she said, attempting to divert his attention away from the topic of money.

“What about Mrs. Ricci? Would that satisfy you?” Chris said.

“You’re kidding, right? Even after I marry your father, you still won’t—”

“For over forty years Sarah’s been my mother. She still is.”

“And what about Kassie? You call her stepmother?”

“I don’t call her anything. Haven’t called her in months.”

“I’d say that’s a good thing.”

“Enjoy your car.” He’d left rubber and Karen with her hands on her hips in front of the car dealer.

With conversations like that swirling in her mind, Karen was relieved Chris was in San Francisco on vacation. Not only could she take his parking spot, but she’d also have the opportunity to host Sarah and Charlie Gaines for the weekend without having to listen to Sarah and Chris reminisce about his childhood.

“Remember how I’d leave work early three times a week to take you to swimming lessons?” Sarah would say.

“Not sure it helped straighten out my back,” Chris would laugh.

“Or how every six months I’d have to buy you a new pair of Nikes to keep up with your growth spurts.”

“They were way too expensive for kids’ shoes,” Chris would recall.

“You should’ve seen him, Karen, he shot up like a rocket.”

During Sarah and Charlie’s two previous visits from Chicago, she’d clench her fists as Sarah rubbed her nose in the close mother-son connection she wished she had with Chris.

Yes, I should’ve seen him. I should’ve never given him away, bitch.

That weekend would be the first time Chris’s biological parents would host his adoptive parents at Mike’s house. On their other trips, Mr. and Mrs. Gaines stayed in one of the fancy hotels on Boston’s waterfront, giving them convenient access to Chris who still lived in Charlestown in the furnished apartment he’d rented when he moved there from San Francisco the year before.

Karen looked forward to her role as hostess. It would be good practice for her to be the lady of the Ricci household, soon to be her household once she and Mike were married, and he removed Kassie from the deed. Every chance she got, Karen suggested he sell the house and buy something for the two of them. Maybe one of the fancy townhomes popping up in the suburbs with lavish swimming pools, club houses with entertainment centers, and libraries of all things. They had maintenance crews that handled everything. She had no interest in tending to the

garden and all the flower beds Kassie had planted and nurtured over the years.

Karen had raised the issue with Mike as recently as the night before. “This house is paid off, right? Why don’t you sell and invest in a love nest for us?”

“Not so easy. Kassie owns half. I’d either have to buy her out, or sell and give her half. I have no interest in taking on another mortgage at my age. I hope to retire someday, ya know.”

Karen wouldn’t be discouraged. She had no intention of giving up. Baby steps. First the towels, then the house. By the time Karen was finished, any memory of Kassie would be erased from the brain of her husband and her son. Anything she could do to eliminate Kassie from their lives was priority one.

Without his knowing it, at least Chris was doing his part. Thank goodness he’d ended that ridiculous affair he’d had with her. What the heck was he thinking? She was old enough to be his mother. Well, not quite. Sister maybe. When she ranted about Kassie the night before, Mike reminded her Kassie was only ten years older than Chris.

“I thought you liked her?” Mike said. “If she hadn’t reached out to you on my behalf last year, you wouldn’t be here in Boston with me today.”

“But I’d still have my kidney.” For effect, she touched her scar through her jeans, reminding him she was his lifesaver.

“And I’m eternally grateful to you for that. As I would think you would be to Kassie for reuniting you with your son. You should be thankful he was attracted to an older woman. If he were with someone younger, you could be a grandmother. Try that thought on for size.”

“Well, there’s still that possibility now that he’s free of *her*.”

With that thought, Karen’s stomach growled. She needed coffee bad. Mike’s sexual appetite left her zero time for breakfast before she left the house. Now at the office, she could hear laughter and the microwave timer pinging in the kitchen where some staff members were getting their second or third refill of the morning. When she walked in, you’d swear crickets made more noise.

“Good morning, everybody. Sorry I was late. Something came up with Mike.” Karen grinned, as she forced her eyes to twinkle.

No one laughed, as all but Bill scattered to their desks.

“Some calls came in, Karen. I left messages on your desk,” Bill broke the silence.

“Anything critical?”

“Chris’s father called.”

“What? Mike?” Karen’s eyebrows squinted, confused.

“No, Charlie Gaines called. He asked for you.”

“Mr. Mahoney, when will you accept that Mike is Chris’s father. Ricci and Son. Get it?”

“My bad. Chris is a lucky guy. Two fathers and three mothers.”

“Three? Just me and Sarah.”

“Don’t forget Kassie. Stepmother, right?”

“She’s yesterday’s news. Technically, Bill, she’s nothing to him.”

“Time will tell.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Karen popped the K-cup into the coffeemaker. She waited for an answer that failed to come. Bill walked out, yet his quip lingered as he left her all alone in the kitchen.

“Damn it.” Karen burned her tongue, rather than holding it. She had no regrets. In a few months, she’d be Mrs. Ricci, the majority owner’s wife. Bill would not be able to deny that. He’d be farther down on the ownership succession totem pole than he was since Chris became a partner last year.

Tough luck, old boy.

Karen grabbed her iPhone and the pink messages off her desk and closeted herself in the conference room to call Charlie. The other messages would have to wait.

“Hey, KC.”

“Don’t call me that, Charlie. You know how much I hate it. It sounds too much like Kassie.”

“I know. That’s why I do it. I love to tease you. Reminds me of old times.”

“You’ll need to keep those memories under wraps this weekend, okay? Promise me, that.”

“You got it. Where were you when I called earlier?”

“Taking care of business. Not that it’s any of yours. You still arriving at five?”

“Yes. Sarah can’t wait to see you . . . and Mike. She’s disappointed Chris won’t be there.”

“I bet she is. Maybe next time.” Karen hoped her pissed off attitude hadn’t traveled through the airwaves. “Boston Coach will meet your flight. Look for a man with a sign.”

“A man? That’s pretty sexist even for you.”

“Whatever. Just get here.”

It was after eleven when Karen finally started her work day. The switchboard buzzed as soon as she sat at her desk.

“Good morning, Ricci and Son. This is Karen Copperman speaking.” *Soon to be Karen Ricci.* She inspected her nails, making a mental note to leave the office early to get a mani/pedi, then forwarded the call.

She pulled the *National Enquirer* out of her bag. Pretending to read, she felt hands on her shoulders. Only one person at the office would do that.

“You were great this morning,” Mike whispered in her ear.

“Watch it. No PDA in the workplace, boss. I might have to report you to the authorities.” Karen licked her lips, ensuring the game played on.

“Hate to ask you this.”

“What, here? Upstairs? I’ll get someone to watch the phones.” It wouldn’t be the first time they’d had sex in his office.

“You wish. But that’s not it. I need you to run to the house. Amelia’s locked out.”

“Amelia? Who’s Amelia?”

“Teresa’s daughter. Teresa’s not feeling well, so Amelia’s going to clean. She thought she had a key, but then remembered she gave it back to me a while ago.”

“Can’t she come here?” The last thing Karen wanted to do was get involved with the hired help.

“That’d be rude. Listen, take the rest of the day off. Get ready for Charlie and Sarah. Go have a massage, get your hair cut. Whatever floats your boat.” Mike took out his wallet and handed Karen both his AMEX and a Visa card. “Knock yourself out.”

“You think I need a haircut?” She pulled a small compact mirror out of her desk drawer and ran her fingers through her hair. “Really?”

Though happy to get the hell out, Karen lollygagged her departure from the office. She dropped her coffee cup in the kitchen sink, made a trip to the ladies’ room, and swung by Bill’s office to tell him Mike gave her the afternoon off to get ready for dinner that night. She’d catch Bill and Nancy at the house later.

“See you all Monday,” Karen announced as she strolled out the door. No one returned the sentiment.

She took her time driving to Mike’s house, stopping at every yellow light, and going at least ten miles slower than the speed limit.

Indeed, a car was parked in the driveway when she arrived, but no one was in it, and no one loitered on the front steps. *Where the hell is she?* Maybe Amelia had a key after all.

“Hello?” Karen called out when she entered the house. No answer. She walked around the first floor, a bit spooked. Standing in the family room, she recognized a squeaking sound coming from outside.

“Oh, there you are,” Amelia said as she got up from the back porch swing. “You must be Karen.”

“You’re Teresa’s daughter?” Karen hoped Amelia didn’t notice the surprise in her voice.

“I am. You took so long to get here, I thought maybe Mike changed his mind.”

“About what?”

“Oh, nothing. Let’s go inside.” Amelia followed Karen, who tucked a lock of her hair behind her ear.

Karen stepped aside as Amelia headed for the kitchen.

“Would you join me for a cup of coffee? No time for lunch today,” Amelia said.

Stunned, Karen passed on the offer as she observed Amelia move around the kitchen as if it was her own.

“You don’t live here do you, Karen? Mike said you don’t. Not until after the divorce.”

“No. Not full time yet.” Karen was at a loss for words. Her brain cells exploded as she tried to figure out how this woman, who looked like Sophia Loren in her prime, was a cleaning lady. Since when were skinny jeans and a red V-neck tee shirt appropriate for scrubbing floors and toilets?

“So, you probably don’t know if there’s anything that needs particular attention?”

“No, the usual, I guess. I assumed you’d know what to do.”

“When Kassie lived here, she’d leave a list. She loved lists.”

“Is that so?”

“Grocery lists. Exercise lists. Instructions for taking care of her cat.”

“Cat? I forgot about the cat.”

“Yes. Topher. What a lovey he was. I miss him, even though he made it harder to clean.”

“Don’t worry, there’ll never be another cat in this house,” Karen murmured.

“What? Oh, never mind. I know how Mike likes things.”

Karen disappeared to the master bedroom to get out of Amelia’s way, but mostly to think. How did this woman know so much about Mike? He’d never mentioned Amelia, but Amelia sure as hell knew about her.

“Excuse me, Karen?”

Karen turned toward the doorway where Amelia stood holding what appeared to be DVD cases.

“Do you mind if I come in and put these away? I don’t mean to disturb you.”

“No. Come on in. What have you got there?”

“Oh, just his porn,” Amelia winked at her and headed for Mike’s walk-in closet.

“Where did you find those, and how do you know—?”

“Tucked in the side of his Pleasure Chair. He used to keep them there. Apparently it’s true, old habits do die hard.”

“I guess.” Karen realized there was much about Mike she had yet to learn, if she was so inclined.

“You know, when I walked in here and saw you sitting on the edge of the bed, I could’ve sworn you were Kassie. Mike was right. There is a strong resemblance. Of course, she’s thinner than you.”

Amelia went back to doing whatever high-and-mighty, hot cleaning ladies do. Karen did what she had to. She picked up her phone and called her salon. “Hi, it’s Karen Copperman. Can you take me now? What? The works.”

Chapter 3

Splitting the Difference

Mike looked forward to spending the weekend entertaining the Gaineses. In a way, they’d have their own University of Chicago mini reunion. The four of them had partied hardy there, and it would be easy to pick up where they’d left off. Combined with good food and a steady stream of liquor, there was sure to be lots of laughs and do-you-remember-whens.

But there’d be no sex. At least not in his bedroom. He made sure he’d given Karen a more-than-satisfying poke that morning, hoping it would hold her until next week after the Gaineses were gone. He had no desire to broadcast his huffing, puffing, and middle-aged orgasm

to Charlie and Sarah who would be sleeping within earshot in the spare bedroom.

Speaking of Karen. More than likely she was at the mall, shopping 'til her bags weighed more than she did. He'd given her the opportunity and means to enjoy herself. No reason why he shouldn't enjoy himself as well.

Mike packed up his briefcase, wished his employees a good weekend, and whistled a happy tune on his drive home. Leaving early on a Friday afternoon was not a habit of his. If the team stuck it out until the bitter end of the week, then Mike would as well. Yet, if there were a better excuse for skipping out early than Amelia, he couldn't think of one. And with Karen off with his credit cards, she'd be occupied and contented as a dog getting a tummy rub for hours.

Sure enough, Amelia was still doing her handiwork when he arrived home.

"Amelia, where are you?"

She greeted him in the kitchen with an ear-to-ear smile that stirred him below the belt.

"Glad it's you, not Karen again."

Mike walked to her, pulled her close enough to let her know how happy he was to see her, and kissed her slow and hard. The pressure of her breasts against him and the smell of her perfume reminded him of the last time they were together.

"How far have you gotten?" he whispered, stroking her long dark hair.

"Almost done. Why?"

"Come with me, sweetheart." Mike took Amelia's hand and led her to the family room and the Pleasure Chair. History was about to repeat itself.

"What about Karen?" She unzipped and slid his pants down and slung them on the couch.

"She won't be back for a while." His breathing intensified. "I gave her my credit cards." He chuckled as he returned Amelia's favor.

"I mean, if you're going to marry her, should we be doing this?"

"That never stopped you when I was married to Kassie."

"Actually, you still are."

"Oh, right. Then this shouldn't be a problem for you, or me."

And it wasn't.

Amelia left the house at about four after straightening up the family room for the second time that day and after Mike wrote her a check for three times the normal cleaning charge.

"Hope this isn't for services rendered." She waved the check and tucked it within her cleavage. "I'm not that kind of girl."

"I know you're not. I'm just feeling generous today. And I missed you. Think of it as an anniversary gift."

Amelia kissed his cheek and held his hand. "Here's Karen's key. She asked me to lock up when I was done. Let her know I took care of everything." Folding his fingers over the key, she winked and was on her way.

Mike climbed the stairs two at a time. He felt better that day than he had since the transplant. As he showered, he realized he'd had sex three times in twenty-four hours. If his

kidneys weren't going to kill him, his sex life certainly would. *What a way to go.*

Mike checked his watch. He had some time to kill before Karen got home and Charlie and Sarah arrived. They'd be lucky to get to the house by six if their plane was on time and Logan wasn't insane. And then there was Friday night rush hour to battle.

He patrolled the house ensuring no evidence of his latest escapade with Amelia lingered. Kassie never had a clue. Now was not the time to slip up with Karen.

Everything appeared in order, if order meant the way Kassie had liked it. Relatively little had changed since she'd moved out. Oh, there were minuscule changes like the new yellow towels Karen bought that reminded him of urine and the new blue sheets, too. Nonetheless, the house decor was vintage Kassie. Each room appeared as if it had frozen in time, museum-like. Not a piece of furniture had been rearranged or removed. Bookcases throughout the house still shared their shelves with his favorite biographies and Kassie's historical fiction and best-selling novels. Every nook and cranny in every room, including the bathrooms, contained reading material of one form or another. Mike was good with that, even if it irked Karen, who rarely picked up anything to read other than the latest supermarket tabloid. Maybe that would change after they were married and his habits rubbed off on her.

Mike wandered into the room that had been Kassie's office. He still thought of it as hers. Hard not to. Like Kassie, it was neat as a furniture showroom. Though uncluttered, framed pictures of various sizes of family and vacations were aligned like soldiers taking a stand along the credenza and sofa table. A lone eight-by-ten picture of Topher stood watchful guard on her desk. Was it his imagination or could he smell vanilla, her favorite bath gel? He soaked it in and rubbed a twinge in his chest. He parted the drapes, which Amelia must have closed, and pulled the door shut.

Next stop the dining room and the wine rack. Out of habit, he grabbed two bottles of pinot grigio. He removed Christmas gift tags that read "To Kassie, Love, Mike," and put the bottles on ice. There was plenty more where those had come from.

Mike picked up the checkbook he'd left on the kitchen counter and headed to his home office. He returned it to a small box and locked it in the bottom drawer of his desk. He sank into his big leather chair and flipped through the past week's mail. Amelia had sorted the envelopes and magazines mostly by size, putting *Playboy* on top. A sticky note with a smiley emoji stared at him. He left it there.

Without opening them, he set aside the gas and electric bills, water bill, trash collection bill, a Visa bill, MasterCard bill, AMEX bill, and Nordstrom bill. "You really should get e-bills," Kassie's voice echoed.

He opened a letter from his lawyer. It simply confirmed completion of the work they'd done in conjunction with his accountant over the last month to finalize the divorce settlement and review his will. The divorce agreement with Kassie was pretty much locked down. With the court date set for September, they'd determined his will was in good standing until such time he might want to make any changes, perhaps after the divorce.

As things stood, if something happened to him, Kassie would inherit a sizable amount of

his wealth. It would have to stay that way. At least for now. That was okay with Mike. Though their marriage failed, he owed her a lot. Just because you can't live with someone doesn't mean you don't care for them. Maybe he'd even leave her something in the revised will after the divorce, as a reminder he was a nice guy after all.

At first, they both thought the divorce process would be complicated. There was a lot at stake. His business, the size of their combined and individual wealth, her inheritance from her mother, and the new tax laws. In one joint meeting they'd laughed when his lawyer said, "At least there's no alimony or child support to fight over." Mike figured Kassie went along with the joke only to be polite.

And they didn't have a prenuptial agreement. When Mike and Kassie married thirty years ago, prenups weren't popular. Even if they were, they came into the marriage with little in the way of individual assets. All of their wealth came from working hard, building Ricci and Associates—now Ricci and Son—investing, and inheritance.

Before negotiations got serious, his advisors warned him the business could be a bone of contention with Kassie. When he'd made Chris a partner, Mike gave him a small 10 percent share, leaving 90 percent divided evenly between him and Kassie. If he were going to buy her out, the business would need to be valued and a cash payment made to her.

Rather than get into a pissing match with the attorneys, one morning Mike invited Kassie to breakfast at Panera Bread. On his way he stopped at the florist and still arrived a few minutes early to snag a quiet booth away from incoming traffic. He placed a single yellow rose on the table and had her favorite English breakfast tea and a blueberry scone, warmed, on a plate with a knife and fork ready and waiting. Four brown paper napkins aligned the white kidney-shaped plate. The tea was double-cupped and sleeved just the way he knew she preferred.

"Hope this is okay?"

"Great. Thanks. What's this all about?" She rubbed the tips of her fingers like she always did, anticipating the cup would be too hot to handle, then lifted it and nodded. "Perfect."

Mike talked about how the business was thriving and how Chris brought new energy to the office even though Bill was a little ill at ease with him.

"Competition can be healthy," Kassie said without mentioning Chris's name.

Mike complimented her, reflecting on how critical she'd been in making the firm a success over the years. He'd always admired her for maintaining her marketing career separate from his.

"Thanks. I thought if we'd worked together we'd have divorced much sooner than now."

Mike let that slide. Instead he moved on.

"I'm wondering," Mike said, "how to handle the value of the business. Your forty-five percent could be a significant chunk of change for me to come up with or finance along with everything else."

"I've been wondering about that, too. My attorney keeps telling me to get all that I'm entitled to. It's been such a long haul. I have no desire to screw you, Mike. You must believe that."

“I do.” Mike resisted reaching across the table to touch her hand.

“Where have I heard those words before?” They both laughed and shook their heads.

“We’re both creative, Kassie. Surely, we could come up with an alternative that works for both of us *and* our attorneys. Don’t you think?”

Kassie abruptly excused herself and got up. Mike could see her put her phone to her ear as she walked past the registers.

Mike wasn’t sure who she was talking to or where this was headed, but he appreciated how cooperative she’d sounded so far. Bad Kassie was nowhere in sight.

“Listen, Mike,” she said, sliding back into the bench seat. “Like I said, I have no appetite to make any of this any more difficult on you than it already is. You’ve had a helluva year. I get that. Looks like you’re doing okay?”

“Yes, I am. Thanks. Go on.”

“Here’s an idea. Obviously, if I received a huge lump sum from the business, I’d get screwed tax-wise. Why don’t we amortize my share over a period of years?”

“Spread it out, you mean, over time? How many years?”

“I have no clue. Why don’t we have those that do have a clue value the business and then give us several different scenarios?”

“Good idea. See, that’s why I married you,” Mike said.

“It’s important they know what our goal is.”

“Which is?”

“Minimization. The burden on you, and the tax impact on me. It could be a win-win, I think.”

“And then there’s our retirement accounts?” Mike rubbed his hands together.

“Isn’t that out of our hands? As I understand it, soon after the divorce we’ll need to retain a separate consultant to value and distribute those accounts. From the statements I saw last year, the size of those accounts is pretty equal. There are laws and formulas. It is what it is.”

They’d finished their meet up by talking about Topher and how Kassie was thinking about going to Venice with Annie in July.

“I need to get going.” Kassie moved to leave.

“This is for you,” Mike said, sliding the rose toward her. “Still friends, right?”

“Ouch.” A thorn pricked Kassie’s finger as she picked it up.

“You okay?” Mike asked.

“Yes,” Kassie said, sucking the slight cut. “You doing okay?”

He leaned down to kiss her cheek. “Yup. And Karen’s fine.”

She stepped back, her neck and head rising like ET. “Really? I don’t recall asking.”

Mike shook his head and touched her arm, reminding himself that Bad Kassie was never more than a heartbeat away.

The doorbell and a knocking woke Mike. It was 6:23 according to the digital clock on his desk. He gathered up the mail and shoved it in a drawer and shuffled to the front door.

“Hey there, you two. Come on in.”

Charlie crossed the threshold past Mike like he owned the place, leaving Sarah and their bags on the front porch.

“Let me help you with that,” Mike said, picking up the largest gray roller bag and guiding Sarah into the entryway.

After hellos and how are you were exchanged, Mike rolled the biggest bag in front of Charlie and directed the Gaineses to their upstairs bedroom in case they wanted to get settled and freshen up. *Where the hell is Karen?*

“Where’s the lady of the house?” Charlie said.

“Charlie, you know Karen and Mike aren’t married yet. Technically, Kassie’s still the lady of this house, am I right, Mike?” Sarah piped in.

“Yes, she is. Legally. For a few more months anyway,” Mike murmured as he showed them their room and the adjoining bath, hoping to change the subject.

“Once you and Karen are married, I’m sure you’ll change all that and make a proper woman of her. You’ll make her part owner of Ricci and Son, too, right? How about that? You could change the name again to Ricci and Family.” Charlie laughed.

Neither Mike nor Sarah shared his joke.

The doorbell rang again.

“Excuse me.” Mike left his houseguests to unpack. He pulled back the white lace curtains covering the narrow window next to the front door. He didn’t recognize the redheaded woman whose back faced him and hoped she wasn’t trying to sell him something he neither needed nor wanted.

“What took you so long? Charlie and Sarah should be here soon.” Karen spun around and sped past him.

“Uh, they’re here already. Where have you been? What’s with the red hair?”

“You like it?” Karen primped in front of the small blue-framed antique mirror in the hallway.

“Why’d you ring the doorbell?”

“I had to give Amelia my key. Speaking of, how well do you know that broad?” Karen closed in on Mike.

“Later, Karen, okay?”

“Oh my god, thought I heard your voice. Look at you!” Charlie descended the stairs two at a time and spun Karen around. “Hey, Sarah, doesn’t Karen look fabulous?” Charlie said, never taking his eyes off her.

Leaving Karen and Charlie behind, Mike touched Sarah’s arm and led her to the family room. “How about a drink?”