

**Dice Maddox** was once a great private investigator. As fate would have it, her partner died in a fatal car accident. Dice ended up in a dead end job with a cheating fiancé. She has had enough and would like to reclaim her old life, or a piece of her old life. The problem is going back to work as a private investigator; she is facing many unforeseeable challenges. She wonders if she can do this kind of work again. Then Ryan Winters walks into her office, she isn't sure if he is crazy or sane but he needs her help. After a recent car accident, he finds himself married to a gorgeous woman who he has never met before. She's hiding something. The closer Dice looks into the case, the more she finds herself wondering whether, the woman is a demon or an alien? What has she gotten herself into?

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# Maddox Files: Back to Business

R. J. Davies Mornix



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g u t t e r

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Warmest thanks and best wishes to you all,  
R. J. Davies Mornix

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## Prologue

An unseen battle was happening in the universe. It's a power struggle between good and evil. She chuckled at the thought. As the battle wore on, the lines between the two were getting blurred. Good was mucking up things and getting their hands dirty in the process ... real dirty. They no longer could hold their heads high and look down their noses at her kind.

It was becoming more of a battle between those with good intentions and evil ... at the end of the day, was there any difference? There was none that she could see. Yet, as a dutiful warrior she would trudge on for her team. Earth was another playground where its occupants were merely pawns in this drawn out struggle. Back on Earth, she inhaled deeply. Smelling them ... the humans were everywhere, it was like a childhood memory. She had some good times here.

Power ... control ... these were the weapons of choice for her side. The tug-of-war raged on. Sitting in human form in a small cafe ... she mused as she kept a watchful eye on him sitting across the room from her. They sat in the same small restaurant.

Her target ... Mr. Ryan Winters, young, strong, handsome ... but more importantly brilliant. Catching him now before he became successful was a power play move that would pay off in the long run. Fragile ... the whole lot of them ... including Mr. Winters. She felt comparable to the wolf hidden amongst the flock of sheep in sheep's clothing ... mingling with them, smiling at them ... all the while plotting and planning against them.

On the outside, she appeared to be a very attractive female, and this time around she would go by the name of Lily Winters.

She spied her prize sheep across the room. He was keeping a watchful

eye on a table where two young ladies were seated and deep in conversation. They hadn't noticed him. He sat alone, reading or pretending to read a book. The woman that captured his attention appeared attractive, average height, fit ... and her dark hair had the ends tipped blue. He waited until her friend got up and left, then approached her. He said something ... she laughed, then got up and left.

It was a wise move. Lily Winters was not going to let her sheep stray too far. No, no, no, she had plans for this one. A delicious grin spread across her red lips as she watched Mr. Winters pay his bill and head back to his office like the good little sheep he was. She mused at the thought of her delicious plans for him.

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# Chapter One

April 12<sup>th</sup>

Thursday 9 am

**D**ice Maddox, a twenty-six year old Toronto born native, who felt ... trapped. Engaged to a man she fell out of love with ... stuck in an unfulfilling job. Trapped ... she felt like the last bit of air on Earth was running out and there wasn't anything she could do to stop it. The walls of reality were closing in and the lies she told herself were no longer a comfort. What more ... receiving her neighbor's mail on a regular basis was getting on her last nerve ... how hard was it to put a "B" on your address! She shared her condo with her fiancé Chris Douglas. It was just the two of them residing in 410A, Unit 731. Looking in her mailbox one would think there was a ménage à trois going on up there. Clicking her tongue against the top of her mouth as she sorted through the pile; Sean Larke, Sean Larke, Dice Maddox, Sean Larke, Dice Maddox, Chris Douglas, and Sean Larke. More mail for her neighbor than for her fiancé and herself. How was that possible? Frowning, if he wasn't such a nice guy she was tempted to sock him in the nose. It has been ongoing for the last four months ... an ongoing annoyance.

Sean Larke her new neighbor ... sort of. He lived in the condo right beside hers. Chris Douglas her fiancé, lived with her in 410A, Unit 731 Queens Quay. However Sean Larke lived in the building beside theirs on an angle from them in 410B, Unit 731, the two condos formed a 'V' shape and shared some of the building's amenities. Tucking the mail meant for Chris and herself back into the mailbox she would collect it after her run. Still holding Sean Larke's mail she stepped outside and felt the cold

wind against her exposed skin. It was April 12<sup>th</sup> a couple more weeks and it would be spring with the exception that Mother Nature forgot about spring in her neck of the woods. It felt so far away. She hurried over to the second building and entered the lobby. The inside security doors were wide open. It looked like someone was moving in or out. Stepping over to the elevator she reached out and pressed the button.

The elevator doors opened and Sean Larke was standing there. He stood five-eight, dark hair; dark mysterious eyes, that always looked like he knew a secret he wasn't sharing. He wasn't very tall but he was fit for the most part. A little soft around the middle, yet his personality made everything else forgivable. As soon as he saw her his lips twitched into a smile. Stepping off the elevator, he leaned in close to her. He smelled so good. For a man who worked in construction it was just wrong that he smelled so good. Shame on her for noticing, she wagged an imaginary finger at herself inside her mind. He whispered in her ear, "we have to stop meeting like this, people will talk." A shiver snaked down her back, the outside door behind them, opened and then closed as someone came in. Sean chuckled, the soft rumble sent a tingle down to her toes as the sound filled the small lobby; it was like a cat purring.

Swallowing hard she cleared her throat. "Fat chance of that," She wasn't sure why but he made her feel a little uneasy. It could have been just the fact he was a very handsome and every time she was around him she couldn't help noticing it. Guys like that weren't supposed to be smart too. It wasn't right. It just wasn't fair to the rest of the male population. Aside from that construction workers were supposed to look a little rough around the edges, yet Sean Larke's edges were all smooth, maybe, too smooth. Her suspicious instincts were kicking in again.

"Dice Maddox, how are you this beautiful morning?"

"It would be if I wasn't being your secretary," she frowned and held out his mail to him.

He didn't make any movement to take the mail from her. Instead he looked her over. "You look different, new jogging outfit?"

"No, here's your mail sir."

"Your mail sir?" he shifted a little ignoring the mail in her hand that was extended out to him.

“Please take it I am in a bit of a hurry this morning.”

“Where do you have to go? It’s your day off isn’t it?” He didn’t wait for an answer, “yes, I’m right. Ah! Your hair!” he reached out and touched the ends of it. “You got a haircut ... and tipped the ends blue?” he raised an eyebrow at her locks. “What a bold statement, not everyone can carry this look, you know.”

She flicked his hand away, what would he know about women’s hair? “I happen to love it. So does Chris.” She lied. Chris hated it and wanted her to re-dye the ends to a darker normal color.

“Well he does have great taste; he’s marrying you after all. I have to agree with him. You have that personality that makes this work.”

She shoved his mail at him and turned away. “Have a good day Mr. Larke.”

“Hey I thought we agreed you’d call me Sean? I’ll meet you tomorrow out on the trail, stay warm!” he called after her.

He had joined her on runs a few times. It wasn’t uncomfortable then. In fact she liked his company, but she would never tell him that. Stepping back outside in the nipping cold air, she zipped up her jacket and stretched her calves then her arms.

“I wished I didn’t have this morning meeting or I would join you,” Mr. Larke was standing behind her. She felt her insides dance around. Skip your meeting a little voice in the back of her mind sang in a little singsong voice. He stood behind her. She closed her eyes, inhaled the crisp cool air ... opened her eyes and shoved the thoughts of wondering how Sean Larke would look dipped in chocolate ... just chocolate and nothing else. Thank God people didn’t come with thought bubbles over their heads, she would never be allowed to leave home.

“Enjoy your meeting,” she stuffed her ear buds in, as she smiled to herself. The world around her melted away ... back into the deep recesses of her mind as she started off. Images of chocolate and the little voice disappeared as well. Starting off first slow, allowing her body to adjust to the cool air. At lunch yesterday, Tessa told her she needed to figure out what she wanted to do. She kept giving up things that she enjoyed. Her freedom ... her career ... she had lost her partner who was also family when he died. Now she was in a soul sucking job, spending her

nights alone for the most part working on a conspiracy website. Intending on marrying a man who had cheated on her of course it was a while ago since that had happened. People were entitled to one mistake in a relationship, were they not? She had her quirks and character flaws as well, she had enough of them to spare and to share. There were just no takers. There were just a couple of nagging issues that gnawed at her, he was preoccupied with his work the last little while and then there was the lack of commitment on both sides. She wasn't a clingy person, which made her feel at odds ends. Staying with Chris was making her feel clingy. Did she love him still? Not like she should, that was more her fault than his. Was Tessa right? Was Dice just staying with Chris because she didn't want to be alone? Didn't want to be like her Aunt Sophie? Feeling her muscles loosen and warm up against the cold wind. Pressing on she tried to shove the thoughts out of her mind. She wasn't her Aunt, she wasn't staying with Chris because she was afraid to be alone ... at least she didn't think so. Picking up the pace a bit she focused her attention on her surroundings. Spying a middle age couple in the heat of an argument on her left it looked like the man was on the losing end, as his ladylove whacked him across the face. Then her eyes found a young mother trying to coax her toddler to cooperate, he was having nothing to do with that. He was content to make snow angels and didn't care if mommy was going to be late for work. People ... she loved people. She used to be a private investigator. It seemed like another lifetime ago. Considering she was just twenty-six it might have been a different lifetime. She had quit her job. It had been one of the toughest decisions she had ever made. Three weeks before she stopped doing what she loved more than life, her boss died in a car accident. He wasn't just her boss. She was eighteen when she got her private investigator's licenses and found Eric Lawson in the help wanted ads. He didn't want anything to do with her at first, but he was the only detective agency looking for a new private investigator at the time. After two weeks of surprising him several times with different disguises he agreed to take her on. It was supposed to have been temporary. She stayed on, and then he met Aunt Sophie. Eric and Aunt Sophie got married six months later.

It was great until Uncle Eric died. His death brought back the pain

of her parents' death; they had died in a car accident when she was five. No one wanted her. She had almost ended up in the system. Aunt Sophie caved and took her in; she wasn't the parenting or nurturing type. Aunt Sophie made sure she had a roof over her head, clothes on her back, and it kinda stopped there. It wasn't until her Aunt met Eric that Dice knew her Aunt had loved her. Dice had started dating Chris about two months before Uncle Eric's death. Chris expressed that he didn't like her job. Didn't think it would be appropriate for him, because after all it was all about him. Chris and Aunt Sophie banned together after Uncle Eric died, coaxing her into quitting the business.

Before she knew it she was working for a call center as a tech support agent at home. She knew some technical things and was surprised that the company trained everyone right from the basics. In retro spec, she should have realized it was a dead end job, going nowhere, and it was an unfulfilling job nonetheless. It made Chris happy and her Aunt was less worried about her. If she didn't want to be alone ... her aunt had expressed several times that she could go home anytime she wanted. Growing up she never felt like her aunt's house was home. She had no idea how much her aunt adored her. When she was in high school she paid for the on-line course out of the part time job she had. The college at first was not interested in allowing her to take the course; they thought she was too young. She called them, spoke with several people and sent a few letters. Next thing she knew she got an acceptance letter and a bill in the mail.

Now here she was in a job she hated, concocting conspiracy theories and posting them on-line. There was a huge crowd out there that loved her work. It was her way to still stay in touch with researching, digging into things and finding a theory that might be plausible. Everyday she got emails from fans, they thought she was brilliant or that she was working for the government undercover trying to stray the sheeple. The sheeple being the general public that normally didn't ask any questions.

It all boiled back down to people. She couldn't do a job that didn't involve people. Well not just people, digging in to things, researching, seeking the truth...

Before she knew it she was standing back outside her building ... wow that run went by too fast. She had too many things on her mind this

morning. Heading inside she stopped and gathered her mail. Scooping it up, Dice headed over to the elevator and found a little piece of folded paper with her name on it, stuck to the wall. The elevator dinged and she got on pressed her floor number and unfolded the paper. On the inside it said "Thanks". No indication of who sent it. Just her first name scrawled on the front "Dice" and then "Thanks" on the inside. She folded it up and stuffed it in her pocket. There was a birthday card from her Aunt; her birthday was a couple weeks away. Chris got a credit card offer and more junk mail.

Getting off on her floor she went down the hallway and to her door. Unlocking it she went inside and locked herself in. She was home. It didn't feel like home. It did at one point before Chris moved in. Now it was just a place where she stayed. She was beginning to think maybe Tessa was right. Which was kind of frustrating because she had been alone most of her life, or at least it felt that way when she was growing up with her Aunt. Maybe she was staying with him just because she was afraid to be alone again. Didn't he deserve better? Didn't she deserve better? In her mind, she cursed her friend for putting those ideas in her head. Kicking her shoes off at the door she pass the kitchen and headed up the stairs of her loft condo, to their bedroom and grabbed a change of clothes.

Within minutes she had showered, dressed and fixed her hair. Cut the ends off, or dye it ... Chris was off his rocker! There was no way she was changing her hair she had already changed so much of her life for him. She put a little make up on and stopped at her computer. Turning on her laptop she went back to the kitchen and made herself a quick bowl of cereal. Sitting at her computer she checked her email. There were a few more email inquiries about her conspiracy website. There was the one guy that always emailed her and wanted to meet her because he felt they were kindred spirits. He always signed his emails "your friend". Today he was commenting on her posting from last night. In truth she had been feeling a little melancholy last night and suggested that maybe the society that they lived in, was in fact a rouse. The illusion of control, democracy, the flea circus that people came to see with ooo's and ahh's. Perhaps we should tear down the illusions and just admit it reality is a communistic ...

dictatorship. The government is carrying on with their secret agencies, and their secret divisions ... operating right under everyone noses. In all fairness she did make a couple other accusations and perhaps went a little too far.

Mr. Your Friend thought she was spot on. He commended her on her intelligence and insightful perspectives. When Dice checked the email and tried to trace it, it was like a ghost email. It didn't belong to anyone, nor did it exist. This made her feel a little uneasy about her new friend. Who was he? Or she? Dice had more questions about the individual than answers. She chuckled as she got an email from a pastor from another province. In short it was 'you are desecrating and polluting our world with your heathen spoken and written words. You must stop now or you will burn in hell forever'.

"Guess I'm not on your Christmas card list this year," she smirked. She refrained from responding. There was no need, to rile the already riled. Smirking she put his email in another folder. Just in case.

Logging into her website, she went through the comments and selected the ones she would allow to be seen. She added a few that were controversial just to stir the pot and spark some discussions and more ideas. It was something she had discovered over time.

She kept a conspiracy theory website. No one had ever approached her to tell her she was going too far, nor had any government agents showed up on her front door and demanding to go through all her notes, files, or her home. As far as she was concerned, no one on the government scale had even blinked an eye in her direction. Which meant one of two things, she wasn't being controversial enough or her antics were so way off that no one in the government took her serious. Either way she was no threat. This was okay with her because Chris had an image he wanted to keep up with.

She took her bowl to the kitchen, cleaned up the small pile of dishes in the sink and then headed back out. She was meeting her friend Tessa for lunch again. On the way down, she wondered if there was some truth into what her friend was saying. Could she be clinging to Chris for all the wrong reasons? Frowning, she realized she had used the word 'clinging'; it was like a calling card to their relationship. Swallowing hard as she

stepped off the elevator she headed over to her car and didn't like where her thoughts were taking her. Self-reflection was sour antidote that should always be taken with liquor, Uncle Eric would say. Shoving the thoughts out of her mind she drove around for a bit and found herself outside the old Lawson Investigation building on Eglinton Avenue West. Sitting in her car she watched the people passing by, they had their own lives; no one even gave her a second glance. She parked in her favorite parking spot across the street from the old office. It was a place she liked to come to and sit ... think and reflect.

A small voice in the back of her head whispered ... you have enough money to open up Lawson Investigation again. Chris paid for all their expenses, condo fees, food, etc. It had been something that irritated her at first but she worked and stashed her money away. She did have enough to open Lawson, or maybe one called Maddox Investigations? Shaking her head, she thought ... no, that was her past. There was a reason why people moved on; being stuck in one place will leave you stagnant and unable to evolve. She couldn't go back. Chris would never allow it for one! Her Aunt Sophie would throw a fit, for another. No, what was that saying something about not going back home. Home? Did she feel like Lawson Investigation was her home? In many ways, yes it had done so much for her. When she went looking for a place, Uncle Eric told her that she had saved him. But it was more in reference to the fact that she introduced him to her Aunt.

Could she go back? Should she go back? Was there a possibility of returning to that life? The little hairs on her arms began to stand up. She felt goose bumps at the thought of returning to that lifestyle.

Sense of reasoning swooped in and caught her. No, no there was no going back. Can't return home, she shook her head. Why was she torturing herself in coming here? There was nothing good that could come from this. Starting up her car she checked her mirrors and pulled out. Her mind was distracted with wild thoughts that she had presented herself. The notion of opportunities that no longer existed and yet, there they were; so close she could almost taste them again.

She felt a little choked up at the mere thought. It was a cruel twist of faith wanting something and not wanting it. No, that was not true she did

want a piece of her old life back. Being trapped in a job she didn't love, just going through the motions at work, at home and in life in general. Dice Maddox was too young for this! She had to decide. There were so many things she needed to come to terms with. Putting those thoughts on the back burner for now, there had to be a change in her life, there just had to be one. She just couldn't live like this anymore.

Biting her bottom lip she pulled back out into traffic and headed over to her friend's workplace for lunch. Tessa was in the office alone and she was shouting on the phone to someone who wasn't doing their job. Dice sat down and looked around the office. She had been in there a few times, but she never looked around.

Tessa worked for Larke Construction. The same guy who lived in building B, it was Sean Larke. The guy she became secretary for when it came to his mail. She had found out a couple weeks after he had moved in that he was Tessa's boss when she was trying to set her up with him. It was never going to happen.

Frowning she picked up a magazine and began flipping through it not looking at anything nor reading it. A distraction ploy she used to distract that little voice in the back of her mind that was singing *'Maddox ... Maddox Investigations ... need someone checked out? Need someone followed? Need some racy pictures? Only one place to call ... Maddox Investigations, if you have a case that needs to be solved. Call ... Maddox Investigations.'*

Clearing her throat she put the magazine down and got up and began to pace around the waiting room. Sean had a nice business. The Larke Construction's waiting room was crisp, clean, inviting, and professional. Much like the owner himself.

"Sorry about that!" Tessa grabbed her by her by the arm and led her out the front door. "So how was your run?"

"It was good."

"Anything new or exciting that I should know about?"

"Sorry, nothing since yesterday. What about with you?"

"Nothing here either."

"What will we talk about over lunch then?"

"Dice you're such a tease."

Forcing a smile she was sure Tessa had something up her sleeve. ‘*Only one place to call ... Maddox Investigations ... if you have a case that needs to be solved ... Maddox Investigations,*’ haunted the back of her mind in a soft singsong jingle.

Lunch was fantastic. Tessa was on the ball she had checked into the rental space beside Larke Construction who also owned the place and if a certain Investigator wanted to get in on it. Tessa was ready to put in a good word with the landlord. She meant well. She did, Dice kept reminding herself, so that she wouldn’t strangle her friend. If she hadn’t been thinking similar thoughts about getting back into the business it may not have bothered her so much. Dice did want to reclaim herself. Hanging a sign up over her door and getting back into familiar territory. The one thing or person stopping her was ... Chris. She loved him ... she did, it just wasn’t the kind of love she imagine she’d have for someone she was getting married to. He was a good person. But the question she had been asking herself for the past month did she love him enough to give up a piece of herself?

Growing up she never felt that family connection. She had felt abandon and alone most of her life. When Eric became Uncle Eric ... it was the only time she knew her Aunt Sophie had any feelings for her. She had a family, an Aunt and Uncle who loved her. It was great. Until her uncle had died. Her Aunt’s love never faltered, it’s just at that point, her aunt felt like she had lost enough people in her life and didn’t want to lose anyone else. When Chris got anxious about it, they had banned together. Dice had been grieving for a man she respected and adored. Eric was a father figure she never had. She had not only grieved for his lost but for the loss of her parents too. Giving in to Aunt Sophie and Chris seemed like the right thing to do at the time. Yet looking back now, she wasn’t so sure.

Dice wasn’t getting any younger. She needed to decide settling down with Chris and having children with him ... or doing what she loved? Tessa was going on about how the place just needed a fresh coat of paint and some nice furniture in there.

“Aunt Sophie and Chris wouldn’t allow it,” she took a gulp of coffee and rested it back on the table with great care, resting between them.

“This isn’t you. This isn’t making you happy. Find another job then.

Forget about investigation. It's too dangerous anyways. Find something else. That job that you're in is sucking the life out of you."

"I am in need of a change. I just don't know what that change will be yet."

"Well just quit your current job, it's not like you need the money."

"I know but I need to be doing something or I'll go crazy. I'm not a sit at home and watch the television kind of girl."

"No you're not. Maybe you should go back to school and take up accounting?"

They both laughed. "Sure like that would ever happen."

"Alright Dice. I just want to see you happy and you haven't been for a long time. What's going on with the wedding plans?"

"He's wanted to book a date, but we can't decide on anything."

"Is it him or you, who doesn't want to concrete this wedding into place?"

"We just couldn't agree on a date. We're supposed to make another attempt at it next week. I'll let you know when, and if anything is finalized." She had been finding excuses and dragging her heels but didn't want to admit it.

"Please do. I expect to be your matron of honor I should at least know when this is going to happen."

"Of course is there anyone else I would trust with that?"

"Best not if you know what's good for you."

"So, what are your plans for tonight?"

"Evening in with Chris, he's making dinner and then we're watching a movie or something."

"Such an exciting life you lead now. I remember a time when ..."

"The past is the past, let's not bring that up again shall we?"

"I'm just saying the old Dice Maddox would be cringing on the inside if it was dinner and a movie."

"That's not true."

"Do you hear yourself? Am I lying on you?"

"I think it depends on the company," her lips creased to a grin. "And the movie..."

“Okay, you got me there, love. I better get back to work. It’s what we normal peasants do during the day.”

“Ha, ha, ha,” Dice mocked. Maybe taking a college course or two might be a great distraction. Putting that thought on the back burner she would let it simmer for a bit.

Tessa got up and hugged her almost straggling her to death, then kissed the air by her ear, pulling back there was that look again. It was becoming the poster child, for whenever Tessa looked at Dice these days ... a sad frown.

“Your face is going to freeze like that,” Dice teased.

“And it will be your entire fault,” a small grin broke the frown.

“You’re going to be late.”

She nodded and patted Dice on the shoulder than left. Dice lingered a little longer at their table and watched the people around her. Everyone was deep in conversation except for a gentleman who was sitting reading a book. He was an attractive man, maybe a little older than she was. The book he was reading was titled, ‘The Single’s Man Guide to Travelling Around the World.’ He glanced up and noticed she was looking in his direction. His lips twitched in to a full on smile with teeth and that ‘how are you doing?’ look in his eye. He tucked his book under his arm. Taking his time, he drew himself up to his height of ... she guessed it to be about 5 feet 10 inches. He moved toward her allowing her the time to take in his whole appearance. Grant you ... yes, he was very attractive. Maybe women swooned when he poured on the charm. Dice wasn’t most women though, how unfortunate for him. He was a little prettier than Sean Larke.

“Hi, I noticed you noticing me,” he sat down in Tessa’s seat. “My name is Ryan Winters, what’s yours sugar?”

“My name is sugar,” she smiled and got up. “Enjoy your trip,” she strolled over to the counter paid her bill and left. Stepping outside it hadn’t gotten any warmer since morning. She was going to take a walk, but decided to head back home.

Twenty minutes later she was sitting in her living room with a good book. Trying to read the same page for the third time, she decided that it was useless. Putting the book down beside her she looked around at her condo. It was hers before Chris moved in. Everything felt off for the last

few months. Maybe it was just her? She felt a little off. Was it because she wasn't doing what she loved? Did she blame him for it? No one could stop her from being an investigator if that is what she wanted. Was it, what she wanted?

Getting up off the sofa she trudged over to the balcony. Stepping outside, she was grateful she had her slippers on; the concrete under her feet was freezing. Rubbing her arms, she shivered from her head to her toes.

Across from her was Building B. She wasn't sure, which condo her running partner lived in, but he was at work. Doing something he loved doing. Chris was at his job doing what he was meant to do. What would Uncle Eric tell her? Would he be disappointed that she stopped working? Biting her bottom lip, a sigh escaped her lips; she just wished she knew what to do. What she was doing now ... it was not satisfying, plus she was not happy. There was just no way, to sugar coat it. Could she just be depressed? Could it be the weather? It wasn't so simple to pick something out of a hat or thin air and label it ... say; yes that's it ... then fix it. A gnawing in the pit of her stomach told her it wasn't just one thing. Clicking her tongue against the top of her mouth she rubbed her arms and gave the area a sweeping look. Popping back inside, she closed the sliding door behind her and decided to stop down at the gym. A work out might put her in a better mood.

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## Chapter Two

Thursday 5:14 pm

**S**tepping out of the shower, the tension she felt earlier had melted away. She felt a little achy; maybe the workout was a little too much. One of her problems, she never did know when to give up. Toweling off, she wiped the steam from the bathroom mirror and saw a glimpse of a woman she once knew. There was a knowing in those eyes looking back at her. It wasn't there yesterday. It assured her that there was something coming. She was going to go back to work ... work that she loved doing. When did she decide this? It didn't matter she knew it was something she had to do. The corners of her mouth twitched into a smile. Yes, it was a decision she was mulling over and now she had come to that conclusion. She could no longer pretend to be this woman that Chris Douglas wanted. If he wanted her ... he would have to want all of her. There were going to be some changes in the next few days.

Wrapping the towel around her she headed into her bedroom. The ensuite was nice to have and it offered privacy whenever she had guests over. She hadn't had that many people over since she bought the place. They were too young to be living like this. She made a mental note to herself that they should have a party soon. It was a two bedroom, loft condo, 924 square feet with two floors. The bedrooms were upstairs with the ensuite bathroom attached to the master bedroom. The two bedrooms opened into a cozy area that was like an extra seating room, which was open to the downstairs in a loft format. It was open concept and the floor to ceiling windows offered plenty of sunlight. The two buildings were on an angle

to each other with a vantage glimpse of Lake Ontario. The glass windows didn't offer much privacy, but then her second floor was shielded with the balcony of the people who lived upstairs. One of her favorite things about this place was the sound proofing ... unless you had your windows open or the balcony door open, you couldn't hear what everyone else was doing. The design of it was breathtaking. Long white silky drapes that had an oriental feel to them covered the large two story windows if she wanted her privacy. Dice had lived there for five years and absolutely loved the space. She never noticed her neighbors peeking in on her at all. Sure they would look over and some would smile and wave at her from other balconies when she sat outside, but they were a good bunch. Dice lived on the 17<sup>th</sup> floor and there were 30 floors all together. She loved everything about her condo and couldn't imagine living anywhere else in the world. Living on Queens Quay right on the waterfront could be a little pricey but she loved the old feel to this neighborhood, the area she lived in was referred to as Old Toronto. Her aunt lived in North York, which was less than half an hour drive away. Downtown was where all the action was. When she first moved in she was always out meeting new people.

Slipping into comfy yoga pants and a tank top, the material soft and hugged her like a glove, she pulled her hair back and clipped it. Cleaning up after herself she went back to the kitchen and began to make some dinner. The kitchen was an open concept. She pulled out some vegetables from the fridge and placed them on the counter. Looking up she could see her dining room and living room. Everything was in its place, neat and tidy. The sun was creeping across the wooden floorboards. Leaving a cold shadow in its wake, the sun was going to set. Ahead she anticipated longer days ... the air was promising.

Sniffing, she shook her mind free from that, turning the radio that rested on the counter on. A rock station came on and filled the room with a fast upbeat melody. Washing then prepping her veggies, she began making a stir-fry. She got herself a glass of wine and began setting the table for herself and Chris.

"Hey babes, I'm home." Chris walked in just as she was placing the food on the table. "Hey, I was supposed to make dinner tonight."

"Great timing," she smiled not looking up.

He dropped his briefcase by the door and dumped his keys in the tray on the side table by the entrance. It was the same thing he did every night he came home. "It smells delicious in here."

Closing the gap between them he hugged her from behind. "What did you do today?"

"Not much went out for lunch with Tessa."

"Oh her," she couldn't see his frown, but she could feel it. He kissed her cheek. "I hate to do this to you, but I have to leave in a couple hours. It's a business trip."

"Kind of sudden isn't it?" she decided she would hold off on telling him of her plans to go back to the investigation business.

"You made my favorites I feel like such an ass. I'm sorry I have to leave town for business. Maybe I should call Bill and ask him to send someone else."

"Would you?"

"Sure give me a minute." He pulled out his cell phone and began dialing. "Bill, hey there I ..." he headed upstairs to the bedroom and she could hear them chatting. She couldn't hear the exact words of their conversation, however, every so often he would laugh. He came out wearing a frown to find her finishing up setting the table. She knew by the look on his face that he wasn't going to be home that night.

"I can have dinner, but then I need to pack the plane leaves in 2 hours, you know how they are at the airport. I should be checking through security as we speak."

Nodding, the news sealed the deal of waiting until he got back for that talk. It wouldn't do to get into a fight before he left on a business trip. She did care for him and didn't want to ruin his evening any more than she had to.

Closing the gap between them he hugged her, and whispered against her hair. "I promise I'll make it up to you." There was sadness in his voice she didn't like it. She hugged him tighter.

Nodding she patted him on the back and they separated. Sitting down he began to eat then paused. Looking at the table he tilted his head a little and their eyes locked ... "Is there something you wanted to tell me?"

Chewing, she smiled and shook her head. He nodded and continued

eating. Nothing more was said as they ate in silence; each caught up in their own plans.

He pushed himself away from the table. His lips spread to a grin. "That was amazing baby."

Smiling, she nodded and began clearing the table. He headed off upstairs to the bedroom to pack. The last two months, this seemed to be a common occurrence. A small part of her wondered if there was something else going on. Biting back the suspicion, she reminded herself she wasn't going to practice being an investigator on Chris. He had given her no reason to be suspicious. Or has he? No, no she shoved the thought out of her head. Sighing she tried to focus her attention on cleaning the kitchen. The problem with that was ... it was clean within minutes and all the leftovers put away for tomorrow.

He was standing by the door. "I'm going to head out now; you know how busy it is at the airport. I should have been there by now." She crossed the room and he pulled her close, he smelled so good that was one of the things she liked about him. He always dressed sharp and smelled so good. It was a quick kiss on the lips and then he was out the door. Staring at the closed door for a few seconds, she frowned.

Blinking, she sighed and she turned to face her quiet condo. Crossing the living room she sat down in the sofa and turned the television on, flipping through the channels for anything interesting. Turning it off, she stretched out on the sofa and noticed across from her by the door was his briefcase. Her eyes went wide like saucers.

Jumping up, she slipped her shoes on, grabbed his briefcase, her purse, car keys and drove off. She had to hurry if she wanted to get to the airport before he boarded the plane. Taking the stairs was quicker, she thought as she hurried. Her footsteps echoed through the corridor as she raced down taking the stairs by two, floor after floor, until she reached the underground parking lot. No one got in her way. Bursting through the doors, she hurried across the pavement to her car. Within seconds she was gunning the engine and moving through the underground lot. Seconds later she was above ground and headed towards the airport. She tried calling him on his cell, but he wasn't picking up. He could have turned it off.

Finding a parking spot was easy. After making the 30-minute drive in 20-minutes she sprinted across the parking lot and into the departure entrance. The airport was busy, but she knew which airlines he preferred, and she hurried over to that area. She stopped, looked around searching like radar for a familiar bleep.

The thought that maybe she should just page him entered her mind. Yet, if he was in a hurry he may not even hear it. She kept looking for the check-in lines. He couldn't have cleared security so fast. Could he? Dice hurried but scanned each departure check in line until she saw him.

She spotted him standing in line getting ready to go through security, and there was a young woman in front of him. She looked a little familiar. Tall, thin, blond, maybe twenty or early twenties, she had seen this woman at his office a few times. Dice hurried over to him, "Chris!"

"Dice?" his smile faded as their eyes locked.

"Hey," she smiled.

"What are you doing here?"

"What are you doing here?" the woman standing next to him demanded grabbing Chris's arm and moving toward Dice.

"I'm sorry, who are you?" Dice looked at her.

He shook the woman off his arm and pushed her aside. "What are you doing here honey?"

"Do I need a reason to see my fiancé off at the airport when he's taking a business trip? You forgot your briefcase at home," her eyes never leaving his lady companion. "Chris who is she?"

"My assistant, she is Bill's niece. He insisted I take her with me. Thanks for bringing this, I would have been looking for it in about twenty minutes and kicking myself in the ass for leaving it behind." He stepped between the two women getting Dice's attention. Smiling down at her. "Thanks honey for always looking out for me."

"You're welcome. I have to admit I was a little concern when I saw her there."

"Don't be." He kissed her.

"This is bullshit!" the young assistant interrupted them. "He's been lying to you idiot. We've been sleeping together for months. This isn't

a business trip it's a vacation to Cuba." She kicked Chris in the leg and stormed off. He bit his lip and began to nurse his injured leg.

"She's a little crazy too, did I mention that?" he smiled at her.

"Are you sure about that? Let me see your airline ticket."

"I'm sorry what?"

"I want to see the ticket. Now," she growled.

"It's an e-ticket," he began to protest. "Honey, don't be like this. People are looking."

She grabbed his phone and began pressing buttons.

"Dice this is ridiculous. Come on give me back my phone, I gotta get on the plane."

"You're such a liar Chris!" she shoved the phone back at him revealing the e-ticket destination Cuba. Storming out of there, she couldn't believe she was such a fool.

She didn't care who was watching them or her. The tears burned her eyes as she blinked them back. Swallowing hard, she hurried to her car. How could he? Little blond bimbo was right; she was an idiot. Fumbling with her keys, he grabbed her arm.

"Dice wait please," he pleaded. "I love you."

She turned and looked at him. Hot tears tumbled down her cheeks. Shaking her head, she couldn't look at him. Her voice had left her. She couldn't even tell him to go away. Swallowing hard she bit back a sob.

"Dice please, I am so sorry. Please tell me what I can do to make this right. Please say something. Please tell me what I can do to make this right with you. Please Dice ... say something. Dice please."

Swallowing again she sniffed. "Don't come back to my condo! It's my home not yours anymore." She unlocked her door and got in. Jabbing the key into the ignition she started up the car and tore out of the parking lot. About a couple blocks away she pulled over into an empty parking lot and she had a good cry alone in her car.

She had been so dumb in the first place. Once a man cheats once ... god, she knew the statistics on this! How could she have fallen into this trap? What was she thinking? Things weren't going great with them, but they had been committed to each other. At least she had thought so. Letting it all out, she sat there in the quiet of her car and watched as

vehicles zipped by mostly heading to the airport to pick someone up or to drop someone off, people carrying on with their lives. What scared her most was that she felt relieved. She shouldn't have felt so relieved if she was so in love with him. But it still hurt. She still had feelings for him. If she didn't it wouldn't have hurt at all.

After fifteen minutes she wiped her eyes dry and sniffled. Checking her mirrors, she got back out on the road and headed home.

He had cheated on her four years ago just before she found out about her Uncle's death. She was enraged. Loyalty and trust was high on her priority list. He had broken two of her most important rules. The first time when she found out, she was going to break it off with him. In fact she told him off and told him she didn't want to ever see him again. Then her Aunt Sophie called sobbing that Uncle Eric was in an accident. Dice felt distraught.

She was too young to know the loss of her parents; she was only five and didn't remember them. She never cried or grieved for them. Well, she had stopped talking for a few months, but that was the extent of it. Her Aunt had taken her in, when she had no one else to care for her. Her Aunt was reluctant at the time to take on the burden of raising her. Dice was a good girl growing up. She brought home good grades and never got in trouble. In fact she kept her areas clean and no one noticed a child had lived in her Aunt's home. It was a little tough growing up without a parental role model. Her Aunt Sophie could never have been accused of being a helicopter mom. Not until she met Uncle Eric, then she wanted to be involved in everything Dice did. At first Dice thought Aunt Sophie was just trying to be the perfect mother role model for Eric's sake. Then she realized it was worse. Aunt Sophie had realized she had kept Dice at arm's length the whole time she had raised her. When she realized that Aunt Sophie wanted to right the wrongs, she had tried to be as understanding as much as she could. When her Uncle died it had gotten even worse. Aunt Sophie didn't want to lose her too. It was like strapping on training wheels to everything she did. All of a sudden she had found herself working alone and taking over the business was unheard of.

Chris ... even though she said she didn't want to see him again, he refused to leave her knowing her situation all too well. He apologized

and promised it would never happen again. Dice couldn't deal with him. The pain of losing the only father figure she had, who was also her partner at the office was a crushing blow. It made her realize that she missed all those moments of not having her parents around while she was growing up without them. She also was angry that she missed them so bad. The stories her Aunt Sophie had told to her over the years were the only things that kept her close to her parents. Not having them around left a gaping hole in her life. She always felt alone. She kept everyone at a distance. Growing up, her Aunt Sophie had done that too.

It was the final blow that that pulled the carpet of reality out from under her feet. Her Aunt Sophie became the overprotective and always an interfering parent. Dice felt like she had fallen into a bottomless pit where she couldn't tell up from down. Her world was tossed this way and that way. Getting up in the morning was a chore. The next thing she knew Chris had moved in and he was the person who helped her reclaim herself. He became her friend and before she knew it he had proposed and she couldn't believe her own ears, when she heard herself say yes. Getting a job in tech support wasn't hard. She had mastered the fine art of surveillance in her old job. Surveillance and computers ... she knew how to get around computer software, and operating systems ... it just all came easy for her.

It had been a mindless ... unrewarding job. It didn't provide any challenge. It did provide her with an income, and the convenience of working from her home. She had an office already set up in her two-bedroom condo. After a couple months of working at home she got back into running which invigorated her back to her normal self to some degree. Starting the conspiracy website was another act to help keep her connected to her old life of solving mysteries. Running and the website were the life preservers that kept her afloat. Every day she woke up, she felt like she was losing a bit of herself in a strange new life. When she looked at herself in the mirror she no longer knew who she was. The young woman staring back at her looked old and lost. The stranger staring back at her in the mirror just wanted to survive one day at a time.

She was more than that, wasn't she? Here she was sitting alone in her car sobbing over a man who kept compromising her own relationship

standards. It was the same man she was going to break up with earlier that evening and here she was sobbing over him. He didn't deserve her attention. He didn't deserve her tears. Yet, he had been there once when she needed someone and she had no one else. He took care of her.

Dice Maddox decided she was stronger than this. She was capable of taking care of herself, of being in charge of her own life. That meant following her passions. She was no longer going to stay in relationships that didn't work for her. In fact she wasn't going to get married. Not every woman in the world wanted to get married and have children. It was just a piece of paper anyways. She was one of those women who didn't think she would be a great role model or mother figure. Getting married was something that didn't interest her. Men managed to have random relationships to satisfy themselves on a pure physical level all the time. If they could do it why couldn't she do the same?

Being free of that prison ... the prison of lying to herself and staying with someone for the sake of not being alone was not her. She never would have accepted it before. In fact, her Aunt was so worried that she would be alone for the rest of her life until she met Chris. Aunt Sophie didn't want Dice to be alone. That was for Aunt Sophie's reasons. Aunt Sophie felt so guilty over the way she raised her, blaming herself for Dice getting into private investigation and for being so distant with people on an emotional level. Dice didn't see any emotional distance on her part. She could no longer live for other people. This was her life. This was her one and only life here on Earth.

There were no second chances. No do overs or extra lives. She was her own boss. Deciding that she was no longer going to be someone else's missus? She felt better ...stronger ... Dice loved being with men; that wasn't going to change. However, she was done being the doormat for men who didn't deserve the time of day from her.

She was angry with herself, for staying in the relationship with Chris even after she found out he had cheated on her the first time. Living with him was like living with a stranger. In fact it reminded her of when she was growing up.

Growing up with her aunt they sort of lived separate lives. Maybe, it was her? Maybe, she was just incapable of having a solid relationship

like those you see in movies and read in books? When she was younger, sometimes she would only see her Aunt Sophie at dinnertime, but not for much else. Once in a while they would take a family vacation, which was when Aunt Sophie had to go away for work and it was longer than a week. She would take Dice with her. Dice didn't like it much ... sure she got to see some of the world. For the most part it was being trapped inside a hotel room reading books or playing with dolls. As she got older she was able to sign up for tours and visit libraries, museums and art galleries. But she always did it alone. People didn't notice her much because she just blended in with the other tourists.

Dice had learned so much over the years. Part of it was the reason she knew she wasn't the motherly type. Kids made her nervous. Kids and animals always could sense fear. Whenever they were around they seemed to migrate towards her. She had heard many times from strangers that their son or daughter didn't take to just anyone she had to be some kind of special. She knew what kind of special that was. Fear. The little beings could sense it and relished in her squirming and uncomfortableness.

Looking in the rear view mirror she saw someone she hadn't seen for a long time. It was a hint of the old her. Trapped in the world that this new Dice Maddox; had created for them. That was then. No more. She couldn't be that person that Chris wanted to have at home and take out for parties whenever his boss called for it. No she was her own person. She felt like she was having a mid-life crisis. Chris was a good guy when he wasn't checking out other women. No ... no he had expectations of her that weren't her. He was just like her Aunt in that respect. They both wanted Dice Maddox to be this nice little housewife who had babies and took care of her lawyer husband. Turn the other cheek when he had his indiscretions. Soldier on when life got tough and not say a word about it. She had been doing that for the last four years of her life. Since Uncle Eric died ... He had been her business partner first and friend. It was only after he met her Aunt that they became more than that. Once Aunt Sophie met Eric. Dice knew ... she knew her life was never going to be the same again. Her boss, partner and friend ... became family fast. Aunt Sophie wasted no time when it came to that. She saw something she liked and she went

after it. There was no making a list of pros and cons. No second-guessing herself, Aunt Sophie just knew.

Dice decided she needed to take control of her own life. She needed to be the one in the driver's seat. No one else could do this but her. She didn't want to wake up and discover she was trapped in a relationship that she didn't want to be in and strapped with kids at the age of forty or fifty. She had already lost herself in so many ways. She needed to be strong she needed to be in control of her life. She needed to be the boss, the head honcho of her own world.

Breaking up with Chris was the first step. It felt a little scary and at the same time she was never surer of anything in her life as she was now. Staying in that same rut that was her life ... it was the slow walk down death row ... it was suicide.

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