

## Protection

Being married to a saint was hard work. You'd think it would be easy being with someone you know will never cheat, never do anything dishonourable, someone who is as respectful and kind as a human is capable of being. I certainly did.

Boy, was I wrong.

Twenty four years. For over twenty four years, we'd lived in that house as a happy family. From engagement to marriage to having our two beautiful children and watching them grow into the young adults they were now. So much history in that one place, so many good times and special memories. All lost now. All because my saint of a husband couldn't walk away.

I didn't know all the details. It was, apparently, better that I not be told the whole story.

What I did know was that my husband had witnessed a crime taking place. A big crime, involving important and wealthy individuals. Mob business. And, rather than walk away and forget what he'd seen, rather than go back to living an ordinary life and never looking back, my *saintly* husband decided to instead go to the police and file a report.

From there, everything happened very quickly.

My husband, I, and our two children, were taken into state custody. Fast-tracked into some form of witness protection program for our own safety.

Everything, the life we'd built over the last two decades, was gone. Friends, family, jobs, money, everything was taken away. Even our names. Our very identities.

Karen was the name on the driver's licence they handed me. Karen Hanson. My husband's new name was William Noel. The kids were Sally and Christopher now. And, according to the various ID packages we'd each been given, they weren't even to be considered our kids any more. 'William' wasn't my husband. 'Karen' wasn't married, didn't have any children.

Why couldn't he have just walked away?

The four of us were led into a room where a balding man sat waiting for us. There were four empty chairs, one for each of us.

"Sit, sit," the man gestured to the empty seats. "I'm sure you all have questions you'd like answered. Get comfortable and ask to your heart's content. From this moment onwards, I will be your guide and observer, the one in charge of your case. Your personal rendezvous and contact. So tell me, what would you like to know about your new lives?"

A flurry of questions followed, everyone wanting to know what was happening, why this was necessary, if we'd ever be able to go home again. When questions about our new identities came up, the fact that none of them were related, the man shook his head sadly.

"We have to split you up, I'm afraid," he said, eyes moving slowly from one person to another. "These men, the ones that will be after you now, are very powerful. We need to do everything in our ability to throw them off the scent. Settling you down as a family of four is too obvious. We have no choice but to separate you."

A heavy silence fell over us all, uncomfortable and uneasy.

"You'll all have plenty of chances to see and talk to each other, what with the backstories we've constructed for you. More on that later, don't worry. For now, we must ensure all four of you blend in perfectly. In cases like this, the greatest risk of being tracked down is through your own actions, your mannerisms and personalities. Changing someone's name will only go so far, you see. If nothing else changes, a person can be hunted down through their known habits and hobbies. In order to remedy that potential risk, each of you will undergo a temporary, and I can not emphasise that word strongly enough, *temporary* personality modification through hypnotic suggestion.

"Now I know that sounds scary, but you have nothing to worry about, I promise.

You'll still be you. Just you with a few small changes here and there. Enough to help keep you hidden safely away."

"I'm Karen," I said into the mirror. "I'm Karen."

Why I was repeating my name, I had no idea. One of those strange quirks I have, I guess.

There was something strange about the face staring back at me through the mirror, something off about it. When had I gotten so old? Why did I look so tired?

I felt like I was supposed to know something, remember something...

Remember what, I couldn't say. But it felt important.

I shook my head to clear the thoughts. Work wouldn't do itself and I didn't have the luxury of time.

Without allowing myself another moment to think, I got on with the early morning business. A quick shower to wash away the drowsiness, then drying myself off and slipping on my uniform - a modern-day cleaner's getup complete with fluorescent green apron.

Then it was down the the corridor to the room I was currently renting out.

I tapped on the door, waited for a response. None came. I tapped again, waited. Nothing.

Business as usual, then.

I placed a hand on the door handle, turned, walked inside the dark room. After flipping the light switch, I walked towards the bed. On it, wrapped in blankets and snoring softly, was my young tenant. I stared down at him for a long moment, then raised my hands into the air and slapped them together in a single, loud clap.

Christopher woke instant, flinching at the sound, eyes blinking open, squinting against the light.

"Mom?" Chris asked, dazed.

"No dingus, it's me. Come on, get your ass out of bed."

Christopher blinked up at me. Realised who was standing over him. Comprehension dawned in his eyes.

"Right, yeah. Sorry."

I rolled my eyes at him. Turned and began making my way to our shared kitchen. It wasn't surprising that the boy had mistaken me for his mother, I mean I was old enough to be exactly that. But still, no woman wants to be called 'Mom' by a younger man. No-one wants to *feel* old like that, even if they were *that* old.

By the time Chris ambled his way into the kitchen many minutes later, breakfast was done cooking.

We ate in silence, both of us too tired and sleepy to spark up a conversation. Though, it seemed, Christopher was awake enough to stop and stare down my shirt when I reached over to pick up his plate. Good to know an older woman like myself still had *some* desirability left, at least.

It wasn't a long walk to the Noel residence, just a few streets. A few roads and the size and stature of the houses changed drastically. From the small, cramped living space of my own house to the multi-story upper-middle class housing that my boss and his bride-to-be lived in.

Chris walked alongside me, rubbing the drowsiness from his eyes and yawning.

When we got to William Noel's large home, me and my tenant co-worker split up, him heading around back to get his gardening tools from the shed and me to the front door.

I let myself in, careful not to make too much noise.

Mr Noel would be awake and out of the house by now, off working whatever whatever well-paying job he had. It was his fiancée that I was trying not to wake.

Sally was, simply put, a gold-digger.

Why else would a beautiful young woman like her end up with a relatively much less-attractive, older, successful man like William? She was, at best, a trophy wife. But everyone must know she was only with William for the money and perks. The girl was young enough to be his daughter.

That, on it's own, wasn't bad. What two adults did privately was none of my business. It was the girl's unbearable attitude that was the issue.

She treated me and Chris like servants. Demanding that we fetch this or that for her, threatening to fire us if she didn't get her way. She was smug, juvenile, self-centred. An all-round horrible human being.

Thankfully, I didn't have to deal with her for most of the day. She got out of bed just before midday, left the house almost immediately to do whatever it is she did - probably go to the gym or shopping or something. It wasn't like the girl had a job or any responsibilities, after all.

Once she was gone, I began cleaning inside the master bedroom.

As always, Sally had left it a complete mess. Clothes strewn about all over the place, bed-sheets creased and uneven.

I was cleaning the floor when I found the used condom.

For some reason, my chest ached at the sight of it. Pain lanced through my heart and tears welled up in my eyes.

It lasted only a moment, a few seconds at most, before the feeling disappeared. After, the only thing I felt was stupid. Of course William and Sally had sex. They were getting married soon. They lived together. Slept in the same room. Of course they were having sex. Why was I getting emotional over it? It wasn't my business, not in the slightest.

So I did my job. I picked up the condom and disposed of it.

When me and Chris finally got home, both of us were exhausted.

Rather than even attempting to cook food, I ordered us some pizza. We ate it while watching TV, chatting and bitching about Sally, getting to know each other a little better.

It was nice. Pleasant. But something about it felt hollow.

I was getting old, with no boyfriend and no husband, no kids and no life outside of cleaning Me Noel's house. This wasn't what I really wanted, was it?

Soon enough, the alcohol came out.

Chris and I drank and laughed and joked about. It was all innocent, light hearted. There was some flirting, sure. But it wasn't serious. Wasn't overly sexual. Not until I decided to call it a night and told Chris I was going to bed.

"Yours or mine?" He asked, smirking.

For some reason, my mind wandered back to the condom. The fact that William and Sally were having sex.

If they were, why shouldn't I?

And so, drunkenly, I answered with a wink.

"Yours."

The next thing I knew, I was walking through into his bedroom, Christopher right behind me. His hands came up, cupped my breasts from behind. Something about the contact seemed unbearably naughty to me, forbidden. But then, I was much older than him. A cougar.

My top came off and, a few seconds later, my bra followed.

One of Christopher's hands reached in between my legs, under my panties. For however young he might have been, Chris was far from inexperienced. Within moments, he had me moaning, biting down on my lip.

He lifted me off my feet, placed me down on his bed.

Between his legs, under his jeans, was a very noticeable bulge. It looked

uncomfortable, tight. I reached out, began undoing buttons, pulled his jeans and underwear down.

What I saw made my eyes widen.

He was large. Larger than I'd been expecting. An angry red head with a wide, long shaft. Just the sight of it made me start salivating. Leaning in, mouth open, I wrapped my lips around Christopher's cock.

Finally, the day of the wedding. I'd been surprised when William invited me and Chris to it. We were just the people he paid to clean his house and do his garden. But, seeing how few people actually turned up to the church, I figured he must have wanted *someone* to show.

Neither his nor Sally's family were there. Not a single person from either side. Save for a few friends, and one balding man that no-one seemed to recognise at all, the large church was empty.

At the alter stood William himself, wearing a simple black suit, waiting. In front of him stood a smiling priest.

When the music began playing, all faces turned to the church entrance where, alone, Sally emerged. She walked down the aisle, looking more beautiful than ever in her white wedding dress.

I couldn't help but feel a little jealous at the sight.

I'd never been married, never started a family in the way William and Sally were about to. Sure, I had a nice little fling going on with Chris. But that was just sex and fun, we were fuck-buddies. It wasn't a real relationship and, with how things were, I doubted it ever would be.

I suppressed a sigh.

Maybe in another life I'd have that, a happy family. In another life, it might have been me walking down the aisle to marry the man standing there.

But not in this one.

Instead, I put my hand on Christopher's, gently guided it between my legs.