

Death of Peace of Mind

by

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No one likes to be woken up by a phone call. Has it ever been good news? I reached for my phone on the bedside table, the screen glare blinding my tired eyes. Rosewood Care Center flashed on the screen.

“This is Raven,” I said, clearing my throat to hide the exhaustion in my voice.

“Hi, it’s Patty. Sorry to call you so early. I wanted to let you know we sent your mother to Seton Medical Center this morning.”

“What happened?”

“Nothing specific, but it’s not good. I think you should get there as soon as possible.”

“Can you text me the address?”

“Of course.”

“Thanks for being there for Mom. She loves you.”

Patty huffed. “When she’s not arguing with me.”

I couldn’t help chuckling. “It’s her way.”

“I know. Give her my love, too.”

Patty hung up and I set my phone back on the nightstand. Death was never expected, even when it was. Mom had been prepping me for this day for weeks, but now that it was here—and I knew it was here—it was hard to stomach. The sun crested on the horizon, filling the room with enough pale light to throw shadows over everything.

Dain’s hand slid over my hip and pulled me close.

“An emergency?” he asked, his voice cracking with sleep.

“It’s always an emergency.”

“It’s what you’re good at. Putting out fires.”

I didn't want that particular skill. My career should be considered a fireman, not an attorney, a mother and a wife.

"How about putting out my fire." He ground his erection into my ass.

I rolled my eyes. Jesus fucking Christ. Every goddamn morning, without fail.

His hand slipped under the waistband of my shorts, slinking lower. I held his wrist and pushed him away.

"Come on, Raven," he whispered, kissing my shoulder. "It will only take a minute."

"A minute would be a record length," I threw over my shoulder as I pulled back the covers and slid away from him. "Believe it or not, that's not a selling point."

He flopped on his back, a sour look on his face. "You don't have to be such a bitch about it."

"You have a hand. Use it."

I hurried through a shower in case he joined me for a second attempt at a morning quickie. I slipped into our walk-in closet and thankfully heard his soft snoring.

I tugged on jeans and threw on a sweatshirt, then dried my short hair and applied a quick swipe of liner and mascara. I grabbed my phone and called Taylor on my way to the kitchen for coffee.

My partner answered on the fourth ring, just before it went to voicemail.

"Yeah?" he said.

"Can you handle the deposition this morning?"

"I'd prefer not to." I could hear the exasperated inconvenience in his voice. "You've done the prep." Yeah, but you're the fucking lead in this case.

I swallowed my frustration, desperate to keep my tone neutral. "I need the day off. My mom isn't well."

"Your mom hasn't been well in months."

And my patience fled. "Fuck you, Taylor, she's dying."

"Fine, fine. I still need you there. I can move it to later this afternoon."

Always a compromise. "Not before two. Text me the time."

I hung up and made a cup of coffee and leaned against the kitchen counter.

Tomorrow, Mom wouldn't exist. Can a grown woman of forty two be considered an orphan? When Dad passed away when I was fourteen, I had nightmares that I would be a ward of the state, or be sent to live with my aunt in New York, a stranger in a strange city, completely foreign to my native California.

Of course, that didn't happen, and my therapist said fear of abandonment was a common emotion when a child lost a parent. Not sure that really helped, but I eventually got over my fears, but not the loss of Dad.

He was the center of our world. The one that was always smiling, who showed up to my softball games with a ready hug and words of encouragement. Mom was the distant one, always there for us but emotionally unavailable. I knew she loved me, but it wasn't in her nature to show it. I respected who she was as a person, and while we were different, I never doubted she loved me fiercely.

I glanced at the clock and drained my cup, then went upstairs to wake Tanner.

I opened his door and smiled at his gangly long legs tangled in the sheets, one thin arm thrown over his head. I was constantly amazed at his transformation in the last year. At twelve, he had sprouted, his body stretched between childhood and an adult.

"Hey," I whispered, knowing that never worked. The kid slept like the dead. "Tanner," I said a little louder. He grunted, and I gave him a moment, familiar with the required routine to ensure he didn't wake up as a fire breathing dragon.

I flicked on the light and he groaned. "Time to get up."

"Okay," he mumbled.

I gave him another moment. "Tanner," I said in a much firmer voice.

"I'm up, Mom."

"You aren't until your feet hit the ground."

I heard him mumble something not very polite, but he threw back the covers and rolled out of bed. He kissed my cheek as he passed by, having to lean down to reach me. I was average height, but it hit home how tall he was.

"I have soccer today at three thirty."

"A game?"

"No, practice."

"I'll have your father take you. I need to see Grandma this morning."

"Okay," he said and shuffled down the hall to the bathroom.

I watched him until he closed the door and I heard the shower turn on. That child had a hold on my heart that was terrifying sometimes. We all know we'll love our children, but I never expected to love him so much. And I thought of Dad again, wishing I had someone to talk to. He understood that kind of love.

I went back to the kitchen and fixed a second cup of coffee in a travel mug. Dain shuffled into the kitchen and popped a pod in the Keurig machine. He leaned against the counter while his cup brewed.

"Why are you in jeans?" he asked.

"I'm going to the hospital."

"Again?"

"Yes, Dain. Again."

He didn't say anything as he took his cup to the fridge and poured in a splash of cream.

"What about Tanner's practice?"

"You'll have to take him. I had to move my deposition to this afternoon."

He frowned. "I can't. I have a showing at one and need to be on the course by four."

"The course is five minutes from the soccer field. You can make it."

"It's your turn this week," he snapped.

"For fuck's sake, Dain. A little help would be nice."

He shuffled away without a word and I heard his office door slam. God, I wanted to kill him. I went to our bedroom and threw slacks, a blouse and shoes into a bag so I could change in my office. I stuck my head in Tanner's room as he pulled on a t shirt.

"Hey, can you get a ride with Kai to soccer?"

He dragged a towel over his wet hair and threw it on his bed.

"Yeah, I think so."

"Thanks. Just text me by noon if you get jammed up."

"Can you take me to school early this morning?"

"Sure, if you hurry. I need to leave in five."

"Gimme ten."

"Get that towel off your bed."

He grumbled and took the towel with him to the bath and the sound of his electric toothbrush buzzed down the hall.

I dropped Tanner off at school and began the agonizing commute across Los Angeles traffic. An hour later I pulled into the Seton Hospital parking lot, ready to commit murder. I needed another coffee. Preferably with a shot of whiskey in it.

I checked in with reception and was directed to the third floor nurses' station.

"I'm here for Nancy Edenton. I'm her daughter," I said to the harried nurse at the counter.

“Oh, thank God you’re here. We were afraid you wouldn’t make it.”

She showed me to her room, the beeping of the heart monitor the only sound filling the quiet morning.

“The doctor was just here. I’ll track her down.”

“Thank you.” I pulled a chair close to Mom’s bed and held her withered hand in mine. Pancreatic cancer had ravaged her features in a few short weeks. By the time we had discovered the insidious disease, she was already stage four and declining rapidly. I’d barely had a moment to wrap my brain around the inevitable outcome when I got the call this morning.

She turned her head and opened her eyes, and I smiled at her.

“Hey, Mama,” I said, stroking her cheek. “How are you?”

“Shitty,” she croaked. “It’s time.”

“Don’t say that.”

“Why not? It’s the truth.” She closed her eyes and took a rattling breath. “I’m ready. But I’m glad you’re here.”

“I love you.”

“I know you do.”

“Say hi to Dad for me.”

She smiled. “Can’t wait to see him.”

“I’m jealous.”

She clucked at me. “That’s nothing to be jealous of.” She looked at me again, and squeezed my hand, her strength surprising. “Live your life, Raven. Live it fully, and don’t compromise who you are.”

I frowned at her. “I am, Ma. I love my life.”

She stared at me with knowing blue eyes, but said no more. I held her hand for another few moments when the monitor began to beep irregularly, and an alarm went off. A nurse hurried into the room and turned off the machine.

I held my mother’s gaze and watched the life leave her eyes. Her hand went slack in mine. I looked up at the monitor, and a dot streamed across a flat green line.

“She’s at peace,” the nurse said. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

It’s a strange process when you begin to accept a parent’s death. I’d been so young when my father passed that all I remember was crippling grief. This was different. It was a numb shock, and a little relief that she was no longer in pain. A new world stretched in front of me, one that didn’t include her. I wouldn’t see her on the first Sunday of the month for brunch. Or pick her up to bring her to my house

for Thanksgiving dinner. Or take her to her brother's house for Christmas. No lunch and a movie the day after Christmas.

I'd have to find my way in a world that didn't have her in it. I was surprised to find I was angry, too. Maybe this was the adult version of grief.

For the next hour I made arrangements, keeping my eye on the clock, knowing I needed to be in the office by one thirty.

I was almost to the car when my phone chimed with a text from Tanner.

Kai is sick so I'm hitching a ride with Sam's brother.

Fuck. I texted back, *He's seventeen. You're not supposed to ride in a car with him.*

I texted Dad, but he can't take me. It's okay, Mom. It's only a mile away. How's Grandma?

The hell if I'd tell my son his grandmother died over text. *She's sick. Let's talk tonight.*

Okay. I love you.

Thanks, monkey. I love you too.

Fucking Dain. I texted him, *Can you please pick up Tanner this afternoon?*

I fastened my seatbelt, watching the minutes tick by while I waited for his reply.

Can't.

One fucking word. I gripped the steering wheel, numb with anger and disbelief. What a fun parenting moment. I could either text a few parents and try to get him a legit ride and be late for the deposition, or I could leave now, let him ride with an underage driver and be on time for work.

My knuckles turned white as I took my rage out on my car.

I texted Tanner, *Just this time. Be safe. Wear your seatbelt.*

He texted back an eyeroll emoji. *Bruh.*

Even through my anger, he made me smile. God, how did I get so blessed to have this kid in my life.

I raced across town, grabbed my change of clothes from the back seat and flew past reception into my office. Taylor followed me and stood in the doorway.

"What the hell, Raven, they're already here."

I glanced at the clock on the wall. "They're early. I still have ten minutes. But unless you want to see me in my bra and underwear, get out so I can change."

Taylor's eyebrows rose and he folded his arms and leaned in the doorway.

I glared at him. "Out."

He grinned and walked away. "Hurry up," he called over his shoulder.

“Are you sure you want that answer in the record?” I asked the defendant. “You’re under oath.”

I knew the weasel was lying.

“Asked and answered,” Canon said, the same damn thing he’d been saying after every question I asked for an hour.

I looked at Taylor, who almost imperceptibly dipped his chin.

“Then that’s it for today.”

Taylor stood and gathered his notes. “I’ll have the transcript send to you Monday morning.”

I walked Canon to the lobby and waited for him while he spoke to his client. When the dirtbag, I mean defendant, was in the elevator, I said to Canon, “You know he’s lying.”

Canon’s bright green eyes sparkled. “I know nothing of the sort.”

I rolled my eyes. “Why do you defend slimeballs like this? He swindled nine elderly people out of their retirement funds.”

“Everyone deserves representation.” We’d had this conversation many times over the last eight years, when Canon had moved here from northern California. A senior partner in the civil defense group at one of the best law firms in Los Angeles, I’d seen him regularly on multiple cases and we’d become friendly acquaintances.

“I’m assuming you want a plea,” I said.

“I’d be willing to hear an offer.”

“It would involve prison time.”

He clucked. “Vicious.”

“Fair. He deserves more than that.”

Canon’s brows rose. “Like what?”

“How about public shaming. Or a whipping.”

He stared at me for a moment. “Are you okay? You’re a little angry today.”

I sighed. “Sorry. I’ve had a rough morning.”

“Work?”

“No, personal.”

“Want to talk about it?”

“Not really. I need to pick up my kid from soccer.”

“Raincheck then. Can I use an office for a few minutes?”

“Sure.” He followed me down the hall and I got him settled in an empty office a few doors from mine.

I sat at my desk when my associate came in and set a pile of papers a foot high in front of me.

"I didn't want to bother you earlier, you were in a hurry. This just came back from the transcriber for your review."

"I can't get to it tonight."

"It's okay. I need it back day after tomorrow."

Wow. A whopping two days to review a thousand pages. "Can't Taylor do this?"

"He asked me to have you do it."

As a professional partner, Taylor was worthless. The only reason I stayed with him was his connections in the financial industry, where we picked up most of our clients. His deal flow was incredible, but he didn't do shit when it came to actual work. I took a few inches off the stack and stuffed them into my overflowing briefcase and picked up my phone.

A text from Dain. *Where's Tanner?*

A moment of anxiety hit me, when I envisioned Tanner in a car accident involving an inexperienced, teenage driver. Then I saw the text from Tanner. *I'm hitching a ride with Keenan's mom and having dinner at their house. Can you pick me up at eight?*

I texted him back. *Yes, happy to.*

Why Dain couldn't text Tanner directly was beyond me. Just another fucking thing I had to do for that man. *He's having dinner with Keenan.*

A few minutes later, a text came through. *Nice of someone to tell me.*

I texted back. *Nice of you to ask your own son.*

I can see your pissy mood from this morning didn't get any better.

I wanted to throw my phone across the room. I typed out another snotty answer, then deleted it. He wasn't worth the time.

I blew out a breath, settling into pure exhaustion. Since the call this morning until this moment, my mind had been bouncing from person to person, responsibility to commitment, errand to task.

Canon stuck his head in my doorway. "Thanks for the office. Sure I can't tempt you to join me for a drink? I'm a great listener."

"I should get home."

"Traffic is miserable right now."

He was right. And why did I need to be home again? I couldn't think of a single good reason, and I had three hours to kill before I had to pick up Tanner.

"Okay, you talked me into it."

We sat at the bar at a local tavern frequented by the white collar downtown crowd. I ordered a dirty martini and Canon ordered a scotch.

“What’s up? Something definitely has you off your game.”

I raised a brow. “I think I did okay today. Enough to know your client won’t make it through a trial.”

“Now, now. Keep those sharp claws sheathed. We’re not talking work right now.”

I stared at him for a moment, not sure how to respond. He wasn’t a friend, and I barely knew him outside a professional setting. The truth didn’t seem like something to dump on someone the first time they asked you a personal question. But he waited patiently for my response, and seemed truly interested in honesty. He was the first person aside from Tanner that had asked. I twisted my glass. Eh, what the fuck. It wouldn’t hurt, right? Right?

“My mom passed away this morning.”

Canon’s drink froze halfway to his lips. “Excuse me?”

“Don’t make me say it again.”

“Why the hell didn’t you postpone the depo?”

“I tried, but Taylor wanted to do it today.”

Canon gaped at me. “It didn’t need to happen today. Monday would have been fine. Even next week.”

I could feel heat rising in my neck. “I’m guessing Taylor was taking Monday off.” He usually spent Mondays working from his Malibu retreat. Asshole.

“God, Raven, I’m so sorry.”

I looked away from his eyes, his honest sympathy making my throat tight. I really didn’t want to lose my shit in front of him in a bar. “It’s okay. She had cancer, so it was a bit of a blessing.”

“When was she diagnosed?”

“Five weeks ago.”

“Five *weeks*? Jesus, this must be a shock.”

“I guess so. I suppose that’s why I’m so numb.”

“Were you close?”

“Yes and no. She was a very private person who kept her feelings close. Most of my friends have complicated relationships with their mothers, and I’m not an exception. Between arrangements at the hospital, my son, my job and dealing with my husband, I haven’t had a chance to really think about her.”

“That’s insane. You deserve to take a moment for yourself, to be with your husband and son, someone to lean on for support rather than a work colleague you barely know.”

I smiled ruefully. Wasn’t that the truth. “My son is twelve. Not quite aware of others’ emotions. But he’s a sweet kid.”

“What about your husband?”

I looked down, not trusting myself to voice the first thoughts that came to mind.

“The reason I moved to LA eight years ago was I got a divorce,” Canon said. “My wife woke up one day and decided she didn’t love me anymore. Possibly one of the worst days of my life.”

“You moved here to get away from her?”

He shook his head. “She moved here and took our two kids. We have joint custody, and she had a great career opportunity. I didn’t want to be that kind of dad who only saw his kids on holidays, so I moved here and bought a house in their new school district. Our kids are good, and we’ve found peace.” He shrugged. “The reason I’m telling you this is I leaned on my mother a lot during the first few years afterward. She passed last year, and it almost destroyed me. I understand what it’s like to lose a mother.”

“You had your wife to lean on?”

“I never remarried, and while my relationship with my ex is decent, I wouldn’t share that with her.”

“How did you get through your mom’s death?”

“A lot of tears. My dad. Time with my kids. Friends. Work. I found a way through. Some days are still not great.”

“I’m sorry if this conversation brings back bad memories.”

His smile was warm, genuine. “It does, but I also remember the good times.”

“Maybe I’ll get a dog,” I grumbled.

He laughed. “If you’re not a dog person, I wouldn’t recommend it.” He cocked his head. “What of your husband?”

God, where do I start? “We met in college and were inseparable, every free moment outside our jobs we spent together. When Tanner came along, we were so focused on him that I think we lost each other along the way. He would reach out and I wouldn’t be there, and when I finally felt the distance between us, he wasn’t interested in talking.”

“I think kids can either bring people together, or shine a light on something that’s already missing.”

I thought about that for a minute. “You might be right. The only time we ever really argued before Tanner was born was when we were on vacation.” I shook my head, remembering some of the shouting matches we had that ended up with us not speaking for days. “I think vacations forced us to spend time

together. We were good in short sprints, but days of togetherness was something we outgrew once we left school.”

“Yet you’re still together.”

“If you want to call it that. We live together, and we parent well, for the most part.”

He raised a brow. “But?”

“But he isn’t interested in my mother. They never got along, so not a lot of sympathy there.”

Canon frowned. “This isn’t about your mother. It’s about you. You’re the survivor, and hurting. And you’re his wife.”

I looked at him closely for the first time. He was attractive in a lawyerly kind of way. Fit, broad shoulders, brown hair with a touch of gray at the temples, and lovely green eyes. But more than that, he seemed to have an emotional range beyond his own needs, and that struck me as unique, at least in my experience with the men I’d had in my life.

“Your ex-wife is a fool,” I said.

His surprised expression made me wonder if I’d stepped too far. “Why do you say that?” he asked.

“You seem like a sympathetic person, at least emotionally. You’d be surprised how rare that is.”

“I’m not perfect,” he insisted. “I made mistakes. But I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“It was meant as one.”

My phone chimed and I checked my texts. “Oh shit, I need to pick up Tanner.”

“Go ahead, I’ll take care of the bill.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course.” He winked. “I’m happy to bill this to my scumbag client.”

A real laugh bubbled out of me for the first time today. “Fair enough. Thank you. This was...nice.”

He turned to face me. “I’m happy to talk if you need a friend in the next few weeks. At some point you’ll be on the freeway thinking of work, or your kid’s baseball game, and your loss will hit you hard. Trust me, I know.”

I searched his face for guile, but either he was sincere or a really good liar. I didn’t think it was the latter. “I might take you up on that.”

He tipped his head and a brilliant smile broke on his face. “You have my number.”

I thought about Canon the entire drive home. I wasn’t so blind that I didn’t see his attention and empathy had affected me. I was bound to be a little starstruck when a handsome man offered comfort

when I was emotionally fragile. But aside from a momentary crush, I had to admit it had been soothing to have someone to talk to.

I texted Tanner when I was at a stoplight two blocks away, and when I pulled up to Keenan's house, he clambered into the car, slinging his backpack in the back seat.

I dodged out of the way of the forty pounds of crap he carried around. "Careful, that thing is a weapon." He rolled his eyes and pulled on the seatbelt.

"How's Grandma?"

I looked at him, and it struck me that I could see his adult face bursting from the child's features I knew so well.

He frowned. "She died, didn't she?"

I nodded. "This morning. I wanted to tell you in person." He faced forward, but I saw his chin quivering. "She was in pain, pumpkin. It's better this way."

He turned to face me, and the almost-man was gone. Only my child could be seen in the sorrow in his eyes. "Better for who? It isn't better for me."

I smiled ruefully. "I know. Life is supremely unfair sometimes."

A tear dripped to his cheek, and I gathered him in my arms. He heaved, then his emotions turned mine raw. I allowed myself to face my own pain, and my tears mingled with his. We cried together for a woman we remembered, but who had been vastly different to us. Where my mother had been aloof and reserved with me, she had doted on her grandson. She had given her whole heart to him the moment he was born, and for that alone I loved her deeply.

I finally pulled away from my son and wiped his cheeks.

"Do you want ice cream?"

"Hell yeah," he sniffled.

"I'm not even going to bitch about your language tonight."

"Good. I won't bitch about yours."

I grinned, then sniffled and laughed as I chucked him under the chin.

"A sundae, gelato, or froyo?"

He looked offended. "Sundae. Duh."

We drove to a small, old fashioned ice cream parlor that had been a fixture in our neighborhood for fifty years. A throwback to the days of soda counters, juke boxes and milkshakes on dates.

We ordered at the counter and brought our heaping monstrosities to a small circular table with a chipped pink formica top and wire chairs with round red vinyl cushions.

Tanner shoved a heaping spoonful of ice cream, whipped cream and chocolate fudge in his mouth and a dot of white stuck to his nose. I flicked it off and licked my finger.

“God, Mom, you’re gross.”

“Please. I’ve seen worse from you.”

“I don’t want to know more.” I laughed and scooped a mouthful of coffee ice cream with caramel.

“Tell me a story of grandma when I was a baby.”

“How about the one where she kidnapped you and took you to Legoland for the day?”

“She never kidnapped me.”

“Okay it may be a mild exaggeration, but it wasn’t planned. She was supposed to watch you for an hour.”

“I loved Legoland.”

We walked down memory lane together until we hit the bottom of our dishes and I felt slightly queasy from all the sugar, but in the best way.

Tanner was quiet on the drive home, until we pulled into the driveway.

“Are you okay, Mom?”

I looked at him, then stroked his cheek. “It’s been a rough day. I’ll have good days and bad, but I’ll be fine.”

He sat still for a moment, then leaned over and hugged me. “Me too.”

I helped him lug his backpack out of the back seat. “Good god, which one of your teachers is asking you to carry bricks to school?”

He expertly slung the pack over a shoulder. “All of them.”

“Smarty pants.”

“Oooh, language, Mom.”

I pushed his sassy self toward the house. “Finish your homework.”

Dain leaned on the kitchen counter sipping a glass of wine when I set my briefcase on the table.

“You were late picking up Tanner.”

“I wasn’t.” I walked past him and upstairs to our bedroom. I stripped off my work clothes and pulled on a pair of cotton shorts and a t shirt and washed the makeup off my face, taking a moment to press cold water on my eyes.

“Where were you?” Dain asked from the doorway.

I turned off the water and dried my face. “I took Tanner out for ice cream.”

He frowned. “Without me? You didn’t even text. I could have joined you.”

I blinked. He was right. It never even occurred to me. "It was a spontaneous thing," I blathered lamely.

"You know he's my son, too."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"It means I think you are purposefully trying to exclude me from his life."

I gaped at him. And something inside me broke, and a fire burst forth, a wicked anger that burned hot.

"You've got to be the most self-centered bastard I've ever met."

"Oh really? You work with lawyers. I doubt I even come close."

"Oh, right, I forgot. Lawyers, *including your wife*, are scum of the earth."

"Fuck, Raven, don't put words in my mouth."

"I'm providing a mild translation of your sentiments," I spat. "Did it ever cross your mind, even for a moment, that I might have needed someone today? Maybe my husband to care about his wife's feelings?"

He didn't say anything, but gulped his wine.

"My mother died this morning, not that you've asked. It's obvious you don't care."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Liar."

"You know we didn't get along."

I laughed bitterly. "And it's all about you, isn't it? I hear my mom is in the hospital, and all you can think about is a quick fuck before you take a shit and shower. I've had to deal with this all day while working and picking up Tanner and helping him cope, and all you can think about is why I didn't ask you to come to ice cream."

He just stared at me, his eyes cold and indifferent.

"I didn't think to ask you to ice cream because Tanner and I were talking about my mother. Remembering her fondly, wandering through good memories. I certainly didn't want to sit across from you looking at your pissy, sour face the entire time."

"That is so unfair."

"It's the truth." I brushed by him. "This isn't about you or my mother. It's about me and Tanner in pain. And it's disappointing that as a husband and father, you just don't give a shit about that."

"I care about Tanner. Deeply."

And there it was. "But not about me."

I walked downstairs and poured myself a glass of wine and drank half of it. I topped it off, then sat on the couch in the dark.

Death had a strange way of killing you inside. My mother died today, and death took a part of my heart with her. I thought about her last words to me.

I love you.

I know you do.

But she didn't tell me she loved *me*.

She never had. I was just supposed to know a mother loved her daughter, but that wasn't how this worked. Words matter, whether they are spoken or omitted. That would be a regret I had to live with in this new world that didn't include her.

In a day where my life marched on relentlessly around me, death had visited me and changed the world around me forever. I wasn't the same person who answered the phone at five in the morning.

I took a long drink of wine and thought about Tanner. I told him I loved him today, at least twice. I wanted him to know, to never have a doubt about how I felt. And I knew he didn't. Tanner had the confidence of a child raised in love. Dain and I may have our problems, but Tanner wasn't part of them.

Dain. Just the thought of him burned, and not between my legs like it used to. That idea was repulsive. The mind, body, and heart are connected, and if one isn't right, the others don't work. Today, that piece of my heart death took was also where my tolerance lived. I needed change, desperately. In this new world, I was an adult orphan. The only thing left of my family is what I'd chosen for myself, and I refused to live in a world where I didn't matter. I wanted to be loved for who I was. All of me, every day. A life partner who was mature enough to put their own cares and concerns aside when I needed someone to lean on.

And that sure as shit wasn't Dain. I'm not sure it ever was.

I could never fault him as a father, but I knew now he wasn't the one for me.

I stared at the black night and drained my wine. In the quiet darkness, where I didn't have to be an attorney or a wife, a daughter or a mother, I only had to be myself. And a profound loneliness settled over me. I missed myself. I hadn't been around lately, so busy trying to be something for someone else.

My mother's final words echoed in my head.

Live your life, Raven. Live it fully, and don't compromise who you are.

Who was I? Was I compromising who I was to be all these things to other people?

The answer was yes, but not all of that was bad. The joy in Tanner's eyes when he scored a goal and found me on the sidelines, giving me a fist pump was a moment every parent hoarded in their heart.

Seeing him coming to life as a young man, confident in himself and the world around him was a gift I could give to him, and was my responsibility as a parent. He didn't ask to be here in this world. It was my job to make sure he had the foundation to succeed. I would never regret compromising my own needs to give him a chance to be a well-rounded, emotionally mature, successful man.

My job was a compromise. I loved the work, but hated Taylor's bullshit. It was time to have a talk with him. Either I get a junior partner, or more drastic changes were coming. I made that commitment to myself.

And Dain. I compromised the most with him. And I was done with that. A weight lifted off my shoulders, knowing I had put a name on something that had been weighing on me for months, if not years. My marriage was over. I had a moment of panic, of fearing the unknown, of making a mistake I couldn't undo. But the alternative was a compromise that no longer worked for me. I couldn't give my heart, mind, and body to a man who valued none of them. He wasn't there for me, and he didn't love me. I deserved that in my life, too.

So maybe death took part of my heart that was already dead. What was left was raw and bleeding, but ready to receive something new, to grow into something whole and healthy.

I stared at my phone lying on the table, intrigued by a world full of possibilities.

I picked up the phone and dialed a number from my contacts.

"Hello? Raven?" Canon asked.

"Sorry to call so late."

"It's fine, I was awake. Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Just wanted to thank you for your time earlier this evening. It was a kindness I truly needed."

"Of course. Any time."

I chewed on my lip, the old me afraid to ask for something that was just for me. The new me pushed her out of the way and stepped forward.

"How about now?"

I could almost hear him smile over the phone. "Tell me a story about your mother. I bet she was an amazing woman. She certainly raised an incredible daughter."

The new me leaned back on the sofa and stared at the ceiling.

You know, he may be right.