

Presumed Guilty

Contemporary Romantic Suspense

By:

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ISBN-13:
978-1722321550

ISBN-10:
1722321555

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Dedication:

To my dear friend, Jill. Every day, in every way, you're getting better and better. Love you, sister.

Chapter 1

Blood spattered against Michael Venetti's jacket a second before he absorbed the impact of Ernie Kinsley's body. He whipped out his gun and scanned the rooftops, but saw nothing. Twenty more steps and he would've delivered the older man safely inside the court house. *Son of a bitch.*

Amid the panic of the growing crowd, Michael holstered the Glock and kneeled next to Kinsley's prone form. A uniformed officer ran around the front of the patrol car clutching a towel. He applied it to the gaping hole in Kinsley's chest as Michael once again assessed the area.

Kinsley gripped Michael's arm, his eyes glazed as he struggled to form words. "Tell Grace to take care." He coughed blood. "Protect her."

Moments later, life left his eyes and body. Emergency personnel rushed onto the scene. Michael stood, Kinsley's words searing him with a jolt of regret. He had to know that Michael was the last person Grace Cooper would turn to for anything. Michael owed her an explanation, the truth she didn't want to hear.

He'd given her the space and time she'd demanded from him, but someone just took out her stepfather and that changed everything.

The overcast skies mirrored Grace's mood as she stared at the flag-draped casket. She and Ernie hadn't been close, but he was the only father she'd ever known. He was a decorated war veteran. He was a disgraced money launderer. He was dead.

Susan had understandably begged off. Grace's sister lived in California and was two weeks away from delivering her first child. But their mother, who'd moved out to Susan's once the news broke about her husband's arrest, had refused to make the trip. So Grace stood alone in the crowd of businessmen and veterans until the casket was lowered into the ground.

Tears threatened as she walked to her car, the echoes of the twenty-one gun salute, and the murmurs from the wagging tongues, still ringing in her ears. Six months ago, her life had been picture perfect. How things had unraveled since then.

"Hello, Grace." Michael Venetti slid into step beside her. His deep voice shook her from her thoughts. "I'm sorry about Ernie."

Her heart bumped in her chest. *Jesus, not now.*

She thought she'd gotten enough emotional distance from him to feel nothing, but the sincerity in his tone wrecked her already frayed nerves. Anger bubbled to the surface. Which part was he sorry for? Dating her to get to Ernie? Arresting him? His death?

She swallowed the bitter words like bile. "Thank you."

"Do you have time for coffee? We need to talk."

Grace stumbled at his audacity. This man who'd put an engagement ring on her finger then walked out of her life on the same day still thought they should talk? Michael reached out to steady her, and she recoiled from the zing his touch still evoked. "I'm busy. And there's nothing left to say, Michael. Pretty sure I've made that clear." She breathed a sigh of relief that he didn't follow her to her car. Her hold on her emotions was tenuous at best.

“There’s a lot to say when you’re ready to listen.” His voice carried in the damp air. “And I’m a patient man.”

Grace slammed the car door on his words, then jammed the key into the ignition. Would there ever come a time when he didn’t affect her? Not if she stayed here. That much was obvious. She loved Chicago and had lived in the area her entire life, but the pressure to flee was mounting. There was only one thing standing in her way, and in sixty days, she’d be free.

With the keys to her new locks tucked in her pocket, Grace cranked her speaker and jammed to her Eighties hairband playlist. Nothing like a little Def Leppard to shake off the heaviness of yesterday’s funeral, and get her motivated to clean. In every house she’d rehabbed, some unwritten rule demanded that former occupants let the place go to hell.

She cleared enough space in the formal living room for her air mattress then propped the broom against the broken fireplace mantel. This place might look like a distressed property to the naked eye, but to her, it was her most ambitious project. The one that, when finished, should allow her enough financial cushion to figure out what and where was next.

Grace used her portable air compressor to blow up the mattress. Living here while she renovated would be an experiment she hoped to never repeat, but her options were nil. Her family home had been sold, her childhood memories packed away in storage. She’d already spent weeks on her friend’s couch, and she’d given up her apartment lease based on a lie. Not that she wanted to waste a penny of her budget on living space. She’d be here almost every waking moment anyway.

On the floor next to Grace’s work stool, her phone lit up. She checked the caller ID, then set it back on the stool. “Not tonight, Sis,” she whispered.

The texts she'd sent to Susan after the funeral would have to hold her over. Grace loved her, but every conversation came around to the seismic shift they'd experienced since their stepfather's arrest. Grace didn't see the point in rehashing any of it. Ernie was gone. And the collateral damage of her broken heart was finally beginning to heal, and would continue to, as long as Michael stayed out of her life.

Seeing him yesterday had led to a restless night filled with memories of their time together, and their aborted plans for the future. Even this property was a reminder. They'd found it and drawn up renovation plans together, considered keeping it for themselves.

Grace ordered a pizza to silence her grumbling stomach, then took the half flight of stairs from the living room up to the kitchen. The open floor concept and the expanse of windows along the back of the house had drawn her the first time she'd seen it. She leaned her head against the wooden window frame, imagining the finished product and the happy family who would eventually call this place home.

It wouldn't be *her* happily ever after, but it would be for someone.

The waning sunlight allowed her enough light to study the perfect, manicured landscapes of the houses that circled the lake. Despite her property's decent outward appearance, she was positive everyone in Stonebrooke Estates knew it was a foreclosure, and was anxious for it to be rescued and restored for their property values' sake.

Grace wanted that more than anyone. Because when this chapter of her life was finished, there would be no more reason for Michael to haunt her dreams.

Michael motioned to the chair across from him and waited for Brian Perry, the Federal agent he'd worked with for the last year and a half, to take a seat. Together they'd closed down

the money laundering ring run by Ernie Kinsley and four other high-profile businessmen. After days of answering repeated questions about the events surrounding Kinsley's murder, Michael was ready to ask his own questions.

"Thanks for swinging by the station," Michael said.

Brian declined the coffee Michael offered with a shake of his head. "No problem. I'd have come by sooner but I was in D.C. Been a hell of a week, huh?"

"That's for damn sure." Michael paused. "What's this do to our case?"

Tossing his glasses on the desk, Brian squeezed the bridge of his nose. "It'll go on. We're air tight. We'll still get convictions."

Puzzled by his dark tone, Michael crossed his arms. "You make that sound like a bad thing. We shut down one of the biggest money laundering operations since Wachovia."

"Pale in comparison." Brian met Michael's frown. "Kinsley cut a deal with us."

That was one thing Michael liked about Brian. He never had to wait for the punchline. As part of the city team that had coordinated with the FBI, Michael wouldn't have been involved in the negotiations, but the news still caught him by surprise. "What deal?"

Seconds ticked by before Brian spoke. "He gave us names, Michael. Big names. Powerful names. A U.S. Senator among them. Hinted at extortion, even murders for hire. We kept it as quiet as possible, but someone who knew about it took him out. We have some details, but no hard proof. Kinsley was supposed to provide that after his court appearance."

Michael contained his frustration, but damn. That might've been good information to know before he marched Kinsley toward the courthouse and his death. "Now what?"

Brian threw up his hands. "Now we start over. Try to build the case without him."

Michael felt the squeeze of uncertainty in his chest as Ernie's last words rang in his ears. Elbows on the table, he leaned in. He respected Brian, but still thought twice before he spoke. "You think there's another way to get the proof he had."

Brian's shrewd eyes narrowed. "Is that a statement or a question?"

"Both." Michael didn't flinch. "I need to know why Kinsley's last words were a warning to protect his stepdaughter, and whether it has anything to do with your deal."

Silence filled the small room, and Michael got the distinct impression he was being weighed on an invisible scale. Metal chair legs scraped along the tile floor as Brian stood, his hard look daunting.

"Kinsley said he had insurance. A data backup. We confiscated his corporate and personal computers and didn't find shit. We're keeping this possibility buttoned up as tight as we can."

Just like they thought they kept the deal quiet. Uneasiness shifted to urgency. He couldn't assume Grace was safe. She might not want to see him, but he *had* to see her, talk to her.

"You could help us out here, Michael. I know you don't have skin in this game, but we need to know what Grace Cooper knows ASAP. One of my agents saw you talking to her at the funeral yesterday."

Michael rose, studying the man across from him. He had every intention of seeing Grace again, but he wouldn't do it under false pretenses. "I'll track her down because she needs to know what's going on. If she has information she's willing to give me, I'll let you know."

Brian shook Michael's hand, his grip firm. "You have twenty-four hours, then I'm bringing her in."

His tone made it clear he was issuing a professional courtesy. Nodding, Michael subdued a spark of anger. "Understood."

Mind whirling, Michael returned to his desk. If Brian's case had any legs, he'd do what he could to help, but gaining intel was secondary to protecting Grace. He shoved his laptop into its bag then tugged his jacket from the back of his chair.

"What was Perry doing here?" Jason Nunez, his long-time partner, sat at the desk across from him, popping his bubble gum like a teenager. It used to drive Michael crazy, but it was better than the incessant leg tap that would begin the second the gum went in the trash can. "Haven't seen him around much."

Michael swallowed his growing anxiety as he checked his watch. He had to figure out where to find Grace. "He's been in DC. Just got back and wanted to follow up on Kinsley."

Jason nodded. "Yeah, shitty deal." He stood and stretched. "I'm headed out to play some Texas Hold 'Em. Wanna come so I can clean out your wallet?"

Michael laughed and shook his head. "No time today. And I like hanging on to my money."

He hadn't invested much energy in his social calendar. Hadn't even seen his cabin in Door County all season. Nothing felt right without Grace by his side, but that didn't keep Jason from trying to fill up his evenings.

Jason blew a bubble then popped it. "Your loss. I won three hundred bucks last week."

"That should help make up for the five hundred you lost the week before."

Michael dodged the pencil Jason threw at him as dispatch came over the radio requesting a response to a noise complaint at 318 Sandy Avenue. It only took a second for the address to click in Michael's brain, sending a quick, hard punch straight to his chest. That address, plus a noise complaint, could only mean one thing. Grace had closed on their property.

Her property, he corrected.

Relief flooded through him at his good fortune. “Hey,” he hollered to Jason as he strode to the door. “Tell dispatch not to send a patrolman. I’ll run over there myself and take a look.”

Jason jumped up from his desk, wearing a frown. “You’d rather spend your evening checking out a noise complaint?”

“It’s Grace’s new rehab. I need to catch up with her.”

“Damn, dude.” Jason shook his head. “Why keep letting her break your heart? She ain’t worth it.”

Michael held his tongue, and his temper. He tried to keep his personal life private, but Jason was too close, knew too much. *Or at least he thought he did.* He had no idea Michael had proposed to Grace. And he damn sure hadn’t heard the tears in Grace’s voice when Michael shocked her by walking away.

A hard knock at the front door jarred Grace from her thoughts. Had to be a new record for the pizza guy. Nice selling point for the house, maybe. After turning down the music, she dug bills out of her purse then opened the door. Her breath caught in her throat as Michael stood there, blue eyes shadowed in the bright porch light.

She tamped down the unwanted twinge of attraction, and her surprise at seeing him two days in a row, and tried for a neutral tone. “What are you doing here?”

“Got a noise complaint at the station.”

Bristling, she crossed her arms. “From who?”

Michael tilted his head slightly to the right and pulled out a citation book.

Her eyes widened. “You’ve got to be kidding me. You’re going to write me a ticket?”

He gave her a sideways grin that took her all the way back to the first night she met him at a friend's party. "Pretty unhappy neighbor." He shrugged. "You going to let me in?"

The urge to turn him away simmered in her chest. She was on a better emotional plane than yesterday, but overall, her pride was still more than a little wounded. There was no way she wanted to pay for a freaking ticket, though. Or let him know the effect he still had on her. She opened the door just wide enough for him to walk through. If she played nice, maybe he would, too.

He glanced around the interior. "Doesn't look any different than it did a few months ago. Still a hell of a lot of potential."

"Give me time. I just got the keys today."

"Which explains why we got our first noise complaint tonight."

At one time, she would've appreciated the humor in his tone. Instead, she shrugged it off. "I'll try to keep it down."

The doorbell rang again, and Grace pulled the money back out of her pocket. She thanked the delivery driver, barely suppressing a groan of appreciation as the scent of pepperoni and yeasty crust wafted around her. She headed to the kitchen and slid the pizza box onto a small section of remaining counter top.

Michael was close behind her when she turned, his voice low. "I wasn't criticizing your progress, just observing. And remembering."

His nearness almost overwhelmed her good sense. She closed her eyes for a brief moment against the powerful temptation to lean into him, to feel his arms come her. Her brain argued that she should tell him to leave. Take the damn ticket to preserve her sanity.

Fool that she was, she ignored the wisdom and offered him a paper plate instead. “I’m starving.” She pulled a steaming piece of pizza from the box then stepped away to get some distance from Michael. “Help yourself if you’re hungry. I don’t have a refrigerator for leftovers.”

He didn’t comment on her quick getaway. Instead, he walked around the room as he ate, studying the space, and Grace could almost guarantee he was taking mental notes. Mental notes that she valued, despite the circumstances. The son of a trade carpenter, Michael had had a great eye for the other three properties he’d helped her flip. She swallowed a cheesy bite, and her pride, then walked over to him. “What do you see?”

By the time they’d toured the upstairs and the main floor, she had two pages of notes. So many things she’d forgotten. With a few of his suggestions, she might even be able to trim her budget by a couple thousand.

“Thanks for the insights,” Grace said as Michael followed her back to the kitchen. She ripped open a case of water and tossed a bottle to him. “I’m sure you probably need to get going.”

More like she needed him to get going. The last thirty minutes proved it would be all too easy to let her guard down.

“You’d mentioned the patio and outdoor space. Let’s see what kind of ideas we come up with out there.”

Self-preservation mode kicked in and Grace folded her arms. “It’s dark.”

He opened the sliding glass door and looked up. There’s a fixture. Got any lightbulbs?” She paused, but he pressed on. “Fifteen minutes. Tops.”

She shook her head, but went and found one of her packs of bulbs. “Fifteen minutes,” she echoed, handing one to him.

He screwed in the bulb, which didn't do much for the yard, but cast the patio in soft light. Too soft. Too romantic. God, he was bad for her peace of mind.

She swallowed hard. "On second thought, maybe this wasn't a good idea."

"Grace."

Her name, soft on his lips, drew her up short. Their gazes locked, memories and broken trust surfacing all over again. She held up her hands as he walked toward her, the hard shake of her head sending her ponytail dancing on her shoulders. "We're not going there."

Michael opened his mouth to respond as a sharp series of barks erupted from behind the neighbor's fence.

With a silent sigh of relief, Grace stepped back. Part of her had wanted to hear what he would say next. The insane, glutton-for-punishment part. She schooled her features, anxious to get off the roller coaster and back on solid ground.

She jerked her head toward the neighbor's privacy fence. "Before you go, maybe you can issue a ticket for her yapping dog," she joked.

Michael's face turned flinty. "Listen, Grace. I didn't come here to issue a noise citation. I came here because you may be in danger."