

A dark, rainy street at night. The ground is wet and reflective, with several large puddles in the foreground. Streetlights cast a soft glow, and the buildings in the background are mostly dark. The overall mood is somber and atmospheric.

Floodgates

Mary Calmes

FLOODGATES

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A Note From the Author

Also by Mary Calmes

About the Author

Floodgates

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A THANK YOU

When I've added more words to other books, it was for more story, more explanations, and more happily ever after. It was true for this one as well but more than others, this one needed clarity. I'm so thankful to my wonderful team, Keren, Brian, and Judy. This book needed fresh eyes and I'm so happy with how it turned out.

FLOODGATES

Tracy Brandt considers himself a lucky man. He has a wonderful family, good friends, and a dependable job. His love life, however, features a cheating ex who, though out of the house, is not yet out of the picture—an ex with a past that might get Tracy killed.

Homicide inspector Cord Nolan wants nothing more than to show his best friend's little brother that he's a reliable man, but to do that he'll have to get Tracy to look past the player he used to be. It'll be a tough sell. Reputation is everything, and Cord's is tarnished by his past indiscretions.

Tracy and Cord have spent five years trying to smother their fiery attraction under a blanket of grudging antagonism. When Tracy finds himself with a target on his back, Cord rides to the rescue, and he finally has the chance to break through the dam of Tracy's reserve. But Cord had better be careful: if he's opening the floodgates to wash away the past, he's going to have to hold tight to Tracy to make sure they're still standing when the tumult recedes.

ONE

The shot went off over my head, exploding the horrible framed picture of dogs playing poker. I had always hated it, had complained that it didn't belong in our upscale office close to Jackson Square, but shot into a million pieces was a fate I had never imagined for it.

Luckily, I'd heard the intruders busting into our offices, and I'd managed to dive under my desk and crouch there just as a bullet whizzed past. I heard men going from room to room, yelling that there was no one there. It was only a three-person office normally, the bulk of our staff working at the docks and the rest delivering goods. Whoever was still in my office with me kept quiet, but I knew they were waiting, hesitating, unsure if I had a gun or not. If they'd known where they were, the answer would have been self-explanatory. But if they had checked, they would have never been there to begin with.

They were in the wrong place on an early Wednesday morning in October because someone hadn't done their homework. They didn't know yet that they'd made a mistake. They would, and there would be hell to pay on their end. There was some consolation in that for me, but it didn't help at the moment. I was still about to be dead at thirty-three because someone had, again, confused one brother for another.

Weighing my options, I considered whether I should attempt going out the window, which was the closest exit point, or try to make it out the back, assuming I could get out of my office and to the stairs leading to the parking lot. I had

seconds to decide. The window would be faster, but it had ancient, thick glass, and since the building was a historical one, chances were good that it was sturdier than it appeared. There was no guarantee it would give under my weight if I didn't hit it perfectly. Plus, I didn't have much space to build up momentum. Also, for all I knew, the shooter could be right beside it. The back door was safer all around, but again, only if I could get past my new nemesis without getting shot.

The *if* was kind of funny, since when we moved to this office from the old one close to the Embarcadero, and I had brought up his infamous brother to him, Dimah Mashir—my partner—had assured me that, honest to God, nothing exciting was ever going to happen. His brother, Kirill, was the one involved in nefarious pursuits; he, Dimah, was the legitimate one.

I chanced a peek, and seeing the shooter was on the other side of the room, I made a run for it. With a lamp exploding beside me, papers blowing off my desk, chunks of bookcase whizzing through the air, the whole room blasting apart, my only thought was that if I lived through the attempt on my life, I was going to rip my partner a new one.

Flying into the hall, I hit the wall hard, bounced off, and saw a guy running in with a semiautomatic pistol in his hand. I wheeled around and took off in the opposite direction. My only advantage was that I knew where I was going and they didn't.

I skidded around the corner, went right, then left, through the small staff kitchen/breakroom, into the conference area, out the other side, and down the stairs to the door with the panic bar. What didn't help was that the door had an alarm—it was a fire exit—so the bells went off the second I hurled it open, pinpointing my location. At least I had a little head start.

Up and over the chain-link fence, and then I came down on the hood of a car on the other side. I lost my footing and banged down hard, bounced, then slid off into gravel. Normally, I was a bit more coordinated, but as I'd been in the process of making coffee when all this started—and since the

cup I'd had on the way in wasn't nearly enough—I was not at the top of my game.

Hearing sirens in the distance, I covered my head with my arms as I ran, completely missing the ankle-high chain sectioning off the parking lot. I tripped and fell onto the hood of a parked black Mercedes Benz. Another lucky break, as the bullet aimed my way hit my left bicep and not the back of my head. Sometimes it just didn't feel like luck until the end.

THE COPS CAME, and the second I gave my name—"Tracy Brandt"—the question came.

"Brandt?" And then, "Any relation to Inspector Alexander Brandt, now Agent Brandt?"

What was I going to do, lie? "Yes," I groaned, "he's my brother."

They wouldn't have known—no one knew every Drug Enforcement Agency agent off the top of their head—but Alex had started out as a cop here in San Francisco, so a lot of guys knew of or remembered him.

The officer yelled over his shoulder, "Call Brandt over at DEA!"

The whole time I sat in the back of the ambulance getting checked out, answering the questions fired at me, I was hoping and praying that my brother would come alone. I wasn't up to seeing his old partner. The fact that they didn't work together anymore improved my chances.

"You're bleeding," the EMT noted, pointing to my left bicep.

"Bullet grazed me."

"We need to get you to the hospital."

"Oh yes," I said happily. "Let's do that."

She gave me a funny look. Apparently, most people weren't excited to go to the hospital. But it was a quick trip, and by the time we were on our way and I thought about

whom I could possibly see—as opposed to whom I was hoping to avoid—it was too late.

The day was going from bad to worse.

IN THE MOVIES, being grazed is something the hero normally shrugs off. In real life, with real people, it hurts like crazy. It didn't really start to throb until they removed my suit jacket, but between the blood and taking off my shirt, it was a lot of movement, and I really started to feel it. The good news was, it wasn't that big, and I got a shot of numbing agent—which honestly hurt more than the graze, but at least it killed the pain. I did yell. It was not one of my finer moments, but again, I was not the guy from the big summer blockbuster, I was an accountant, and I got shot at, and I was *done*.

“It's okay,” the very nice nurse told me. “Go ahead and yell. It's better to get it out than to try and be stoic about it. The last guy who was in here passed out instead of making any noise.”

“Thank you,” I said, trying to smile.

Of course, because this was the hospital, time seemed to stand still, and I was now sitting on an ER bed, waiting to be bandaged up, having had the *lavage* already—fancy word for *rinse*—when my phone rang. I answered without checking the caller ID because I was bored.

“Tracy, are you hurt?” Dimah asked, his accent thicker than usual, which happened when he was worried or stressed.

“I was grazed by a bullet, nothing serious.”

Silence.

“It's okay.”

“No.”

“Yes, it is,” I assured him. “I'm just glad Marta is already out on maternity leave, and that Wednesdays are Sonja's early days at school so she wasn't there. You know I was thinking that until Marta gets back, we could use a temp to—”

“I will come there.”

“No, don’t. I’m fine, I promise.”

“I want to see for myself.”

“It’ll be a whole thing,” I warned him. “Agent Brandt is probably already on his way, right?”

“Your brother is no concern of mine.”

I sighed deeply. “I’ll come by as soon as I can, in two, three hours tops.”

“It is ten a.m. now. Do you expect me to wait so long to see you?”

“It’s hospital time,” I lamented. “You know. It’s like *The Twilight Zone*.”

“Yes,” he agreed. “But I want to see you.”

“And I appreciate that, but I don’t want to have the Alex-and-Dimah scene today. I’m not up for it.”

“Fine,” he said gruffly. “When you are done, wherever you are, I will be there.”

“You really—”

But he’d hung up, and calling him back would be useless. He never answered when he knew I was trying to tell him not to do something.

“Tracy?”

Looking up, I saw Katie Crenshaw, one of my ex’s best friends. They had come to the program at County together, interns who’d bonded right away. I had thought, after all the time we’d spent together, that she and I were better friends. But after my ex and I separated—almost six months ago now—she’d disappeared from my life.

“Hello,” I greeted her, trying to keep the coldness out of my tone.

She rushed to me, but when she reached for my face, I tipped away from her touch.

“I don’t deserve that,” she said flatly, a wounded look in her eyes.

“I already have a doctor.”

She took a quick breath and thrust a cordless phone at me—it looked like the one from the nurses’ station. I didn’t take it. There was no reason for me to do anything she asked.

“Please, Tracy, just talk to him.”

I took the phone and put it to my ear. “Yes?”

“Are you all right?” Breckin Alcott, my ex, sounded scared. “What happened?”

I cleared my throat. “Bullet grazed me. It’s no big deal.”

His breath caught. “No big deal?”

“Really. Dr. Lin says I’ll be perfectly fine, with a nice scar to tell the tale.”

“You should see Amir Kattan in plastic—”

“I think a scar sounds romantic,” I said, talking over him.

“You—”

“I’m fine. Thanks for calling. I’ll talk to you—”

“Wait.”

So I did. It was still a habit, listening to him. You didn’t stop doing something after two years together, even after a six-month moratorium.

“I want to come home, Tracy.”

I cleared my throat, and when I did, Katie drifted away from me, giving me space. “I heard you’ve got a nice place in Pacific Heights with your new salary bump. Why would you want to come back to Noe Valley with me?” I sounded petulant, I was sure, but my arm hurt.

“You know why.”

And I almost got sucked in; I was that close to tumbling into the trap of the same old argument, the familiar back-and-forth. But I stopped myself before it escalated, because even

though my brother's ex-partner, Cord Nolan, didn't think my brain worked, it most certainly did. And wasn't that an odd thought... What was that about? Why was I thinking about Cord right now?

"Tracy, please, just listen to me. You know we need to..."

I checked out of the conversation, losing track of what he was saying because why in the world had Cord Nolan popped into my—

"Tracy!" he yelled.

Shit. "Yes," I replied automatically because it was the polite thing to do and I was my father's child. "I'm here and I'm fine," I soothed him, lying, my voice cracking a little with how scared I still was. The adrenaline had left by the time the police arrived, and I couldn't seem to stop shaking. "No worries."

He huffed out a breath. "But I do worry. I'll leave for the airport now and—"

"Where are you?"

"I'm in Chicago. I'm supposed to be here until Friday, but —"

"Are you there on business?" I asked before I could stop myself, regretting it instantly.

"Of course I'm here on business!" he snapped defensively, and I understood I'd triggered that. He was reacting to my blurted question. And it would've never occurred to me to ask before that day in May, when I came home early from my five-day family reunion and found him fucking his friend and fellow attending, Sean Granger, on our couch. I had left my dad and my brothers in Tahoe because I had missed my partner. He hadn't been able to get the time off—an ER doctor's schedule was not his own. But it turned out he had the weekend off. My fairy tale had ended right that second, and now all I could think about was how beautifully it had begun.

People were forever looking at us, the gorgeous, hot blond doctor and his...assistant? No one ever looked at us and thought, oh yeah, they fit, they're a couple. When you saw

most couples, it was easy to spot the connection, but not with us. And I actually loved that. I loved the way eyebrows would rise when the most breathtaking man in the room passed everyone else up to reach me. I got a charge out of it every time. It was an ego boost that was very high school, but I didn't care. Sometimes after a few drinks—bravery by bottle—we would get asked, *How?* When what they meant was, what had made Breckin Alcott ever stop and look at a plain guy like Tracy Brandt?

“He had to stop,” I always said. “I was bleeding, after all.”

“No.” Breckin would grin—the one that made his eyes sparkle—and then he'd run his fingers through my hair. “It was his sense of humor. I'm in thrall to his laugh.”

My sense of humor runs to the absurd, and it was that, above all else, that drew him to me. I had never stopped traffic; I did, however, stop Breckin Alcott in his tracks.

On that fateful day, almost three years ago, I was on my way to work, late, as usual, with the four other people I carpooled with, when we were hit by another car. It was one of those accidents where the person at fault is easily recognizable, as well as the victim—the latter being the five of us. The car rolled over what felt like seventy-five times but I guessed was actually only once. We ended up on a hill.

Now, the hill part is relative when you're talking about San Francisco. People call them hills, but they go straight up and straight down, so the angle can be more precarious than the word *hill* implies. Everyone got out but me and my friend Matt. That was okay with me as he was, and remains to this day, one of my favorite people in the world. The two of us were on the crushed side, so we were pinned in there pretty good. I heard him start to breathe a little weird, so I asked him if this little fix we presently found ourselves in was going to keep him from his hot date later on.

“Oh shit,” he swore from the front seat. “I do have a date tonight, don't I?”

“Yes,” I said, then added a leer to my voice, “with the hot sportscaster.”

“Tracy, honey, that man is so fine.” He sighed, turning his head to look at me. “And the package was lookin’—oh, Jesus, your eye’s bleeding!”

I shook my head slowly, wanting him to be less screechy—small area and all that. “It’s my eyebrow, I think. Don’t worry about it. Just tell me about this guy. Hell, we’re gonna be here awhile.”

“You’re sure you’re okay?” His voice was rising again, sounding worried.

“Absolutely,” I assured him, even as my right wrist was going numb. Better numb, though, than the shooting pain that had been happening before. “Hurry up and talk so I don’t fret back here.”

“Okay, so, we met at Spin, and he just walks up and—”

“Morning, folks.” A man poked his head through the broken window.

We both looked at him at the same time, and he started laughing. Breckin told me later he had never seen two people trapped inside a crushed car look so annoyed. It was completely unexpected and refreshing. I suppose most people would panic even after they had been assured by several firemen that they would not be blowing up or rolling anymore. We knew we would get out; it was simply a matter of when. I trusted firemen. They weren’t like policemen, who had a difficult reputation. Firemen were always there to help; they didn’t hand out parking or speeding tickets or scare you. So when one of them kept coming over and told you they were working on it, I figured, yeah, they were working on it.

“Our understanding is that it’s tricky,” I told the stranger in our midst. “If you pull Matt out, it puts strain on where I am and I get crushed, and if you pull me out, the same scenario plays out for him. Is that the gist of it?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, then.” I sighed, then took a deep breath. “So what’s the plan?”

“I’m not sure. I’m not with the fire department.”

“Who are you, then? And what are you good for?”

“I’m a doctor. I’m on my monthly ride-along, and so here we all are,” he finished with a flourish and smile.

“Where are you from?” Matt inquired, really looking at him.

“Why do you ask?”

“Because you’ve got an accent,” I said, trying not to laugh. “Where are you from?”

“Why, I’m originally from Georgia, sir.”

Maybe because I was losing blood, maybe because I had a concussion, possibly because his eyes were so blue and crinkled in half when he smiled—I didn’t know. All I did know then was that he was making me feel better.

“I’ve never been to Georgia,” I said, then looked over at Matt. “But I’m thinking perhaps we should plan a trip soon.”

“Oh yes, definitely,” Matt agreed. “Let us be off to the state with the peaches.”

“But you said originally?” I delved in because why not. We had time.

“I did,” he said with a grin. “We moved to Vermont when I was eleven, but by then the accent, or at least a bit of it, stays with you.”

Matt grunted. “That makes sense.”

“Is Vermont the place where all the trees turn the pretty colors in the fall?”

“Leaves turn colors, not trees,” Matt corrected me.

“He knew what I meant.”

“I did know what he meant,” Breckin concurred, “and yes. The colors are really beautiful.”

I looked at Matt. “We should go to Vermont too.”

Matt was quiet for a moment. “That would be a weird trip from a logistic standpoint,” he concluded thoughtfully, “but doable.”

“You two still having a good time in there?” a voice asked from the other side of the car.

That was Kevin, our fireman. “Kevin!” I yelled out.

“Kev!” Matt echoed me. “Kevin, my man, give us the good news!”

“Kevin, my love!” I laughed because he was shaking his head like he couldn’t believe us. “Get us the hell out of here!”

“What’s goin’ on, baby?” Matt asked quickly. “Gonna be out in a sec, right?”

Kevin laughed before saying, “Not yet, guys, but we’re working on it. We might have to get a crane out here.”

“Not the jaws of life?” I offered.

“You watch too much TV,” he assured me.

“That’s very possible,” I agreed.

“And no. We can get you out. The issue is the weight distribution and the hill, of course. Your angle is not great.”

“A crane sounds fabulous,” I said cheerfully, then to Matt, “A crane. Maybe we’ll make the evening news.”

“TV?” Matt asked. “Am I gonna be on TV?”

“If he’s gonna be on TV, we need some stylists in here first.”

“Damn right,” Matt agreed wholeheartedly.

“Did you call Matt’s boss like he asked you to?” I asked Kevin.

“What did the asshole, I mean my boss, say?” Matt took a deep inhale. “Am I in trouble?”

“He said you were excused from work today.”

“Oh hallelujah. Praise the Lord and pass the biscuits. I get a goddamn day off because I’m trapped inside a fuckin’ upside-down car,” Matt ranted.

“C’mon, Kev,” I teased the fireman, “you were surprised his boss wasn’t more concerned, weren’t you? C’mon, you can

tell him. You were kinda shocked, kinda taken aback.”

Kevin scowled. “I was a little, to be honest.”

Matt laughed out loud. “That man is such a prick,” he shouted, reaching out for my good left hand. “I finally have the perfect excuse to get out of work, and there’s nothing he can fuckin’ do about it!”

I was chuckling. Matt was giddy and cackling. And while I was not the kind of person who normally categorized people as assholes, his boss really was awful. The undermining and put-downs were the absolute worst. He needed a new job, like, yesterday. The good news was, he and his dear friend Jasmine Baylor were working on opening their own business; they just needed a bit more time.

“What do you two do?” the doctor asked us.

“I’m an event coordinator,” Matt told him. “Currently at Grant Chessman.”

“And you?” His voice was like velvet.

“I’m a bookkeeper at an import-export company,” I answered, and I realized suddenly that I was really thirsty. “Hey, Kev, can I have some water?”

“You could have some ice chips.”

“Why can’t I have water?”

“Why can’t he have water?” Matt asked, furrowing his eyebrows.

They exchanged looks then, the doctor and the fireman, and for the first time I felt a twinge of worry.

“Guys?”

“It’s in case we have to operate on ya,” the doctor answered me softly, his tone designed to comfort me, which it did.

“That’s direct and to the point,” Matt said matter-of-factly, trying to sound brave, but I could hear the fear in his voice. “Now you two need to go away so I can finish telling my friend about my hot date tonight.”

The fireman smiled and rose from his crouching position next to the window, but the doctor didn't move.

"He's serious," I told the doctor. "He can get a bit graphic. Might make ya blush."

"Can I take a quick look at you first?"

"Go ahead," I said, trying to shift in my seat so I could get my wrist free to show him. "Look at me."

He leaned into the car, and it was only at that moment that I realized the door lock was upside down. I was not in my seat; I was sitting on the roof of the car. The dome light was in the crack of my ass, my head was next to a hanging seat belt, and the reason I couldn't get out was because most of the trunk was beside me.

"Is our friend Sara okay?" I asked. "She was sitting right here beside me."

"It's truly a miracle, but she is indeed all right. Only you and your friend here are looking to have sustained some serious injuries."

"How serious?" I heard the edge in my voice.

"Well..." he began, giving me a small smile, and for the second time I noticed his warm eyes, a gorgeous dark indigo, almost violet. They seemed to sparkle when he smiled. "I think you probably have a concussion, and you"—he indicated Matt with a jerk of his head—"you've probably got a concussion as well. You're both experiencing some shock."

"We're so not in shock," I choked out. "This is us all the time."

Matt laughed then, and I dissolved into a fit of giggling.

The doctor smiled at us again, then left.

"Oh, he's a dish," Matt said as soon as the doctor was out of earshot.

"He's from Georgia. He's a peach."

Matt rolled his eyes and resumed telling me all the intimate details of the sportscaster's anatomy that he had

discovered thus far. The first date had been good; the second was sure to be better.

We were not alone long before the doctor reappeared at my door.

“Let’s talk a little,” he said to me.

“Okay. What would you like to know, Doc?”

“Names would be good for starters,” he said, really looking at me, into my eyes.

“Well, my name’s Tracy.” I yawned. “Tracy Brandt, and this is my dear friend Matthew Sato.”

“Pleased to meet you both,” he said, and I noticed how he couldn’t seem to stop staring at me. “My name’s Breck Alcott.”

“Breck?” Matt asked. “Is that short for something?”

“Breckin.”

“Breckin? Are you kidding? What kinda name is that?”

“Manners,” I scolded him.

Matt groaned loudly.

“Listen,” the doctor began. “I—”

“For the record, *I* think Breckin’s a fabulous name.”

“Oh dear God, stop this shameful display of flirtation,” Matt teased me.

“That’s good,” Breckin said. “Now, I want to tell you both what’s going on out here.”

The upshot was that the doors were holding up the car. If they moved the doors to get us out, the car would basically cave in on itself with us inside, and we’d be flattened like pancakes.

“That’s a bummer,” I said to Matt, who nodded his agreement.

Breckin shook his head at us. “Here’s what we’re going to do. We’re going to raise the car up off the ground and pull

Matt out first. You, Tracy, are wedged in pretty tight, but Matt we think will come out easy.”

And I did in fact have metal cocooned around me. Funny that I hadn’t really noticed until he mentioned it. My arms were free, but that was about it.

“He said you’re easy,” I repeated to Matt in case he’d missed it.

He flipped me off.

“Okay, so him first, then me,” I summed up.

“Yes.”

“Groovy.” I was getting really tired all of a sudden. “Go ahead and get him out. I’m not pissed about being last or anything.”

“No, no,” Breckin barked at me suddenly, and my eyes snapped open. “Don’t fall asleep. Not even for a minute.”

I hadn’t realized my eyes had closed until I jerked back awake. I didn’t usually fall asleep so fast. Looking around, though, I realized that it really wasn’t so fast. Matt was gone. There was only the doctor and me.

“Is he okay?”

“Matthew will be fine.”

“You’re sure?” I prodded, looking him square in the eye.

“I am,” he said gently, and his eyes softened as he looked at me. “What import-export company?”

“What?”

“You said earlier that you worked for an import-export company. Which one?”

“Zhabin Daher. I work with my partner, Dimah Mashir.”

He squinted at me. “No wonder you didn’t just say it. That’s a mouthful.”

“Is it? I’ve never had any trouble.”

“Wait now. Dimah Mashir? How do I know that name?”

“I have no idea,” I lied.

“Didn’t he just go to prison?”

“In fact, he did not,” I informed him haughtily. “All charges were dropped. It’s a shame everyone just reads sensational headlines and doesn’t follow the whole story.”

“Is that right?”

“Well, clearly,” I said, trying to gesture at him, but my arms were too heavy. “You read the bad parts but not about him being innocent.”

“Fair enough.”

“Now, in your defense, there was a lot of coverage of his arrest and practically nothing about the FBI letting him go.”

“The FBI?”

“Just, never mind.”

“Didn’t he put some guy through a wood chipper and use him for chum?”

“Oh dear God,” I groaned, and he started laughing.

“Wasn’t there some informant they found with a Colombian necktie?”

I gave him the most pained look I could manage. “That doesn’t even make sense.”

“What?” He chuckled at my irritation. “I heard he’s a very bad man.”

“You have to stop getting your news from Twitter.”

“No, that was real.”

“Was it?” I scrunched up my face.

“Fine,” he allowed, putting a hand on my cheek. “I really don’t like how dilated your pupils are, so I’m going to go talk to—”

“Wait.”

“What?”

I coughed. “Since I’ll never see you again after today, I’m gonna tell you something that I wouldn’t otherwise.”

“Go ahead and talk, but you must open your eyes and look at me.”

Again, I hadn’t realized my eyes had closed until I opened them back up.

“Perfect,” he said, all soft and lazy, the drawl clear in his voice. I loved the sound of it, all slow and sultry and warm.

“I bet you get this all the time, but you’re gorgeous.”

“I do,” he agreed, grinning at me. “I hear that a lot.”

“And you smell really...good, and...well, I’m really a scent kinda guy, so that’s all good, and your voice is like...” I trailed off, not because I was embarrassed, but because I could no longer collect my thoughts. I wasn’t sure if it was him being so close to me or if I was losing blood somewhere.

“I hear all that *a lot*,” he teased me, tilting my chin so I had to look into the dancing blue again. “Tell me some more.”

“Whatever,” I groaned, lifting out of his gentle hold. “I’m over it now.”

When he reached for me, I let him take my hand.

“I think it’s the accent that does it,” he said, raising my hand to his face and placing my palm flat against his cheek. “Men—and women—dig the whole Southern-gentleman thing.”

“Even though you’re not from the South anymore.”

“That’s right.”

I was having trouble breathing. “Are you doing this to keep me awake?”

“Why? Is it working?”

“It is,” I confessed, and tried to pull my hand away.

He held tighter, and I asked him to call my brother Alex if I died. Not my dad, but my brother. Better Alex told Dad than the other way around. My father had been the one to have to

make the calls when my mother died. Let him be second this time around.

“You’re not going to die,” Brekin promised me. “I won’t let you.”

“Hardly fair of you to use all your charm on unsuspecting men,” I said, pulling my hand free with a good hard yank.

“Yes, sir,” he said slowly, his eyes twinkling. “I promise to refrain from doing so in the future.”

“I don’t think it’s possible.” I was miserable all of a sudden. “I bet you’re married or about to be married, aren’t you? I bet you’re not even gay.”

He shook his head. “No on both counts, and I’m bi, actually.”

“Yeah?”

“I swear.”

“Have you had more boyfriends or girlfriends?” I didn’t really care. I just didn’t want him to leave, so I was making conversation.

“About the same.”

“Huh.”

He started laughing.

“I just—and I don’t mean this in a bad way, but most guys I know who swear they’re bi, I’ve never seen them with women.”

“Oh yeah?”

“It’s not funny.” I was indignant.

“Well, honey, I promise you that bi is truly what I am. I like both.”

“That’s good, then. I mean, to be attracted to both, equally, that sounds pretty awesome.”

“It is. Now, what were you going to tell me?”

“I’m rethinking if I should,” I replied honestly. “It sounds like you’re probably really busy doing a lot of dating.”

He snorted out a laugh. “Please.”

“Fine. Would you go...” I started, but then trailed off, suddenly remembering who I was. I was not as beautiful as this man. We were not a matching set.

“Would I go...” he repeated, waiting.

“Forget it.” I shifted in my seat uncomfortably.

“I will go anywhere with you.”

“Ha! You’re just saying that because you don’t expect me to live.”

“You’ll live. And we’ll go dancing.”

“Dancing,” I said with a sigh, and then heard him talking to me from far away. He was telling me to open my eyes, but I just couldn’t, no matter how much I wanted to see him.

The waking up hurt, and when I finally did, my dad and Alex were there in the hospital room with me. Alex was asleep with his feet on the edge of my bed, and my dad was asleep in a chair by the window. The doctor—Breckin—was standing beside my bed, looking down at me.

“Hey, Doc,” I croaked.

“You’ve got an awfully concerned family here,” he said, smiling. “I couldn’t get either of them to go home.”

“There’s one more brother too,” I told him, just to be saying something. “And when he hears about this, he’ll be flying out from New York to make sure I’m really alive.”

“Well, you can tell him from me that you are very much alive.”

His smile was contagious—I had to return it. “Am I okay? Or are you getting ready to give them bad news?”

He ran it down for me: the serious concussion, broken right wrist, two broken ribs, the cut above my left eyebrow,

and a gaping one in my left wrist that had needed fourteen stitches.

“But your feet are okay, so I can count on the dancing.”

“Aw, Doc, now that I’m okay, don’t sweat it. You’re off the hook for the dancing.”

He leaned down then, put one hand on either side of my head, and looked at me hard. “I don’t want to be off the hook.”

“Why not?” I asked him seriously.

“I don’t know, really. I just feel that we should go dancing.”

“It’ll be a while before I can,” I said, suddenly aware that he was looming above me, waiting, not moving.

“I’ll just hang around your place until you’re up to it.”

“Oh yeah? You gonna come by and just sit with me? Watch TV on my couch?”

“I think I have to.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. There’s something, I’m just not sure what.”

I reached up then, and with one hand in a cast and the other taped up with tubes coming out of it, put both around his nape. It was so strange to be touching him so intimately, to be thinking of kissing a man I hardly knew. Normally there were steps to a seduction, but my rulebook had gone right out the window.

“You’re going to follow me home?”

“I’d like to.”

“Why?”

“Like I said, I just have to.” He looked perplexed, almost annoyed. “I can’t promise I will feel like this tomorrow,” he said honestly, “because this has never happened to me before, and I’m not really sure what it is.”

“Like, maybe it might wear off in a while, and you’ll want to get the hell away from me?” I teased him, as was my way,

at the same time holding my breath.

“Yeah,” he said softly, his voice husky. “Maybe.”

There was a long silence before I spoke again. “I feel like I’ve known you a long time.”

“I feel the same.”

Like old love, not new love. Not love at first sight, more like love rediscovered. An oh-it’s-you love. Comfortable even before it began. I pulled him down to me and breathed him in before I kissed him. No awkward moment, no jerky movement of uncertainty, no inhibitions. We fit. I felt it, he felt it. I relaxed, sighing in his arms, and held him tight. He would not get away from me. Not that he seemed to want to go anywhere. But he was right. It could wear off, the feeling of homecoming, and it finally did two years later, the day I walked into my house and my life with him changed as quickly as it had begun. As days went, it had been one of my worst. The relationship ended like it started: surprisingly.

“Tracy!” Breckin’s sharp tone jarred me back to the present.

“Sorry, my mind wandered.”

“No, I’m sorry, forgive me,” he pleaded.

“It’s fine, but I was just making conversation earlier,” I explained. “I wasn’t accusing you of anything or trying to be an ass. Just asking a question about your trip, like business-or-pleasure kinda thing.”

“No, I know you, I overreacted and... I just don’t want you to think that there’s been anyone at all since we’ve been apart.”

“Okay.”

“You don’t believe me.”

“It’s not really any of my business,” I reminded him.

He coughed. “I’ll get on the first plane out and—”

“Don’t. There’s no need. I’m really all right. Just come home on Friday like you planned.”

“I won’t be in until late, or I’d come by and see you.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Could I see you Saturday night?”

“Actually, I’m supposed to go out with Matt, Ira, and Eric on Saturday. We’re meeting some of Ira’s new girlfriend’s friends at Mabon.”

“What?”

“Ira has a new girlfriend, and we’re meeting her friends for the first time on Saturday.”

“Ah, okay. Got it,” he said, then asked, “Can I come?”

“Um...sure. But you have to remember that Matt’s still Matt, right?”

“Meaning he still hates me.”

“Correct.”

“And probably always will.”

“Probably,” I agreed. “I told you to tell him we were just taking a break. He didn’t need to know the why. No one but you and I needed to know that.”

“No, he didn’t need to know. That’s my mistake. I thought he would appreciate my honesty and we’d still be friends.”

“I think in any kind of breakup, people take sides. I haven’t seen any of your friends either.”

“Yes, but we’re just taking some time, not breaking up. We’re not done.”

He kept saying that, but I didn’t believe him, and I wasn’t sure he believed it himself anymore either. When he’d first moved out, there had still been hope, but now, half a year on, both of us settling into our separate lives, it was time to use the word *over* because that’s what we truly were.

“Okay,” I said quickly, not wanting to reiterate, again, that we were through. I had told him that day, that week, when I moved in with Matt and Eric until all his stuff was out of my

house, and I told him again when he'd come by once for his mail before the change of address kicked in. We were finished.

I had always figured myself the type to forgive an infidelity, but it turned out that trust was the issue, not the actual act. I could forgive him fucking his friend on our couch, in our bed—I'd bought a new one of each after he left, which had made me feel infinitely better—but wondering if he was going to do it again, that was where the problem lay. Out of sight, I always wondered what, or *whom*, he was doing. So whereas he was talking about us getting back together, I was simply working on remaining friends. I hoped he'd get on board soon before even that became impossible. "I gotta go. Do you want to talk to Katie again?"

"No, that's okay."

I was going to hang up, but he stopped me.

"Hey, real quick."

"Yeah?"

"You know we're going to talk about Dimah Mashir when I get home, right?"

Something else he had no say in—where I worked and with whom—but I didn't have the energy right then to deal with it. "Sure."

"No, Tracy, really."

"Okay."

"Good. I'll see you Saturday."

What was I supposed to say? Thanks? I couldn't say I loved him because it wasn't true anymore. "Great."

Apparently that was enough because he hung up, leaving me to sit there and wonder if trying to be his friend was really in my best interest. Maybe cutting him out of my life altogether would be, as Matt said constantly, the smartest thing. Hard to know what the best answer was: cut your losses and run, or stay and try to build something new on what had been. Everything would have been clearer if I just had some coffee.

TWO

A new nurse came in and dressed my wound, gave me a tetanus shot that hurt even more than getting grazed by the bullet *or* the numbing agent, then told me to hold on for the doctor. Translation: sit tight for the ice age. When my phone rang, I was relieved it was my buddy Ira Kohn and not my brother Alex.

“Hey, my mom just called me. She was watching the news and said your office was shot up? Is that right?”

“Yeah,” I muttered.

“What the hell is going on?”

“You know what’s going on,” I answered, my voice dropping. “Think about it.”

He was quiet a second, and then came a long sigh. “Oh, I get it. Wrong office.”

I grunted.

“You guys should move down to the diamond district. People have to be buzzed in if they even want to look at a stone. Or Chinatown—you can work over a dim-sum place.”

“How would that be helpful?”

“You like dim sum.”

“So clever today, when I almost fuckin’ died,” I growled at him.

“Did you really, or are you screwing with me?”

I had to lie or he'd be really pissed. He'd wanted me to quit since he found out whom I worked with. Ira and I had been friends since a chance meeting four years ago at the gym. When he'd found out about Dimah Mashir, that we were partners, he nearly had a seizure. He, like Alex, never let it go. "It was mostly just noisy."

"You're sure?"

"Yeah."

"You're not being brave, are you?"

"Me? Brave?"

He chuckled warmly. "Okay, fine. But I think I should come pick you up anyway."

Ira was being so nice, worrying more than usual, and that was so...out of character. So why was he? "Oh, hell no," I flared irritably. "You do not get to use me as an excuse to bail on dinner."

"What?"

"Stop," I warned him.

"I'm sorry, what dinner?"

"Fuck you, Ira."

"Oh? Wait. Is that tonight?" He sounded so innocent.

"Worst. Actor. Ever," I pronounced. "You know it's tonight."

"What?" he said with way too much squeak in his voice. He was looking for any reason not to go. He was like a wolf ready to gnaw off its own foot to get out of seeing his mother.

"I'm fine, Ira. You're the guy taking the shiksa goddess home to your very nice, very kind, but extremely volatile Jewish mother." I snorted. "Lemme know how it goes. You can stay with me if you need to hide after."

"You could come," he said brightly.

"No."

“But my mother loves you. Plus, you’re hurt,” he said, and I could hear the wheels turning in his mind. “She would feel sorry for you, and—”

“And if you were engaged to me, she might let you live.” I laughed evilly.

He groaned. “But she really does like you.”

“All parents like me. I’m an accountant, for crissakes. I’m the poster child for dependability.”

“Are you really okay?”

“I am. The bullet only grazed me. It’s like a deep scrape, that’s it. You and I both know if I were really dying, I’d be working it to my advantage.”

“True.”

“Yeah, see? So it’s fine. Call me later if your mother doesn’t kill you.”

“You’re so funny,” he said sarcastically.

“And by the way, I told Breckin he could come with us on Saturday.”

“*What?*” His voice started rising. “What did you say?”

“Bye.”

“No, you—”

My cell phone beeped, and since I was done anyway, I ended the call because my father was trying to get a hold of me.

“I’m fine, Dad,” I said immediately.

“You’re certain?” he asked, and I could hear the concern in his voice.

“It was no big deal,” I lied to the man who raised me, because him being worried, or coming to the hospital to sit with me, would be a huge waste of his time. “Really.”

“Well, you sound good.”

I was being as careful as I could not to let my voice shake, since I was slowly freezing to death. Hospitals. Why did the temperature need to be set at arctic?

“Well, Alex is on his way, so prepare yourself.”

I scoffed. “Gird my loins, you’re saying.”

“Yes,” he said, chuckling. “Gird.”

“Hang up the phone!” came a sharply yelled order.

“Oh, there he is now,” Dad teased me.

“Love you,” I said, then hung up and gave my attention to my brother, who’d just stormed into the room.

“What the fuck, Trace?” he snarled at me.

And because my luck was never that good, I was not only looking at my older brother, but also at his ex-partner, Cord Nolan.

It hit me then, the reason why he’d popped into my head earlier. Cord and Alex were a packaged set. Even though they weren’t partners anymore, as Alex was no longer a cop, they were still best friends. I was certain that when the officers on the scene had contacted Alex, his first call had been to Cord, the second one to my father. It followed that since I’d known Alex was going to show up, I’d get Cord as well. That was the reason I’d thought of him earlier. I felt infinitely better for figuring it out. I didn’t want to have my mind occupied with Cord Nolan for no reason. I couldn’t imagine anything worse.

“I’m going to kill you myself!” Alex bellowed.

With his volume, yes. I was going to have a monster headache; of that I was certain.

The two of them charged across the room, and as they were both big—my brother at six feet two, Cord two inches taller—I felt crowded and smothered, though at five eleven I wasn’t tiny myself.

“How many times have I told you that working with Dimah Mashir is gonna get you fuckin’ killed?” Alex barked at me.

I shook my head.

“Yes,” he insisted. “Yes it will. And you can talk that fuckin’ bullshit about how Dimah’s the good brother and Kirill is the monster, but so you know, there is no record of a Kirill Mashir ever coming into this country. He died in some Russian prison when he was eighteen, and that was the end of him.”

Dimah Mashir and I had met when I was fresh out of college and looking for my first job as an accountant. My degree was in management accounting, but I had no great desire to be a CPA. He’d offered me a bookkeeping position at his company, but said there would be a lot to the job.

“I’ll get bored if there’s not more to it than just crunching numbers,” I’d told him.

“You will not be bored. I want you to run office as well,” he said in his gorgeous thick Russian accent that made my dick hard.

“How do you know I can do that?”

“I am looking at you, am I not?”

It was one of the nicest things anyone had ever said to me.

Six years ago, after I’d worked for him for four years, Dimah asked me to be his partner, and I quickly accepted. I bought shares with my savings, we signed the paperwork, and simple as that, we went into business together. So after ten years of first employment and then friendship, I knew my partner. He was not a liar, and even if he were, he definitely wouldn’t ever lie to me. His business—our business—was legitimate. I was the bookkeeper. I set up 401(k)s and retirement packages. I paid the personnel and vendors. Dimah was in charge of logistics. He did the legwork, went to the wharfs, watched goods coming in and being shipped out. Ours was an easy distribution of responsibilities. His brother, Kirill, had his own endeavors, and those, from what Dimah told me, walked a thin line between clean and criminal. Being in business with Kirill might get you used for chum if loyalty was not high on your priority list. I didn’t know the whole story of why the two brothers weren’t partners, and I honestly

didn't care. They were completely separate, and since I saw our books on a daily basis, I knew where every penny came from and where it flowed out to. I could say with great certainty that if Dimah said he had a brother, then he did have one. A living, breathing one, even if no one I knew had ever seen him.

"Your partner is a criminal," my brother told me for the billionth time.

"My partner is a businessman," I corrected. Again.

Cord grunted and flicked his moss-green gaze to me. "What's under the bandage?"

"Just a scratch."

Alex growled. "We both know a scratch doesn't get you taken to the hospital in a fuckin' ambu—"

"That's it," I cut my brother off, picking up my phone. "I'm telling. I'm calling Dad back, so you better watch out."

He grabbed the phone out of my hand, slammed it down on the bed beside me, and then took my face in his hands, forcing me to look up at him. "You scared the fuck outta me. I lost Mom. I ain't losing you."

God, he had to play the mom card? "You realize I'm thirty-three, right?"

"I will always be older than you."

Yes, he would. "You can see I'm fine."

He was squinting so he wouldn't cry, but his eyes were red-rimmed, giving him away.

"Really," I said, yanking free and then putting out my arms for him. "I'm good."

Leaning in fast, he clutched me tight, burying his face in my shoulder. Underneath the outer persona of prickly, volatile, alpha DEA agent lay his great heart that couldn't take losing another family member. I had to be more sensitive to that.

Glancing over at Cord, I saw him shaking his head, condescension dripping off him. He was such an asshole, and

he had no right to judge me. When I flipped him off, he clenched his jaw in irritation.

“He’s fine, Al,” Cord growled. “Now ask him why someone would shoot up his office first thing this morning.”

Alex pulled back to look at me. “Trace?”

“I have no idea.”

“Hazard a guess,” Cord said snidely.

“I don’t have one.”

“Maybe somebody thought shooting up the office and killing you would send Dimah Mashir a message,” Cord surmised, making me want to deck him.

“Like what? Like, *I’m gonna shoot the bookkeeper so nobody gets paid?*”

Before Cord could tear into me, Alex excused himself to take a call. We both watched him walk to the opposite end of the room, and then Cord moved closer to me.

“He was a wreck on the way over here,” he admonished me.

“Which I’m sorry for, but—”

“Not enough to get another job, though, right?”

“I like my job,” I said, defending myself. “And I own half the business.”

“You’re putting your brother through the wringer for no good reason. Way to be a dick.”

“You didn’t even listen to me.” I sighed. “And I don’t tell him not to go undercover for months on end and miss Christmas with his family, so why should I worry what—”

“You could get another job.” He was relentless.

“It’s not just any job. It’s my business as much as Dimah’s. Should I say it again so you hear me this time?”

“It’s selfish,” he berated me. “Your brother’s in law enforcement. You should show some fuckin’ respect.”

“How so?”

“By not working with a member of the Russian mob for starters!”

Russian mob. Was he kidding? “You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You should think about someone besides yourself.”

I smiled slowly.

“Tracy,” he warned me.

But no way could I have stifled my snort of laughter.

“Listen to me—”

“Did you really just say that to me? *Think about someone besides yourself?* Did that actually come out of your mouth?”

“You—”

“You’re giving me life advice? You? The man who doesn’t even get first names when he fucks?”

“Tracy—”

“The man who once had a quickie in a men’s room when he was on a date with somebody else?”

“I’m gonna kill your brother. Why does he tell you that shit?”

“The man who once washed off a condom with soap and water so he could reuse it?”

“That’s not exac—”

“Disgusting is what that is,” I apprised Cord, talking over him, shaking my head in revulsion. “Think about someone besides yourself... Gimme a fuckin’ break.”

“If you weren’t hurt—”

“I wouldn’t even be seeing you right now, Cord, so what the hell? Why are you even here? You guys aren’t partners anymore. What’d he do, call you to come give me shit with him?”

He opened his mouth to really give it to me with both barrels, but Alex saw him.

“Cord, lay off.”

I arched an eyebrow, baiting him. “Yeah, lay off. Better listen to your buddy.”

“You’re a real piece of work, you know that?”

I took a breath. “You know what, Cord, I—”

“Stop,” he ordered calmly, surprising me with his tone but even more when he slipped his hand around the side of my neck. I went mute as he stroked up and down my throat with his thumb, stilling under the unexpectedly tender touch. “We were both concerned, not just Alex.”

I was stunned. “You were?”

“Of course.”

He was worried? He cared?

“We were having breakfast when he got the call, so that’s why I’m here. I wanted to come see you. I had to.”

Had to?

Staring up at him, caught in the remarkably warm gaze, I was amazed at my own reaction, at the tingly feeling in the pit of my stomach. Why did being the focus of all of Cord Nolan’s attention always cause that reaction?

We had a history that was both sporadic and temperamental. We had been dancing around each other for years, almost close and then abruptly apart. The first time I met Cord, five years ago, was at a party to celebrate him and Alex being promoted. They were both going to be inspectors with the San Francisco Police Department. Before that, whenever Cord had been invited to meet the family, have a meal, he’d backed out. Alex made excuses for him, said the man with estranged parents and no siblings had trouble being around others’ families. My brother had celebrated quietly with my father and me first, but then he was having a huge blowout of a party, a total rager, and I’d been invited to stop by, so I did.

I had been walking into my brother's loft; Cord had been on his way out on a beer run. The collision wasn't hard, but he'd had to grab me so I wouldn't fall down since he was so much bigger and stronger. It had been like getting sideswiped by a train.

"I'm so..." I couldn't remember what I was saying when I looked up at him. I inhaled sharply, and no way he'd missed that.

"You're the little brother, right? Tracy?"

"I'm the middle brother," I'd corrected automatically, as I'd been doing all my life. Those simple words were all I could manage gazing up into his beautiful moss-green eyes. Combined with the short sable-brown hair, broad shoulders, and thick muscular frame, the man was easily the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen in my life.

"Alex says you're smart."

It was better than the alternative.

He smiled slightly, a trace of softness around his mouth, a crinkle of laugh lines, and my breath caught again.

Fuck.

"He didn't say you were mute."

I had seen beautiful men before, but nothing like him. And he wasn't movie-star handsome, but there was strength in his face, and between the sharp-angled features, the smirking curl to his mouth, and the bored look in his eyes, I was utterly transfixed. Any man who dared me to be brilliant, to dazzle him? Of course I was all over that.

He went on speaking even though I was obviously afflicted in some way. "I'm Cord. Cord Nolan. Your brother's partner." He extended a hand to me. "We should've met before this, but you know how it is."

I was supposed to touch him and retain higher brain function? There was no way.

He grunted after a moment, dropping his hand. "Okay, so I guess you didn't like whatever Alex told you about me."

There was disappointment on his face, like maybe he'd been expecting more from his partner's supposedly smart brother. Before he could leave, I grabbed his hand and held it tight. "Sorry."

His eyes widened, and he squeezed my hand automatically.

"I just..." I raked my fingers through my hair roughly. "Sorry."

He ran his gaze all over me, head to toe. "No, it's okay."

"Good," I said, realizing he still hadn't let go of my hand and that I hardly cared. Just that slight touch was sending jolts of electricity up and down my spine.

"I'm going on a beer run. You wanna come?"

I did, but then my brain kicked on, and with that came the warning sirens. What would prompt him, out of the blue, to invite me? He didn't even know me.

"Come on," he offered seductively, his voice low and full of heat.

Being the focus of all his attention made my cock thicken in my jeans. He was dangerous, that was easy to see, and a bit chipped around the edges. And that was my type—hell, it was everyone's type. Broken bad boy needing to be healed? Gimme. And I definitely wanted to taste him, but... "Maybe not," I whispered, easing free and taking a step back.

He took one closer. "Why not? You've got bottom written all over you."

Oh...lovely.

"You can ride my cock in the car, and we'll be back here before the party even gets going."

I understood then. The man was a player, and he saw me as a quick diversion, a meaningless notch on his bedpost, utterly forgettable. He had an itch that needed a scratch, and there I was, looking up at him with hungry, needy puppy-dog eyes. I would have offered to fuck me in the back seat of his car on the side of the road too.

“What’s the matter?”

I was such an idiot, still susceptible to his breed of sexy at twenty-eight. “Alex.”

“Your brother doesn’t need to know, does he?”

“No, of course not.”

“Then come on, just— Where ya goin’?”

I didn’t realize I’d been walking backward, inching away. “Nowhere. I just don’t fuck like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like it doesn’t mean anything.”

“So to you, it has to mean everything?” he asked dryly.

“No, just more than nothing.”

He scoffed. “No one-night stands for you, huh, princess? Don’t you think you’re a little old to be saying no?”

“And don’t *you* think you’re a little old to still be fucking in your car?”

“I’m only seven years older than you.” He winked. “That’s not ancient.”

And he’d been right; thirty-five wasn’t a fossil. He was a year younger than Alex, both of them having joined the police force right out of college. They had started as patrolmen and were then on the inspector track—a job Cord would keep and my brother would eventually leave to join the DEA—but at the time, the way he sounded, all defensive, made me wonder who Cord was trying to convince of his maturity.

“I have years before I even think about settling down,” he’d insisted.

“Sure,” I agreed, walking by him.

He caught my arm. “You’re sure you only do serious?”

“I do.”

“Your loss.” And he left.

It had been the beginning of a mess. Every time we saw each other from then on, there was teasing and flirting, irritation, and endless, annoying banter. There had not, however, ever been Cord reaching out to touch me with tender warmth. That was brand-new.

“Trace?”

“Sorry,” I said quickly, leaning away from him, away from his touch, not wanting to let my guard down, ever, with Cord Nolan.

“No, you’re fine. I just—”

“I was grazed by a bullet. That’s it. I’m fine now. Please be sure to put that in your report, Inspector Nolan.”

He glowered at me, which was good. I liked us smack-dab in the middle of familiar territory. At least some things never changed.

MY DOCTOR WALKED into the room just then, and my brother and his *charming* ex-partner had to leave. I figured the latter meant that my office getting shot up was not, in fact, the most interesting thing to happen in all of San Francisco on a Wednesday morning. But that did not stop Alex from sending two police officers to escort me down to the Mission Station to answer questions, write up a statement, wait while it was typed up, read it again, sign it, and then tell the story all over again to another pair of inspectors on the organized-crime task force. I was hungry, sore, and cranky by the time I finally got out of there hours later, just after four in the afternoon. My whole day had been eaten up between the hospital and the police station. The only thing that sounded good was my bed.

What was nice was that as soon as I limped out the front door of the police station, a huge Hummer pulled up beside the curb. The passenger side front window rolled down, and I found myself looking at Pavel Babić, one of my employees. Next to him, in the driver’s seat, sat a guy I didn’t know.

“Hey.” I smiled.

Pavel just squinted at me.

“What is it?”

“When you set up my retirement plan, you put Slavic and not Russian on the paperwork.”

“Yeah? So?”

“That is correct.”

“You think I don’t check that stuff?”

His smile made his ordinary face quite handsome. “No, I should know better.”

I groaned and bent over, trying to stretch out my back. He touched my shoulder. “What happened?”

“A bullet grazed me, that’s all.”

“Get in. Dimah wants to talk to you.”

I groaned again as I straightened up. “Nope. Food and bed, and that’s it. I’ll grab an Uber.”

The back door opened then, and a man got out and held it open for me. I didn’t know him either, which was weird. I knew almost everyone who worked for our company, even the guys on the docks and the fleet of delivery drivers. The thing was, I was never allowed to introduce myself. It was a Dimah thing. He introduced me to people when he was ready, not before. So I didn’t ask the strangers’ names, and they didn’t offer.

“I’m going home,” I said, directing my words to Pavel.

I was about to leave when I heard, “Come *now*, Tracy.”

Leaning forward, I saw Dimah in the back seat. “*Food*,” I whimpered, hoping he’d get the message.

“Da,” he agreed sharply, his hand gesture just as cutting. “I know. Now get in.”

“Dimah, can’t this wait?” I whined, pushing him like I always did. The man was normally malleable. We were good friends, after all. “I just—”

“Tracy,” he snapped, “come here!”

He was acting oddly; he was normally much more lenient with me, had been from the start, let me do basically whatever I wanted, but not at present. Something was different.

I didn't want him ranting like a maniac, so I took a deep breath and climbed into the car. The guy who'd opened the door was right behind me. As I made my way toward Dimah, I wasn't prepared for the car to move suddenly, and I lost my balance and fell against him.

"Shit, I'm sorry," I groaned, trying to squirm out of his lap, only succeeding in tangling my legs with his more, my right leg under his left thigh and right knee, more on my back than my ass.

"Sit still," he ordered, one hand on my upper thigh, the other on my knee.

I froze, and when I did, I realized how warm his hands were and the strength in them as he maneuvered me off him and back to a sitting position. When he bent close, I caught a whiff of cloves and citrus and something woody. I inhaled deeply, and he turned his head and caught me.

"Sorry," I said, biting the corner of my lip.

"No," he said gruffly, his ice-blue eyes lifting to mine. "You have nothing to be sorry for."

That close, all I could do was stare.

Dimah Mashir had sharp, sculpted features, from his high cheekbones to a strong, angled jaw. His long, straight nose was gorgeous, and he had a full bottom lip and a thinner top one. The scar under his right eye and the small missing section of eyebrow over it gave me the idea that at some point he'd been in a knife fight. I imagined a battle to the death over some woman who had, of course, rewarded him when his opponent lay dead.

I had a pretty active imagination.

"You will tell me from the start as we drive to Menshinstvo for dinner."

Menshinstvo was his bar off Sixth Street, close to Market and Folsom. It was divey, small, with a kitchen that one of his uncles cooked in only when he felt like it or if Dimah was going to be there. There were always big guys in suits sitting out front, and no one who didn't speak fluent Russian had any business even loitering anywhere near the place.

Slouched in the back of the car, I explained what happened, the abbreviated version, and Dimah didn't grill me or try and make me remember more than I did.

"I have already spoken to Kirill."

I knew he hated to do that. Dimah had spent his life separating himself from his brother and his brother's world. "You didn't have to."

"I did. He had to let those who wanted his attention know that they have mine instead."

"I'm fine."

"Yes, and everyone is fortunate that you are."

"It's not your job to take care of me."

"You are my partner. If not mine, then whose?"

Once we got to the bar, the five of us poured out of the Hummer and went inside. A strong aroma of garlic and pepper hit me, making my stomach grumble, and when we all filled up a table in the back, the first thing I got was a shot glass full of vodka.

"I need a soda or I'm gonna fall asleep."

"Drink," Dimah commanded.

I threw it back, and he poured me another, but a woman brought a pitcher of ice water and several glasses, so at least I got to hydrate.

Dimah made everyone speak English, which was nice of him, and when the pickle plate was brought to the table, I started in on the cucumbers and mushrooms.

"Do you want soup?" he asked me.

Since the last time I was there I got stuck eating borscht, I said no as strongly as I could without offending him. I had barely choked it down.

“No soup,” he told the waitress.

Thank God.

He went back to talking with the others and sitting there, drinking, while everyone smoked around me. I started to get really sleepy. When I put my head on the table, no one said a word.

The conversation changed. I heard the English give way to Russian, and after a while, someone’s voice was in my ear.

“Are you going to pass out?”

“Hopefully not,” I answered Iosif Bazin, one of the guys who worked with Dimah on the logistics end.

“You have so much trust in him, in Dimah. Why?”

“Because he’s trustworthy,” I answered softly. “We’re partners.”

“You are strange man not to listen to others, only yourself.”

I had no idea why that was odd. “He’s a good man.”

“You are what keeps him so.” He bumped my shoulder gently as the table dissolved into laughter that was cut short by a sharp command.

“Stoy.”

When I sat up, I found Dimah hovering over me, staring down at Iosif, who had taken his spot. He must have gone to wash his hands before dinner because his coat, suit jacket, and tie were off and his sleeves rolled up.

Iosif said something under his breath in Russian without meeting Dimah’s eyes and then moved quickly away and toward the bar.

It was weird. You could feel the tension in the room.

“The bathroom is yours, dorogoi,” Dimah whispered.

I was being excused, so I didn't argue, just got up, a little unsteadily, and walked to the bathroom. It was nicer than I expected, so I washed up, ran cold water on my face, then trudged back to the table. I noted that Iosif was gone, and I would have inquired about it, but that was another Dimah thing. When he excused people, he didn't like me asking why. If we were together or married, I would have pressed him to be different, to explain things and tell me why. And we were friends, yes, but those men worked for him, not for me, so the relationships were different. It wasn't my place to get in the middle.

"Ne volnuysya," Dimah was saying as I flopped back down beside him. I knew that was some derivative of *don't worry about it*.

The two new guys who'd been in the car with us, whom I now remembered having seen around the office but never met, were both sitting across from me, and one of them addressed me. "You look tired."

I nodded.

"I am Vassi Leshev," he said, then tipped his head at the man beside him. "And this is Danya Kudrin."

I offered Vassi my hand.

His eyes flicked to Dimah, who gave him the slightest nod. Vassi took my hand in his, covering it with his other in the two-handed shake I always found so warm and genuine. Danya did the same, his gaze locked on mine as he did.

"Pleasure to meet you both," I said, smiling.

"And you," Vassi returned hoarsely. "It is not everyone Dimah lets meet his partner."

He was right, but I had no idea why Dimah was always so protective.

"Tracy."

I gave Dimah my attention.

"You know I would have never left you alone in office if I thought, even one moment, that it was not safe."

“No, I know,” I replied, bumping him with my shoulder.

He grunted. “Eat now.”

I was about to point out that there wasn't any food on the table when everything arrived, hot and steaming and smelling amazing.

“I think he is drooling,” another man said, teasing me, and Dimah chuckled.

“Here, you will like this.”

And I did. The dish was called pelmeni. It was like ravioli filled with minced pork, and I could eat a million of them if no one stopped me. There were also crepes, but not like the French ones most people knew, more like super-thin pancakes, and these were delivered to the table with bowls so you could fill them with things like caviar, sour cream, mushrooms, and smoked salmon. Dimah liked his with mascarpone and apricot jam, or condensed milk and blueberries. He had a big sweet tooth. I much preferred the beef and chicken kebabs and ate far too many every time. His uncle, Leonid, liked that about me and always came out of the kitchen to give me a hug and kiss.

After we ate, there was more vodka, but I got to take a pass after two more glasses and had hot tea instead. Sated and exhausted, I was afraid I was going to fall into a coma if I didn't get home.

“Get up,” Dimah said, and I followed his direction.

I shook hands with all the men I had sat with, and then walked with Dimah, Pavel, Vassi, and Danya back to the Hummer. Dimah never traveled alone. Even when others didn't accompany him in some place, that didn't mean they weren't waiting in the car.

Inside, Dimah and I again sat in the back as he gave Danya, who'd been driving earlier, my address in Noe Valley. I sprawled over the seat, head rolled sideways, looking at him as he gently put a hand on my knee.

“Are you afraid to return to office on Friday?”

“No, why? Should I be?”

“No. You have nothing to concern yourself with,” he insisted quietly. “Those men will not come again. I have made certain.”

“Well, no, of course not, they were obviously in the wrong place.”

“Da,” Dimah agreed softly, “in wrong place.”

“Wait,” I said, my brain fuzzy with vodka and the need to sleep. “Tomorrow’s Thursday. How come I’m not working tomorrow?”

“You take day for rest. You sleep, you eat, and that is all. I will have office cleaned up tomorrow while you are not there. Friday, you come back. It will be nice again.”

“Do me a favor,” I said with a yawn. “Don’t replace the picture of the dogs playing cards, all right? I saw some nice paintings at that new gallery down the street from us. Let’s get some actual art in there.”

“Whatever you want, dorogoi. You take card, get what you think.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes. Whatever you want.”

“Can I do that tomorrow if I want? Shop for the office?”

“No, tomorrow you rest. Friday is better. I will have Iosif bring card to you and drive. What time do you plan to get up?”

“I dunno. Noon?”

“You are funny man.”

“That’s what I hear,” I said sarcastically.

It didn’t take me long to fall asleep again in the car, and when we arrived at my place, Dimah gently shook me and shooed me out. I was confused because he’d been so concerned all night, and then to dump me outside my little A-frame house with the wood-planked porch seemed cold. But

when I swiveled around, almost taking a header over my white picket fence, I saw Cord sitting on my front steps.

“Why are you here?” I called over to him, trying to keep the annoyance out of my voice.

“I came to check on you.”

“Why?” I whined without meaning to.

“Because I should.”

“That makes no sense,” I mumbled as I opened and closed the front gate and started toward him.

“Don’t mutter,” he scolded me. “If you have something to say, speak up.”

“Does Alex know you’re here?”

“No.”

The gold shield on his belt drew my eye. Normally whatever jacket he was wearing covered it, but tonight he only had a sweater on over a T-shirt, and his holster had pulled up the fabric on that side. I could admit to finding the badge and gun ridiculously sexy. I was as susceptible to the whole danger thing as the next person. “Then why are you here?”

“You notice that your thug partner saw me, right?” he said, changing the subject.

I scoffed at the implication. “My partner is not a criminal.”

“Just—”

“Cord,” I said softly, reaching him, then crossing my arms as I hovered. “He’s not. I would not work with a criminal. Can we give this a rest?”

“Yes, you *would* work with him regardless, if you thought that underneath it all he was a good guy.”

I threw up my hands, wincing at the sudden pain in my left bicep. “You’ve got to—”

He grabbed my right wrist and yanked me down beside him on the porch.

“For crissakes, Nolan,” I groused at him, straightening up, bracing myself with a hand on his muscular thigh.

“I thought you were going to get married.”

“What?” I asked, taken aback.

“Breckin Alcott.”

“Yeah?”

“Your brother said you were going to marry him.”

“I was,” I said, sniffing. I slid away slightly, putting some distance between his big, hard, warm body and mine. “I still might. We’re taking some time,” I lied because I was annoyed.

“What the fuck does that even mean?”

“Why are we talking about this?” I asked irritably. “Since when do you even care?”

“You smell like smoke and sweat,” he said disdainfully. “And alcohol.”

“Cigarettes and sweat I’ll give you, but what does vodka smell like? Nothing. It smells like nothing, so—”

“You’re hammered,” he accused.

“I am not,” I defended myself, shivering in the chill air.

“Go in if you’re cold.”

“I am,” I snapped at him. “Why do you always have to bark out orders at everyone?”

“Maybe it’s just you,” he said gruffly. “You ever considered that?”

I hadn’t, not really.

“You don’t think about me at all,” he mumbled.

What an odd thing to say. “That’s not true,” I said too quickly.

“No?”

“No,” I answered, my voice much too breathy. But he was so...*there*, in my space. His height, his presence, the broad

shoulders and solid chest, all of him made me want to touch, just once, to see what the muscles that rippled under his clothes felt like. I heard from other people that he intimidated them, but I'd never gotten that. All I registered was heat and sinewy strength. As he leaned close, my shiver was involuntary; there was no way to hide my reaction.

“Go inside,” he husked. “I’m just waiting for the patrol car to show up. They got pulled off because someone thought they heard a prowler.”

I cleared my throat. “Did it ever occur to you or Alex that if my partner were a criminal, having the brother of a DEA agent working with him wouldn’t be too smart?”

His gaze stayed locked on mine.

“So maybe, Nolan, just maybe, he’s a legitimate businessman.”

“No, that never crossed my mind.”

“And that maybe seeing you here, he thought I was your late-night booty call and that’s why he left.”

“What?”

“Or maybe,” I said cheekily, “you’re mine.”

“I’m your what?” he asked indignantly.

“The man I call to come fuck me at”—I checked my dive watch—“nine thirty on a weeknight.”

He got to his feet, as did I, and only because I’d stepped up on the porch, two steps higher, was I eye to eye with him. On equal ground, he could rest his chin on the top of my head. He was bulkier too, covered in thick, heavy muscle. “No one in their right mind thinks you call me and I come running. You’re deluded if you think so.”

My eyes fluttered at how full of himself he was.

“Trace.”

“What?” I asked as he joined me on the porch.

He took hold of my chin and tilted my head back so he was gazing into my eyes. “Please don’t give your brother any more heart palpitations.”

“I’ll try.”

Taking a step forward, into my space, he leaned close, and under the porch lights, I could see sepia flecks in his moss-green eyes.

“Thank you for waiting for the changing of the guard.”

“You’re welcome.”

His hand was warm, and whether he realized it or not, his thumb was rubbing over my jaw.

“Do you want to come in?” I swallowed so I wouldn’t make any telltale whimpering sound of desire. I was hurt, and I wanted someone to lie in bed beside me and watch TV while I slept. Even more, I wanted to be fucked through the mattress. There had been no one since Breckin. I wanted, needed, a man. It took everything in me not to yell at him to get his ass in my bed. It was the alcohol, and I knew that, but it didn’t help the hunger for him. My inhibitions were nonexistent. I wanted more than anything to be naked under him, under his power, under his hands.

“I better not,” he said, dragging his thumb along my bottom lip before he let me go. “You’re a little too defenseless tonight.”

I was going to ask what the hell that meant, but he turned and left me on my front step, watching him do what he always did—walk away.

THREE

It turned out, Dimah was right. Everything hurt more the second day. I felt like I was a hundred years old and moved like it. It was all I could do to get up, stagger to the couch, order food to be delivered, and then turn on the TV. I think when I tripped and fell onto the car the day before, that was what hurt the most. The graze on my arm was okay, but the jolt from the fall was what made me have to roll off the couch to the floor instead of sitting up like a normal person. I was broken.

Matt came by after work with Jasmine, and they brought Chinese food, and I got to hear them both vent about their boss and the stupid things he expected. I enjoyed their company, Jasmine made me mint tea with honey and ginseng, and by the time they left, I felt the best I had all day.

Friday morning was so much better, and it improved even more when Pavel and Iosif came by to drop off Dimah's personal credit card. Not the business's American Express I carried as well, but the one that just had *Mashir* on it like he was Beyoncé or Adele. It was beautiful and sparkled in the morning sun.

“*My precious,*” I said in my best Gollum voice.

Pavel shot me a look like I was not right in the head.

I leaned into his window to look at Iosif, who was driving. “What did you do the other night for the boss man to send you home?”

Iosif glared at me. “I was not sent home. I had to take dinner to my family.”

“Uh-huh,” I placated him. “Sure you did.”

“Dimah, he does not like it when he is not there to gatekeep what is said to you.”

I looked at Pavel, who shook his head slightly and squinted like that was crazy talk.

And while I agreed that Dimah had a way he liked all the people working for us to interact with him and me, “gatekeeping” was a bit much.

“You want we should drive you?” Pavel asked me.

“Oh no, you guys would be bored to death,” I told him, leaning sideways to look at Iosif. “Especially you. And what if you need to take lunch to your family or something?”

He rolled his eyes and then ordered me into the back of the black Ford Explorer.

Since I didn’t have a car and it wasn’t the weekend—so there were no friends to call to go with me, and I always preferred company—I was very pleased to have them along on my redecoration journey. Or at least I was until I found out how opinionated they both were. Pavel liked clean, modern lines. White, glass, steel, and highly structured, that was his aesthetic. Iosif, on the other hand, was more Art Deco meets Bauhaus, which wasn’t working for me either. I was after warm and inviting, and neither thought that was a good idea.

“It is office, not Starbucks,” Pavel explained. “You do not want people there all day, using our Wi-Fi.”

He was missing the point.

After lunch I sent them both back to work because I’d lost half a day arguing with them. It was easy after that. I chose area rugs, a couch, several club chairs, and new desks. The art I had to wait on because that I really had to spend time with. Plus, Dimah should be with me. He occasionally worked in the office as well, so he needed to have some input. When I called and told him, he agreed that we would go the following week.

“I have the card with no limit,” I teased him. “You want me to hold it until Monday? Do you trust me with it for that long?”

“I trust you,” he said curtly, the way he was sometimes on the phone with me. At first I didn’t understand and thought he was mad a lot of the time, but it turned out it was more his tone than anything else. If I was with him, I could see him smiling or rolling his eyes or shaking his head. Over the phone, he came off terse.

“I might order food with this tonight,” I baited him.

“Make sure you get something expensive,” he directed me.

Cackling as I hung up, I then called my favorite Mexican place and got carne asada fries, jalapeño poppers, and rolled chicken taquitos with extra guacamole. I was watching reruns of *Law & Order* when the delivery driver arrived, at the same time as my brother. Alex was checking on me, which was nice, and since I’d ordered way too much food, it worked out perfectly. The best part was we didn’t have to talk. He just went to my refrigerator, got himself a beer, got me a bottle of water, and flopped down beside me to feast.

“You’re so lucky you don’t get heartburn,” he told me. “I’m going to regret this.”

“Don’t worry, I’ve got antacids for you, old man.”

He turned to look at me, and I spit out my water.

“You’re an ass, Trace. And you scared me the other day.”

“I know,” I said softly. “I’m sorry. You know I love you.”

He grunted, which was very much like him. Alex Brandt was not big on showing his emotions, and that was okay because I could do that for both of us.

When he ended up asleep on my couch, I took off his boots and covered him with a blanket, tucking it around him before going back to watching my show.

“I feel the same,” he mumbled, rolling over.

And I knew he did.

ORIGINALLY, my agenda for Saturday night had been for Matt, Eric, and me to meet Ira and his new girlfriend, Courtney Abernathy, out at a club they would enjoy. But then Courtney had asked to bring along two girlfriends, and I had added Breckin because I was a gutless coward. So what had started out small had gotten bigger than I wanted, and that was before Alex called earlier in the evening and interrogated me about where I was going. He never questioned—he demanded. In the dictionary under *overprotective* there should be a picture of Agent Brandt.

The only part of my plan that remained was the place I chose. Mabon was a mixed club, which was good for our mixed group, and I'd already had a couple of mojitos by the time everyone started showing up.

“Does the bartender make a good Cosmo here?” Eric asked me.

“Yeah, really good. Order one.”

“Get me one too,” Matt chimed in.

“Yes, dear,” Eric said, leaving the high table I'd commandeered near the dance floor.

Matt leaned in close. “I love it when my husband calls me dear, even when he's being sarcastic.”

“Yes, I know.” I chuckled.

It was nice to see a relationship that worked. After his second date with the charming and gorgeous sportscaster—which he'd been all aflutter about while we were waiting to be retrieved out of an upside-down car—Matt had decided that he was going to keep the man, and it had been smooth sailing for them from the start. My sometimes obnoxious, decidedly jaded best friend had fallen hard and fast. What was perfect was that Eric Harmon felt the same about him. I had been the best man at their wedding and had looked surprisingly good in my maroon tuxedo.

“Why are we here again?” Matt whined at me. “I wanted to go to Castaway and have the white-peach sangria. Why aren’t we there?”

I was quiet a moment, studying him.

“What’s happening? Why aren’t you speaking?”

“I’m just looking at you.”

“Me? Why?”

“Because somehow you get better looking with age.”

Instant smile. “Oh?”

He knew he was beautiful. His brown-black eyes, jet-black hair, flawless porcelain skin, and sculpted features always made him stand out.

“It’s just genetics,” Matt said shyly, loving it when I complimented him. “Japanese father, Taiwanese mother. How could I be anything but stunning?”

He didn’t normally bring up his folks. When he came out, that had been the end of them having anything to do with him, which moved me and my family into their spot. He loved going to see my father with me and was very protective of my brothers. It always made me happy to see them all together.

Matt narrowed his eyes. “I won’t allow you to change the subject no matter how much flattery you lay on me. Now—why are we not at Castaway?”

“Because that’s a gay club.”

He made a circle with his index finger to indicate us both. “We’re gay, in case you haven’t noticed.”

“But Courtney’s not, her friends are not, and neither is Ira.”

“Why do I care?”

“C’mon, Matt.”

“What? Ira never cared either.”

“Which makes him a really good sport and us a bunch of selfish pricks.”

“How’s that?”

“We’re shitty wingmen. None of us helped him get laid.”

Matt’s face crumpled. “Yeah, but he never wanted to get laid, he was shopping for a wife. Do you not remember going through those online profiles with him?”

“We’re still crappy friends.”

“Who are these crappy friends?” Eric asked as he returned, passing Matt his Cosmo and me my third mojito.

“Thank you, sir.” I beamed at him.

“Anytime, Trace,” he said, flashing me a smile back.

“And it’s us, we’re crappy friends,” I informed him. “To Ira.”

“Oh, yeah. That’s true.”

“How is that true?” Matt wanted to know.

“Well, we never went out with him to a straight club to pick up women. That was not cool.”

“Straight women love gay clubs.”

“Yes,” Eric conceded. “But they like it because they know they’re not going to get hit on. They can just enjoy the music and dance with men who will compliment their outfits without leering.”

“You’ve thought about this too?”

“Sure,” Eric answered his husband. “Ira was always so great about going with us when we used to hit the clubs all the time. A real mensch.”

“Oh, nice,” I complimented him.

“I try,” Eric said, grinning at me before turning back to Matt. “That’s why now we have to make sure to get Courtney’s friends to like us.”

I grinned. “It’s so nice that we’re on the same page.”

“Why do I care about them?” Matt asked us. “I adore Courtney, but I couldn’t care less about her girlfriends.”

“But you should,” I told him. “Courtney’s bringing her friends with her tonight, and we’re trying to make a good impression and make them comfortable, so that’s why we’re here. Because you know as well as I do that if Courtney’s friends don’t like us, then they will take Courtney and Ira away, and we will never see them again.”

“How do you figure that?”

“It’s just the way these things go.”

Eric nodded in agreement.

“Do you want to lose Ira and Courtney in our friends group?”

“No,” he grumbled.

“Then you need to play ball.”

“I’ve never played any kind of ball in my life.”

“Hah,” Eric scoffed. “A blatant lie. We play racquetball every Thursday.”

“Tracy meant baseball. Everyone knows that’s a baseball metaphor, Mr. Sportscaster, sir.”

I was quiet, and so was Eric.

“You two are killing me.”

I glared at him, and Matt looked from me to Eric, who was scowling, and threw up his hands in defeat.

“Fine. You’re both right. I adore Ira and don’t want to lose him.”

“Or Courtney,” Eric reminded him.

“Or Courtney,” Matt amended.

“God, it’s like pulling teeth with you,” I muttered.

“On with the plan,” Eric said, getting us back on task. He was very good about that.

Left to our own devices, Matt and I could wind up way out in the tall grass. It was a gift to be able to become so ridiculously sidetracked. It was the same when we went

shopping for some specific thing. God help us if we came home with anything remotely similar to whatever we went out to get.

“The first thing you must do,” Eric instructed him, “is make sure Courtney’s friends like you.”

“Why are we only talking about me?”

“Because you’re always the life of the party,” I told him honestly. “You can make or break the night.”

Eric nodded.

“Well, you don’t have to worry. Everybody likes me. I’ll schmooze them.”

“Most people like you,” I corrected him. “Most.”

“Who doesn’t like me?”

“Wait,” Eric said, “I have a list on my phone.”

“I will murder you in your sleep,” Matt warned the love of his life.

“You won’t,” Eric replied confidently. “You like far too much dressing up and going to red-carpet events with me.”

“That’s valid,” Matt agreed, staring at his handsome husband.

“So all you have to do,” Eric pressed on, “is be your regular charming self. The girls will have a great time, and they’ll want to hang out with us again and again, and we’ll get to keep Ira and Courtney forever.”

“Of course we will. We’re fabulous.”

I groaned, and Eric shook his head.

“What?”

“We’re really not that fabulous,” I told Matt. “We’re all kinds of boring, and our circle is only five people if we’re counting Ira and Courtney.”

“Can that be right?”

“We all have acquaintances we see once in a blue moon, but every Sunday for brunch, every Wednesday for dinner, and every Friday for drinks, it’s just us. When was the last time we were out in a big group?”

Matt opened his mouth to speak.

I cut him off. “Not counting college.”

He went quiet.

“There, you see? Our normal is you, me, Eric, and Ira, now Courtney as well, having dinner, playing cards, and putting in a movie we never finish because we talk through it.”

“Which I hate, by the way,” Eric chimed in. “I still don’t know what happened at the end of *Life of Pi*.”

Matt rolled his eyes.

“But really, we’ve all been friends so long, we forget sometimes how to be social. And now that Ira’s found someone, if we want to keep him around, we have to get her friends to like us too.”

“You’re right, you’re right. I’ll make it happen.”

“Excellent,” I praised him.

“Plus, it’s good practice for when you get a new guy,” Eric said brightly, and took another sip of his drink. “I mean, I like Ira a lot, but I love you. Matt and me, and you and your new guy, we’ll be bonded for life.”

I looked at him, and so did Matt.

“What?” Eric seemed confused at the attention.

“New guy?” I questioned him.

He scowled. “Of course. You’re not going to be celibate for the rest of your life, Trace. That’s ridiculous. There’ll be someone new in our group eventually.”

“Not by inviting the ex along there won’t,” Matt commented.

“I’m sorry, what?” Eric did not sound pleased.

“Yeah. You get to see *him* tonight if he shows.”

The *him* could not have been uttered with any more revulsion.

“Oh joy,” Eric groaned.

“Stop that. I couldn’t say no.”

“*No*,” Eric said dramatically and with conviction. “There. See how easy that was?”

“I—”

“For fuck’s sake, Tracy, you don’t hold on to a guy who lies to you.” Eric’s gaze was back on me, and I saw the disappointment and concern in his bright-blue eyes.

“Eric—”

“No,” he snapped. “He slept with that guy and—”

“I didn’t say we were ever going to be more than friends,” I pointed out.

“Why would you even be friends with someone who fucked you over?”

“I—”

“And you never really loved him anyway.”

This was new. “I’m sorry?” I said defensively.

“Guys,” Matt began.

“Feelings for, yes. I’ll even go so far as to say deep feelings, but love? I don’t think so,” Eric went on. “It was infatuation that got *way* out of control.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about you and the walking, talking Ken doll.”

“He’s a doctor,” I said, feeling compelled to defend my ex. “He’s brilliant.”

Matt cleared his throat. “*Guys*,” he tried again.

Eric made a jerking-off motion. “Yeah. A guy who screws around on you is a goddamn fucking genius.”

“One has nothing to do with the other.”

“And he’s not,” Matt chimed in. “A genius, that is. Not by a long shot, which is the real point.”

I was scowling. Eric had his arms crossed, glaring back.

“Let’s just drop it,” Matt said. “I see the girls.”

I was going to argue with Eric some more—and he looked more than ready to keep going—but Matt told us both to shut up and plastered on a big smile as Courtney and her friends, April and Jennifer, crowded around us.

“Hey,” I greeted Courtney, trying to shake the irritation out of my voice as she leaned in to hug me.

“Oh, honey, are you sure you should be out? Aren’t you hurt?”

I didn’t know the other two girls well enough to make a judgment yet, having only met them once before, but Courtney I truly liked. She was so good for Ira—his champion, the whole wind-beneath-his-wings and all that. “I’m fine,” I promised her. “You remember Matt and Eric?”

“Of course,” she cried happily, obviously delighted to see both him and his charming husband, again.

“So,” Matt said conspiratorially, playing it up with an evil smile, “how big of a drink did you need after going to meet Mrs. Kohn?”

Courtney choked. “Oh my God, no, she was lovely. Really.”

Eric’s smile turned even more sinister. “You can dish. Go ahead.”

She was laughing and shaking her head. “No, you don’t even know. She was so nice to me. Ira had me so nervous, and it was nothing like he said it would be.”

“Ira can be a little…” Matt seemed to be searching for the right word. “Overzealous in his panic?”

“Oh yes.” She giggled. “That’s putting it mildly.”

“Well, you’ll help him with that.”

Courtney threw her arm around Matt's neck, which, I could tell, both surprised and pleased him. It was always fun to watch his cheeks flush when he was happy and see the shy smile, the real one, come out.

"Oh my," Jennifer gasped.

"That was over a guy. I used to make that sound," Matt said seriously, leaning close to Jennifer. "Who are we looking at?"

"Right there. In the red Henley. Jesus."

"Where are you looking?"

"With the shoulders and the muscles and...*damn*."

"Honey, what's red to you?"

"Right there," she squeaked. "Okay, I'll be right—oh, never mind, here he comes."

When we all finally saw who had captured her interest, Matt and I groaned loudly.

"No, no, no, that is not pretty," Eric said dryly. "That's related, as in brother."

"What?" Jennifer seemed confused.

"Really?" Ira groused at me, back from the bar long enough to hear what was going on. He passed out Cosmos to the girls and took a swig of the black and tan he'd gotten for himself. "Your brother the DEA agent had to come?"

"It's because of what happened on Wednesday. His overprotective mode is still engaged."

Ira jolted suddenly. "Please tell me the partner isn't coming."

"They haven't been partners for a while," I informed Ira, "and to answer your question, I really hope not."

"Oh," Matt whispered, "is he? Is Cord coming?"

"I'm standing right here," Eric reminded him.

"Is he?" Matt pressed.

“That guy is your brother?” Jennifer’s breath caught.

“Ira, how come I only now discover that Tracy has a hot brother?” Courtney demanded to know.

“Ira, honey, you can date me,” Eric told him. “Because apparently your woman wants the brother, and my guy wants the brother’s partner.”

“As if I could ever get Cord Nolan’s attention away from Tracy,” Matt scoffed. “That’ll be the day.”

“What are you talking about?”

Matt gave me a patronizing look. “Gimme a break, Trace. Even you are not that oblivious.”

I squinted at him.

He stared at me for a minute, and then his eyes widened. “Oh shit, you really are.”

“What are you—”

“Excuse me,” Alex said as he reached the table, gently moving around the women to step in front of me. “How’re you? You feel all right?”

“I’m fine,” I grumbled, glowering at him.

Immediately, he turned to Matt, leaned in, and hugged him. Matt’s smile was warm as he soaked up Alex’s attention, answered his questions about how he was, and then remained close—Alex’s arm was still draped around his shoulders so he couldn’t have moved if he’d wanted to—when my brother offered his hand to Eric. It was nice to see my best friend and his husband so at ease with Alex. He gave Matt a final squeeze and then turned to the women.

“Ladies,” he greeted them, smiling.

All the men in my family but me were handsome. I simply wasn’t. The adjective couldn’t be applied to me. And that wasn’t to say that I was some hideous creature that should have been locked in a dungeon, but somehow the genes got mixed weird when it came to me. I took after my mother in bone structure and build. So instead of looking like my

brothers and my father, tall and muscular, with swimmers' builds, I was shorter and leaner, toned, with some definition, but no amount of cardio and weight training could make me into the perfect specimen of manhood that Alex Brandt was or, even more so, Cord Nolan. Cord was hard all over, with cut, rippling muscles...

"What about Cord?" Alex asked.

My head snapped up at that—had I said something out loud?—and I was faced with my brother's smirk.

"What?" I asked him.

"You said something about Cord?"

"No," I said crossly, then took a breath. "I need you to be nice to Breckin when you see him, all right?"

Instant scowl, and then Alex crossed his arms, which made his biceps bulge. "Why would Breckin be here?"

"Just don't be a dick," I warned him. "Go get a drink."

When he turned to go, Jennifer moved quickly into his personal space. "You're a DEA agent?" she asked him.

"Yeah."

"I'd love to have you come speak to my fifth graders if you could ever find the time."

I watched him get interested fast. "Absolutely. Can I get you a drink?"

Shoving the barely sipped Cosmo back at Ira, she smiled wide. "Oh yes, please."

Alex took her hand to lead her to the opposite end of the bar, where the bartender seemed stuck.

"Oh, that was smooth," Eric agreed.

"Yeah, she picked him up like a pro," I told Courtney, impressed. "Damn."

"Fucking teachers," her friend April complained. "Would he have been as impressed if I said I was a lawyer at Putney Marsh on the partner track?"

“No,” Eric assured her, putting an arm around her shoulders. “But you don’t want him anyway. Law enforcement, late nights, no time off... Who needs the irritation?”

April laughed with Eric, leaning into him.

“Besides,” Matt said, “Tracy has a better brother.”

Courtney and April both turned to me.

“Evan’s not better,” I said, defending Alex; it was hardwired in me. “Just different.”

“What does he do?” April wanted to know.

“He’s an actor,” Eric whetted their appetite.

“What kind of actor?” Courtney sounded just as interested.

“Why do you care about this?” Ira asked his fiancée.

“Go get some more drinks,” Matt suggested.

“Somebody needs to drink Jen’s Cosmo,” Eric reminded them.

“Pass it over,” Courtney said with a cackle.

“Spill about the brother,” April prodded me.

“He’s on a show on HBO,” I explained, and watched them both perk up at the news. I smiled. I couldn’t help it. “It’s called *Cape Cod*.”

It was about a political family, loosely based on the Kennedys, and their machinations to get their youngest son in the White House. My brother was not the golden boy. He was the other guy, the villain who had more fun, the one all the women wanted.

“Oh my God!” April squealed. “I never miss that! I watch it every week!”

“Me too!” Courtney looked excited, a drink in each hand, as she rounded on Ira. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“It never came up.”

“You liar!”

“Shit, Tracy!” he groused at me.

“Why is this my fault?”

“Who is he?” April was dying.

“Tracy, who does he play?” Courtney demanded, her focus back on me. “C’mon!”

I had to think. “Bradley Harrison?” Was that right? “Harrodsburg? No, Harrington?”

Shit.

“You’re thinking of the wrong show,” Matt apprised me.

“I am?”

He nodded.

“Which was that?”

“The one on CBS where he was an FBI agent.”

“*Oh*, that’s right,” I agreed, remembering. “Well, it’s not like he’s been on the new show that long.”

“Three years isn’t long?” Matt arched an eyebrow at me.

“Really? Three years already? God, where have I been?”

“Tracy!” Courtney yelled at me.

“He plays Marco Dahlia,” Matt told them, putting them out of their misery.

They both looked stunned, staring at him wide-eyed.

“Oh yes, that’s the one.” I snickered, grinning wickedly.

“Marco Dahlia?” April asked breathlessly.

“Yeah,” I confirmed.

“Are you kidding me?”

I shrugged. “No. He is indeed my brother.”

“Evan Brandt is your brother?”

“He is.”

“So gorgeous,” April said adamantly. “So beautiful. Oh my God, when is he going to visit?”

“Where does he live?” Courtney asked me urgently.

“In New York. Manhattan. He loves it there, and I love going to see him. I got to go last winter for the holidays with my dad and my part—” I stopped because no. I didn’t have a partner anymore.

“New York at Christmas,” April sighed. “Was it awesome?”

“It was amazing.”

“Does Evan ever come here?” Courtney pried. “Like, ever?”

I glanced over at Ira, and he threw up his hands in defeat.

“Oh, come on, Ira,” Matt teased him. “The man’s on TV. Let her be excited.”

“Yeah, Ira, let me be excited.” She laughed at him.

“I hate you all,” he informed us.

I sat and drank while Matt hit the floor with April, and Courtney with Ira. Eric promised to go save Courtney if Ira’s dancing started to look more like a seizure and less like he had any rhythm.

It was fun sitting there, watching the club fill up until I was unable to see the dance floor even from how close I was.

Alex came by to say goodbye; he was taking Jennifer and bailing. They needed to talk, and trying to communicate over the top-of-the-charts and trance music was impossible. He said to call if I needed him, and then he was gone, Jennifer clinging happily to his hand.

“Well, that’s just great.” April groaned as she and Courtney joined me. “So who do I...oh.”

From the way April’s eyes narrowed and her mouth went slack, I knew she’d seen something pretty behind me. When I turned, I saw the man who held her interest.

“Hey,” Breckin hailed me as he made his way through the crowd toward our table.

“Hi,” April said, delighted, when he reached us.

He offered her his hand. “Breckin Alcott. And you are?”

Courtney moved close to me. “First your brother for Jen, and now this guy for April. Holy crap, Trace, my friends are going to jump at the chance to go anywhere with you all.”

I watched April move in on Breckin, smile and laugh, and then ask him to buy her a drink.

“Sure,” he agreed. “Any friend of Tracy’s.”

Her mouth opened as he turned to me, running his gaze over my face. “May I look at you?”

“Here?” I teased him.

“Out on the patio, please.”

The man looked good, but really, he always did. The chiseled line of his jaw, the wide breadth of his shoulders, and his warm blue eyes were all stunning. His T-shirt was too tight and clung to his sculpted chest and abdominal muscles.

“You didn’t do laundry,” I commented, knowing he was out of clothes if he was wearing the tight T-shirts that normally were only worn under his scrubs.

He stepped close to me and put his hand on my face, stroking his thumb over my cheek. “I don’t have anyone to remind me.”

“Get a maid. I’m sure you can afford one now that you’re working at an actual practice and not at County anymore.”

“That’s not what I need.”

I nodded.

“Could you please come out to the patio so I can look at you?”

“I dunno if I can afford you now that you’ve moved uptown.”

He leaned close to my ear. “I’ll take a kiss in payment.”

“That sounds a bit steep,” I told him. He opened his mouth to argue, but I patted his shoulder to stop him. “I’ll meet you

out there. I gotta pee first.”

His smile made his eyes glow. “Hurry up.”

I got up, told the girls to guard the table, and headed to the bathroom. It was on the other side of the club, behind the dance floor. The door was heavy when I pushed on it, and the inside was smaller than I anticipated. There were no urinals, and most of the stalls were backed up. I found a working one near the back, and when I was done, I hunted for soap at the sink closest to the door, which looked the cleanest. Standing there, I had an epiphany: I would have much rather stayed home and watched movies on my couch. I was completely over this whole scene.

“It’s official,” I told my reflection, smiling at the brown eyes and hair I saw in the mirror. “My club days are over.”

“Yes,” a voice said, startling me. I’d thought I was alone. I heard the *squeak* of a stall door, and when I looked that way to laugh with whomever it was, all I saw was a mask.

I only had time to gasp before everything went black.

FOUR

Who the hell was that?

Jolting awake, I would have sat up if there weren't hands there immediately to soothe and comfort me.

"Baby, you're okay."

But I wasn't, clearly, because I was in the hospital. White walls, the cold, the smell of antiseptic, the bed I was in, everything let me know I was hurt. I had a tube in my arm as well, which was probably responsible for the lack of pain, which I knew I should have been in because I'd been hit. The first time I'd ever been in the hospital, when I was nine and fell out of the tree in our backyard, the feeling had been the same. Only really good drugs got administered through an IV.

Turning my head, I found Breckin leaning down to wrap his arms around me. I grabbed hold of him hard, clinging, closing my eyes, breathing him in.

"You're all right," he assured me, his voice a husky whisper against my ear. "I promise you're okay. Everything's fine."

I nodded but couldn't stop making a funny noise in the back of my throat. It was like when you're crying hard and winding down, the sniffing part that usually won't stop.

"I'm right here."

But that wasn't comforting. I was still scared. I didn't feel safe.

“You’re okay now. I’m here,” he repeated.

He took a seat beside me on the larger-than-normal bed and leaned me against him, trying, I knew, to give me solace. It was really very kind. But when Alex came striding into the room with a Styrofoam cup, I felt much better.

“Christ, Tracy, you scared the fuckin’ shit outta me. *Again,*” my brother griped as he set the cup down, then came around the bed and leaned down to gather me in his arms.

I pulled away from Breckin quickly, needing family comfort, and was surprised when that too didn’t take away the hollow feeling in the pit of my stomach.

I hugged Alex as hard as I could, and he held on to my hand when he straightened up. Courtney and April rushed the bed then, and each took a turn squeezing my other hand. Ira came last, and patted my shoulder. Matt came in not long after. He too held a Styrofoam cup, having gone for badly flavored beverages from a vending machine just like my brother. When he and Eric crossed the room to me, I knew from their faces that whatever I looked like was bad.

“What?” I asked Eric, knowing that the man who did the sports on Channel Five at six and eleven weekdays would give me the straight scoop.

“Were you beaten up?” he asked bluntly. “No one knows what happened but you.”

“I dunno,” I said, looking over at Breckin. “Was I?”

“You were hit with something,” he answered, standing up and shoving his hands in the pockets of his jeans. “Something heavy, like a bat or a club.”

I looked at Alex. “Did they catch the guy?”

He shook his head. “Of course not,” he said, his angry tone giving him away. “Nobody saw a fuckin’ thing.”

Knowing him as I did, I knew he was blaming himself. “You do realize that even if you’d stayed, you couldn’t have prevented what happened. I mean, can you remember the last time we peed together when we weren’t camping?”

“It’s not funny,” he rasped.

“No, I agree. Nothing funny about camping. And I have volunteered, as you know, to never go again as long as I live.”

His jaw clenched hard, the muscle in his cheek working.

“This is *not* your fault,” I said frankly, wanting to assuage the guilt I’d heard in his voice. “So stop beating yourself up. Please.”

“Then stop treating this like it’s no big deal.”

“What? I’m not.”

He growled at me. “Yes, you are. You’re gonna laugh any second now.”

“What? You’re crazy.” I smiled suddenly.

Everyone gasped but Alex and Matt, the rest, even Breckin, not having been around long enough to know that when faced with anything really serious, I laughed. My mother had been the same.

“Who would want to hit me with a bat?” I asked Alex, chuckling because I was imagining someone whacking me with a fruit bat. I was a little loopy.

“I dunno, maybe I’ll go ask your scary-ass boss?” he yelled loudly, and I flinched from the volume.

“Must you?”

“I knew it,” Breckin nearly snarled at me. “You’re quitting. Today. Now.”

“Yes,” Alex agreed. “That’s what’s gonna happen.”

It wasn’t.

“Can you please call my doctor in here?” I asked the nurse who had appeared at the foot of my bed.

“Right away,” she assured me, then glanced at Breckin. “It’s nice to see you again, Dr. Alcott.”

“And you, Angela. And don’t worry about paging Dr. Cutler. I just called him on his cell.”

“Thank you. I’ll be back to take patient history.”

“I did that for you already. It’s in the chart.”

Apparently he still had privileges at the hospital he left. I suspected that was also why my bed was the width of a twin bed and not a normal gurney size.

“Thank you.” Angela beamed at him.

“Of course.”

“Am I okay?” I asked Breckin the moment Angela left the room.

He nodded. “You’re okay, just banged up. You have a concussion, so Tate’s going to keep you overnight, but the brunt of the blow was to your upper back and shoulder blades, not your head or neck. You were really lucky. If you had taken the full blow to the back of your head, things might have ended differently.”

“Who’s Tate?” Matt asked him, and I could hear the ice in his voice.

“Dr. Cutler,” Breckin told him.

“That’s me.” Tate Cutler, one of Breckin’s old colleagues, breezed into the room.

“So?” I asked him as he got out his penlight and checked my eyes. “Can I go home?”

“Tomorrow. I want to keep you overnight.”

“But he’s going to be okay?” Alex pressed him, and I noticed how he purposely didn’t direct his questions to Breckin or ask his opinion like he used to. While Alex didn’t know the specifics of why we were taking a break, he’d already relegated the man to a stranger in his mind.

“He is,” Tate said resolutely.

“He’ll be fine?” Matt inquired of my doctor as well.

“Absolutely.”

Matt looked at me. “You feel okay?”

“I feel a little out of it,” I confessed, and was going to say more until I really looked at him. “Why? How bad do I look?”

“I just—” He trembled. “I was scared.”

“Come here,” I said, lifting my arms for him.

He moved fast, bumping Alex as he dived at me, breathing hard so he didn’t cry, dragging air in and out of his nose. “There’s only Eric and you, and...and...I have a lot of...but not you. Not Eric.”

“I know.”

Matt had such a soft heart, which was why I was so glad that Eric saw Matt’s heart quite clearly and cherished it and kept it safe.

Matt pulled himself together, and a few moments later Angela came in and announced that everyone needed to clear out of the room and let me get some rest. The only people she succeeded in herding to the door were Ira, Courtney, and April. I promised to call them as soon as I got home.

“Where did you leave Jennifer?”

“I dropped her at her place,” Alex muttered as he got on his phone.

“Are you going to see—”

“Shut up,” he barked.

My brother had the social skills of a wolverine. I turned my attention to Brekin. “Are you all right?”

“*Me?* Who cares about me?”

“I do,” I said, reaching for his hand. “And you look a little green.”

He sucked in a breath, squeezing my hand. “I was scared.”

“I’m sorry.”

Leaning in, he kissed my forehead. “When the EMTs rushed into that bathroom and we saw you lying there... I can’t lose you.”

“If you’re gonna get hit,” I teased him, smiling, “doing it in front of a doctor is what I’d recommend.”

“Yeah, well, don’t do it again,” he insisted.

“I’ll try not to.”

He calmed, gave me a nod, and then went to confer with Tate.

I asked Matt to entertain me, so he sat on the end of my bed and told me how the wedding he’d coordinated on Friday night had ended up not happening.

“What? Why?” I was dying to know. Matt’s stories were legend. Most of his weddings went off without a hitch. They were either stunning, romantic, or over the top, but every now and then, there was drama.

“The bride caught the groom with her sister.”

“Oh shit,” I groaned.

He regaled us with the juicy details: about things getting thrown, the screaming, and eventually the decimation of the ice sculpture of two swans.

“Swans?” I said, grimacing.

“I know. I told my team, if someone orders any kind of birds—”

“Enough, you two,” Eric said briskly, cutting us off. “Let’s get the hell outta here, Matt. Tracy needs to rest. You heard the doctor.” He indicated Tate with a toss of his perfectly coiffed head. “He’s got a concussion and—”

“Okay, okay,” Matt almost whimpered. “Please let’s not go over it again and again.”

“Then come on,” Eric pressed, then leaned over and kissed my cheek. “Forgive me.”

“What?”

“About before. At the club.”

It took me a minute. “Oh, don’t be an idiot,” I soothed him, hugging him tight. “You just want what’s best for me. I

know that.”

“Yes, but if that had been the last time we spoke...” He trailed off, obviously upset.

“Stop.”

He nodded, kissed my cheek again, and then gave me an order. “Get better, baby.”

“I will. Thanks for coming to check on me.”

“Like we would have stayed away,” he replied, walking around the bed to give Alex a hug. He then forced a sort of smile for Breckin, but you could tell it was an afterthought, and for my benefit. It looked more like a grimace, really. And of course my brother noticed. He narrowed his eyes, and I knew he was putting things together. There were only so many reasons people took breaks.

“Mattie, get up.”

“I’ll call you in the morning,” Matt promised, rising from beside me, his eyes purposefully wide, like his husband had flipped out. “And I’ll keep trying until I get you.”

“Good.” I smiled at him, and he hugged and kissed Alex goodbye. Breckin, he ignored completely.

I made the mistake of looking at my brother, who tipped his head and met my gaze. He had it then. Matt’s icy demeanor was a dead giveaway. Once Breckin’s biggest fan, the reversal could only mean one thing.

After they left, I was alone with Breckin and my brother. I hadn’t noticed that Tate and Angela had left.

“You two look decidedly grim,” I said, as Breckin walked over and took hold of my hand.

“We’re fine,” Breckin assured me. “We’re both just tired.”

“Speak for yourself,” Alex said coolly.

Oh yes, he knew what Breckin had done.

“There’s nothing you can do here,” I told Alex. “You should go home. I’ll be fine.”

He shook his head.

“Please,” I pressed, then turned to Breckin. “You should go too.”

“No. I’m going to stay a bit.”

Not wanting to be alone, I scooted over in the bed to make room for him.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to stay?” my brother asked me. And I knew he wouldn’t have even thought about going if Breckin wasn’t there. Now that he knew, he could barely stand being in the same room with my ex.

“Yeah, go. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He nodded, kissed me goodbye, then left without a word to my ex-partner.

“Well, that was fun,” Breckin sighed.

“Sorry.”

“Thank you for not telling him what happened.”

“You’re welcome, but I have no doubt he knows at this point.”

He nodded.

“I mean, he’s really good at ferreting out secrets. It’s pretty much in his job description.”

“Course.”

I leaned back against the pillows, and Breckin did the same. He was warm there next to me, and he smelled like fresh laundry.

“Why don’t you smell like cigarettes?” I asked absently. He should have smelled like smoke and beer, but instead he smelled like he always did, clean, like soap and a trace of vanilla.

“I wanted to stay with you, and I knew that if I smelled bad, you’d make me go home and take a shower. So I already went there and took one.”

“Christ, how long was I out?”

“A while,” he answered, shivering. “But I knew you were okay, so like I said, I did what I had to so I could stay here with you once you woke up.”

“You’re a very considerate man.” I patted his shoulder.

“No,” he said, chuckling. “I just wanted to be with you.”

I sighed deeply, wondering about how well he knew me, and let him get comfortable beside me. I was suddenly so tired, the night catching up with me. So I closed my eyes and let sleep take me.

FIVE

I woke up early in the morning, and one glance at the clock on the wall told me it was four thirty. A noise caught my attention—dress shoes scraping over the floor—making the hair rise on the back of my neck. I hadn't realized how frightened I'd been and still was.

"Who's there?" I asked the darkness, sitting up, careful not to jerk the IV needle in my left arm. My heart was pounding so hard I could barely hear anything. I started panicking as soon as I realized Breckin wasn't in bed with me. Where the hell had he gone?

"It's me," came a tired grunt from the shadows to the right of the bed.

When I turned, I found Cord walking toward me. It was a relief that it was him, and I let out a deep sigh as I sank back down on the pillows.

"You thought maybe I was your stalker?"

"I have a stalker now?" I asked him, annoyed. "Since when?"

He stepped out into the light from the hallway, and I saw him clearly. "Jesus, you look like shit."

"Nice. Real nice. I'm going to forgive your rudeness since you're all hopped up on pharmaceutical-grade narcotics."

"Why are you here?" I asked pointedly, letting him hear in my voice that I was only tolerating him, that I didn't like him.

“Because I have to talk to you,” he said, his expression hardening.

I was about to ask the next logical question when his cell phone rang, and he shushed me. I heard enough of the conversation to realize he was talking to some guy, and between his tone and his body language, I was certain he was blowing him off. I was not surprised in the least. Cord collected men and then discarded them; it had always been his way. And I understood how. The man exuded heat; everything about him was strong and hard. If I didn't know him, I would want him too, but that was all surface appeal. Underneath, the guy was an asshole even if he looked like he'd been carved from stone. What I found more interesting, though, was that some men thought he was just okay looking. Unlike Breckin, whom everyone found appealing, Cord Nolan worked only on the senses of those who liked a wild, rebellious kind of guy. He came off as cold, dangerous, and untamable. He was not the kind of man you made a home with.

“Hello,” he snapped at me, and I realized he'd been done with his conversation for some time and my mind had been drifting.

“What?” I answered quietly, carefully crossing my arms over my chest.

“As I said, I have things to discuss with you.” Picking up a chair, he walked across the room and put it down beside my bed. He took a seat and got comfortable. “You look pretty good for a guy who almost got brained with a bat.”

“Thanks,” I said irritably. “Is that what you came by to tell me?”

He shook his head and took a deep breath. “You're such a pain in the ass.”

“Do you actually have something useful to say, or are we just going to have our usual—”

“Fine,” he interrupted, exasperated. “Here it is. You got beaten up in a club last night, and Celia Hughes got beaten up at a football game the week before.”

I stared at him hard, waiting for him to go on. The silence stretched out longer and longer, and I finally had to cave. “Who is Celia Hughes, and what does she have to do with me?”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

“Oh, for the love of God, just tell me what the hell you’re talking about.”

He looked past me then, to the doorway of my room.

I glanced over my shoulder and found no one there. Returning my gaze to his, I waited only seconds. “What? What is it? You’re making me nuts with this.”

“I—”

“Speak!”

He cleared his throat. “Celia got beaten up just like you did. She saw a flash of someone just as the lights were turned off, and then she got hit with something hard. We don’t know what.”

“She got hit at a football game?”

“Yeah.”

“And?” It was like pulling teeth.

“It was a 49ers game.”

Why was that important? “What’s with you?”

“Nothing. I’m just telling you—you and Celia Hughes, same setup, hit in the back, same outcome...except she’s pregnant.”

“Oh shit,” I gasped, horrified, distracted from my annoyance by the possibility of someone hurting an unborn child. “Is she okay? Is the baby okay?”

“Yeah, the baby’s fine. Celia had the presence of mind to roll into a ball and protect her kid.”

“So it was a little different because I got hit while the lights were still on. I had no presence of mind to keep.”

“You never have any presence of mind,” he said matter-of-factly.

“Really?” I said flatly.

“Lest we forget how well I know you,” he countered, grinning at me.

He knew events; he didn't know me.

Like the time he and Alex had driven up to my apartment only to find me in a T-shirt and pajama bottoms on the front stoop, freezing, because I had locked myself out, and Matt wasn't home, and crazy Mrs. Fishman from upstairs wouldn't buzz me back in. Or the time I nearly fell off the pier at Fisherman's Wharf because I wouldn't let Cord help me carry the boxes of cracked crab I had been asked to pick up for my friend Denise's rehearsal dinner. Or the time Alex had sent me to pick Cord up from the airport, and I'd forgotten where my car was parked...and it took three hours to find it. Sadly, it seemed like he always caught me at my worst.

“Moving on,” I said, hoping my scowl showed clearly on my face and in my voice, “are you allowed to tell me who Celia Hughes is, or are you just trying to torture me?”

He looked past me again to the door. “I was hoping I wouldn't have to tell you this stuff. I thought Alex would.”

“It's almost five in the morning.” I was incredulous. “I hope he's asleep. I don't even know why you're awake.”

“Just am.”

“Coming home from a booty call?”

“Shut up,” he groused.

“Why Alex?” I said instead of escalating the discussion to a fight.

“Because when I told him, he said he would be here.”

“Okay, now I'm getting a little freaked out. Just tell me whatever it is.”

He glanced at the doorway again, and when he looked back at me, his gaze catching mine, I was swallowed up in it.

Caught off guard, I stared back and realized, as I always did, how beautiful his eyes were.

“Cord?” I asked as he moved closer to me, until our faces were inches apart.

“I called Alex last night”—he checked his watch—“yeah, last night, because I needed to talk to you, and I wanted to know if he wanted to be with you when I did.”

“Last night when?”

“Like, three hours ago,” he said, and I saw the tablet then and wondered what was on it and what he was reading.

“Jesus, Cord, are you sleeping at all?”

“Who cares, just... I needed to talk to you, so that’s why I’m here.”

“So talk.”

“We could wait a little,” he stalled.

“You said you already told Alex. Now tell me.”

He inhaled sharply. “Last week, I was following up on a lead in the Stanson case, and it took me to Celia Hughes.”

After a minute I realized he wasn’t going to clarify. “English, Nolan. Please.”

“Well, you know I work Homicide now, right?”

“What do you mean now? You transferred to Homicide two and a half years ago, right before I met Breckin.”

After a moment he nodded. “Yeah, that’s right.”

“I know it’s right, so...what?”

“So I’m working a case right now involving a man who was burned to death in his home.”

“Jesus,” I gasped, horrified.

“Yeah, so I’ve been working it maybe three months, and I haven’t been able to come up with anything concrete except for one thing.”

“And what is that?”

“All I’ve got is the fact that Timothy Stanson had previously reported being attacked in a public bathroom. He was hit in the back of the head.”

I shivered and pulled the blankets up around me.

“As soon as I found out he’d been attacked, I checked to see if there were any matching reports filed recently. One name came up a perfect match—Celia Hughes. Are you following me so far?”

I nodded, unable to speak.

“As I was questioning Celia, I asked her who might want to hurt her or her baby, and she gave me a name that surprised me.”

“What name?” I choked out, shivering again and moving closer to the side of the bed, needing to be in his personal space for whatever reason.

“Yours.”

“Mine?” I was stunned. My stomach twisted into a painful knot as my throat went dry.

“It seems your ex-boyfriend is the father of Celia Hughes’s baby.”

Baby.

Time stopped. Terror gone, shivering gone, all pain forgotten.

“Tracy?”

Wait.

“Honey?”

Wait...

“Trace.”

“What?” I choked out.

Baby.

Breckin and this woman were having a baby.

“Are you listening to me?”

I nodded slowly.

“Did you understand what I said?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Then I’m gonna say it again, okay?”

“Yeah.” I felt like I was in a vacuum and all the air was being sucked out of the room. And it wasn’t hearing that Breckin had cheated on me more than once, and it wasn’t that it was with a woman. I knew he was bi. It was the baby part that was suffocating me.

Cord took a quick breath. “Breckin Alcott is the father of the child Celia Hughes is carrying.”

I stared at him.

“Did you hear me this time?”

“What?” I was confused.

“Did you hear what I said?”

I just knew I must’ve misheard him. “One more time.”

So he did.

“Tracy.”

“Yeah?” I shook my head, trying to clear it.

“Honey.” His voice was like crushed leaves, so hoarse.

“What, what are you...who?” I couldn’t think. I could barely breathe. “What now? What?”

“Tracy,” he began softly, his tone gentle, as I’d never heard it. “Listen to me. Breckin—”

“What?” I snapped at him, my voice high and unhinged. “What the hell are you saying?”

“She had pictures of the two of them together at some convention,” he growled, suddenly aggravated. “She’s a doctor too, a cardiovascular surgeon, and it’s his baby.”

“But I— He—” I stopped, realizing I was beginning to hyperventilate and needed to calm down. I needed to breathe.

“What?” he prodded. “Tell me.”

His demeanor helped. He sounded composed, so I could be as well.

“We, Breckin and I, talked about having kids someday. I mean, I want kids. I think I would make a good dad, don’t you think?”

“You would. I’m absolutely sure of that.”

I was surprised I didn’t cry. It seemed like reason enough to. But I was gutted, hollow, and absolutely empty. The idea that Breckin, whom I’d trusted with my heart, could betray me not once but twice, and most importantly, not tell me about a baby he’d fathered, made me feel like the biggest idiot on the planet.

Cord dropped the tablet he was reading from onto the rolling table beside the bed, pushed it aside, then leaned over and wrapped his arms around me. I couldn’t get enough air, and I couldn’t wrap myself close enough to him. He held me tight against him, and I started shaking. I felt like a cold wind was tearing through me, blowing me apart into a thousand pieces.

“It’s gonna be all right,” he soothed me, and his breath in my ear, down the side of my neck, was comforting, as were the slow circles he rubbed on my back. “I swear. You’re gonna be okay.”

At some point he released me. I watched him take off his gray wool overcoat, then bend and pull off his wingtips before getting in beside me. We were face-to-face, and he yanked me against him. He put one arm under my head so I was pillowed on his wide bicep and curled the other around my back. I wedged my knees between his thighs and pressed my nose into the warm hollow of his throat. Unlike Breckin, Cord smelled like stale air and coffee, but he was so warm, and I was freezing. I was shaking hard, trembling in his arms, snuggling tighter. I closed my eyes for a minute, realizing right before I did it that not once, the entire night, had I felt so safe.

I ROSE SLOWLY, the light in the room telling me it was still early, and when I looked around, I noticed the pair of feet on the edge of the bed. When I lifted my head off Cord's broad chest, I saw the crossed ankles belonged to my brother, who was asleep in a chair.

I looked down at Cord, who was yawning and stretching under me. He gave me a rare lopsided grin before finally speaking.

“You hurting?”

What did he mean? From what, my heart or my body? “A little.”

“I'll go get the nurse and have her put something better in your IV,” he said, and there was sand in his voice, all soft and husky.

“Just push the button,” I croaked out, my own sounding gruff and nasal.

He did, then got off the bed and put on his shoes.

The nurse's entrance woke Alex, and he was suddenly all over me. I put up my hand to hold him off, and the nurse made him wait while he—Trevor—introduced himself, unhooked my IV, and very gently removed the needle from my arm. He put cotton there first and then wrapped my arm with neon-yellow tape.

“Pretty,” I commented.

“I think so too,” he agreed, and then, when he was done smoothing it down so it wouldn't lift, looked at my face. “Sadly, my friend, that is the end of the really good drugs. I can get you something else for the pain. Just tell me where it's at between one and ten.”

“Right now it's nonexistent.”

“That's good. I'll check in an hour and see how you're doing. I'm warning you now that I will want you to eat something before I give you anything, though, so if you feel a twinge, call me so I can get you some food quickly.”

“Got it. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” he said, and left the room.

“Tell me the rest of it,” I asked Cord after a few moments went by. It felt good to have the IV out.

He was talking to Alex in the corner of the room and didn’t hear me.

“Nolan,” I called over to him. “Please tell me the rest.”

He crossed quickly to me, and when he sat down, I immediately noticed how different he appeared, how gentle. I had never seen him early in the morning. Maybe that was what he looked like first thing, before he hardened up in the course of a day. Amazing to see his eyes so warm and unguarded, and coupled with being rumpled and sleep-tousled, you could almost mistake him for human.

“Where did I leave off last night?”

“About Breckin being the father of Celia Hughes’s baby.”

“You must have been really out of it to be able to fall asleep without hearing everything,” Alex remarked, trying, I knew, to infuse normalcy with banter. He was worried I was going to break down, and he couldn’t have that. “And you must have been way doped up to let this asshole comfort you,” he finished, tipping his head toward Cord.

I didn’t have the strength to make Alex stop giving me crap, so I kept quiet, my gaze riveted on Cord’s face.

“He was in shock,” Cord explained to both of us. “But now you need to listen to me.”

I nodded.

“Celia Hughes was Breckin’s lover, but on closer investigation, we found that Timothy Stanson had also been Breckin’s lover. He knew Tim before you, Tracy,” Cord told me, his voice hoarse. “All three of you—you, Tim, and Celia—have been attacked by the same person. Tim is dead, so there’s no reason to believe that the same is not planned for you and Celia.”

“Did you tell Dr. Hughes your theory?” Alex asked.

“I did. She regretted having placed any blame on Tracy.”

Alex was squinting at Cord.

“What?” I asked.

“Cord suspects Breckin.”

“Oh, he does not,” I assured my brother, but then when I looked at Cord, I saw how disgruntled he looked. “Oh my God, you do?”

“Of course I do,” he snapped at me. “Why would Breckin not be a suspect?”

“Why on earth would Breckin want to hurt me?”

Cord said, “That right there is the only thing that doesn’t make sense.”

“What?”

“Celia was a problem for him. Getting her out of the way would seem logical.”

I gasped. “She’s pregnant, Cord. That would make Breckin a monster.”

“Yes, it would,” he agreed.

“Well, he’s not.” I was adamant. “I *know* he’s not.”

“I—”

“He’s not,” I repeated. “And why kill Tim Stanson when that relationship was over ages ago? That seems like a stretch to me.”

“Does it?”

“Why’re you baiting Trace?” Alex chimed in. “Despite all this back-and-forth crap, I know you already figured out it couldn’t have been Breckin, so just tell us how.”

“As you know, murder doesn’t always make sense. You can’t always connect the dots. Looking at all this objectively, it adds up to people who inconvenience Breckin ending up dead or hurt.”

“But?” Alex prodded him.

“But,” Cord repeated, sounding exasperated, “checking up on Breckin’s whereabouts was pretty fuckin’ easy.”

Apparently a key card was needed to get anywhere in the building where Breckin worked, there was video that showed where he was at any given time, and when he did go home, after putting in long hours, there was an alarm code that needed to be punched in, and again video feed.

“So Breckin is in the clear,” I said, relieved.

“He is,” Cord granted. “As for last night, Matt vouched for Breckin. He had eyes on him the whole time, said Breckin never went near the bathroom. It ended up being one of the servers that found you, and Matt and Breckin didn’t go to the bathroom until they saw the EMTs making their way over there.”

That made sense. Matt would have been watching, since he’d been upset that my ex was there to begin with.

“And Celia’s attack?” Alex pressed.

“Breckin was out of town, at a conference in Dallas, so he couldn’t have been responsible.”

“And Stanson?” Alex was always thorough.

“At the time of Tim Stanson’s death, Breckin was performing surgery at County. He’s in the clear. His alibis all check out.”

“And you didn’t even have to question him, did you?”

“No, I did not,” Cord told my brother.

We were all quiet for a moment.

“You wanted it to be him,” Alex suggested.

Cord shrugged. “It would have been easiest, and would have made the most sense.” He sighed deeply. “Now I’m looking for an answer that’s twisted and much harder to figure out.”

Alex nodded. “Did you check if this second attack on Tracy had anything to do with the one at his office?”

“No,” Cord shut him down. “I told you: this second attack was similar to Celia’s and to the one Tim Stanson reported. I suspect that the guys who shot up the office were there for Dimah.”

“They weren’t after Dimah, they were after Kirill,” I corrected as I always did. “And please don’t worry about that,” I told Alex. “Dimah handled that.”

“Oh? Did he? I wonder how long before we find bodies in the bay.”

“Knock it off,” I grouched. “Whatever this is, it has nothing to do with Dimah or my job.”

“I would agree,” Cord admitted, his voice soft, lulling, as he gently took my chin in his hand to look me in the eye. “Right now, I need you not to fall apart. Can you do that?”

“I don’t fall apart,” I promised, massaging the bridge of my nose, then nearly rubbed my eyes raw. “Lex, would you do me a humongous favor?”

“Anything.”

I hardly ever used his childhood nickname, so when I did, he always responded to whatever I was about to request of him.

“Could you go to my place and get me fresh clothes, clean underwear, and my glasses? I need a break from my contacts.”

“Of course,” he said softly, standing up. “I told Dad that you and I would be home tonight. I talked to your doctor, and he said he would release you later this afternoon.”

“Where *is* Dad?” I asked him, surprised my father had not yet been to see me.

“He was fishing in Manhattan Beach with Uncle Rudy. He’s on his way home now, though. I talked to him this morning.”

“Okay.”

“And Evan’s coming in at six, so I gotta go pick him up at the airport.”

“What? Why?”

“Because somebody tried to kill his brother,” Alex said flatly, shoving his hands into the pockets of his black leather biker jacket. “Dad called him. There was nothing I could do to keep him from flying out.”

“Fine, whatever,” I sighed. “I’ll go with you. I’ll call Tate ___”

“Your doctor, Tate whatever?”

“Yeah, and I’ll tell him I need to be gone by five.”

Alex nodded and then promised he would be back soon.

“You have the keys?” I asked him.

“I do.” He jiggled them for my benefit. “I’ll be back.”

“And you remember the alarm code?”

“It’s stupid, so yeah, I remember it.”

“Okay, good,” I said, smiling.

“Hey, Cord.”

Cord snapped his head up.

“We’ll be in touch,” Alex told him, and left the room.

“Yep,” Cord called after my brother, and then his gaze was back on me. “You didn’t ask me if it was true.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You didn’t ask me if I was telling you the truth about Breckin’s affair with Celia Hughes,” he said gruffly.

“Oh,” I grunted. I threw the covers off my legs and swung them over the side, still facing him. “Why would you lie? You don’t lie. That’s not one of your many faults. In fact, the opposite may be true—you’re too damned honest.”

He chuckled before giving me a wicked grin. “I guess with me you always know what you’re gonna get.”

“Yep,” I agreed, raking my fingers through my hair. “Unless I was dating you, of course. People you date don’t get to hear that one night is all you’re after.”

“That’s what you think?”

“That’s what I know.”

He cleared his throat. “I’m just—man, did I fuck this up.”

I squinted at him. “What are you talking about?”

“Just, listen,” he began, sitting down beside me so we were shoulder to shoulder. “I want you to call me if anything at all weird happens, okay?”

“Sure,” I said stoically. “I’ll call you.”

He pulled his wallet from his back pocket and tried to pass me a card with his name and number on it. “I wrote my cell on the back of that for you.”

“I don’t need that. Did you forget who I am?”

His expression was so odd, like he was unsure what was going on.

“Did you have a brain fart or something?”

“What?”

“I have your cell number,” I told him irritably, giving him back the card. “Unless you changed it. Did you change it?”

“No.”

“Then I don’t need a card,” I said like he was dumb.

“Fine.”

We were quiet then, just sitting there side by side until I said, “You didn’t have to stick around and tell me all this stuff. Alex could’ve told me.”

“It’s okay. I wasn’t busy.”

“Liar,” I grunted, even though I was completely numb. “You’re always busy. You’re a Homicide inspector, for crissakes, and this is a big city.”

“It surely is,” he agreed. He put an arm around my shoulders and squeezed me up tight against him. “But I will always make time for my friends.”

“Are we friends, then?”

“We have more history than you obviously remember.”

“Oh, I remember it all right,” I said wryly, leaning my head against his collarbone. “I just usually see and speak to my friends more than once every couple of years.”

“We don’t run in the same crowd.”

“Understatement of the year.”

“But you could invite me,” he said softly, grazing my jaw, curling his fingers around my throat as he tilted my head up with his thumb. “It wouldn’t kill you.”

I scoffed. “And do what with my friends? They’re all paired up. No one for you to fuck and forget.”

“You’re right. In the past I haven’t done relationships,” he acknowledged. “I haven’t seen the merit.”

“Right now I don’t either,” I said miserably, turning to look out the window at the rain. “I feel like I got the crap kicked outta me.”

“You did get the crap kicked outta you,” he said affectionately.

“Yeah,” I muttered, crossing my arms over my chest, shivering suddenly.

He leaned me close and pushed the hair back from my face. I closed my eyes, and he didn’t move away. It was very comforting and almost undid me.

“Thank you for being here with me,” I told him wearily. “I appreciate it more than you know.”

“I know,” he huffed, and I felt his warm breath on the side of my neck.

“Okay,” I said quickly, squaring my shoulders and sitting up straight. “You go ahead an’ go, and I’ll call ya if anything weird happens.”

He stood and put his coat on over his thick sweater. “Call me if nothing happens.”

“That doesn’t make any sense at all,” I muttered, watching him grab his pad, his phone, and readjust his gun holster.

“Well, either your brother or myself or another officer will be guarding you from now on.”

“How is that possible? I mean, there’s crime all over this city. How does one guy merit twenty-four-hour surveillance? All I got was beaten up.”

“But you’re obviously a target for someone with an agenda. You’re in danger.”

“I am?”

“Oh, for crissakes,” he flared. “What the hell have I been saying for the past half hour?”

“So what you’re saying is I do merit twenty-four-hour surveillance?”

“You merit watching, and because you’re Alex Brandt’s little brother and my friend, you merit more watching than would be regularly assigned.” I could tell he was trying to inject an air of calmness into his tone. “Considering that one of the other people who was attacked in the same manner you were is dead now, I would think this news would give you comfort.”

“I’m sorry,” I apologized fast, motioning him over to me. “I didn’t mean to sound ungrateful. I appreciate everything you’ve done so far.” I clutched at his sweater.

He looked at me, and I saw his jaw tighten before he spoke again. “Okay, I’ll see you.”

“Am I okay to be here alone?” I asked, suddenly alarmed by his leaving. I looked up at him towering over me and felt safe. If he left, I wouldn’t be scared, but I would be anxious.

He motioned behind me with his head. “You’re not alone.”

I turned to find my ex standing in the doorway. He lifted his eyebrows in question, waiting for a sign from me that it was okay to come in. My hands fell away from Cord, and I nodded.

“Call me,” Cord ordered, walking around the bed to the door. He shot me a look before he left, and I wasn’t sure what I saw there.

Suddenly alone with Breckin, I felt my unease return.

He entered the room and would have closed the door behind him, but I asked him to leave it open.

“Why?”

“I just don’t want to be closed in,” I said, even though it didn’t make much sense.

“Okay,” he agreed, and I realized how terrible he looked.

When he crossed the room to my bed, I found myself shivering again. He stopped a few feet away and swallowed hard before carding his fingers nervously through his thick hair.

“You left last night.”

“I had to check in at work and let them know I needed some time off.”

“Time off for what?”

“For you, of course.”

Of course. “You look ill,” I croaked out.

“I feel ill,” Breckin admitted, lacing his fingers behind his neck and then resting his arms against both sides of his face.

“How come?”

“You know how come,” he answered woodenly.

“Tell me.”

“It didn’t mean anything,” he began haltingly. “It was a mistake.”

“That’s what you said about Sean,” I reminded him.

“You forgave that. You can’t bring that up now.”

“I can, actually, but this one’s different anyway: she’s going to have your baby.”

“It’s her baby. You’re the only one I’m having a family with.”

For the first time I felt hot tears fill my eyes and then slowly slip down my cheeks. And he probably thought, and anybody else might too, that I was sad over Breckin’s latest indiscretion. But really, it was the loss of the hopes and dreams I’d had when we got together: the kids, the family, the forever. I was grieving for the finality of it all. My plans, what I’d thought, would never come to fruition, and I needed a moment to be sad over that.

“Tracy, don’t—”

Deep breath, quick wipe of tears, and I was better. “It’s not just her baby,” I corrected him. “It’s your baby too. Make no mistake about that. It’s yours and hers.”

“I don’t love her,” he said flatly.

“That makes it even worse.”

“I told her I didn’t want it.”

“You need to do the right thing.”

“Which is what?”

“Don’t play dumb. You know what you have to do.”

We both went silent before I found my voice again. “When did you sleep with her?” I couldn’t help asking. I wanted to know how far along she was, which was weird, but still. It was like I was getting my facts straight to do a podcast or something.

He took a deep breath before walking over to the chair on the other side of my bed. He picked it up and turned it around before he took a seat. I watched as he crossed his arms on the back and rested his chin on them. I saw all the pain in his eyes and that they were swollen from crying. “I slept with her in April when I was away at that conference in Florida.”

It was mid-October now, so six, almost seven months ago. Before Sean. Celia first, Sean second. I hadn’t caught him in April. I caught him in May. And I’d had no idea about either of them. My instinct had been to trust.

Talk about dumb.

“So you slept with her at the conference where you presented your case about how you saved that little girl in the ER with the holes in her heart.”

He nodded.

“I wanted to go with you,” I said, my voice sounding hollow.

“I was only there for two days,” he returned quietly.

“Then you didn’t want me there because—”

“No,” he interrupted, holding up his hand. “I had no idea when I left that something was going to happen. You have to believe me. I didn’t plan any of it. I swear to God, Trace.”

“What did happen?”

“I cheated on you,” he conceded, raking his hands through his hair again. It was an unconscious gesture; one he did whenever he felt trapped.

“Which made it easier to do the second time,” I said flatly.

“No.”

“Yes,” I scoffed. “Come on. Be honest. It doesn’t matter anymore.”

“What do you mean it doesn’t—”

“Just tell me what happened. I’m curious.”

His eyes narrowed. “If you really don’t give a shit, then why should I—”

“Fine. Don’t,” I said, resigned. “Just go.”

“I let myself be seduced,” he rushed out. “That’s what happened.”

I thought about that. “Isn’t that what you said happened with Sean?”

He shook his head. “No. Sean... We’d been flirting for years, just fun, didn’t mean anything until that day. But we had a history.”

Good to know. All the times he'd told me that he flirted with everyone and it didn't matter, that too was a lie. And I could hear Matt in my head saying, *fuck him, who cares, get over it*, and I would. I would. But still, I had to process it all. It was like a thread I had to find the end of. Once I could see the whole thing, then I could make my peace with it and move on.

I was almost glad I hadn't known about Celia when Breckin and I broke up. If I had found out about her right after Sean, I'd be dead. That would have killed me. Because one affair I'd felt bad over, stupid, unwanted, unloved, but two meant I had not been enough for him at all. Ever. He had to find more because I was so very lacking.

But now, after months had gone by, I was far more invested in the why of it all, in the timing, than anything to do with me emotionally. Breckin had been there for me when I was in that accident three years ago, and again last night when I was vulnerable, and for both, I would always be thankful. But my heart was no longer engaged, and I was so thankful for that. He didn't belong to me anymore, so I didn't feel possessive. I felt like I was on the outside looking in.

"But with Celia," he continued, "it just happened. Like I said, for once I let someone pick me up."

"Meaning that you're approached often and that lots of people try to get you into bed," I concluded.

"You know it's true."

I did. He was eye candy and a doctor, for heaven's sake. "Go on."

"She was different, and I was drunk."

"You've been drunk before."

"She was different, then."

"A surgeon, right?"

"Cord?" he asked, wanting to know how I knew.

"Of course Cord. So she's a surgeon and really smart like you."

“Like me,” he echoed, closing his eyes and resting his forehead against his hand. “Yeah, I’m fucking brilliant all right.”

It was funny to think that I had been defending his brain to Eric the night before. “So she comes on to you, and you, what, ended up going with her to her room?”

“No,” he sighed, letting out a deep breath. “We talked for hours. We closed the bar.”

“Really,” I murmured wistfully. “Those are the best kinds of talks.”

“Tracy, it wasn’t like—”

“What did you talk about?” I interrupted. It was like a documentary series I would have watched, the how and why of the affair. I liked learning the ins and outs of relationships. Those and documentaries about serial killers. I couldn’t get enough of them.

“I don’t remember,” he said, seeming to dismiss the idea that it was important enough to recall. “I just know that after that, she suggested we continue our conversation in her room.”

“Okay. What then?”

His gaze flicked to mine, and I could tell he was uncomfortable. It had to be hard, like being on the witness stand, recounting what had occurred. “Is this really necessary?”

“No,” I replied honestly. “You don’t have to tell me. You can just go now and—”

“We—” He stopped for a moment, and I noted how exhausted he looked. “We were in her room, on the bed...” He trailed off, watching me, and I saw him deflate suddenly, the look in his eyes, the expression, pleading for me to stop. And he could. He knew he could. But the minute he did, he had to go. “And then she said I was the most beautiful man she had ever seen.”

“As I’m sure you were. You still are.” I swallowed hard, trying to dislodge the lump in my throat. And it wasn’t his

confession that did it, that made me react like that. It was simply that, once upon a time, I thought he was only mine.

It took me a moment, the truth much harder to hear than I thought it would be. But once I could breathe again, I prodded him to finish.

He squeezed the chair's back, his knuckles turning white. "I remember laughing, and she leaned over and kissed me, and I didn't stop her."

"Okay," I whispered. "Thank you."

"I didn't sleep with her," he told me, emphasizing the word *sleep*. "I left as soon as it was finished."

Meaning he had not held her next to his heart as he did me. He had not snuggled her up tight against his chest. She had not slept in the crook of his neck. He had not woken with her tangled around him. But these were memories now too, and I had to put them away.

"And when did you know she was having your child?"

"A month later, she showed up at work to see me," he barely got out. "We went to my office, and she told me."

I nodded.

"She said she would be whatever I needed. I told her I didn't want her or the baby in my life. I told her it was a mistake. I told her how much I love you."

"Did she laugh?" I asked before I thought better of it.

"No, she didn't laugh," he said crossly, defensive and annoyed. "She knows I love you."

"Oh, I'm sure she does."

"I can do without the sarcasm."

"And I could have done without the cheating, both times, but what are we gonna do?"

He scowled darkly. "She promised me I would never hear from her again."

"But? I hear a but coming."

“She came back a month later with sonogram pictures.”

“That’s nice,” was all I could think of to say.

“I told her again that I wanted nothing to do with the baby.”

“That had to have hurt her,” I said, imagining her in my mind, Celia Hughes, what I thought she looked like and how sad she must have been.

“I didn’t give a shit.”

“That’s not true. You care about people. You’re a doctor, for fuck’s sake. First do no harm and all that.”

“I didn’t care that day.”

“And now?”

“And now even less,” he confessed gloomily. “Because I know this is going to haunt my life forever.”

“And you’re sure it’s your child?”

“I had a DNA test done.”

“Very thorough of you.”

“I was hopeful,” he muttered.

“But?”

“But there’s no doubt. He’s mine.”

“He?” I said shakily, my breath stuttering.

“She had an amnio done just recently, as she’s in her second trimester now,” he answered, his voice sounding hollow. “It’s definitely a boy.”

“Your son,” I said breathlessly. I heard the chair scrape on the floor as he leaped to his feet, overturning the chair in the process. He wrapped around me, and I couldn’t move. “Get off me.”

He tightened his grip and buried his face in my hair. “Trace... Tracy,” he chanted, on the verge of tears. “Please forgive me. Please, please forgive me. I’ll do anything.”

It was my fault. I let him think we could still be friends after his betrayal. But the trust was dead, and by thinking we could be friends, I'd given him hope. That had been cruel, and I felt the weight of that cowardly decision now. "We're done, Breck," I said softly, using the abbreviated version of his name like I never did, pushing gently out of his embrace and slipping off the bed. "And honestly, I should be the least of your concerns right now."

On my feet with the bed between us, I felt better, like I could breathe.

"Trace—"

"You should probably go."

He looked cornered. "Please, Tracy, please," he said over and over, a thread of panic in his voice, the tears in his eyes spilling over. "You must forgive me. You have to forgive me."

"It's not even about that. You and Celia have a lot of decisions to make, and what I do or don't should have no bearing on anything. I'm so insignificant in your life right now that it's laughable."

"No, you—"

"Go talk to her. Don't waste your time here with me."

He came around the bed fast, and outside of flipping over it like a gymnast, I was stuck. So when he grabbed me and pulled me into his arms, I let him. "Trace," he said into my hair, his voice like a caress. "I need you. You need me. I belong to you. Don't throw me away. You love me. Don't stop, don't ever stop. I'd die—I would die."

But his words, which had once meant everything, sounded hollow now. It was sad, the ending, the actual completion of us. And that's what I was feeling, nothing else. I had shed tears for him months ago. I was all out. At this point, he simply needed to go and figure out the next part of his life.

"I messed up, but it can be fixed if you'd just let me."

I looked up into the violet eyes I knew so well.

"Don't send me away, baby. Please don't."

But he was already gone, out of my house, out of my bed, done.

“Can I kiss you?” he asked me, his gaze soft.

“No,” I said, slowly but firmly extricating myself. I needed him off me, out of my space. He was too close.

“Tracy...baby...”

Again, I put the bed between us by walking around to the other side. “Listen, you need to do the right thing, the honorable thing.”

“And what’s that?” His voice, merely a whisper, was imploring. “Please look at me.”

“First off, you need to work on your relationship with Celia. It’s important to be on amicable terms for the baby. That should be your sole concern.”

“You’re my only concern.”

I shook my head. “Second, you should set up a trust for your child. He’s going to need to be provided for.”

“Why aren’t you listening to me? The only person I’m worried about right now is—”

“You should go now,” I told him thickly, my voice so full of painful resignation that I hardly recognized it as mine.

“I want to take you home.”

“I’m going home with Alex. He’s coming back to get me.”

“You’re going to Alex’s, or to your dad’s?”

“My dad’s, but really, you don’t want to be here when Alex gets back.”

“Your brother has never scared me.”

But that was then, and this was now, and everything was different.

“I can go to your father’s, though. I know I’m always welcome there.”

“Maybe give it a bit.”

“No. Your father loves me.”

He did, that was true. But it wasn't a bedrock, an unmovable, unshakable love like my father had for me and my brothers. It wouldn't survive the truth of the betrayal, and Alex had surely already told him.

“Listen, you need to focus on Celia and your child.”

“I don't want to do that. You're my only focus. It's just you and me.”

“There's no more you and me, Breck,” I said implacably, my gaze locked with his. “You know there isn't.”

“Don't say that. Just give this some time. Don't make a decision today. It's too soon. Just wait. Wait a little while.”

I shook my head.

“We're not over,” he said, sounding scared, as he brushed away tears from under his eyes. “I won't accept that we're over. Just say you'll give it some time. Just say that, and even though it'll kill me, I'll go away.”

“You should go see Celia,” I repeated. “Not for her, or you, but for the baby.” That was the right thing to do. He'd dismantled us with his infidelity, but that had nothing to do with the kind of father he would be.

He smiled at me then, and it was bittersweet. “Trace, I am not going to anybody else's place. You're my partner and my future. I'll come by your dad's tomorrow to see you.”

“Is that wise?” I asked, imagining my father and both my brothers there when he arrived. Alex might actually hit him if he showed up. “Because I'm thinking no.”

He shrugged and gave me a rueful grin. “I have to face him eventually. And I want to see you in the morning.”

Funny that he thought I was only talking about my father. “It's not a good idea,” I reiterated, hoping he'd hear me that time.

“I don't care.” His smile brightened as he let out a deep breath. “I'll see you then.”

“It’s a mistake,” I said, sounding like a broken record.

“It is mistake indeed,” a voice agreed, and when I glanced toward the door, I saw Dimah.

I was so happy to see him, my smile had to be out of control. “You came.”

“Of course,” he said, scowling at me. “I had to see for myself that you were good. You look better than I feared.”

It was good to hear.

“I was going to wait until”—he gestured at Breckin—“but this begging was taking too long and I have other business.”

Breckin charged toward Dimah, who simply squared up and waited, appearing bored but also ready if Breckin attacked him. Because even though my ex and my work partner were about the same size, Dimah had muscle on him, not to mention that general feeling of danger that clung to him. Dimah was not the kind of man you messed with. It wasn’t smart.

“You’re the reason he was nearly killed the other day,” Breckin snarled at him.

“And it is because of you that he was attacked in that bathroom,” Dimah countered. “We are both wolves, one no better than other.”

Breckin just stared at him.

“From what I know of Alex Brandt, you going to their house tomorrow seems like bad idea, no matter how much more groveling you intend to do.”

“You sonofa—”

“Just go now and speak to mother of your child,” Dimah suggested. “There is nothing for you here.”

But Breckin didn’t leave, instead just stood there looking at me.

“Please, Breckin,” I said hopefully. “I need to speak with Dimah.”

He stuffed his hands down hard into his pockets. “I can’t help it. I want to bring you home with me. You’re hurt, and I love you, and so I want to be with you.”

I swallowed hard and looked at him. “We’ll talk at some point,” I assured him, because we had to. We were both involved in an investigation after all.

“Can I hug you goodbye?”

The last thing I wanted was to touch him. “Not today.”

He took a step toward me, hesitated for a moment, then came over to the bed and gave me a quick kiss on the cheek. I didn’t recoil. I didn’t have it in me to pull away and end things like that. No matter what it was now, once, not so long ago, I had been in love with Breckin Alcott.

I watched him leave the room without a backward glance, and then I lost it. It needed to come out, all of it—the sadness and the finality and the end. I grabbed the pillow and sobbed. And really, they weren’t tears for him, but for the whole shitty situation, for things that would never be. A moment later, strong arms wrapped tightly around me, and I was squeezed gently.

“Do not cry,” Dimah ordered, which was kind of funny and made me smile through my tears. “Yes. Better,” he said, leaning away and passing me tissues so I could blow my nose. “This is problem with you.”

“What’s that?” I asked, my voice sounding nasal.

“You need to learn to say no. Just no. This is whole sentence, the one word. *No*.”

I chuckled. “You’re laying it on a bit thick.”

“This is for your benefit.”

“Of course.”

“I understand sarcasm.”

Just him being there was helping so much. He was just like my brothers. I counted on him. “Okay, so...*no*,” I said with some flourish.

He shook his head at me.

“No,” I repeated with nothing extra that time.

“Very good,” he commended me.

“I know it’s done, him and me, you get that, right?”

“Yes, but you worry for his feelings, which you should not,” he apprised me. “That man has not only fucked others, but he has also placed target on your back.”

“I don’t think that part’s his fault.”

“Myself, your brothers, your inspector—”

“He’s not my inspector,” I rushed out, needing to make a point.

He scoffed. “You do not remember saying to me, *oh, green in this marble is same color as Cord’s eyes?*”

“What?”

“When we brought in the Italian marble for our client in Marin.”

“I don’t—when was this?”

“It matters little when, only that your first thought was of your inspector. You are very smart man, and I know your head has taken hit, but try, my friend, to use your brain.”

I squinted at him.

“Now hug me, as I must go see to office renovations.”

The word *renovations* perked me right up. “So like, the mudroom can go in?”

“Yes, yes, whatever that is,” he allowed.

I smiled at him and opened my arms, and he filled them. At least the office getting shot up was good for something.

Alex returned minutes after Dimah left, muttering under his breath.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, wondering if he’d seen my partner.

“Fuckin’ Breckin was downstairs talking to the staff, all the doctors and nurses were around him, and you’ll be happy to know I didn’t shoot him. I didn’t even swear.”

“No fun being a grown-up, is it,” I teased him.

“Nope. Not at all.”

And minutes later, as I watched him unpack his army-green duffel bag, now full of my stuff, something occurred to me.

“I’m having kind of a fucked-up week.”

His grin fired his eyes and made his dimples pop. “Yeah, you are.”

“Maybe I need to be cleansed by a shaman or something.”

“Maybe you need a new job and a faithful partner.”

“Or just a vacation,” I threw out.

“Or that,” he agreed, passing me a pair of jeans and ordering me to go take a shower. Apparently he didn’t want me stinking up his car on the way to the airport later. I couldn’t blame him.

“I talked to your nurse, by the way, and he said I could get you breakfast. So whatever your heart desires, just tell me.”

And suddenly, between Dimah and the renovations and Alex and breakfast, I felt like everything was going to be just fine. I was still me, and my brother was going to get me a mushroom, tomato, and cheese omelet, hash browns, and my favorite turkey sausage from that place two blocks over. I even enjoyed his revulsion over my sausage choice.

“Orange juice too,” I yelled after him.

“I know I gotta get goddamn orange juice,” he roared from the hall.

Hopefully he wouldn’t get in trouble for waking up the other patients. His voice really did carry.

SIX

My father, Raymond Brandt, did what he always did when conflict arose. He took no one's part and refused to pass judgment until he'd heard both sides of the story. He was going to wait and talk to Breckin before he said anything. That was his way. I had always looked to my father to be fair. He never let his emotions get the better of him. Alex, Evan, and I, on the other hand, were much more like my mother, riding the emotional highs and lows at every turn. She'd been a yeller, and the three of us were as well.

"Can you believe it?" Alex said when we arrived at the San Francisco International Airport to pick up my brother Evan. We parked his Toyota 4Runner and got out. "I mean, for crissakes, Trace, it's about time Dad got mad for once. This is a big fuckin' deal!"

"I know," I groaned, sagging against the side of the SUV. "Hey, you got a cigarette on you?"

His eyes got big. "I'm sorry, what?"

"A cigarette," I repeated. "Do you have one?"

"Not for you I don't."

"Oh, gimme the goddamn cigarette," I snapped at him, sounding more surly than I felt.

He pulled a pack from the inside pocket of his black leather biker jacket, pulled out two cigarettes, and lit them both. He nursed them for a second, making sure both were sufficiently burning, then passed me one. When I'd been a

smoker, it had been merely recreational. In college there had been clove cigarettes and pot, and a few times stronger things. I never got a taste for drugs, but I had really tried to be a smoker. It just never took. And I'd been a lightweight anyway; it was all about the menthol. My brother did not know from menthol. He would have smoked them without filters if he could have found the time to roll them himself. As it was, I nearly coughed myself to death on the Camel he gave me. I didn't even know they made anything that full of toxins.

“Oh yeah, this is good for you,” he snarked, rolling his eyes as we made our way across the parking garage to the elevators.

I put out the cigarette before we entered the building, then stood beside him as we waited with others to go down to the terminal and the gates. I noticed a woman and a man looking at me and wondered what they must be thinking.

Aviator sunglasses were hiding my puffy, bloodshot eyes. I'd seen myself after I took a shower at the hospital. I was pale and hollow-eyed. I looked like a refugee. I had on three layers—T-shirt, heavy hoodie, and a parka. Old, faded jeans and my ancient brown brogue boots completed my outfit. I was warm, and that was important. I couldn't seem to get my body temperature to regulate, so I needed to be piled with clothes.

The woman was still looking at me when the elevator arrived, and I noticed she and her husband had drifted back, away from us. Not huddled into a corner or anything, but damn close. Alex grabbed my arm and we got on, and when he held the door open so they could join us, the man politely informed him that they would take the next one. It was official: I was scaring people.

In the terminal I walked silently with Alex, threading through the crowd, his arm draped over my shoulder. I didn't even know where we were going until we reached the arrivals area.

“Looks like we're a few minutes early,” Alex said. “Want me to get you a coffee or something?”

“Tea would be good.”

“Yeah, okay, tell me what kind?” He pulled his wallet from his back pocket.

“Get me an Earl Grey latte.”

“Got it. I’ll be right over there. Don’t go anywhere.”

He was worried, and it was nice. Even though I grumbled about him being overprotective, it was good that he’d been with me all day in the hospital, playing cards, watching football, and eating. He’d gone out for lunch too, and as I never had both meals on a normal day, that was nice too.

The monitor updated, and seeing that my brother’s flight had landed safely, I let out a deep breath. I wasn’t a fan of people I loved being in the air. It was dumb and I knew that, air travel being safer than driving, but still. On the ground was best. Immediately, I looked toward the security check because I knew he would be one of the first out, as he always flew first class. I couldn’t remember a time he hadn’t.

Evan had graduated from Columbia with a degree in art history, but just barely—he had been so much more interested in his acting career. He’d done some theater work, but mostly he was not the kind of guy who did summer stock or Shakespeare in the Park or anything off-Broadway. My brother was definitely the guy who did commercials, then walk-ons, then bit parts, then bigger ones. He was less about the theater or his craft and more about the models and the money. He was young, only twenty-seven, and maybe when he hit sixty, he’d care about Broadway. But after a show on CBS playing a hot FBI agent, he’d moved on to HBO. He’d told Alex on the phone that he had news, so I was looking forward to hearing it. As passengers began streaming out, I looked for him. He wasn’t hard to spot.

Alex and I looked alike, in coloring at least. We both resembled my mother—brown hair and eyes and a tanned complexion, the Portuguese and Spanish evident in us. Evan took after my father’s side of the family—Scottish, Irish, French, and German. He had gray eyes, dirty-blond hair, and a golden tan he kept year-round. People always thought he was

adopted until they met our father, because Evan looked just like him.

“Tracy!”

I didn’t know why, but seeing Evan striding toward me made me feel worse. Maybe it was because the only reason he was home was my being in trouble, or maybe it was the way he was looking at me, like he was sorry for me. Either way, I wanted to crawl under a rock.

“It’s not your fault, idiot,” he barked as he reached me, then wrapped me in his arms and held me tight against him.

“Hey, buddy, get your goddamn hands off my brother.”

Evan pulled back, and his smile for Alex was radiant. They hugged hard, and Evan left his hand on the back of Alex’s neck when they let go. Both pairs of eyes turned to me suddenly, and I waited.

“Here,” Alex said, holding out my tea. I noticed he had even put the coffee sleeve around the cup so I wouldn’t get burned. Damn nice of him.

I took a sip and sighed. “Thank you.”

After long moments of staring, Evan finally spoke. “You feel okay?” His voice was soft, the concern clear in his tone.

“As good as can be expected. C’mon, let’s go, I’m beat.”

Alex took Evan’s Louis Vuitton duffel and swung it over his shoulder. Evan walked between us, his arm around my shoulders and his left hand still on the back of Alex’s neck. I could see people watching us, trying to figure us out. Was he Alex’s lover or mine? Alex and I sort of matched in our faded jeans and casual attire, but Mr. *GQ* didn’t resemble either of us. He could have walked out of an ad for Calvin Klein. All he owned were high-end labels: Donna Karan, Ralph Lauren, Armani, Cole Haan, Versace, Kenneth Cole. Not a pair of Levi’s in there anywhere. At the moment, in his black Hugo Boss suit with a gray cashmere sweater and Dolce & Gabbana dress shoes, we got the staring that usually went along with traveling with Evan.

Once we got to the car, I sat in the back and made myself comfortable for the ride to my dad's place in Sausalito. I fell asleep pretty much right away, and woke up to Evan talking to my dad on the phone, telling him he was being ridiculous.

"What?" I yawned, stretching before I realized how sore I was. "Ow, ow, ow." I winced.

"You want a pill?" Alex asked from the driver's seat.

"Yes, please, kind sir," I said, catching his eye in the rearview mirror.

"In the small zipper pocket in my jacket I've got your 800mg ibuprofen, and there should be an Evian back there on the seat or on the floor next to my duffel."

"Thanks." I scrambled around and found the water and my pill and took it before leaning forward between their seats. "What's going on with Dad?"

"He's got that lady friend of his over at the house," Evan told me, "and he's trying to get rid of her before we get there."

"Why?"

"Because he wants to focus all his attention on you, and he doesn't think this is the best time for us all to meet her."

"I, for one, am dying to meet her," I told them. "I've been trying to get him to invite me over when she's there for almost a month now."

"Yeah, but now it's not the best fuckin' time," Alex reminded me. "We should do it when you're feeling better."

"It will get my mind off other stuff."

"I'll talk to you, and you can watch TV. We don't need company," he groused.

I fixed Evan with a continuous stare. It took him a minute, subtlety was not one of Evan's strengths, but he suddenly got it—I saw the recognition in his eyes. "Oh, you must be kidding," he said, lips curving into a smile before he chuckled.

"What?" Alex asked, interested.

I said, “It’s obvious you don’t want to meet this woman because you don’t want Dad to date.”

“What?” he said defensively, his voice higher than I knew he wanted it to be.

“Alex,” I began. “You—”

“Why don’t you have your seat belt on? That’s against the law.”

“Really?” My voice was steeped in sarcasm.

“Lean back and buckle up.”

“I’m so not gonna do that just because you’re using that to change the subject.”

“Oh. My. God,” Evan croaked out, trying to stifle his laughter. “Jesus Christ, Alex, it’s about goddamn time he started dating. Mom’s been gone for almost twenty years now.”

“I know how long she’s been gone,” he said solemnly, staring straight ahead, his knuckles turning white on the steering wheel.

I put my hand lightly on his right shoulder. “It’s time, Lex.”

“I know it’s time,” he agreed in a condescending tone. “I just don’t think that today of all days is the right time for us to be meeting her. We have important family matters to discuss.”

Which only proved that he was not ready for our father to move on. Alex, who had been with our mother the longest, being the oldest child, was not emotionally prepared for our father to date.

“Dad deserves to have someone,” Evan ventured gently. “I mean, unless you’re going to live with him and be his constant companion for the rest of your life, he needs someone to spend time with. Plus, he’s not a monk. He has needs too.”

Alex turned from watching the road and looked sideways at me, completely ignoring Evan. “I just miss her.”

“I know,” I said, my eyes welling with tears. What I wouldn’t give to have her back, to be going home to her right now. Not that my dad was lacking in any way. He was, in fact, much more nurturing than she had ever been. It was simply that you could sit with her and just be still and silent, and that was okay. She had been gifted with that quiet strength, and it had never left her, even when pancreatic cancer had eaten her down to eighty pounds. Never had she complained, never had she blamed God or cursed her life. She had accepted the inevitable outcome, let my father nurse her in her final month, and told us all how proud she was of us and how much she loved us. She’d made me promise to watch out for everyone, and at the time, I didn’t understand why. Why me? How did that make sense? I wasn’t the oldest. I wasn’t the fixer, like Alex, or the showman, like Evan, who brought the whole family together to see him, to look at him. I was the middle child; all I knew how to do was negotiate and get along and...

Somewhere over the span of years I’d learned what she meant. I was the anchor, the linchpin, and my brothers revolved around me. I was younger than Alex and so needed him to fix things for me. I was older than Evan, so he could reach out to me when he wanted to talk. They all came running when I called. She had been counting on me to hold the family together. Normally, I did a better job.

“So?” I asked Evan. “Is the mystery woman staying or leaving?”

“I dunno. I told Dad to keep her there. Your guess is as good as mine, though. Maybe she’ll be there, maybe she won’t. It’s a crapshoot.”

Once we made it to the house my father had bought after selling the big one we’d grown up in, we parked the SUV beside a silver Mercedes that was not my dad’s. The woman had apparently stayed to meet the children of the man she had been dating for about three months. I was pleased. It would give me something to think about besides my stalker. I led the way, and before I got a chance to knock, my father opened the door.

“Dad.” I smiled as I stepped into his arms. He hugged me gently, obviously not sure where I was damaged and not wanting to hurt me.

“Tracy,” he said softly into my hair, rubbing my back.

I hugged him tight, remembering the last time I’d hung on for dear life. It was back in my last year of middle school, when I’d come out to him. I’d been so scared, and he’d told me not to be, to just tell him. When I’d said I was gay, he’d stood up, thanked me for sharing that with him, and opened his arms wide. He hadn’t cared. It had changed nothing. Gay or straight, I was his son, and that was all there was to it. I knew my mother would have felt the same. Nothing would have come between her and her kids.

A few years later I had another epiphany about him. I realized I could call my dad at three in the morning if I was stuck somewhere. He would come and get me, and we would not talk about what had occurred to get me into that situation until the following morning. He never confronted me when I was drunk or embarrassed; he waited for a new day. And if I was hungover, then I had to endure breakfast, which I normally loved unless there had been an *incident* the night before.

The same was true for Evan and Alex. The amount one had imbibed was directly proportional to what he made you eat. For instance, sausage, eggs, and biscuits and gravy were usually reserved for Alex. Evan and I, who had been bigger drinkers, mostly had chorizo omelets. The worst was menudo. You were in deep shit if he made you menudo after an all-night drinking binge. And he was always so damn cheerful when he served it, asking you all about your night, where you were, whom you were with, and what you had been doing in the wee hours. Then there was the inevitable grounding and added chores. Weeding the garden, pantry rearranging, grout scrubbing, and the worst one, folding everyone’s clothes. God, I hated laundry. The thing was, I absorbed all his life lessons, and they helped me figure out who I was going to be.

He made us all self-sufficient and confident in our abilities. He was our touchstone if we strayed off the path. I

loved his dear, sweet face with the deep laugh lines in the corners of his light-blue eyes. Now, as I clung to him, I felt much better. Seeing him, I knew I was still me. I was still Tracy, and someday very soon I would be okay.

I pulled back, and he let me. Our gazes met before he turned to welcome Evan and Alex. I watched him cup Evan's face in his hands and really look at him, checking him over, making sure he was okay. He could tell if he wasn't. Nothing could be hidden from my old man.

Something bumped my right thigh then, and when I looked down, there was Bo, my dad's huge pit-bull mix. Sinking down on one knee, I started petting the dog, who gave me a lick on the nose, then gently smelled my hair, my face, my left ear, and then stepped forward to rest his muzzle on my shoulder. I wrapped my arms around him and hugged him to a chorus of *awwws*.

Rising, I became aware of someone looking at me, and only then noticed the two women—one older, one younger—standing beneath the arch that led from the foyer into the living room.

“Hi,” I said, sounding lame. “I’m Tracy.”

The older woman came forward, holding her hand out for me to take. “Hello, Tracy, it’s a pleasure to finally meet you. I’m Beth Segal.”

“Beth.” I smiled at her, taking the offered hand. “The pleasure’s all mine.”

“Wait,” my dad interrupted us, and went to stand beside her. He draped his arm around her shoulders. “Beth, I want you to meet my sons. This is my youngest, Evan, then Tracy, and Alex, my oldest.”

My brothers shook her hand, Evan cheerfully, Alex reluctantly.

“And this is my daughter, Joanna,” Beth said, beaming at her as Joanna shook hands with us.

“Come sit down,” my dad said, herding us into the living room.

My brothers took up bookend positions on the couch, and after I shed my parka, I flopped down between them. There was silence as Alex took off his leather motorcycle jacket and Evan removed his suit jacket and folded it carefully.

“I have to tell you,” Joanna burst out suddenly, “I watch *Cape Cod* every single week. I have watched it ever since it started, and now I’m sitting here with you and it’s totally amazing.”

Evan smiled the smile that did nothing for his eyes but looked mostly real. “Thank you,” he said amiably, at the same time patting the throw pillow he’d put in his lap and motioning to me. “Why don’t you rest your head, druggie?”

I would have told him where to go with the druggie comment, but I realized my head was getting fuzzier by the second. The concussion was still happening. So I stretched out, legs on Alex, my head on the pillow on Evan’s lap. As soon as I rolled to my side, Bo was there, beside the couch, putting his head down so I could pet him.

“Tracy, can I make up the bed in the spare room for you?” Beth asked me softly. I heard her, but my eyes had drooped closed, and I couldn’t find the strength to open them or answer her.

“No, no,” my dad said, “he’s better here with us.”

“Wouldn’t he be more comfortable—”

“No,” my dad interrupted her. “He’s plenty comfortable there and feeling pretty safe as well. Safe is the important thing now.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” Alex said sullenly, and I felt him taking off my boots.

“What does that mean?” Dad asked, his tone firm.

“I only told you he got attacked,” Alex almost snapped at him. “I didn’t tell you why.”

“Then tell me why.”

“Not right now.” Alex sounded so peevish, I wanted to kick him, but I didn’t have the energy. He dropped his hand to

rest heavy on my left calf, and the warmth felt really good. I realized I was freezing again and mumbled something to Evan.

“What?” Joanna asked, trying to hear me, I guessed.

“He’s cold,” Evan told her. “Dad, could you grab Mom’s afghan?” And from his sudden inhale, I knew he hadn’t meant to phrase it the way he had. He had no agenda, no underlying hint of malice. And I also knew that Alex must be pleased with the wording.

The blanket was like heaven, so warm, so soft. I snuggled into it and shoved my cold feet under Alex’s leg. I sighed my pleasure, and that apparently broke the tension. Everyone chuckled and relaxed. I tried to follow the conversation, but I nodded off, too content not to sleep.

SEVEN

I stretched and let out a yelp of pain. I had to stop doing that.

“Tracy, honey,” my dad said gently. I looked up, and he was right there, looming overhead.

“Hey, Dad.” I smiled up at him.

“What can I get you?”

“I’m hungry.”

“Let’s have some soup, okay?”

“Soup?”

“The instructions Alex has from the hospital say you should eat small meals because you have a concussion and you could throw up. I’m thinking soup is the safest thing.”

“Okay,” I told him, not about to mention the monstrous breakfast I’d had. I did have a much smaller lunch, but I wasn’t about to tell my father that either.

“By the way, I’m glad to see you wearing your glasses instead of your contacts,” he commented with a shiver. “With how you’re feeling, they’re not a good idea at the moment.”

I was going to say I could sleep in my contacts, but he had a point, and an eye infection was the last thing I needed right now. “How do you still hate my contacts?” I teased him.

“I will never get over purposely putting something in your eye. That can’t be sanitary.”

I chuckled, and he smoothed my hair back from my forehead and bent over to give me a quick kiss before leaving. I leaned up on my right elbow, put on my classic black Wayfarers, and noticed Alex was sitting in the same place, at my feet, and he was snoring, with his head thrown back, his mouth open. I sat up, looked over the back of the couch, and found Evan at the dining table.

“And *I* was tired?”

He chuckled before throwing a card down. I focused on the group then and saw that Beth and Joanna were still there, playing cards with Evan...and Cord.

“Hey,” I greeted him. “What are you doing here?”

“Trace,” Evan scolded me like I was being a brat. “Be nice.”

“I was being nice,” I snapped defensively.

“It sounded accusatory,” Evan assured me.

“Did it?” I asked Cord.

“I can’t tell the difference with you. You’re always mad at me.”

“I am not.”

“But it sounds like you are.”

“You see?” Evan chimed in. “That was my point.”

Cord shrugged. “But whatever, I’m sure I deserve it.”

“Dramatic much?”

“You’re basically proving my point that you’re being an ass,” Evan said. “Though if anyone deserves to be cranky, it’s you.”

“Oh, thank you so much.”

“And that was sarcasm.” Evan tsked at me. “Stop already.”

I groaned and noted that Cord was smiling now.

“So I got off at six,” Cord murmured, “and came by to check on you.”

“You did?”

“Yeah.”

“Thanks,” I said, lying back down. When I turned my head to the right, I realized football was on the TV, and I got confused. “Evan?”

“Yeah?”

“Is it Monday already?”

“No, it’s still Sunday.”

“And it’s night, right?”

“It is,” he confirmed. “Why?”

“Why the hell am I looking at Green Bay and”—I squinted at the screen, still bleary with sleep—“Chicago?”

“It’s called Sunday Night Football, dear. We do have something called night games in this country, ya know. Electricity for stadium lighting is an actual thing.”

“Dad,” I yelled.

“Yes, Tracy?” he called from the kitchen, which was just beyond the table where they were playing cards.

“I’m going to tell your son to go to hell now, okay?” I asked cheerfully.

“Okay,” Dad said, and I could hear the smile in his voice.

“Go to hell, Evan.” I rolled over on my right side to watch the game. The screen was suddenly obstructed, though, as Cord came and took a seat on the coffee table, completely blocking my view of the players.

“How ya feeling?”

“Like shit,” I mumbled. “I’m sore all over. I don’t get it. I always thought of myself as tough.”

“When were you ever tough?”

Was he kidding? Hard to tell from his tone. But his smile was warm and his eyes glowed. Definitely giving me crap, then, and the normalcy of the interaction was good. “Hey,

thanks again for being there last night. I know it couldn't have been any fun for you, but you stayed, and I appreciate it."

"Yeah, you sure got cozy fast," he said, reaching out to push my glasses up on my nose.

"What does that mean?" I asked defensively, annoyed that quickly. He always said something or did something that pissed me off, made some stupid remark that got under my skin because of how he said it.

He shrugged his broad shoulders. "It doesn't mean anything."

I waited because he wasn't done.

"But I guess you're over Breckin Alcott, huh?"

"Come again?"

"I mean, the way you wrapped yourself around me, it was like we were sharing skin."

"You're complaining?" I said indignantly, propping myself up on my right elbow. "I can't believe you're complaining after I just thanked you. God, you're an ass."

His wicked grin made the laugh lines around his eyes crinkle. "No, I'm not complaining. I just think that if I were your man, I would have a problem with how you were lying with me."

"Why?"

"It was too close."

"It was not. You're delirious."

He leaned in so no one else could hear him. "At one point, Trace, I could feel how very happy you were to be near me."

"Oh, go to hell," I grumbled, rolling over so my face was against the back of the couch. "I'm tired."

"Okay," he agreed, his chuckle warm. "Don't sleep with your glasses on."

I groaned and rolled back over, taking them off, laying them beside him on the table. I closed my eyes so I didn't have

to look at him.

I heard the coffee table creak as his weight lifted off it, and I wondered for the millionth time why he had to be such a dick all the time.

I fell asleep again without my soup.

I HEARD CLINKING, and when I moved and stretched, my feet hit something solid. I lifted my head and found Cord staring at me from the other end of the couch.

“Still here?” I asked, reaching for my glasses, my voice gravelly and low.

“Yep.” He pulled my foot into his lap and squeezed it tight.

“Oh God,” I groaned because the way he was rolling his knuckles under the arch of my foot was bliss.

“Your whole body is tense,” he informed me.

“I’m aware,” I grumbled. I pulled my foot out of his grip and sat up, putting both feet on the floor. “I’m still sore too.”

“You hungry?”

I nodded as I put on my glasses.

“Tracy, honey,” my dad called over from where he and everyone were playing Texas Hold’em. “Do you want that soup now?”

“Chicken noodle will make me puke,” I told him honestly.

“I made your mother’s sopón de pollo con arroz,” he said gently.

“You did?” I asked, standing up.

“Yes.” He smiled at me. “Beth helped.”

I turned my gaze to her. “Thank you.”

She nodded quickly. “Oh, sweetheart, you’re so welcome.”

I felt like she was treating me like a child, but that was okay since I was hurt and everything.

“Just sit,” Dad ordered me. “I’ll bring you some.”

“Dad, I can—”

“Listen to your old man,” Cord told me.

I was about to argue, ready to leave the living room, when he took hold of me, his grip like iron on my wrist. “What’re you doing?” His gaze met mine.

“Cord?”

“Siddown.”

Instead, I stood there, staring at him.

“Please,” he croaked out.

It was too much to look and not touch him. I gave up at the same time he gave me a gentle tug. I sank down onto the couch beside him. When he lifted his arm, I curled into his warmth and put my hand on his wide, muscular chest and my head on his shoulder. I craved his solid strength, and I closed my eyes when I felt him brush his lips over my forehead. The tenderness undid me, and I pressed in tightly against him. I was almost holding my breath, worried the moment would pass, but he seemed content to hold me, and I was content to let him.

“Thanks,” he muttered, low and hoarse in my ear.

“What’re you thanking me for?”

“The trust right here. I’ve been hoping for it.”

“I don’t think trust has ever been our issue.”

“No?”

“Not in a physical way. I mean, I know you would never let anything happen to me. You would never allow me to get hurt.”

“No, I wouldn’t.”

“It’s my heart that would have been in jeopardy,” I said, hoping to sound playful.

“Not anymore.”

I nodded.

“You don’t believe me.”

“Are you hungry?” I asked, changing the subject. He’d asked me, but I hadn’t checked on him. “Do you want to eat with me?”

“I would love to,” he said, nuzzling against my temple. “But really, Trace, I swear, your heart would never be in danger with me.”

I stared at him, uncertain what I was supposed to say.

“You can count on me.”

Could I? On Cord?

He smiled suddenly. “You think your dad will bring me some soup too?”

I asked my father to bring a bowl for Cord as well, and he seemed pleased. “This is so weird.”

“What?” Cord asked.

“It’s like I’m in some alternate dimension where you, Cord Nolan, actually like me,” I teased him.

“I like you just fine.”

He was making my stomach flutter.

When my father brought over the chunky, spicy chicken soup, so much better than chicken noodle or anything from a can, Cord inhaled the delicious aroma and smiled at me.

“You’re gonna love it,” I said, passing him his napkin.

“I’m already good,” he said, his voice warm.

I nudged him with my elbow, and we ate together quietly while the others played. It was nice to just sit and talk with him and not feel like either of us was going to run away, like we normally did.

“We should do this more often,” I told him.

“I would like that.”

When I lay back down after dinner, Cord took the bowls to the sink. I wanted to talk to him some more when he came back, and decided to just put my head down for a little bit. I couldn't remember ever being so tired.

WHEN I STIRRED LATER, the house was dark. I rolled over and saw Alex asleep in the recliner in front of the fireplace, and for a minute I thought about getting up and going over there and waking him—both of us needed to be in a bed—but I was too stiff and cold. I lost my balance suddenly and put my hand down on the floor to steady myself, but instead of touching rug, I got dog.

Bo turned his massive head and looked at me. The closest the vet could tell was that Bo was a mix of Rhodesian ridgeback, Rottweiler, and pittie. There might be some kind of mastiff in there as well, but really, he was just a damn big dog. He weighed a good hundred pounds and was all muscle. Every time my dad walked him, he got offers to buy him. People just loved Bo. And as long as Bo saw my old man greet you, and smile at you, and better yet, hug you, he was fine. If, however, you startled my father, or if Bo thought you were trying to hurt him, you'd be in trouble. Not that there'd been more than some growling so far.

A while back, a couple of stoned college guys were in the park, asking for money, and when my dad jogged by, they reached out to get his attention. They didn't mean to trip him—even my dad said it was an accident—but he went down anyway, and the moment one of the guys reached down to help him up, Bo came flying across the grass in a brindle blur. My dad had let him sit and play with some children while he did laps on the jogging path, but apparently the dog was keeping an eye on my old man. He came with teeth bared, growling, snarling, and the guys forgot about my dad and ran. The women at the park with their children cheered. My dad called Bo back with a whistle and accepted the help from the young mothers. They all knew my dad and Bo, and when the policemen came around and asked if Bo was a vicious dog, the chorus of outrage was deafening. How could a dog that

patiently allowed himself to be buried in a sand pile by three-year-olds be vicious? Those guys had, in fact, frightened a few of the mothers with their belligerent requests for money. They all had their children with them, and it was creepy. If Bo had roused them, well, good for Bo.

Bo's loyalty was well deserved. Returning home from his usual Wednesday-night bowling with friends, my dad had seen the dog lying in the gutter on the side of the road. Instead of racing by like everyone else, or driving on as the one who had hit Bo had done, he stopped. He carried the massive weight to the car and drove the dog directly to the emergency animal clinic twenty miles away. Amazingly, Bo's only injury was a broken back leg that the vet on duty said would mend cleanly. The water he had swallowed from what was rushing down the storm drain had been more life threatening, and he was in shock from hypothermia. He would need to be admitted to the hospital and monitored for perhaps as long as forty-eight hours. Three grand right there.

My dad paid the bill, and two days later collected his dog. He put an ad in the paper, and when the owner called, my dad explained to him what happened. The man was touched by what my dad had done and even offered to pay him the money for the vet bill, but then he pleaded with my dad to keep him. Sadly, the dog had been his daughter's pet, and she had been hit on her bicycle by a drunk driver and killed. She had named him Bo and had lavished much loving attention on him. It was painful for the man and his wife to see the dog every day, and in fact, they had been on their way to the local shelter to drop him off when he had bolted en route to the car and leaped over their fence. The dog had been looking for the little girl for weeks, the man told my father, pacing the house anxiously. With a story like that, my dad was a goner.

Bo was still a gem with children, but he was devoted to my father. The only time he left my father's side was when we all came to visit. Instead of sleeping in his dog bed covered by his favorite blanket next to my dad's bed, he was forced by either curiosity or a compulsion to protect, to go from room to room the entire night and make sure everyone was fine.

As I'd touched him, he'd checked on me, and I anticipated him rising to his feet and thrusting his muzzle into my face. I was surprised when he regarded me for only moments before shifting his attention toward the sliding glass door. It was strange, and so I followed his gaze.

It looked like there was a disembodied black-gloved hand trying to soundlessly remove the chain from the door that was covered by a curtain. Usually, my father didn't draw the curtain across the door that led from the living room into his large flower garden. He'd probably pulled it in deference to me. If I slept there all night, the sun in the morning would have blinded me, and so he'd made sure I would be all right. In his haste, though, he'd forgotten to put the dowel in the track to keep it from sliding, making it an easy target.

Now, as Bo and I watched, more of the hand came into view as the chain was quietly rattled as whoever it was tried again and again. The dead bolt had been easily opened; the small chain lock was proving to be more of a setback, probably because my father bought the one you had to turn and lift, slide and go up and down in a zigzag pattern. If you couldn't see it, it was hard to do. It was like one of those metal brain puzzles, and the guy was having trouble.

I sat up without making a sound. Bo came to his feet, and I was afraid if I yelled, the dog would go after the intruder, and I had no idea what would happen then. I rolled off the couch, my gaze never leaving the door, and walked backward until I felt the recliner behind me. I sank soundlessly down onto the arm and put my hand over Alex's mouth.

Alex's eyes flicked open—he worked undercover, so maybe he was used to getting roused like that. He didn't do that surprised startle that always happened in the movies; he just woke up, instantly alert.

I whispered for him to look, and pointed toward the door. I felt him tense under my hand, and I moved away as he bounced up to his feet. He pulled his gun from his shoulder holster, and I only had a moment to think that my brother was sleeping with his gun and that couldn't be good before he ran to the front door, threw it open, and charged out into the night.

It made no sense that he would leave me, but what was he supposed to do, let the guy in the house? That seemed like the worst-case scenario. I also had a second to think, why wasn't the alarm on?

At the same moment the chain finally got worked loose, and I yelled as the door slowly slid open. I saw the outline of a large man framed in the doorway before I heard a command of "*Freeze!*" from outside.

He pivoted fast and bolted, Bo launched himself toward the door, and a shot rang out. I lunged and caught Bo's collar so he couldn't go after the intruder. Having only about fifty pounds on the dog, I wasn't certain I could hold him, but I managed to wrap my arms around him so he couldn't move.

"Tracy!"

The lights came on suddenly, and my dad was there, his hand on my back, and when I squinted so I wasn't blinded and looked, there was nobody at the sliding door, neither the man nor my brother.

"Oh God. Alex," I gasped, and my heart stopped. I was certain the intruder had shot my brother.

Evan blew by us and out the door. Instantly I heard someone yell for him to freeze where he was.

I wanted to get up, to move, to go see, but I was frozen in place too.

"Honey, let go of Bo," my father said tenderly.

I still had my hands clutched around Bo's collar, and I was shaking.

"Bo, sit."

The dog wanted to go see what was going on, but one command from my father and he sat, waiting for what came next.

Slowly, my dad untangled my fingers from Bo's collar and got me up off the floor and back on the couch. Only then did he call Bo to him, and they both went out the sliding glass door.

Alone, I watched the floodlights go on around the property, saw a lot of shadows of people moving, and heard shouting as I sat and waited.

It wasn't long before Evan came back and took a seat beside me on the couch.

"Is Alex okay?" I asked him, holding my breath.

"He's fine," he said, passing me my glasses.

"You're sure?" I asked again, leaning against him heavily.

"Yeah, he's fine. Everyone's fine."

I closed my eyes, trying to calm my racing heart, willing my stomach to unclench and my breathing to even out.

I heard sirens, and minutes later, when I opened my eyes, there was a new flood of noise from outside—voices, doors slamming—too much for before dawn in my father's quiet neighborhood.

A policeman closed the sliding door, so that drowned out the circus outside. I sat next to my brother and stared at the dying flames in the fireplace.

When Evan got up, I made sure I didn't fall over, watching silently as he threw one of those ready-to-burn logs into the fireplace with some regular wood and got the living room warm and cozy again.

We were sitting there, talking about Mom for some reason, when the door swung open and Cord walked in. He looked strange: ruffled, eyes red-rimmed, and he was unshaven, which he never was. He crossed the floor to Evan and me and took a seat on the coffee table beside the couch, facing me, as he had earlier that night.

"You look terrible," I said dryly.

"I've been with Celia Hughes."

"Why?" I asked him, concerned.

"Who's Celia Hughes?" Evan asked, but I shushed him.

“The cops guarding her found a car bomb rigged to her Lexus.”

“Oh my God,” I breathed, leaning forward to put my hand on his knee. “Is she okay?”

He let out a deep sigh and covered my hand with his. “She’s no longer giving me shit about protective custody, I can tell you that.”

“Cord,” I pressed him, staring at him hard.

“She’s fine, just scared.”

“Is the guy who just tried to break in—”

Cord cut me off. “No, he’s not the car-bomb guy. I don’t know who the hell this guy is outside, but he’s definitely small-time. No professional hitman fucks around for ten or fifteen minutes with a goddamn Home Depot chain lock. He comes in, shoots the dog, kills you, and he’s in and out without even waking up Alex. This was like having one of the Three Stooges come to kill you.”

“I was still scared,” I told him, my jaw clenching tight.

“I know you were scared, but between your dad’s fuckin’ monster dog and your scary-ass brother, I don’t really think you were in any danger.”

“Is the guy dead?”

“No,” he said, his face scrunching up. “Why would he be dead?”

“Because Alex shot at him, didn’t he?”

“You think your brother shoots to kill and not wound?”

I yanked my hand from his and flopped back against the couch. “So who is he, and what was he doing here?”

“All we know so far is that someone hired him to deliver a dead rabbit.”

“I’m sorry, what?” Evan chimed in.

Cord rubbed his eyes hard, scrubbing them with the heels of his palms before raking both hands hard through his short,

thick dark-brown hair. “He was paid a grand to come over here, break in, and put a dead rabbit in a box on your living-room table.”

“Why?”

“How *Fatal Attraction* is that?” Evan pointed out.

I really wanted to know what was going on, but with Evan there, I couldn’t help smiling.

“It’s not fuckin’ funny!” Cord barked at me.

“No,” I said quickly, soothing him. “It’s really not.”

“But why a rabbit?” Evan pressed him.

“’Cause in the old days,” Cord explained, “a dead rabbit meant you were pregnant. That’s how they checked. It was called the rabbit test.”

It took Evan a moment, and I pressed my lips together so tight.

“Tracy,” Cord growled at me.

I cleared my throat.

Evan said, “Wait, so that actually meant something in *Fatal Attraction*?” He appeared absolutely gobsmacked. “I thought it was just about the kid’s pet gettin’ iced.”

“Can you let this go?” I was trying really hard not to laugh, for Cord’s sake.

“Did the rabbits only die if a woman was pregnant?” Evan was like a dog with a bone; he had to know the why of things.

“No,” I clarified. “All the rabbits died because to check to see if a woman was pregnant, the rabbit had to be opened up so the doctor could examine its ovaries after they injected it with a pregnant woman’s urine.”

“You’re saying they only used female bunnies?”

I was going to say, *Why would they use male bunnies*, but I knew better. “Yes,” I answered him.

“Gross that you know that,” Evan told me frankly. “But why couldn’t they put the bunny back together when they

were done?”

“That’s a lot of expense for a rabbit, right?” I told him.

“Are you kidding?” Evan was clearly revolted.

“I didn’t say *I* thought it was,” I defended myself, and then I coughed to cover the chuckling. “You know I would have saved every single one of them. I love bunnies. I’m just telling you, that’s how it was done back in the day.”

“That’s horrible.”

“You don’t hear me arguing with you, do you?”

“Poor bunnies.”

“I agree, which is why stick tests are so—”

“Are you two done?” Cord snarled at us, clearly annoyed that we’d been ignoring him. “Because a dead rabbit in a box just got collected as evidence, and neither of you is concerned about the big picture!”

“So who sent the guy?” I asked, back on task.

“He doesn’t know. He got a text, which led him to a locker in a bus station with the box and a thousand dollars in cash.”

“And the phone the text came from?”

“No doubt a burner.”

“What about the cameras in the bus station?”

“Not all bus stations have them, and even if this one did, it’s doubtful they’re angled toward the lockers. But we’ll check, of course. You never know.”

“Okay.” I took a breath. “So some psycho paid this guy to bring a dead rabbit over here, and since he doesn’t even know who it was, it’s a dead end.”

“Correct.”

“So really, he wasn’t here to kill me or Alex.”

“No. He’s just a delivery boy.”

His answer made me feel better despite the lingering fear. “You really do look like crap. You should go home and sleep,”

I told him seriously.

“No, I’ve got clothes in my truck, and your dad’s gonna lemme crash here tonight so I don’t have to make the drive back to the city.”

I thought of something then. “Is it a bad sign that Alex sleeps with his gun?”

“I sleep with my gun.”

“Oh, that’s comforting,” I said sarcastically.

He grinned widely, and his eyes twinkled. “I’m kidding. I think Alex was strapped to protect you, that’s all.”

“Why did he shoot at the guy?”

“Because he wouldn’t put down his gun. Alex had no choice but to put one in his leg.”

“So this delivery guy, he’ll be all right?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Good.”

“Why good?”

“‘Cause I would’ve felt bad if Alex had to kill someone because of me.”

“He’s had to shoot a few people over the years, Trace, and they didn’t all live, ya know? It’s part of the job. It’s not personal. If you do something bad, you run the risk of getting hurt. Alex is there to enforce the law. Sometimes the law must be carried out with deadly force.”

“I hate guns,” I said flatly. “If nobody had them, it would be better.”

“That’s ridiculous. Guns have nothing to do with anything. It’s the person, not the gun.”

I was going to give him hell, and opened my mouth to do so, but he held a hand up.

“I’m a cop, Trace. Of course I believe in gun control and that no civilian should be allowed to own any kind of assault rifle, ever, and that there should be a firm, enforceable limit on

the number of weapons an individual is allowed to have. But you still have to deal with human frailty, error, and idiocy.”

Taking a breath, I said, “Fine.”

“Who in the hell is Celia Hughes?” Evan asked suddenly, clearly annoyed.

I got comfortable on the couch, leaning sideways into the throw pillows as Cord brought Evan up to speed on Breckin’s affair.

I dozed off listening to them talk, and drifted in and out of sleep until all the policemen cleared out and my dad and Alex finally came back into the house. My dad made chamomile tea, and I got reheated soup and saltines. We all sat at the kitchen table and listened to Cord explain about Celia Hughes and the car bomb and how confusing it was to have amateur night being played out alongside the work of an obvious professional. I finished eating, went back to the couch, and curled up in a corner. I fell asleep listening to Cord explain about Tim Stanson.

When I came to again, Cord had gotten around to the intruder. He was, Cord explained, a nobody, a hack compared to whoever had planted the car bomb. The police only found the bomb because Celia had dropped her car keys, and because she was pregnant, one of the officers got down on his hands and knees and retrieved them from under her car. The keys had done the Murphy’s Law slide and wound up way under the car, inaccessible from either side. As he crawled and reached, the officer had seen the bomb and alerted the others. Just plain dumb luck. So much C-4 had been rigged to the ignition key, there would have been nothing left of Celia to identify. I heard the room go silent, but I didn’t say anything, nor did I open my eyes. Moments later, I felt the dip in the couch beside me.

“Sit up and pay attention,” Alex directed me.

“I have a concussion,” I reminded him, opening my eyes to squint at him.

“You have a minor one, and you took a nap, so it’s time to focus.”

Shifting around, I got into a sitting position, shoulder to shoulder with Alex, and realized that Cord was back on the coffee table again, holding court, and all the Brandt men were on the couch in front of him, including my father.

“Cord, be honest now, do you believe that Tracy is in the same danger as Celia Hughes?” Dad asked suddenly, sounding frightened.

“I do,” Cord replied solemnly. “I don’t know what’s going on yet, but I think it has something to do with Breckin and I’m not sure what else. Someone is attacking—and in Tim Stanson’s case, killing—the people Breckin’s been with, but I’m missing the why of it.”

“Because once you eliminated Breckin as a suspect, the case made no sense,” Alex summarized.

“Exactly.”

“You suspected Breckin?” my father asked Cord.

“It made sense, sir.”

“No it didn’t,” he assured him. “Why would Breckin ever want to hurt Tracy?”

“Which was what I kept coming back to,” Cord admitted. “But Breckin is the common denominator, so I had to make sure.”

“And now?”

“Now that I know it’s not Breckin, I have to figure out who would want to hurt your son, Celia Hughes, and why Tim Stanson was killed.”

“Not to be...indelicate,” my father began, “but do you think that whoever this is, they’re after everyone Breckin has ever been with?”

“I don’t think so. It feels more personal than that.”

“And what are you basing that on?”

“The attacks themselves,” Alex answered for him. “Hitting someone, stabbing them, that’s rage at work. Whoever is doing this is furious at Tracy and Celia but also at Breckin.”

“It’s a mess,” Cord grumbled. “Given the proximity of the last two attacks, I get the feeling that Tracy and Celia are somehow tied together. I’m not sure how Tim Stanson fits into the picture.”

“And Sean Granger,” I said without thinking.

Everyone was quiet for a moment.

“Hold on now, who?” Cord asked me.

“Yeah, *who* is right,” Evan grouched from the other end of the couch. “You can’t just throw in a new character without any background.”

“What are you talking about?” Alex wanted to know.

“That’s just poor plotting,” Evan insisted.

Alex looked so confused.

“Evan’s right,” I agreed. “I just blurted that out without any context.”

Poor Alex. He glanced from me to Evan, then back to me.

“I’ll explain.” I leaned forward so I could meet Evan’s gaze.

“Go ahead,” he encouraged me.

“He’s the guy Breckin slept with.”

“Before Celia or after?”

“After.”

“Okay,” Evan said. “Thank you for putting this guy into the story in a way that makes sense. Now, *who* is he?”

“He’s a friend of Breckin’s.”

“But not yours, right? He was never yours even before?”

“No.”

“That part’s good,” Evan commented, then looked at Cord, who, for some reason, was now standing. “Are you all right?”

Cord ignored Evan, instead glaring at me.

“What?”

“Who *the hell* is Sean Granger?”

Before I could respond, Alex took hold of my bicep. “Is that the guy I met at your house once? Breckin’s doctor friend?”

“Yeah. That’s him.”

“The one he worked with at the hospital?”

“Correct.”

“*That’s* Sean Granger?”

“Yessir.”

“Holy shit, Trace,” Alex groaned, leaning forward and putting his face in his hands. “I played basketball with him and Breckin.”

I glanced at my father. “He’s sorry for cursing, Dad,” I apologized on Alex’s behalf.

“I think we’re not going to worry about any colorful language right now,” my father assured me.

“It’s quite normal to feel betrayed yourself after an affair that affects those you love,” Evan told Alex. “Especially if you were friends with those who hurt them.”

“Can you shut the—”

“Oh!” I grinned, excited. “That was from that movie where you played the homicidal psychiatrist. What was it called? *Dark Therapy*?”

“*Bad Therapy*,” he corrected me.

“Must be nice when you can slide some movie dialogue into everyday life.”

“Right?”

“Boys, let’s focus on Cord now,” my father chided us.

Looking at Cord, I noted the fisted hands, clenched jaw, and heard how carefully he was breathing in and out.

“Would you prefer I fell apart?” I asked Cord. “When I was in the hospital, you said you didn’t want me to do that. Do

you remember?”

“I would just like you—and your drama coach—to focus.”

“Rude,” Evan muttered.

“And aggressive,” I seconded.

“What you’re telling me is that I have a new suspect I didn’t even fuckin’ know about until right now!”

Evan gasped.

I gasped.

Alex sat up. “Dad said colorful language was all right at the moment,” he said, clipping every word, “so knock it off, you two, and take this shit seriously!”

“Are you hungry?” Evan asked him. “Because we both know this is serious, and we’re processing that, but you’re being extra special douchey right now.”

Alex didn’t even look at him. “He slept with Sean?”

“Granger,” both Evan and I said at the same time.

“I apologize for swearing,” Cord said to my father, “but really, how do you deal?”

My father chuckled, leaned forward, and gave Cord a gentle pat on the cheek. “We all process things differently, and I promise you, Tracy is taking this seriously.”

Cord gave me his attention then.

“Sean Granger cannot be a suspect,” I assured him. “He works with Doctors Without Borders, and he left the country right after he and Breckin had their...thing. You can check with the organization, but no way he’s your guy.”

“How do you know he left?”

“Breckin told me when he explained it was a one-off.”

Cord nodded. “He said that to you? That’s how he characterized what he did?”

“No. He said it was a mistake and that he was sorry, and then something about Sean leaving soon anyway, so I could

put him out of my mind.”

“Like Sean was the bad guy in all of it.”

“More like he was out of the picture,” I said, scowling at him. “I’m telling you it’s not him. He’s far, far away.”

“It’s probably why he hasn’t been attacked,” Evan concluded.

All eyes turned to Evan.

“What? That makes sense, doesn’t it?”

“It does,” Cord agreed. “If it’s true.”

He got up then, pulled out his phone, and made a call.

“You two are driving him nuts,” Alex snapped.

“Better than being an ass because you’re feeling guilty about something you had absolutely no control over,” Evan volleyed back.

Alex stared at him.

“Just because you’re in law enforcement doesn’t mean you have some sixth sense about people. Cut yourself some slack.”

“Yeah,” I seconded, bumping Alex with my shoulder. “I didn’t know Sean was going to sleep with my partner either. Get over it.”

Alex’s gaze met mine. “How are you so calm about all this?”

“Because Breckin and I have been apart for a while now.” I gave him a wan smile. “And finding out about Celia threw me, but not because I found out Breckin had cheated a second time. It was the baby part. That blindsided me.”

He nodded. “Are you okay now?”

“I am. I just want all this to be over.”

“Yeah, me too,” Alex sighed.

“Okay,” Cord said, returning to sit on the table. “Looks like Sean Granger used his passport four months ago to leave the country. I have my guys digging further into that, and I’ll

know everything by tomorrow, but in the meantime, we're back to trying to figure out who this person is."

"And you're thinking the perp must have been watching Breckin," Alex concluded.

"Yeah, that's the only thing that makes sense," Cord agreed, yawning quietly. "Which means that one of two things is gonna happen: either the suspect will eventually go after Breckin, or they will reveal themselves to him after everyone is dead."

"But Celia Hughes is still alive, and Tracy is certainly not going to die," Alex said adamantly, daring Cord to contradict him.

"No. Tracy will not die," my father rasped.

I leaned forward so I could see him. "Don't worry, Dad. Everything will be all right."

"You can't say that," Cord argued. "Timothy Stanson is dead. He was killed in a house fire after he was attacked just like you and Celia were. Someone tried to blow up Celia's car, and they've upped the ante with you by delivering the dead rabbit."

I would murder him for scaring my father. "Cord," I said under my breath.

"I will protect you," he insisted, then looked at my father. "Nothing will happen to your son. Trust me."

My father took a breath and nodded, clearly trusting in Cord's ability.

"So did anyone deliver any dead animals to Celia?" Evan asked out of the blue.

"No."

"Then why send the rabbit to Tracy?" Evan persisted.

Cord tipped his head back and forth. "I have a theory about that."

"Which is?" Alex prodded him.

“The perp is mad at Breckin and wants Tracy to know that Breckin cheated on him. I think they’re after Breckin, maybe trying to punish him for some perceived trespass. In a twisted way, they might even be upset on Tracy’s behalf despite planning to kill him.”

“Jesus Christ,” Alex whispered. “What the hell, Cord?”

“I know.”

“I don’t—” Alex took a breath. “You have to help me protect my brother.”

I patted his leg. “I’m not gonna die, Lex. I promise.”

“No, you’re not,” Cord said hoarsely, and when his gaze flicked to mine, I was taken aback by the weight of his stare.

I reached for him, and he took my hand tightly, surprising me with his grip.

When he turned to Alex, he didn’t let go of me. “There’s a patrol car on the street, night and day, so everyone can get some sleep.”

“Good,” I said, yawning. “We all need it.”

“Yes, we do,” my father agreed, standing up. “Cord, the couch is yours. Tracy, you go with your brothers.”

Too tired to do anything but listen, I trailed after Evan up the stairs to the back bedroom, which had the second—and even better, gas-fueled—fireplace. I heard Alex mumbling something behind us as we all trudged along, but I couldn’t make it out.

My last coherent thought of the night was that I had not slept in the same bed with both of my brothers since I was, like, seven or eight. After Evan flicked on the fireplace, he got into bed, and it was comforting to look from Alex, asleep on his stomach, closest to the door, over to Evan, who had his back to me and was facing the window. Seeing them both fall asleep as soon as their heads hit the pillows, I exhaled a long sigh of happiness. I felt safe even as I looked over to the nightstand and noticed, in the flickering light of the fire,

Alex's gun lying beside the lamp, on top of my mother's Bible.

EIGHT

I dreamed about Cord.

It was embarrassing and made no sense, but in my dream, he held me down and took me, and because of that, I woke up panting, which was not a usual occurrence. I had to get up, climb over Alex, wobble to the bathroom, and take care of myself before I could pee. I was thankful no one had been awake in the bed to notice my discomfort.

Back under the covers, I was lying there staring at the ceiling, wondering why I was dreaming about Cord again after so many years, but really, with him being around again, in my orbit, it wasn't hard to figure out. After we first met, I had gone through a stretch of time—six months, maybe a year, I wasn't sure—when he'd been the focus of almost every nighttime fantasy and daydream. I could only hope all that interest and longing would not return. I was thinking about all of that, incessantly, so when Alex rolled over and scowled at me, I was wide-awake, having been lying there for what seemed like hours.

“What?”

“Whaddya mean what?” he grouched. “Don't you hear that?”

Evan was snoring and had been since I'd become conscious. “It's jet lag. He's tired.”

“I don't give a fuck.”

“Isn’t snoring supposed to be bad or something?” I offered. “Maybe he’s got sleep apnea and needs one of those mask thingies.”

“He doesn’t have—he’s just goddamn annoying as shit,” Alex said hoarsely, frowning at me.

“You need to consider that he might have an underlying health problem,” I scolded him.

“He’s got a problem, all right,” he said, sitting up in bed. “I wouldn’t have stayed in here if you weren’t because, Jesus, who can sleep with him doing that?”

“Me, I guess.” I sighed, struggling to sit up beside him.

“Yeah, but you were all whacked out on drugs.” He put a hand under each of my armpits and hauled me up next to him. “Christ, no wonder he ain’t got no woman. Who can take this every night?”

“There’s no one woman,” I told my brother, “but I’m sure there are many women in and out of his bed.”

Much eye rolling accompanied my statement, but we both knew it was true.

Alex got up then and went downstairs to get us coffee. He came back a few minutes later with a stricken look on his face.

“What’s the matter?” I asked as he passed me the two cups of coffee, one light, as it had half-and-half in it, and the other black because Alex, horribly, took nothing in his. He got back under the covers, careful not to spill our cups.

“I don’t know what to say, Trace.” He passed me my glasses from the nightstand, then retook his coffee cup.

“Just tell me. Something’s obviously weird downstairs.”

The bedroom door opened then, and Cord walked in. He closed the door gently behind him in deference to Evan, who was still dead to the world.

“Okay,” I said, taking a sip of my coffee and looking at Cord expectantly. “Alex isn’t talking, so I need you to tell me what’s going on downstairs.”

He stood there, visibly deciding what he wanted to say, looking uncomfortable.

“Cord?”

Still nothing.

“Maybe a skosh of a hint?”

He gave me the most pained expression I’d ever seen.

“Oh, for crissakes, what the hell is going on?” I snapped at him as Evan rolled over and nearly made me spill coffee all over him. “Jesus, be careful. I understand you actually need your face in your line of work.”

“First thing in the morning?” he complained. “Sarcasm? Really?”

“Ev, I could’ve burned you.” I was indignant.

“And whose fault is that?”

He had a point. I was the one drinking scalding liquid in bed.

“Where’s *my* goddamn coffee?” Evan grumbled irritably, which was evidently Cord’s cue because he told Evan he’d get it and left without another word.

I gave Alex what I hoped was a searing look. “God help me, if you don’t start talking in the next second—” My threat got interrupted by my dad, who walked into the bedroom with a cup of coffee—for Evan, I assumed, since he was the only one without one—and a homemade scone in a napkin. “Oh.” I smiled at him, knowing that here finally was a man who would be blunt and to the point. “Dad, what’s going on downstairs?”

“First,” he said, smiling warmly at me, “try the scone.”

“New recipe?” I asked as I took it, because I was always the guinea pig, which was how I knew the scone was mine. I’d never seen him make them before.

“Yes.”

I tried it because it was my job and I knew I wouldn’t get anything out of him until I did. “It’s good, Dad.”

He nodded.

“Downstairs?”

He cleared his throat. “Yes, well...I know you weren’t aware, but Joanna’s getting married soon, and—”

“Who’s Joanna?” Evan asked.

“Beth’s daughter,” I griped at him.

“Oh yeah.” He yawned. “How come I didn’t get a scone?”

“I can get you a scone,” my father assured him.

“Or coffee?”

“Dad brought you coffee,” I told him.

“No, I didn’t,” my father said. “This is mine. I just brought you the scone to try before I fed them to everybody else.”

“Okay, so Cord’s bringing you coffee, then,” Alex chimed in. “Will you shut up?”

“Yeah, but—”

“Oh, for crissakes, here,” I said, passing him my cup. “Will you stop now, please?”

“Is there sugar in here? I don’t like sugar, only cream.”

“There’s only half-and-half in it,” Alex explained. “Tracy doesn’t like sugar either.”

“Okay, good,” Evan sighed, pleased.

“All set now, angel?” I asked sarcastically.

“Well, no, actually,” he huffed out. “I thought Dad was getting me a scone.”

At which point my father started chuckling and went for the door.

“Don’t you dare leave,” I threatened him.

The way he was smiling at all of us when he turned back, like we were all just the greatest thing, would have distracted me if I hadn’t been having a nervous breakdown. “Come on,

Dad,” I said dramatically. “Joanna’s getting married, *and...*? Please tell me how that’s relevant at this moment in time.”

“Well,” he answered, “unbeknownst to her, Joanna’s maid of honor, Celia, is the same Celia who has come between you and Breckin.”

It took a minute. I wasn’t really awake yet, and now I had no coffee. I squinted at him, like maybe that would help with the clarity. “What?”

He cleared his throat. “Celia Hughes is downstairs in my kitchen.”

“Celia Hughes is downstairs in your kitchen?”

He nodded. “Yes. She’s there, and so are Breckin and Beth and a distraught Joanna. Joanna’s concerned that you might hate her, and while I’ve only just met Celia, I would say that she’d rather chew off her own foot than stay here a second longer than necessary.”

“So why is she still here, then?”

“Because presently she finds herself in the middle of a heated argument with your ex-partner.”

I sighed. “Then I guess I should go down and meet her.”

“What?” Alex choked on his coffee. “No! What the hell for?”

“It’s Monday, isn’t it?” Evan asked out of the blue.

We all went silent, looking at him.

“Right?”

“Yes, it’s Monday,” I replied, annoyed. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Don’t most people have to work on Monday?” Evan seemed confused. “I mean, why is everybody here? Don’t they have jobs?”

It was a valid point.

“And who’s Celia whoever again?” he grumbled.

I scowled at him.

“What? I wasn’t listening. I can’t even see until the caffeine hits my bloodstream.”

“She’s the woman Breckin cheated with, idiot,” Alex barked at him, which was loud in the small bedroom, and especially that close to my ear. “We talked about this just last night.”

“Lower your voice,” I ordered, crawling carefully over Alex since he was holding hot coffee on an unsteady surface.

“You’re actually going down there.” Alex sounded incredulous.

“What am I supposed to do? Hide up here? Show Celia that I’m spineless and scared and weak? I haven’t done anything wrong. I didn’t cheat on anybody.”

“But, Trace—”

“No,” I interrupted, holding up a hand. “Seriously, I’m going down there. I want to see her.”

“Fine. I’ll go with you,” Alex said, throwing off the covers.

“No, you stay here with Evan. Dad’ll go with me.”

Alex looked like he might protest, but Dad silenced him with a simple gesture to be still. I opened the bedroom door, and Cord was there, poised to come in along with Bo, who, I was sure, was checking to see where my father was.

“Hi,” I greeted Cord, petting the dog before reaching for the cup. “That’s mine now. Evan has his.”

“I put half-and-half in it, and cinnamon ’cause I know he likes it.”

“Oh,” Evan whimpered behind me.

So we played musical cups once more, and Cord started chuckling along with my father.

“Did you bring a scone?” Evan asked him.

“Eat the rest of mine,” I growled but stopped when Cord pushed my glasses up a little higher on my nose. “What?”

“I like these on you.”

I felt my face heat. “Thank you.”

“Are you going down?”

“I am,” I announced, passing by him, and then descended to the first floor.

I realized as I walked into the kitchen what I was wearing. Sometime in the early morning, before I’d woken up the second time from my hot dreams about Cord, I’d gotten up, taken one of my horse pills, and changed into a white T-shirt and a pair of pajama bottoms. I looked like I just rolled out of bed, which I had, but that was hardly the point. Everyone else looked great, as it was a little after eleven thirty, and I was a slob. Fantastic. Beth looked stunning, and Joanna would have looked good too if her eyes weren’t swollen from crying.

“Good morning,” I greeted her, walking over and staring down at her before giving her a soothing pat on the shoulder.

She looked up at me and sighed heavily.

I forced a smile before turning to my ex and his one-night stand turned baby mama.

Celia Hughes looked like she was maybe thirty, with a flawless golden complexion and straight blonde hair with bronze and wheat highlights. It fell to her shoulders, and wisps of layers brushed her face. Her eyes were pale seafoam green with traces of laugh lines around them. She was a startlingly beautiful woman. Her face was simply luminous.

I didn’t know what to do. I had not brushed up on the etiquette for this situation. All I could think to do was extend my hand to her. “I’m Tracy Brandt.”

She took my hand and squeezed it back. Not wimpy, not too strong, just enough to tell me she was there. “I’m Celia Hughes.”

“Can we talk?”

“That would be great.” She rose, and I gestured for her to follow me into the living room.

Breckin started to say something, and I saw Celia wince. When I turned to him, I noticed how wrung out he looked. “It’s fine. Everything’s fine.”

He furrowed his brows but nodded before I led Celia away.

In the living room, I took a seat in the overstuffed chair by the fireplace, and Celia sat on the couch where I had fallen asleep the night before. I told her to put her feet up on the coffee table, and she thanked me before stretching out her legs.

“How far along are you?”

She placed a maternal hand on her swollen abdomen. “Five and a half months, now.”

I nodded, then took another sip of coffee.

She took a deep breath. “God, that smells so good.”

“What? The coffee?”

She smiled and nodded.

“I thought caffeine was okay.”

“Some say yes, some say no. I figure it’s better not to tempt fate at thirty-six.”

“You’re thirty-six?” I asked, amazed.

She laughed. I could tell she didn’t want to, but she couldn’t help it. “Yeah. How old did you think I was? Forty?”

“No,” I told her honestly, “I thought maybe twenty-eight, thirty at the most.”

“Oh, really?” I had caught her off guard. “Thank you.”

There was silence then, and she finally fixed her gaze on me, not in a mean way, just straight in the eye, really looking at me. “I’m sorry. Truly. It wasn’t my intent to seduce your partner.”

“So why did you?”

“First off, I had no idea he was involved with anyone. There was no ring, and he didn’t announce it.”

“Sure.”

“And second, I’ve never met anyone like him.”

“In what way?”

She thought a moment. “Gorgeous, smart, funny, dedicated, gentle... I went to the conference to recruit him for the Dedham Foundation, and I totally blew it.”

“Yet that’s where he works now in private practice.”

“Yes.”

The plot thickened. “So you both work at Dedham.”

“I don’t work there yet. I’m a consultant. I work as a cardiovascular surgeon now. I’m a resident, but I also do advisory work for the Dedham Foundation. After the baby’s born, I plan to join the board there, as they’ve offered me a seat.”

I nodded.

“They used to be a pharmaceutical company, and then they expanded to research and development, and finally to what they are today, which is a privately funded facility for rare diseases. It’s an incredibly prestigious company that subsists on private donations from elite benefactors.”

“But then why solicit Breckin? He was an ER doctor. He liked being in the trenches and helping out regular people,” I said flatly. “He doesn’t do snooty fundraisers and fancy-shmancy hundred-dollar-plate dinners. He’s a Democrat, for crissakes.”

She chuckled, the sound unexpectedly soothing. “Here’s the thing: they need some in-the-trenches people. They need the perspective of the working doctor.”

“I see. So how did his name come up?”

“By accident, actually. Fenton Deveraux, who sits on the board of directors at Dedham, had to take his daughter to County about a year ago. They were in an automobile accident close to Fisherman’s Wharf, and due to the weather, they couldn’t helicopter Marissa to Los Angeles to her regular doctor. Breckin was on duty, and right off the bat, he identified the rare blood disease she has. Mr. Deveraux was all prepared

to give Breckin her full medical history, and so when he didn't have to, he was stunned."

"He's an impressive doctor."

"He is. And since then, Mr. Deveraux has been really interested in the caliber of the hotshot young doctors we have in our public hospitals. He's impressed and has made a point of saying again and again how Dedham could benefit from an influx of new talent. He wants to specifically scout and hire the best, and for him, that began with Breckin."

"Makes sense. So you went to the conference to plead Dedham's case."

"I did."

"But?"

She took a breath. "But, when we started talking, I was suddenly sixteen all over again. I'm not proud of what I did, but I couldn't stop myself. I didn't just see him there and decide to go over and seduce him. I went to him to talk about Dedham. I remember introducing myself, and I had all the literature with me, the facts and figures I wanted to show him."

"But?" I asked again.

"But then we started talking, and I started to notice things."

"What things?"

She scrutinized me. "You really want to hear all this?"

"I do." I took another sip of my coffee.

"Well, like how warm his eyes were, and how funny he was, and how charming. How I could just sit there and talk to him and how easy and natural it was."

"Sure."

"I realize now that the ease and warmth he exudes is mostly due to you." I waited silently until she went on. "He's so very in love. He's not on the prowl at all, not looking to impress anyone, just content and himself with everyone all the

time. He has no hidden agenda, and he isn't trying to get everyone he meets into bed, so he isn't careful, and he holds nothing back. He spreads this warmth and tenderness, and it's so..." She trailed off then, snapping her head up to look at me, afraid she'd said too much and offended me.

"It's so what?" I asked, staring at her hard over the rim of my coffee cup.

"It's so sexy," she said honestly. "He just exudes raw sex appeal. You must know."

Raw? No. Breckin was smooth and sensual. There was nothing dangerous or wild about the man. Not like Cord. "I do," I replied woodenly.

"You just look at him and your thoughts go carnal. His confidence is a magnet. I'm surprised you don't have to beat them off with a stick."

"I wouldn't know." I clipped my words. "Normally, if people persist in trying to get his attention, he gets a little hostile and cold."

"You don't have to tell me about hostile and cold. I am now clearly on the receiving end of hostile and cold," she told me, and looked down. When she raised her head back up, tears had welled in her eyes. She looked ready to break down and sob. "I didn't mean to get pregnant. We used condoms. I can only hazard a guess that one of them broke. It was a long night."

Really, I could have lived my whole life without hearing that, but she was being honest, and I had asked for the brutal truth. And the question was why: Why did I need the brutal truth? Why did I care? But it was like the documentaries I loved. I wanted the whole picture, the anatomy of the end of a relationship. Suddenly I could see how the whole thing—*Breckin and His Lovers*, dun-dun-dun!—would make a great three-part limited series on Netflix. Of course, it wouldn't be interesting to anyone without the stalker thrown into the mix. It was very run-of-the-mill infidelity without that part. The mystery was what would make people tune in. "Did he spend the night with you?"

“Yes.”

“You two woke up in the morning together?”

“He was gone when I woke up, but when I fell asleep, he was there with me.”

There was a long silence before I asked her another question. “Why did you think I was the one trying to kill you?”

“For the obvious reason,” she huffed out. “I’m sure that one case of infidelity you could forgive to keep a man like that, but the baby thing, that’s a whole other ballgame, isn’t it?”

“Actually, the infidelity in and of itself was enough. And not because of the act—or acts, rather—but because of the loss of trust. I mean, once the trust is gone, what do you have?”

She was silent.

“There has to be that.”

“If it means anything, he’s always maintained he loves you.”

“Stop,” I scoffed.

She sucked in a breath.

“If he was really in love, would he have cheated?”

Quiet a moment, she then met my gaze. “Love and sex are two separate things. It’s irrational—to me, at least—to think that a surge of feeling would keep one from an indiscretion. A physical act with one person has no bearing on an emotional connection with another.”

“So you don’t think I should feel his commitment to me diminished in any way because he slept with other people?”

“I think the idea of monogamy was a lovely premise when everyone was dead at thirty-five. But now...it’s outdated at best.”

I sighed deeply. “I always knew I was obsolete.”

She smiled at me.

“Listen, are you scared about all this with your car and everything? Are you okay?”

Clearly, she was relieved we were changing the subject. “I’m terrified. But Inspector Nolan seems to have a good solution, don’t you think?”

“I haven’t heard the solution yet.”

“Oh.” She sounded surprised. “Well, he thinks it’s not safe for either of us to stay and be around our families because we might inadvertently put them in danger.”

“That makes sense.”

“Yes. I mean, think about it. Some guy was here in your father’s house last night. How many more of these would-be killers do you want to come here? That’s really scary. I’ve been staying with my mother, and I don’t want anyone to hurt her. So I’m going to do what the inspector suggests.”

“Which is what?”

“He thinks that whoever is behind this wants to eventually confront Breckin, so where better to do that than at his parents’ home in Fieldcrest. In Vermont.”

Funny how she thought she was telling me something I didn’t know. “Go on.”

“Well, so he thinks we should all go to Vermont to visit Breckin’s parents, and there, with us all together, he can protect us and draw out the killer.”

“That’s awfully risky for Breckin’s family.”

“From what I was told this morning, the inspector has already spoken with them, and they gave him the green light. They’re not scared—they’re pretty big in their community apparently, and have a close relationship with the local police.”

“Must be nice,” I said, leaning forward and putting my mug down on a coaster on the coffee table. “But I would think they’d still have concerns.”

“I don’t—” She looked flustered. “They’re not worried, that’s all I know.”

“I wonder why.”

“Like I said, I’m not sure. Inspector Nolan assured me he will have a lot of local help. He seems okay with it, so I’m confident.”

“Inspector Nolan makes you feel safe?”

“Oh my God, yes. Doesn’t he do the same for you?”

“Yeah,” I answered thoughtfully, “he does.” There was no denying that with Cord in the room, I felt protected. “So you’re okay with going?”

“I can’t continue like this. I’m having a baby. I will not have whoever is out there coming after my son. I need this to be over. I have a life to go on with. I have friends and family I want to spend time with, and I need to come to an agreement with Breckin about how he plans to help or not help with this child. If it’s nothing, then it’s nothing, but I need to know.”

I nodded. “That’s between you and him.”

“No,” she said, raising her voice for the first time. “It’s between the three of us if you plan to stay with him. You have a say too.”

“Dr.—”

She cut me off. “Celia. We should at least have that.”

It was stupid not to. “Celia. We’ve been over for a while, and I have no plans to—”

“Listen,” she began hesitantly, her voice trembling a bit. “I know it’s hard, but I think if you told him to leave you, he would do the right thing and help me raise my son, perhaps even choose to be a husband and father.”

“I already told him to help you in any way he can,” I informed her, rising from the chair.

“You did?” She was obviously shocked—the way the color drained from her face told me so.

“I did. You can ask him yourself if you don’t believe me.”

“Why would I not believe you?” she asked sincerely. “You’ve been nothing but honest with me.”

“Here’s the thing: I know you want him, or you wouldn’t have gone back after you spoke to him the first time.”

She nodded.

“I’m sure the two of you can work out something that will be best for everyone.”

“Tracy, I don’t know what to—”

“Don’t say anything. It’s not necessary. Just know that your way to him is clear. I’m completely out of the picture.”

She looked stunned. “You’re amazing.”

I was done was what I was.

I left the living room and went into the kitchen. Breckin was sitting at the kitchen table, head in hands, and didn’t look up when I came in. If it had been my house, the cup I was holding would have been history—I would have smashed it into a thousand pieces. As it was, I used every drop of self-control I had to place it gently in the sink. I looked from my father to Beth to Joanna and back to my ex again. They had all heard—maybe not every word, but enough.

I looked over at Joanna. “I’m not mad at you, okay?”

Her eyes were huge as she gazed at me. “You’re not?”

“No, why would I be? You had no idea.” I sighed deeply, suddenly exhausted.

So without another word, I left them there and went to the stairs.

My brothers were sitting on them, both with coffee, also having heard it all. Alex lifted his head and looked at me as I started up, and Evan squeezed my hand before I could get by. Cord was waiting for me at the top of the stairs.

“I am not going to fuckin’ Vermont with my ex and his pregnant lover. Is that clear?”

“We’ll see,” he said evenly, looking at me hard.

“No, we won’t see. I am so done with this whole thing.”

“You don’t get to be done until your stalker says you are.” He drilled his finger into my collarbone as he spoke. “Don’t you get it? You are not in control here. You might be in the driver’s seat with this little domestic drama you’ve got going with your ex and his knocked-up dish on the side, but as far as the attempts on your life are concerned, you have no power, and you are not the one calling the shots. Don’t delude yourself. You will do what I say.” He poked me one last time for emphasis. I was sure I would have a bruise.

“Fuck you, Cord. I’d rather get shot than have to listen to you.”

He was going to really launch into me, I could tell by the way he squared his shoulders and took a deep breath, but I walked around him, went back into the bedroom, and slammed the door behind me. I sank down onto the bed, then buried myself under the covers and closed my eyes. I was almost asleep when my phone rang. It was Dimah.

“Shit,” I said instead of hello. “I forgot to call and say I wasn’t going to be in this morning. I’m sorry.”

“I knew you would not be in. You were hurt on Saturday. It is only Monday.”

“Yeah, but I still should have called.”

“I forgive you. Now tell me all that is happening. I am sitting, having tea, so speak at length.”

So I told him all about Breckin and Celia and the explosives under her car. About how I was probably going to Vermont, but that no one had said anything to me officially. Then I covered the guy last night trying to break in with the dead rabbit, and went on to cover Tim Stanson and Sean Granger. I then switched topics to Beth and Joanna and how much Alex didn’t want our father to be serious about anyone.

“He loves your mother,” he replied gently. “He is her firstborn son. Perhaps you should make better allowances for his feelings.”

“I am. I just don’t want him to make my dad feel guilty about finally being happy.”

“Which is good, but again, be kind to Alex. He remembers her best.”

I sighed deeply. “I promise.”

He grunted. “Now, tell me why Cord has not considered Breckin or Sean to be suspects.”

“Oh, he has,” I groaned, and then went over everyone’s alibis, and how worried Cord was, and how distraught Alex was, and that my father was being strong and silent, and how nice it was to have Evan home.

“You have good family.”

“Well, I consider you a part of it as well.”

“Which is my honor,” he almost whispered, and I knew he was touched.

Once I hung up with him, I rolled over, facedown, and tried to sleep, but someone came in and flopped down beside me on the bed.

“You okay?”

Evan.

“Yeah,” I lied.

“You want the report from downstairs?”

I rolled onto my back and threw off the covers. “Okay.”

“Well, Breckin plans to sit in the kitchen until hell freezes over or you come down or whatever. Basically, he’s staying put. Cord needs to talk to you about Vermont, so he’s staying put too. Celia, Joanna, and Beth left. Alex is having words with Breckin, or trying to over Dad shushing him. It’s a lot of fun down there.”

“She seemed nice, huh?” I sighed heavily.

“Who?”

“Celia Hughes. Who else?”

“I dunno. Joanna? Beth?”

“Oh.” He was right, of course. We hadn’t actually discussed our father’s lady friend. We had not given one another our opinions. I was more than eager to change the subject. “Yeah. I thought Beth was really nice. I’m sure Joanna is too, though I didn’t really get to talk to her last night.”

“Right.”

“Beth and Dad look good together. She’s very elegant, and he’s so distinguished. They could be one of those couples in the frames.”

“What?”

“You know, when you buy a new frame, there’s always a picture of a perfect couple in there already.”

Evan squinted at me. “I have my frames custom made. There’re no people in them when they’re delivered.”

“Such a snob,” I said, shaking my head. “My point is, they fit.”

“Yes,” he agreed. “Much like Celia and Breckin.”

“What?”

He scoffed. “Come on. You and Breckin, I never saw that.”

“What are you talking about? You loved Breckin.”

“I liked him a lot. I did. But not anymore. He cheated twice.”

“He did.”

“Not that it matters. Once was enough for me. And just so you know, even if you forgive him for all this bullshit, I won’t. Not ever. Nobody treats you like this. He and I are done.”

It was sad to hear. One of my favorite things had been that both my brothers liked Breckin so much.

“But even before that, I never really got you guys.”

“How do you mean?”

Evan shrugged. “He’s a status guy, and you, you’re happy with the working-class stuff. You’re about the day-to-day and the work and the long run, and him, he’s more about the fast rise and power and prestige.”

“How can you say that? He was an ER doctor.”

“*Was,*” he emphasized. “Now he does research and decides who gets grants from the foundation he works for. He attends fundraisers. He’s the face of Dedham and rolling in money now.”

“I guess.”

“But back in the day, when he was yours, did he really enjoy being an ER doc?”

“I thought so.”

“But you’re not sure.”

“No.”

He was quiet a moment. “So what does Breckin really want?”

I grunted. “Well, obviously, I have no idea and probably never did.”

“Exactly.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means, I think, that his goals were always country-club dinners and yachts and shit.”

I snorted out a laugh, I couldn’t help it.

“Celia is much more his kind of long-term commitment.”

I couldn’t argue because the more I really looked at his life now, the more that made sense. “Maybe he met me at a weird moment for him, like he was feeling vulnerable that day.”

“Like you were some kind of charity case? That’s what you’re saying?”

“I dunno. Maybe.”

“So being with you was his idea of slumming?”

“Could be.”

“You’re stupid.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter anymore, does it?” he checked.

“No, and I think he’s going through the motions of trying to get me back because he thinks he should. Like we’re in a rom-com and this is the script.”

Evan laughed. “Well, to me, Celia looks like the kind of person I would imagine he would be with. She’d look good next to him on a Christmas card. You know, I wasn’t surprised when Cord told us Breckin came from a wealthy family. He’s got that thing about him that tells you that’s how he was raised.”

“Like what?” I asked, my voice muffled in the pillow.

“Like I said before, you can tell he’s about money and prestige. He wants more. He wants to be wherever he used to be. It chafes him that I make more money than he does.”

“Oh, it does not. He couldn’t care less.”

Evan grunted.

“Is it bad that I don’t care?”

“No,” he rushed out. “That’s good. Now you can see other people around you.”

“What?”

“Like Cord.”

“I’m sorry?”

“I always thought it would be awesome if you guys ended up together.”

“Cord,” I repeated, rolling back over so I could see my brother. “Have you lost your mind?”

“No.”

“Evan, you—”

“You realize you’re exactly alike.”

“Yeah, no,” I grumbled. “We’re nothing alike.”

“You’re wrong. Everything he wants, you want.”

I shook my head. “You’re deluded.”

“I’m not.”

“How do you even...”

“What?”

“You don’t know Cord.”

He chuckled. “I’ve known him just as long as you have, but unlike you, I’ve been out drinking with the man. I’ve sat and listened to him and Alex talk about what they want their futures to be and about their dreams and everything.”

“You have?”

“Of course I have.”

“Huh.”

“He wants a home, he wants kids, he wants to coach soccer, vacation at Disneyland, and have someone to come home to who wants to take care of him. Period. End of story.”

“So he wants a wife? Or actually, the stereotype of a wife.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, I don’t mean take care of him like iron his clothes and make him dinner. I mean take care of him emotionally. Be his safety net.”

I squinted at him.

“Don’t be so provincial,” he said disgustedly.

I groaned loudly.

“And you want all that same stuff.”

“So did Breckin.”

“As I said, Breckin wants a yacht and to belong to a country club.”

“You’re being extremely judgmental.”

“About what? I don’t think there’s anything wrong with wanting to be rich and have money and the life that wealth

provides. That's great. More power to him. The issue is only that he wants status while you couldn't give a fuck."

That was true.

"I'm telling you, even if Breckin never cheated, you guys would've been donezo eventually anyway. Your future was never bright."

"You used to like the man," I reminded him again.

He shrugged. "I like Cord better. Always have."

"Why do you keep bringing up Cord?"

"Because he gets you."

"Where is this even coming from?"

"I told you, we've talked."

"Uh-huh."

"Believe me or don't," Evan said, smiling down at me warmly. "But I know for certain that Cord wants you, Trace."

I rolled my eyes. "Man, whatever you're taking, you need to fuckin' share, 'cause all they gave me was giant Motrin."

He laughed softly. "I always thought you'd make a really good husband for a policeman."

"Why?"

"Because you know it's dangerous, but you wouldn't let that run your life. I think that's how a policeman's mate has gotta be."

"Cord. Right. Cordell Nolan could have a contest for dog of the year with any of your slick Hollywood friends. See which of them could break more hearts and fuck more people."

Evan took a breath. "I think because you've had what, two lovers in your life, that you equate sex with love where the rest of the world does not. Why are you so judgmental about screwing lots of people? If they want it, and you want it, and everyone is a consenting adult, how is that bad? Why does that make Cord a dog?"

He had a point. I did tend to be a bit judgy where Cord was concerned.

“And if Cord’s a dog in your book, I am too. But I can promise you I’ve never broken any hearts. People know I’m not ready for serious from the jump. Same with Cord, same with Alex, same with most of the people I know. A lot of folks, not everyone, but you see it in the news, they’re getting married later and later. Like, most of the people I know want puppies and plants, not kids. None of my friends are married, and that’s both the men and the women. But everyone is having sex, on their terms, when they want and how they want.” Grinning, he said, “Get out of the 1950s, man. You’ll like it better here in the future.”

I was quiet, thinking about what he said.

“Can I ask you a question?” Evan moved closer and lay down on the bed right next to me so we were touching down the lengths of our sides.

“Of course.”

“Do you think, maybe, that the reason you think of Cord as a heartbreaker is because he broke *your* heart when he wasn’t serious about you all those years ago?”

Could that be? Because I thought of Cord as being a “fuck ’em and forget ’em” kind of guy, whereas I didn’t think of either of my brothers as being that way.

“Are you punishing him for your own bullshit?”

“No,” I said defensively.

“No?”

“Maybe,” I granted.

“Attaboy,” he replied with a wicked grin.

“I hate you a little.”

“That’s okay. It comes and goes.”

I reached over and gave his cheek a pat. “I never hate you.”

“Yes, I know.”

We were silent for a while.

“So...what now?” I asked him. “We’re going to stay up here and wait out the storm?”

“Why not?” He yawned. “What the hell else you got planned for today?”

“Matt’s supposed to call me and maybe come by.”

“Who’s Matt again?”

“My best friend since college.”

“Oh yeah.”

“You know, you really do have the attention span of a two-year-old.”

“If that,” he agreed. “But I do know what’s truly important.”

“Like what?” I teased him.

He thought a moment. “Like that your favorite ice cream is chocolate chip and that Mom’s was coffee, and that Dad is afraid of loving Beth, and that Alex almost got strung out on heroin the last time he was undercover.”

“Holy shit,” I gasped, rolling my head to stare at him. “I should know that. How come I don’t know that?”

He shrugged.

“I didn’t think he talked to you more than me about stuff that went on at work.”

“You thought wrong,” he said kindly but firmly.

“How come?”

“It’s because he wants you to think of him one way—he needs it to be that way, counts on it. It makes him feel safe. He can share the garbage with me and know that nothing will change.”

“He has more faith in you than he does in me,” I said sadly.

“No. He counts on you for his emotional support and on me as a sounding board.”

“I worry about him.”

“Hell, so do I. I’d really like him to quit.”

“He’s like Cord, though. Fat chance of either of them ever quitting.”

We were quiet then, and I realized how sick I felt thinking of all the things I couldn’t fix or change.

“Say something else, Evan.”

He lifted his left wrist. “You want this?”

Alex and I had banned Evan from buying us things, gifts, because he didn’t have to. We loved him no matter what. But what he wanted was to pay off my mortgage, Alex’s, and to send my father around the world. None of us allowed that, not wanting to take advantage. So lately, he’d started to leave things when he visited, or he would swap Alex a Schott motorcycle jacket for whatever he had in his closet, and steal my bracelets and watches and apologize by sending ridiculously expensive replacements. Or my father would get a delivery of brand-new kitchen knives out of the blue; or some bill, like the food he ordered for Bo, would no longer be debited from his bank account. When he called to check, it was always the same story: it was now being billed to Evan Brandt instead. No amount of arguing would change anything. Evan slowly and methodically did whatever he felt would help, and he would not be deterred. We weren’t letting him do for us as he wanted, so he had work-arounds. At the moment he was tempting me with the Bvlgari Octo Grande Sonnerie Perpetual Calendar watch with the transparent dial and heavy black leather band he had on his wrist.

“No,” I lied.

He took off the watch, which cost more than I made in a year, and passed it to me. “You could just borrow it.”

“Evan, you don’t—”

“I’ll get it at Thanksgiving.”

Arguing was futile. He knew me, had seen my eyes light up, and I recognized in him a desire to make me even a little happy. When I put the watch on, his smile made his eyes glow.

“It looks good on you.”

He was so transparent.

“So now you wanna hear about this movie part I’d just read for?”

“Oh fuck yes.”

And so I listened to his excitement about a war movie that sounded horrific to me. There would be sacrifice and unrequited love and death, lots of that, all in the future where World War III was a done deal. The longer he talked, the worse it sounded. I liked the other one he had already signed up for—an urban-fantasy epic, with steampunk vampires and lots of layers. He’d made it sound like a cross between *Underworld* and *The Matrix*, with *Supernatural* and *Van Helsing* thrown in for good measure.

“So do you get to wear leather?”

“Probably too much.”

“Awesome.”

“I’m leaving *Cape Cod* too.”

“No shit.”

“My death scene is gonna be epic.”

I chuckled.

“I’m moving back to regular TV.”

He told me about his new show, which sounded a little spooky and a lot graphic. In fact, it was going to have one of those cool disclaimers at the beginning of each episode that warned you to get your kids the hell out of the room so they didn’t get the crap scared out of them. I was pleased with him and his decisions. I’d been worried he would forever be cast as the pretty boy, but his latest choices were not that.

“You’re gonna do more than show off your abs.”

“Oh, I suspect the abs are still damn important.”

“You know what I mean.”

His smile told me he did.

I TOOK a shower around five in the afternoon, and right after that Matt called. He had called before I woke up, and I had missed it. I stayed on the phone for an hour and was surprised by how much easier it was to tell when I wasn't living through it at the same time. Even a little bit of distance helped.

My explanation came out in staccato bursts—I said and he said, and I said and he said—until the whole thing was out. The baby part was too much for him, and I found myself relating that piece to Eric instead. I'd had no idea Matt's beloved could swear like a sailor.

When Matt got back on the phone, after he breathed into a paper bag for several minutes, I got to the part about the psycho trying to kill me. Since it became an episode of *Criminal Minds* at that point, he calmed down. Police drama, he understood.

After I got off the phone with Matt, I went downstairs and found my dad and Alex having a couple of Coronas in the kitchen while they fixed dinner together. Breckin was asleep on the couch, with Bo lying down beside it, as if guarding him, and Evan was watching Monday Night Football. It seemed so normal that I almost lost it. I went directly out the back door to my father's flower garden. It was nice outside, and I was warm enough in a long-sleeved T-shirt, jeans, and socks. I took a seat on a chaise and stretched out my legs.

“Can I sit with you?”

When I turned, I found Cord staring at me, a beer in his hand.

“Sure.”

He sat down in front of me on my chaise, so I had to sit up cross-legged as he faced me, his long, muscular legs draped over the sides.

“You all right?” Cord asked.

I shrugged.

He reached over and brushed my hair out of my face. “I like seeing your eyes, and this got a little long, huh?”

“It’s gotta be cut. It’s on my list.”

“Or you could leave it,” he rumbled, sliding his fingers down my cheek.

I grunted.

“So listen, I wanna talk to you about Vermont.”

I exhaled a deep breath. “I’ll go.”

He scowled as he studied me.

“What? Isn’t that what you want?”

“It is, yeah, but why the sudden change?”

“Like you said, I don’t want anyone near my dad or Alex or Evan. I can’t have that.”

He nodded.

“And I’m sorry you’re stuck going with me because I don’t want anything to happen to you either, but there’s no way you’re staying here, right?”

“That’s right,” he said firmly.

“So yeah, you’re gonna have a target on your back no matter what, but you probably would anyway with being the investigator on record.”

“That’s correct.”

“But I need you to be careful while we’re there because it would kill me if anything happened to you because of me.”

“I—”

“Or not because of me,” I amended. “I mean—fuck, you know what I mean.” He was being very still, waiting, so I rambled on. “In general, period, all encompassing, I don’t want you to get hurt,” I told him, meeting his gaze. “It would kill me.”

He smiled ever so slightly. “All encompassing.”

“Don’t make fun.”

“No,” he rumbled. “Never.”

“Okay.”

“I really should be the least of your worries.”

“Yeah, well, you’re not. I need to do whatever I can to get this over with. I mean, I know you’re coming with me, and I know you’ll be in danger too, but there’s no changing that. To fight with you and not go, that draws everything out much longer and increases the chances of you getting hurt.”

“Jesus, Tracy.”

I unfolded my legs and got up, putting a hand on his shoulder to brace myself as I stood. “Can we talk about all this later?”

“Whatever you want.”

“When do you want to go?”

“The sooner the better.”

“Tomorrow?”

“That’s what I was hoping.”

“Can you get tickets by then?”

“Of course.”

“Okay, then. I’ll call Dimah and let him know. You get to talk to everyone else.”

“Sounds good.”

“Man, I’m beat.”

“Emotional stuff can really take it out of you.”

I shot him a look.

“I wasn’t trying to be a dick,” he said defensively. “I swear.”

Studying his face, I realized he really wasn’t. “I’m gonna go in and talk to Breckin and tell him to go home.”

Cord didn't say anything, and I would have stepped away, but he caught and held my hand as it slipped from his shoulder.

“What?”

“I can make him leave,” Cord said casually.

“In cuffs and transported in a police car?” I chuckled, turning my hand in his grip, sliding my palm over his callused one.

“Why not?” he teased, drawing me closer.

“I'll make him go. I need to talk to him anyway.”

“Okay.”

“So you'll call me later and tell me what time to be at the airport and what airline, all right?”

“Yep.”

I meant to walk away from him, but I really liked the feel of his rough, callused palm skimming over mine.

“So, you and Breckin,” he said, his eyelids fluttering as I lifted my hand away from his and put it on his stubble-covered cheek.

“What about it?” I asked, tracing my thumb over his left eyebrow.

“What?”

I stroked over his cheekbone and watched his eyes narrow like he was drugged. “You have a question about Breckin and me.”

“Is it over?”

I could get far too addicted to touching him if I wasn't careful. The way he responded, the feel of him...it was dangerous. “It is.”

“That fast, huh?”

“Not really, not if you think about it,” I said, the sudden urge to touch his short sideburns nearly overwhelming me. “We've been apart for nearly six months already, so—”

“What?” he said quickly, his gaze clearing as he stared at me.

“What did I say?” I took a step away from him.

“How long have you guys been taking a break?”

I scoffed. “Let’s call it what it is, Cord. We’ve been done for—”

“Done?”

“Well, yeah, like I said, it’s been—”

“Are you kidding?”

“Why would I kid about that?” He was so strange sometimes. I gave him a faint smile and walked away. I turned at the door. “Don’t let Alex hit Breckin, will ya?”

“I promise,” he said, seeming distracted. He probably had a lot on his mind.

Walking back into the house, I didn’t say anything until I reached Breckin, who was now at the kitchen table, having tea with my father.

“You need to go home and pack,” I told him. “We’re getting on a plane tomorrow.”

He stood up and faced me. “I just want a chance to talk to you. How come Cord gets time and I don’t?”

The answer seemed obvious to me: Cord had never made promises and broken them. Cord had never made me wonder what was wrong with me or why I wasn’t enough to satisfy him. Cord had never cheated on me and made me cry.

“There’s nothing for us to talk about. Just go home. I’ll see you tomorrow at the airport.”

“Tracy—”

“Make sure you get the flight information and stuff from Cord. You should actually go out and talk to him now.”

“I don’t want to talk to Cord. I want to talk to you!”

“Tomorrow,” I insisted, squeezing my dad’s shoulder as I turned away.

I was upstairs and safely ensconced in the bedroom minutes later. Sleep came fast after that. When I came to a couple of hours later, a little after eight, Matt and Eric were downstairs, and they had brought us all dinner from Molinari Deli. When I asked Alex if Cord was coming back, he said no.

“Why?” my brother asked. “Are you disappointed?”

“No, I was just wondering.”

But from the look on his face I was guessing I hadn't fooled him at all.

NINE

At the airport on Tuesday morning I was thankful Evan was flying out too, so he could stay with me a little longer. His flight back to NY was around the same time as ours to Burlington. It was also a nice distraction to watch people see him, do a double take, and then approach slowly. I enjoyed having my mind occupied.

“What’s it like, Evan?” I asked him when he took a seat beside me.

“What?”

“To look like you.”

“I dunno.” He shrugged, pushing his sunglasses down to the end of his nose to look at me. “Never known anything else.”

I smiled at him. I couldn’t help myself. Our mother used to stare at him in wonder and tell him how beautiful he was. She did that with all of us, though; mothers were like that.

“Better’n being ugly, huh?” He grinned wickedly, giving me an eyebrow waggle.

“It is,” I agreed as Celia joined us in the boarding area and took a seat across from me.

“Not that you would know.”

“What?” My attention returned to him.

“Please.” He made a face. “You know what you look like.”

“Yeah. Not you.”

He gestured at me. “Oh, come on. You got Mom’s beautiful tan coloring, her big brown eyes, and her thick eyebrows and long lashes. You came out prettiest of all.”

I groaned. “Yeah, pretty is what every man strives for.”

He snorted. “Don’t knock it.”

Smiling at him, I watched his face grow serious.

“I will come at a moment’s notice if you need me.”

“I know,” I soothed him.

He sighed deeply. “I’m so thankful Cord’s going with you. That’s the only thing that’s actually letting me get on my plane.”

“Trust in Cord Nolan, do you?”

“Where you’re concerned, no question.”

When Evan had to go catch his plane, I held on to him tight. I had left my dad and Alex at the house, not able to do the whole waving-through-the-security-checkpoint thing that day.

“This will pass, Trace, and it will just be an interesting sound bite in your life,” he promised me before kissing the top of my head and giving me a tight squeeze.

“So, I’ve got my phone and I’ll call you.”

“You’ll call me every day,” he made me promise, holding me out at arm’s length. “Every goddamn day so I don’t worry and make myself sick.”

“I know, I know. You, Dad, Alex, Dimah, and Matt. I promise.”

“And if you wanna get out of there, just call and I’ll get you on a plane.”

I nodded with tears stinging my eyes, my throat dry and my stomach in knots.

“Don’t cry or you’ll dry out your contacts and have to take ’em back out.”

My father had made me pack my glasses just in case, but I had eye drops, so in theory I was back to living in my contacts.

“It’ll be okay,” he told me again, grabbing me hard and hugging me against him. “I love you more.”

I nodded. I couldn’t speak, just put my wire-rimmed Aviators on as soon as he walked away. He knew better than to look back; he just smiled his dazzler at me before he left.

“I love you more?” Celia asked gently as I sank back down into the chair across from her.

I looked up at her but said nothing.

“It’s nice,” she said, smiling almost sadly.

“It’s something my mom always said. She would look at us and say, ‘I love you more than my eyes.’ After she died, I finally understood what it meant. Evan knows too, and so he tells me.”

“You guys are all really close.”

“We are.”

“You’re very lucky.”

“Yes, I am,” I said softly, and knew that was true where my family was concerned. I was blessed in that regard. I was glad I had my sunglasses on, though, so she couldn’t see what a mess I was. I needed to get it together, and soon.

Cord and Breckin still weren’t there by the time we boarded, and my seat number put me in business class behind Celia, two and two, both of us next to the window. Finally, Breckin appeared and moved quickly to put his duffel in the overhead bin above me, but before he could sit down, Cord was there, directing him into the seat beside Celia.

“You guys need to get your stories straight before we land,” he advised Breckin. “Tracy’s out of this.”

Breckin looked annoyed but gave me an affectionate smile before dropping down beside Celia.

Cord shoved his much bigger duffel into the overhead bin, along with his overcoat, and then took his seat next to me.

“You all right?” he asked, checking on me.

“Yeah, fine.”

“You look like shit.”

Charming. “So what do Breckin and Celia need to coordinate?”

“I had Breckin tell his folks they were married, so I need them to be able to give his family a good cover story about when and how they met and all that.”

“That makes sense. They need a good, solid version of events.”

“Exactly.”

“I would make it very exciting, like they foiled an evil dictator when they were both in Guatemala working for Doctors Without Borders or something like that.”

He chuckled. “Small and boring is better.”

“Killjoy,” I muttered with a yawn, checking my phone. After a moment he cleared his throat, and I looked back at him. “What?”

“You’re not upset about me having him leave you out?”

“Leave me out of what?”

“Like, I dunno, having his folks know who you are?”

“No. Not at all. I’m not anything to them and never will be. That makes complete sense.”

“Does it?”

“Of course. What would be the point?”

“Okay,” he said with an exhale, like he was relieved. “Good.”

“I do have a question, though.”

“Yeah?”

“What’s my cover? What am I doing there? Who am I to Breckin and Celia?”

His smile was wide and made his eyes glint. “What’s your motivation, you mean?”

“Yes.” I chuckled, then added dramatically, “Line, please.”

He looked good grinning at me, enjoying the playfulness, sliding closer and lifting the armrest between us. “You’re Breckin’s best friend, who’s also been threatened.”

“Oh, okay, that’s good. I like it. And you?”

“Baby, why would I need a cover?” he said, like I was stupid.

Spell broken, I groaned and turned away from him.

“What are you doing?”

I ignored him.

“Turn around and look at me.”

Rolling my head back, I noticed how clear his eyes were.

“What happened?” Cord asked.

“Do you even realize what you did?”

“Obviously not,” he said, opening his legs wider so his knee and thigh wedged up against mine. “Tell me.”

“Why do you always treat me like I’m an idiot?”

“I don’t.”

“Yeah, you do, all the time. You always answer me like I’m so fuckin’ annoying.”

He was scowling.

“Why can’t you just speak to me nicely?”

“You could do the same.”

“See? That’s what I mean. You always justify how you treat me. How come you being nice to me is predicated on me being nice to you?”

“That question makes no sense.”

“Sure it does. You should be nice to me because it’s what you should do and not for any other reason.”

He thought about it a moment. “Be nice to you on general principle, you mean.”

“Yes.”

He shrugged. “Okay, I guess.”

“You guess?”

“Fine, I’ll be fuckin’ nicer to ya.”

“Don’t strain yourself.”

He pointed at me. “Now, was that necessary?”

I studied his face.

“Well?”

I sighed. “No.”

“Okay.” He crowded me a bit more even as he noticed my regard. “Can I ask for a favor?”

I nodded.

“Could you, maybe, not be so sensitive where I’m concerned?”

“Explain.”

“Like, could you not take everything I say badly? Maybe think better of me?”

“In what way?”

“Instead of assuming, *Cord thinks I’m an idiot*, perhaps go with Cord’s just pointing out that, as a policeman, he doesn’t actually need a cover and that was all he meant by that.”

It was true, I did jump on everything he said, and my first thought was that he was thinking I was stupid.

“A lot of times, I don’t think before I say stuff,” he explained. “Like when you asked me about my cover. I could’ve just answered without being a prick.”

I grunted.

“But in my defense, as an inspector, I do a lot of people’s thinking for them and have to make leaps of logic when they

leave stuff out, whether purposely or by accident.”

“Okay.”

“And because of that, sometimes I miss playfulness or teasing or other stuff and default to my just-the-facts-ma’am state because it’s my core programming.”

I smiled over that, and his grin, in response, made my stomach flutter.

“So try not to just turn away, but instead think, he’s not trying to be a prick, he just missed the funny there or the real question. I mean, you do talk kinda fast.”

I laughed softly and leaned sideways into him, bumping him with my shoulder. “Okay.”

“Yeah? Okay?”

I nodded.

“Good,” he said with a long sigh.

It was strange. We never talked like this. We never cleared the air. It was normally a minefield between us of me being bitter and him being mad. So much was usually left unsaid, but now, suddenly, he wasn’t letting that happen. It was nice. Better than that, actually. It was amazing.

I STARED out the window as we took off, and after that I was quiet, watching the flight attendants bustle around the cabin. After a while, I pulled out my laptop and prepared to work once we were given permission.

Cord interrupted me getting started. “I wanna talk about Dimah.”

“What?”

“You said he’s such a great partner, but he doesn’t seem worried about you.”

“Oh no, he’s plenty worried. Believe me.”

“How so?”

“For starters, he didn’t like the idea of me traveling to Vermont alone. At all. He wanted to send someone with me, but when I explained about being, technically, in protective custody, he stopped worrying.”

“So what was he gonna do, send some goons with you?”

“I can assure you we have no goons on our payroll,” I replied haughtily.

“You’re such a wiseass.”

“One does what one can, Inspector,” I said, mostly playfully but still a bit peeved over him thinking bad things about Dimah. I thought that would be it, but he jabbed me gently with his elbow. “What are you—Cord?”

The smirk I was getting made my breath catch. So much arrogance and sexiness at the same time, and the way he was looking at me was really hot.

“Trace...just unclench already. I’m sorry I opened my mouth about Dimah. You’re fiercely loyal, and I forget that sometimes.”

“I—thank you.”

“Don’t sound so surprised. I can be nice to you.”

I nodded, dazed with the change in the man, his willingness to call a cease-fire, earlier and now.

He bumped me with his knee and then didn’t move it away after.

“Maybe we can both try harder,” I offered.

“I would love that,” he husked, his smile kind and unguarded.

Cord got on his laptop then, and after a moment I was able to tear my attention away from him so that we could both do some work. Breckin turned around in his seat and asked if he could switch places with Cord so he could talk to me, but I told him we both had too much to do.

“Tracy, I—”

“Talk to Celia,” I instructed him. “You guys don’t want to mess up.”

“I—”

“And what are you going to do about a ring? The devil’s in the details.”

He cleared his throat as he looked over the top of the seat at me. “My mother told me I could have my grandmother’s ring when I got married. Assuming the offer still stands, I just have to ask her to get it from the safe-deposit box for me.”

And it was a girl ring already, so win-win. “Oh, that’s perfect.”

“It’s supposed to be yours.”

I shook my head. “This way it can just slide right on Celia’s finger.”

He glared at me. “We’re going to talk at my folks’ house, Trace.”

“Sure,” I agreed because fighting on a plane was so classy.

Cord said nothing about the exchange, but he gently gripped my upper thigh. His touch was comforting, and I appreciated the gesture.

Drinks came for the second time, and then the meal was served. It didn’t look appealing, but I watched Cord wolf down what appeared to be lasagna.

“I promise to feed you when we get there,” I said playfully, “because that is so not going to hold you.”

“Oh yeah? You’re gonna take me out to dinner?”

“I will.” I sighed, bumping him with my shoulder.

“It’s a date.”

I smiled as I went back to my Excel spreadsheet.

When the lights were turned off so people could sleep, I saw Celia and Breckin lean their heads together. It was good they were talking; they had a lot to figure out.

“I’m sorry,” Cord said.

“What?” I mumbled, not turning to look at him, still busy with work.

“I know this is hard on you. You probably thought you’d be meeting his folks someday, but not like this.”

“It doesn’t matter. Truly.” I opened QuickBooks, ready to start paying people.

He leaned close enough to breathe down the side of my neck. “How come?”

“We’re done.”

“Yeah, you said that yesterday.”

“Then why the question?” I asked, turning my head to squint at him.

“I just wanna be clear.”

“It would be stupid on my part otherwise, and I promise you, I’m not.”

“What’s that?”

“Stupid. Are you even listening?”

“Yes, I’m—”

“If we were married, if we’d taken that step, then this might be tragic. As it is, it’s just over, which makes it easier for everyone.”

“You’re sure?”

“Cord, it’s been nearly six months.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why be done?”

“How come we’re going over this again?”

“Humor me.”

I huffed out a breath. “Trust,” I replied flatly. “It’s all gone.”

“Yeah, but you can rebuild that.”

I tried to imagine being back in my cozy little A-frame with Brekin or moving to Pacific Heights with him, but the images just wouldn't come. I couldn't picture us together anymore. Somewhere during the months we'd been apart, everything had changed. Because I hadn't been checking in with myself every day, I'd missed the healing. I wasn't looking for a new relationship, so I'd been going along, living my life, doing all the things I normally did just minus my plus-one. And now, faced with the whole *would I take him back or not*, I could say no without being inundated with pain and longing as when the separation was fresh. I used to wonder how people broke up and moved on because I figured there would always be the interest in the other person. But, it seemed, sometimes things just came to a conclusion and that was all. It was terribly anticlimactic. Not like the end of *The Bodyguard* at all.

"I think that for a lot of people a one-off indiscretion can be forgiven. Like, you messed up and you're really sorry. And you promised you'd be faithful, but there was a moment of weakness. I can see that."

Cord was silent, but he put his big, heavy hand back on my thigh.

"But for me, like I told Evan and Matt and probably everyone but you, it's a trust issue. I don't see how you get back to *I'm working late at the office* without thinking, *yeah, sure you are*. I would always be wondering if he's sleeping around."

He just kept staring at me.

"It's like foreskin."

"No," he groaned.

"Once it's gone, baby, it ain't comin' back."

He squinted at me. "That's a terrible metaphor."

"Yes, but applicable in this situation." I started giggling and couldn't stop. I closed my eyes and breathed. When the laughter subsided, I felt a hand on my cheek. "I'm an idiot."

"Yep," he agreed, tracing his thumb over my eyebrow.

I breathed in and out, concentrating, his gentle touch helping me focus, his thumb smoothing over my lashes.

“I’ve always thought these looked fake.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Your eyelashes,” he growled softly. “They’re so long and really beautiful resting on your cheeks.”

I swallowed down the lump in my throat.

“They look like glossy black feathers.”

It was helping, how he was talking to me. I could feel myself calm. I opened my eyes and went for a change of subject. “You never said if we should or should not be worrying about Sean Granger.”

“No. You were right, he’s in the Amazon, building free clinics with Doctors Without Borders. I got video of him to verify.”

“You should have more faith in me.”

“I do have faith in you, more than you know, but I have to check, yeah? It’s all part of being a police inspector.”

“True,” I agreed. “But what about when Sean comes back? Will he be safe then?”

“Well, God willing, this will be over before he returns at the beginning of next year and it won’t be an issue.”

“Good.”

“It’s really nice of you to worry about the man your ex cheated with.”

“Don’t get me wrong, I don’t want to be friends with the guy, but he doesn’t deserve to die just because he slept with Breckin.”

“Agreed.”

“So basically, we’re back to the psycho killer being after me and Celia.”

Cord did a slow pan, looking like I’d gut-punched him.

“Right?” I pressed.

“Jesus, Trace, really?”

“That’s the truth, isn’t it? That’s why we’re on this trip, being used as live bait.”

“Terrible way to describe all this, but...well, yes, it’s accurate,” he acquiesced. “And I’m not going to let either of you get hurt. If bullets start flying, I’ll be the one to take them.”

“That’s not a less terrible thing to say.”

“Why?”

“Because I’d prefer no bullets in your vicinity at all.”

“Well, hopefully there won’t be, but that’s the point, right?”

“What is?”

“I’m here for you.”

“You mean us.”

“No,” he made clear, “for you.”

“So what you’re saying is, if I wasn’t in danger, you would have let someone else come with Celia?”

“Yes.”

I tested the waters. “You’re such a good friend to do this for Alex.”

“It has nothing to do with him.”

“Oh? What does it have to do with?” I had to ask. I had to know. And with my innocuous question, I was suddenly out in the deep end, swimming into the wild, wild sea.

“It has to do with there being no one for the past six months.”

“Why are you so stuck on that?”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“What would have prompted me to do that? We’re not close, yeah?”

“Six months,” he repeated, sounding annoyed. “Fuck.”

I lifted my hand to his cheek, meaning to pat it, to say it was okay and thank him for worrying, but he covered it with his, turned his head, and kissed my palm.

Everything stilled.

He licked his lips and swallowed like he was nervous. I took in his hooded eyes and heard his breath catch, both reactions causing a quiver of excitement to run through me.

“Cord,” I whispered, sliding my hand from under his, around the back of his head, tangling my fingers in the thick hair at his nape, taking hold. “You want me.”

He closed his eyes, exhaling, and I felt the shudder go through him.

“You want me bad.”

“I just need a second to—”

Easing him forward, I sealed my lips over his. I wasn’t sure what he would have done otherwise. He always got close to me, and then something or someone would pull him away. We’d been interrupted more times than I could count. Just once, I wanted to taste him.

It was simple: there was a mere breath separating us, so I lifted and captured his mouth, taking what I wanted, kissing him hard, slipping my tongue between his parted lips, rubbing it seductively over his. The low moan from the man suffused me with heat as I registered that he was kissing me back roughly, mauling me, hands on my face, holding tight.

The whimper from the back of my throat sounded greedy, full of want, and I scared myself with my own hunger. Some of it was the sex drought, I could own that, but mostly it was Cord. I didn’t have the same kind of history with any other man, no lurking unfulfilled passion, no sexual tension that you could cut with a knife. Five years of desire flooded me, and because I was surprised, I tore free, panting softly, afraid of

what I would do if I kept kissing him, so close to throwing my arms around his neck and climbing into his lap. At least the row adjacent to us was empty, and our seats were the last in the business class partition, so unless a flight attendant happened by, which they had no reason to at the moment, we were pretty much in our own cocoon.

Cord was staring at me, and even in the low light I could see his blown pupils and swollen lips.

I had to swallow before I could speak. "I'm sorry. You were being nice, and I took advantage."

He got up abruptly, and I felt like such an ass. Groaning, I turned to the window.

Normally I would have run. Faced with an embarrassing situation, distance and time would have fixed it. But I was stuck, and even as I ran through scenarios, my mind kept tripping back to kissing Cord.

Dear God.

I always assumed the man knew what he was doing in bed. Everyone wanted him; he was quarry everywhere he went. I'd witnessed that more than once. Men who had been in bed with him once always wanted a repeat performance. But I also knew he never stuck around. He was the king of the one-night stand. None of that mattered, though, as I relived the kiss. The searing heat, his teeth on my bottom lip, how hard he sucked my tongue... I had gone boneless and needy in his arms. There was no question: whatever he wanted, I would give. And to me, after six months and being over Breckin, Cord wasn't a rebound, but maybe to him... God.

I was horrified by my behavior, and worse, again, there was nowhere to run. Lifting my tray table and locking it in place, I then put my laptop away in my bag and shoved it back under Celia's seat.

I was getting ready to go to the bathroom, needing at least that slight reprieve, when Cord said, "What are you doing?"

My head snapped up, and I found him looming over me.

“Nothing.” I turned in my seat, grabbed the flight pillow, leaned sideways, and closed my eyes. Not that I could sleep, but it was the only escape I could see.

I felt him sit down, heard the seat-belt buckle, and then gasped when he reached across my chest, grabbed my right arm, and wrenched me around to face him.

“Cord,” I huffed out.

He took hold of my chin. “I was gonna come right there with you all over me, so that’s why I left. I had to take a quick walk and calm down so I could talk to you.”

I’d gotten him worked up. Me. His confession was dazzling. I’d been so humiliated when I’d walked in on Breckin and Sean because my then partner had chosen someone else over me. I was obviously not as sexy as Sean Granger, and not as hot or funny or smart as Celia. Those were the reasons Breckin had wanted them instead of me. I must have been lacking. But Cord...him, I mesmerized, and he wanted me. A surge of heat burned right through me as I stared at the man studying my face.

Cord said, “I fuck everybody because I don’t fuck you.”

I wasn’t following.

“Things change, Trace, the things we want, and five years ago I was different than I am now.”

Easing closer, I heard how rough his breathing was, felt the slight tremble in his touch, saw his gaze move to my mouth.

“I think about you all the time,” he said on an exhale, cupping my cheek. “But you don’t see me now, you only see who I was.”

“You’re telling me you don’t sleep around anymore?”

He shook his head. “Not for a long time.”

There was a yearning in his expression I hadn’t seen before. “I’m a mess right now, Cord.”

“No. You just think you are.”

“What are you talking about?”

He lowered his voice, crowding me so we were cheek to cheek, his lips next to my ear. “The second you found out Breckin cheated, you threw him out and reclaimed your space.”

His breath in my ear broke me out in goose bumps, and coupled with his lips pressed to the skin behind it and his hand sliding up under my shirt, my cock was thickening fast.

“You’ve been figuring out what to do, whether to remain friends or not, for several months now, but in that time, he hasn’t been back in your bed.”

He was rolling my left nipple, and it hardened under his touch. He pressed his forehead to mine and dropped his other hand to my upper thigh.

I wasn’t a horny teenager anymore. I could control my own body.

“I know you love hard, Trace, so I get that it’ll take time for you to be over Breckin and have your head and your heart clear.”

He cupped me through my chinos, squeezing my cock, and I writhed in his grip, wanting more—more friction, more pressure, more everything.

“So for now, I’m gonna claim the only thing I can,” he growled, opening his hot mouth on the side of my neck.

I jolted under his hands, loving the kiss that quickly became suckling before he added his teeth.

“Pull the blanket over your lap.”

It was bunched beside me under the window, so I moved it quickly as he yanked on my belt buckle.

“Tracy.”

I leaned my head back so he could suck and nibble whatever skin on my neck and throat he wanted. At the sound of my name, followed by the man’s seductive chuckle, I bent forward. He was right there, staring at me, and I closed my eyes and kissed him.

“You keep,” he rasped as I tugged on his bottom lip, “kissing me.”

“You’re finally letting me,” I ground out, putting my hands on his collarbone, inside his shirt, and tracing over warm, sleek skin. The need to wrap both arms around his neck and lock him tight against me was nearly overwhelming.

My belt buckle loosened, the button and zipper fly gave way, and he slid his hand under the waistband of my briefs to my rigid, leaking dick.

“Oh fuck,” I whined softly, bucking up into his fist, shivering with the desire to come and see it on him. Something must have shown on my face because he narrowed his eyes in a look that was all predator.

“Tell me,” he demanded, and the darkness in his voice made my breathing falter. “And don’t fuckin’ lie.”

As if I could.

“Now,” he rasped.

“I want to come on your skin...on your gorgeous abs and your beautiful chest.”

“Because?”

My voice was ragged and choppy. “I’ve always wanted to, to see...to watch.”

“While you’re riding my cock,” he growled low in his chest. It was a statement, not a question, because he knew the answer already, probably always had.

“*Cord...*”

But he had me, literally, and I saw his hooded eyes before he began to slowly nibble along my jaw. “I’ve been waiting for this—for you.”

He wanted me too, and suddenly I was dizzy with the implication.

“All the time,” he said, his voice going out on him. “At night, in bed...it’s you.”

It was too much. I couldn't go from nothing to having the deepest wish in my secret heart granted.

Yes, I had loved Breckin Alcott, and if he hadn't cheated, I probably would have married him. The man had been a gift, someone I thought that I, plain, ordinary Tracy Brandt, could never have. But the tucked-away dream, the one hidden under layers of denial and indifference and distance, was this, was him: Cord Nolan.

Even if nothing worked, even if we crashed and that killed all semblance of civility so we wouldn't even be able to stand being in the same room together ever again...even then, it was worth it to try. I would gamble my heart because it was time to leap and not look.

"I will beat you if you ever go near Breckin Alcott again."

I nodded and suddenly realized that he had to get his hand off me; I was susceptible to him, to our history and his strength, to my endless hunger for him. "Let go."

"No."

"Please," I begged, trying to stop my body from surging toward climax even as I writhed in his grip.

"No," he repeated gruffly, milking my length, stroking fast, expertly, the vise of his hand and the drooling precum making the motion fluid and perfect.

I tried to stifle the sound of his name as I wiggled and shifted in my seat, going suddenly rigid as I came, under the blanket, spurting thick ribbons of cum over his clenched fist, wrist, and heavily veined forearm.

"When we're alone, I expect you to scream if you need to."

He was trying to kill me, saying things like that.

As I stared at him, trying to keep from panting, from making any noise at all, he ground his mouth down over mine, taking in my soft, decadent moans as he kissed me and smiled at the same time. Shoving away from him, I met his heated stare. "I'm funny?"

“No,” he assured me with a low chuckle. “I am.”

“Why?”

“Because I should have done this a long fuckin’ time ago,” he said crossly, recapturing my mouth and devouring me. I had never, ever, kissed anyone like Cord. His kisses were seductive and mauling, rough and ravishing. I wanted more.

He let me go, my flagging cock slipping from his cum-covered fingers, and I adjusted myself fast, tucked in, zipped up, and buckled as he wiped himself off with the same ruined blanket before balling it up and shoving it under the seat in front of him, which happened to be Breckin’s. There was irony there.

I couldn’t look at him—the only image in my head was me under him in bed.

“Talk to me, Trace.”

I met his gaze. “I’m at a loss.”

“Luckily, I’m not,” he said, taking my hand and lacing his fingers with mine. “Wherever we end up tonight, you’re sleeping with me.”

My heart fluttered. “You’re sure?”

“Never been more.”

I nodded.

“How’s your head?”

I could feel my face heat, and I was sure I was blushing.

“Not your little head, idiot,” he said through quiet laughter. “You have a concussion—what I did wasn’t that smart. I hope I didn’t hurt you.”

“I had clearance from my doctor to fly, you know that, and the concussion is all fixed up as long as no one hits me again.”

“No one will ever touch you again,” he promised.

“But even if you had hurt me a little, who cares?”

He lifted my hand to his mouth and kissed my knuckles. “I wasn’t thinking.”

“Good.”

We sat there in silence, and after a while I got sleepy. He lifted his arm, and I snuggled close like I'd been doing it forever. He anchored me there, holding me tight, and leaned his cheek against my forehead. Why that felt so normal after only a few hours' flight, I didn't know, but after years of lead-up, I was finally going to start something with Cord Nolan. I was excited and terrified at the same time.

TEN

We stole the blanket.

There was really no question that it needed to be done. I refolded it and shoved the thing back into the bag it came out of, gave it to Cord, and he made room for it in his duffel.

“You know, I bet that happens all the time,” he reassured me.

I snorted. “Yeah, no.”

“Oh, who cares.” He smiled, leaned close, and kissed the side of my neck. “I’m gonna keep that damn blanket, see if I won’t.”

This new playful and attentive Cord was something I’d never imagined, and I was blindsided because of it, in thrall to every part of the man, mostly his heart. “You’re an idiot.”

“So what?” he said with a smirk. “Idiot or not, you seem to like me.”

“Apparently so.”

“Okay, now we gotta focus,” he said as we made our descent, taking my hand in his.

I didn’t mention that I seemed to be what he was most absorbed with from the way he couldn’t stop touching me. Not that I was complaining.

The international airport in Burlington, Vermont, looked like many other airports I’d traveled through in my life. What

changed was what was sold in the shops throughout the terminal. In San Francisco it was sourdough bread, Alcatraz key chains, and cable-car magnets. In Vermont there was maple syrup, Green Mountain Coffee, and, of course, Ben & Jerry's merchandise. The shops went by in a blur as I followed everyone else.

Cord said, "You look nice, by the way."

Glancing over at him as we walked, I wondered if this was how it was going to be from now on. Would he simply blindside me with compliments? I knew I looked ordinary in slim-fitting chinos, a sweater vest over a long-sleeved button-down, and a brown leather jacket topping it off.

"I like all the stuff too," he added.

My new watch compliments of Evan, the brown leather cuff bracelet on the opposite wrist, he was noticing it all, and I stumbled for a second because I didn't even know the stranger walking beside me.

"You all right?" He checked with a hand on my shoulder, the concerned look in his eyes not completely foreign. Now that I was clear of my detritus where Cord was concerned, I was noticing things as well. The affection on his face had always been there; I had just seen something else. I always thought the worst of him. Now that I wasn't, he had dropped his guard. Everything was brand-new between us.

"I'm fine," I told him, catching his hand before he withdrew it, squeezing tight for a moment.

"Stay close to me," he ordered, and clear as day I heard the possessiveness in the tone. How had I missed that?

"I will."

My simple words drew a smile I had never seen before from the man, and I was reminded again that yes, Cord Nolan was into me. I needed a little time alone to process it, but I wasn't going to get any.

When we walked out through security into the main terminal, I heard several people call Breckin's name. The crowd there was a surprise, as was seeing his parents. His

mother was a stunning blonde, and his father just as gorgeous with his gray hair and piercing blue eyes. They were straining to see their son, and that was confusing to me. I didn't expect that.

In the two years we'd spent together, we'd never visited, and he'd never mentioned them to me other than to say they weren't close. They weren't estranged, there was no bad blood between them, simply the distance as far as I knew. He never wanted to discuss them, and I saw no reason to push.

Now, though, once he was close enough, Michelle Alcott threw herself into her son's arms and covered him in kisses. His father watched them, waiting his turn. I saw his tense posture, his anxious anticipation. Breckin emerged from his mother's embrace and went quickly into his father's waiting arms. Everyone standing there clapped—Breckin was at the center of his family. I saw his sister, his brother. It was amazing how similar they all looked; easy to spot any of them anywhere.

He was eventually released from the cocoon of homecoming, and for the first time, everyone saw us: Cord. Celia. Me. Breckin introduced us without a moment's hesitation.

"This is my wife, Celia," he said, looking right at me as he spoke.

A month ago, perhaps even a week ago, that would have hurt. But it was strange how clarity came at odd times. There wasn't even a twinge of pain. But that made sense because just from when I was in the hospital to now, everything was different. The months that had passed, and then learning about Celia, had changed me. I didn't even feel like the same person, and I was pretty ecstatic about the new me. I felt so terribly healthy and grown up.

As expected, Breckin's family surged around Celia, putting hands on her stomach, on her back and shoulders, Michelle crying now, smiling through her tears and hugging Celia tight. They loved her. Loved her! You could have put it up in neon

lights. She was, after all, the ideal of feminine beauty, and she had come bearing the greatest gift: his child.

They remarked on the fact that she didn't have a ring, and Breckin said her hands were swollen with the pregnancy, but that they had one at home with a small diamond. His mother promised him the ring she had at home, retrieved from a vault in hopes that he would want to give it to Celia.

“Wow,” I said, impressed.

“What?” Cord asked.

I gazed up into his face, as always leaning my head back to see him. “They certainly got their stories straight on the plane. That's some slick lying he did there.”

He squinted at me.

“What?”

He scoffed. “Breckin's always been a world-class liar.”

I shook my head. “No. Not always. You see him like my family and friends do *now*, through that lens of him letting me down, but we started out good. You don't have to talk crap about him for me to understand that I made the right choice to end things. It's not necessary.”

He grunted.

“He's not the one for me, and I know that.”

Cord regarded me skeptically.

“I can do my own thinking, sir, thank you.”

“Fine,” he grumbled.

Leaning into his space, wanting to be closer, I was thrilled when he drew me near and wrapped me in his arms. I was loving this Cord so much that I missed the others around me until I became peripherally aware that everyone was staring at us. Breckin had a strange look on his face, and Celia looked stunned. Cord moved me sideways, keeping an arm draped around my shoulders, and extended a hand to Mr. Alcott.

“Cord Nolan, sir. San Francisco Homicide.”

Mr. Alcott took the offered hand and shook it, his eyebrows furrowing. “Good to meet you, Inspector, though I wish the circumstances were different.”

“As do I, sir,” he agreed, then looked at me. “May I introduce Tracy Brandt.”

Mr. Alcott smiled and offered me his hand. “Mr. Brandt, a pleasure.”

“And you as well, sir.”

“Tracy, is it?” Mrs. Alcott asked me, coming forward to shake my hand.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I’m so glad that in the absence of family out there in California, Breckin has such a good friend in you.”

I smiled as she introduced me to Breckin’s sister, Bethany, and his brother, Brian. They made a beautiful family. I was glad Cord had given me the rundown on everyone while we were on the plane so I knew who I was looking at.

Minutes later I watched Breckin put his arm around Celia and follow his parents out of the terminal. I didn’t move until Cord picked up his duffel and asked, “You okay?”

I nodded.

“You look sad.”

“No,” I assured him, putting my hand on his cheek. “I’m not sad one bit. *Inspector.*”

“Not for long,” he said gravely, “at least not the kind I am now.”

“Please tell me what you’re talking about ’cause you lost me there.”

He draped his arm over my shoulders as we walked. “I mean, I won’t be an inspector anymore, so you gotta stop calling me that. I’m leaving the force to take a job as an in-house investigator at a law firm.”

I was stunned. “You are not.”

His low, seductive chuckle made my cock twitch. “I am. I’m out at the end of next month.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Well, until these past few days, we haven’t exactly been close, have we?”

No, we had not. “Okay,” I said, leaning into him.

He tightened his arm, putting his hand in my hair. “I can’t seem to stop touching you.”

“I’m not complaining.” I sighed, savoring how demonstrative he was. “Why leave the force?”

“I’m not happy.”

“How so?”

“I have no balance in my life. I do the same thing day in and day out, and I don’t want to transfer to the DEA like Alex did, and, well, I’m just over the whole thing.”

“Why?” I asked, tipping my head back and giving him a quick kiss under his jaw.

His step faltered, and if I didn’t already know he liked me, I would have from the sudden staggered step. That fast, I had him flustered.

“I want more,” he choked, clutching at my hair.

“Like what?”

“Like, since I’ll be an investigator and not a cop, I would be home at a decent hour.”

“And?”

“And I could take you to dinner and stuff.”

“Oh.”

He coughed softly. “So, you think you’d wanna do that with me? Eat dinner?”

“I would.”

He instantly went from unsure to excited. “We could even take a weekend trip somewhere, since I wouldn’t work those.”

“That sounds great.”

“The money’s way better, double my salary, and I have room to move up, and there’s incentives and amazing insurance.”

“It seems to me you have everything worked out,” I said, leading him around the back of one of the agent counters at an empty gate.

“What are you—”

“Will you miss being an inspector?” I asked, taking hold of the scarf he was wearing around his neck and easing him down to me.

“I—no. I want to do a job but not have it be my whole life like Alex’s is. I want more.”

“What do you want?” I asked, my lips a hairbreadth from his.

“I wanna see you,” he rasped.

“Who was it gonna be? Since you didn’t know I was even available.”

“I was getting things lined up so I could make my play.”

“For me?”

“Yes, idiot. It was always gonna be you.”

The deluge of honesty was staggering.

“Trace...tell me I can see you.”

“Yes,” I murmured, “you can see me.”

He bent, and I lifted up and sealed my lips over his, kissing him hard, taking what I needed because the man was making my heart hurt. I’d had no clue he could be so romantic, so serious, and the idea that I had brought it out in him was overwhelming. I couldn’t seem to kiss, touch, or breathe him in enough. I needed more.

One kiss became another and another, and as I whimpered and whined against him, grinding my hard groin into his thigh, he put his hands on my ass.

“Bathroom?” I whispered hotly against his lips.

He shoved me off him, both of us panting, his dilated pupils a treat to see. “I am not fucking you in a bathroom stall at the airport.” He sounded indignant.

“Why not?”

He grabbed my wrist and yanked me after him, toward where the others had gone. “Because I don’t do that anymore.”

I scoffed.

“I don’t! I’m a grown-up now.”

“I see.”

He growled. “You’re special. I won’t fuck you in some place that’s not.”

The man was a grouchy mess, and I loved it. “That’s not what you said the first day I met you,” I taunted. “You were gonna do me in your car.”

“Five years ago!” he reminded me loudly.

“Oh, okay.” I chuckled.

“I know your whole family now, for fuck’s sake.”

“Which has what to do with anything?”

He rounded on me. “Your father, both your brothers, they like me. Do you know when I’ve had that before?”

“No.”

“Never. I’ve never had that. So I have a chance here to have everything I’ve ever wanted: a man I love and a family that wants me. Why would I do anything to fuck that up?”

He had no idea what he was really saying to me, but that was okay. I knew. “Okay,” I soothed, leaning in and wrapping my arm around his waist. “Let’s catch up with the others since you’re supposed to be protecting Celia too.”

“Inside this airport is the safest she’s gonna be this whole trip,” he assured me, exhaling a sharp breath, wrapping his arm back around my shoulders. “Don’t worry, I know what I’m doing.”

“I have no doubt, but, um,” I pried playfully, “I can get laid in bed tonight, right? Bathrooms are off your list, but beds are still on?”

He untangled himself from me, scowling, and walked quickly away.

I cackled as I followed. “Please, baby.”

“I will end you!” he shouted as he strode quickly through the terminal.

“No you won’t.”

His growling was really hot.

Everyone was still waiting for the luggage, and when we got there and Breckin saw us, I smiled automatically. I saw no reason to be combative with him, so I promised myself that I would concentrate on getting along.

When Cord bent to ask me what my luggage looked like, I put my hand on the side of his face when I answered. Now that I could touch him, I didn’t plan to miss out on any opportunity to do so.

Outside the baggage claim, two cars were waiting for us. Cord and I went with Breckin’s siblings in a Lexus SUV, and Breckin and Celia went with his parents in a chauffeured Chevy Suburban. Cord chatted easily with Bethany and Brian, and I was thinking that all this had to be weird for them. They hadn’t seen their brother in person for more than eighteen years, and the fact that he was suddenly home must’ve been a little overwhelming if the way they both had stared at him was any indication.

“This must all be a lot,” I said once we were inside.

“It’s just the seeing-him part,” Bethany explained. “I mean, we’ve heard from him over the years, he calls, we call, and we all follow each other on social media.”

“He’s just never been back,” Brian chimed in.

“Well, it’s good he is now, then.”

“Yes,” Bethany agreed, and I could tell she was feeling a bit emotional with the way her voice went out on her.

I couldn't imagine not seeing my family, but not everyone's worked like mine. Not that it was anything I had to worry about, not anymore, but the why of it all intrigued me.

The drive to the Alcott home was beautiful, the countryside breathtaking, awash in fall colors.

“Vermont is gorgeous,” I said in awe.

“It is,” Brian agreed, smiling in the rearview mirror.

“Wait until we go through the covered bridges,” Bethany said. “You're going to love it.”

We took 89 from the Burlington Airport past Colchester and kept going north.

“What are we close to?” I asked.

“We're passing Malletts Bay,” Brian said. “You can't see it from here, but that's where we are. I'll turn off soon, and we'll head west toward Lake Champlain.”

“So your house is on the lake?”

“No, we're farther inland, but it's only, like, a half hour or so to the water if you want to go. We're going to pass over three or four covered bridges on the way.”

“Oh, I can't wait. I just love it here,” I told him, reaching over to take hold of Cord's hand. I felt him squeeze back, but I didn't turn to look at him.

When we finally turned off the highway, we drove down country roads, and all I saw were the colors of fall—auburn, gold, red, mahogany, and brown. The birch trees, aspen, and dogwood were like something out of a magazine.

“Here we go, Tracy.” Bethany pointed, and I saw the beautiful bridge.

“It's not a big deal,” Cord said, nuzzling my ear, covering me in goose bumps.

“It’s a huge deal,” I assured him, marveling at the backdrop of autumn. “This is amazing.”

“No,” Cord whispered, nibbling the side of my neck. “It’s you.”

I suddenly felt overwhelmed. Between the man at my side and the splendor outside, a bad day had turned into a wonderful one.

We passed the sign welcoming us to Fieldcrest, Vermont, population just below five thousand. The Alcott home was a Vermont log house with a saltbox roof, and it sat on twenty acres of rolling hills in lush green and orange. Once we got out of the car, I could see down toward town from the hill the house sat on.

The streets below were lined with sugar maples, there was a church with a high steeple, and I could see from one end of town to the other. In the Alcotts’ yard, I saw a gazebo out back, as well as a shack, which, I was informed, was for storing the maple syrup extracted from the trees on their property. I had never seen a more beautiful home, and I wondered how Breckin could have ever enjoyed life in my little fifteen-hundred-square-foot A-frame after coming from something so grand.

Cord bumped me, and when I looked into his eyes, I saw a glow in them as he smiled at me.

“What?”

“When we get back,” he said hoarsely, “will you let me sit on your couch in your sweet little house?”

How could he know I’d been thinking about what my house lacked? No way was Cord Nolan perceptive enough to know what I was thinking, and yet, somehow, he did. I couldn’t have stopped my lunge if my life had depended on it. I threw myself at him and wrapped my arms tight around his neck as I eased him down for a kiss.

It was fast—I didn’t ravish him, but I bit down gently and tugged on his bottom lip before I let him go. No one was paying any attention to us, too wrapped up in Breckin and

Celia. It was nice. I liked that it felt like Cord and I were all alone.

“Is that a yes?” he prodded, his eyes sparkling as he eased back.

“That’s a yes.”

And my life, that had felt like an out-of-control roller coaster for days, suddenly slowed allowing me to breathe again. All because Cord Nolan had infused everything with just a bit of normalcy.

MR. ALCOTT—“CALL ME JOHN”—OFFERED me and Cord rooms at the house, but Cord explained that we had reservations at the bed-and-breakfast in town.

“We’re not all staying together?” Celia asked Cord.

“No. Chief Riley is sending an officer to stay here at the house with you and Breckin. Tracy and I will be at the Den of Antiquity off Main Street, which is apparently an excellent B and B as well as a top-notch antique shop for the serious aficionado of all things dated.”

I could not hold back the laughter. “The Den of Antiquity?”

He was trying not to smile. “Yep.”

“You made that up.”

He was smiling at me as he shook his head, stepped into my personal space, and took hold of my chin.

“Can we get a room together?” I asked breathlessly.

“Oh yes,” he promised, his voice low and silky.

I stifled a whimper as Michelle invited us all inside.

Their maid, Rita, seemed to have been waiting for us, and she welcomed Breckin home and then proffered a tray of spiced cider and hot chocolate. I wanted neither, but I thanked her for the offer.

“Oh,” I said, amazed when I stepped farther into the huge, stunning house.

John walked up beside me. “You like my home, Tracy?”

“I do, sir, very much.”

“Would you like the tour?”

“If you don’t mind,” I said, taking off my sunglasses and putting them in the pocket of my jacket, leaving on the chunky scarf and my wool beanie.

John was pleased to play tour guide; it was written all over his face.

I was the only one who went with him. We started one floor down, in the basement, which was finished, decked out with a library, offices for him and Michelle, a game room, a media room, and a mudroom that led out to a five-car heated garage.

“Your basement is bigger than my whole house.” I grinned at him.

We walked to the garage, and he pointed out the door to his wine cellar and his workshop, where he tinkered with brass and silver. He made wind chimes, which he sold on Etsy.

“Huh.”

“I’m crafty,” he teased me.

After that, we went up to the kitchen, and then moved into the great room, where everyone was now sitting.

“Tracy, I hope he’s not boring you to death,” Michelle said.

“Oh no, ma’am,” I assured her.

John showed me the wood-burning stove next, then the antique Revolutionary War musket that hung over the fireplace, before presenting his and Michelle’s enormous suite—opulent bedroom, a bathroom that would have made up half my house, and a closet that had a chaise in the middle so they could sit and put on their shoes.

“Awesome,” I told him, and he chuckled.

On the first floor was a foyer, a laundry room with shelves and a place to hang clothes, a sitting room, and a formal dining room. Up one level was where Breckin and Celia would be, along with Bethany and Brian. Each room had an attached bathroom. That level also included a TV room, a small library, a sun room, another small laundry room with a stackable washer and dryer, and two half baths.

On the third floor were the guest bedrooms, four in all, plus a sitting room and a two-person sauna.

“These windows are beautiful,” I remarked, admiring the stained glass at the end of the hallway.

“Thank you, Tracy. It’s wonderfully satisfying to show you around my home.”

The last set of stairs led into a loft area. The open-floor plan seemed to have once been a play area and was now cozy with pillows and a privacy screen and small windows that opened at the bottom and pushed out.

“It’s very oasis-in-the-desert up here,” I said, motioning to the hammock, the throw pillows, and the low table.

“It is, you’re right, except for that side.”

He pointed, and I saw a reading nook, a window seat, a rocking chair, and a love seat stacked high with plaid blankets in fall colors.

“I love it,” I sighed, and he clapped me on the shoulder.

Back downstairs, I followed John into the great room, unwinding my scarf while I took off my hat.

“Oh,” Michelle gasped, looking at me. “Why, Tracy, you’re gorgeous.”

“Thank you,” I said, thinking that if she thought I was pretty, Evan would give her a heart attack.

“Tracy.” Breckin got up and crossed the floor to me.

“Yeah?”

“I’d like to speak to you in here, please,” he said tightly, grabbing my bicep and pulling me out into the foyer. The floor was black marble, just beautiful, and I was staring at it when he cleared his throat.

Snapping my head up, I met his gaze. “This house is amazing.”

“What the hell are you doing?”

I was confused. “Admiring the house.”

“No, with Cord. What the fuck are you doing with goddamn fuckin’ Cord?” He sounded furious, and I was surprised I’d missed that. I used to be so attuned to his moods, but that too had changed. “You hate him!”

“I don’t, though. I never have.”

He threw up his hands. “Why are you staying at a B and B with him? What kind of game are you playing?”

Game?

“What?” I felt like I wasn’t following his train of thought at all, which had to be irritating for him. And I wasn’t doing it on purpose; he just wasn’t making any sense.

“Are you giving me a taste of it? Of what I did to you? Is that what this is?”

I got it then. “Oh, I see. And no, no taste of anything. Hand to God.”

He was staring at me like I’d grown another head.

“I’m not gonna stay in your parents’ home, though. I mean, come on, be serious.”

“I am serious. You need to be here with me.”

“Well, I wouldn’t be with you anyway,” I pointed out, “but really, that would be weird. You don’t think that would be weird?”

“Have you lost your mind?”

“Me?” I snorted out a laugh. I didn’t mean to, it just bubbled out in response to the absurdity of the situation. “I

wouldn't be comfortable here, in what amounts to your childhood home. Think about it."

"The only thing on my mind right now is that my ex is flirting right in front of me!"

First time he'd called me his ex. That was excellent progress, and so very healthy, and I was going to tell him that, compliment him, but he wasn't done.

"How dare you!"

"How dare I what?"

"How dare you flirt with Cord in front of me."

"Oh," I said, and then, "Why?"

"What do you mean why?"

"I mean, why does it matter?"

"So you admit you're flirting with him."

"Yeah."

"Since when, Tracy?" he asked, his jaw clenched so tight, he could barely speak.

"Since when what?"

"How long have you been fucking Cord?"

I scoffed.

"Answer the—"

"Never," I said with a ragged exhale of breath. The conversation was honestly making me tired. "The answer is that I have never slept with Cord Nolan."

"But you've always wanted to."

"Yes," I answered honestly. "I've always wanted to."

He drew his arm back to slap me, but I caught it and held tight. I was so stunned, I just stood there and stared at him, realizing that if I wasn't as strong as I was, he would have hit me. I was still a bit sore from my attack, and he'd tried to hit me. I had no idea who he even was.

“You’re so pathetic,” he snapped at me scornfully, yanking his wrist free. “You think Cord Nolan wants you for anything more than a quick fuck? You know better, but because you can’t stand to be alone, even for a short time, you’d let him do whatever he wants to you.”

I couldn’t speak. I could only stare at him. And when had I ever not enjoyed being alone? There had been no one before Breckin for years, and after we’d separated, being in my own space was good. It was like he had no idea who I was.

“What? Are you going to fall apart now? Cause a scene? I’ve been waiting for you to turn into the pain-in-the-ass drama queen you are, and the rest of us to have to handle you.”

Crazy.

“It’s exhausting, you know. Everyone thinks so.”

I was...stunned. Now, suddenly, with me being honest about wanting Cord, he could apparently confess to how he really felt about me. And it wasn’t good. Evidently I was a nightmare and my family and friends all agreed.

Except I knew better. Because no, I wasn’t perfect. Far from it. But I took care of my family, was as much a caretaker for my friends as they were for me, and the truth was that for the most part, I was pretty grounded. Dimah always said so. It was the finest compliment he could give. And if I could count on anyone for the truth, it was him.

“You know what,” he said disgustedly, “do whatever you want, Tracy. I’m through groveling. You don’t want me, fine. Fuck you. It’s your choice.”

Before he stalked away, I was going to say that yes, fuckin’ right it was my choice, but we were in his parents’ house, and that would’ve been really poor form. You didn’t swear in front of your folks. Who did that? My father had to give us special permission just the other night.

Standing alone in the hall, I tried to understand how I was feeling. And not that I was one of those people who always stopped and thought about what I was experiencing at any

given moment, but this was all very new. I'd never been in this exact situation before and would probably never be again.

“Hey.”

I turned to find Cord leaning in the doorway.

“You all right?”

That I could answer. “Yes.”

“Nice move not letting him hit you.”

“Well, my head is good,” I said with a grin, “the big one, that is—the little one still misses you—but I am still a bit bruised.”

He was chuckling. “The little one misses me?”

“It does, yes.”

His smile made his eyes sparkle, and I loved seeing his reaction to me.

“If he'd touched you,” he said flatly, his voice cold, “I would have hit him so hard, he wouldn't've gotten back up.”

I nodded. “Not necessary. If I can see you coming, I can handle myself.”

He pushed off the doorframe, and I smiled as he closed in on me and gently took my face in his hands. “I don't want you for a quick fuck.”

“You heard.”

“I did,” he whispered, tilting my head back so he could bend and kiss me. It was soft, tender, and when I opened for him, he slipped his tongue inside to mate with mine.

He walked me backward, behind the stairs, and once there, he made the kiss long, slow, and deep, licking and sucking, nibbling on my lips until I was whimpering under the tender assault.

When he eased free, I was left shivering and panting, wanting the man almost painfully.

“I wanna date you. Is that clear?”

“It is. I understood your intentions from earlier.”

“Oh, did you?” he teased.

“Yessir.”

“Okay, good. Now stay right here.”

I nodded and leaned back into the alcove, into the darkness, concentrating on calming my racing heart.

Minutes later, Cord came back. “So it looks like there’s a cheese festival here this weekend.”

I chuckled, and his smile was instant.

“As God is my witness, there’s a whole thing, so the bed-and-breakfast is full.”

“I thought we had a reservation.”

“Apparently they could cancel at their discretion.”

“Or,” I said, surmising what had happened, “if the folks at the B and B had someone standing right in front of them willing to pay them, say, double or even triple?”

“Right.”

“Small towns.”

“Yep.”

“So we gotta stay here?”

“Yes, we do.”

“In the same room?” I asked hopefully.

“In rooms that share a bathroom. So I can attack you in the middle of the night.”

“Is it an attack if I’m begging?”

He pounced on me, putting his arms around my waist, lifting me off my feet, and kissing me savagely. “No begging”—he said between kisses—“necessary.”

I went boneless in his arms and wrapped my legs around his hips as I told him to take me upstairs to the bathroom.

“I have already vetoed any and all bathrooms,” he reminded me before shoving me gently against the wall, telling me in broken whispers and sharp inhales of breath that anything but a bed was for amateurs; together, between sheets, was for grown-ups with serious agendas.

“Oh yeah?” I teased him, sucking his bottom lip into my mouth, feeling a shudder tear through him. “You’re serious?”

“Don’t talk to Breckin anymore. You don’t belong to him.”

“No?” I baited him.

“No, Tracy. He was never gonna keep you.”

And he was so very right.

ELEVEN

The Alcotts insisted on feeding us. They had a whole spread of turkey with all the fixings, as if Thanksgiving had come a month early. It was all beautifully presented, all the flourishes just gorgeous, no detail missed. I had never seen a more lavishly catered meal. Cord and I sat together at the kitchen table while everyone else was in the great room, spread out over couches and love seats. When we were done, I offered to help clean up, but Michelle said the service was paid to leave her kitchen immaculate as well.

I went up three flights of stairs with Cord, who yanked me into his room and shoved me against the door as he locked it. He kissed me before I could get a word out.

There were things I wanted to say, but as much as I knew we needed to talk, I couldn't stop kissing him long enough to form words. When he finally pulled away from me, I was absolutely aching.

"Come back," I uttered hoarsely, my voice crackly with need.

"I gotta go," he said, clearing his throat, sounding unhappy about it.

I crossed quickly to his bed and sat down, patting the space beside me. "C'mere and talk to me."

"I can't," he insisted, pulling his brown barn coat over his gray cable-knit sweater with the button neck. "I have to go check in with the chief of police here in Fieldcrest."

“Who’s gonna watch over me?”

“Officer Dennis Cumberland, who I think is downstairs already. I’ll make sure before I go. You know I wouldn’t leave you alone.”

“Yes, I know,” I whispered, gesturing for him. “Come here.”

“No.” He chuckled, his smile decadent.

“Cord, I—”

“Now listen: do not leave this house for any reason.” He walked to the door and stood there, poised to leave the room.

“You’re really going?” I grumbled, annoyed that he was leaving. I got up, ready to intercept him.

“Yes,” he answered, opening the door before I made it halfway to him.

“Cord!”

“Take a nap,” he said gruffly, walking out.

“Come back here and blow me,” I demanded in a sharp whisper.

“Later,” he called back.

I caught up with him at the top of the stairs. “Seriously, why the hell are you leaving? You can’t touch base over the phone?”

“No.”

“Why not?” I asked, my hands on his sides, feeling the steel strength in the man beneath my palms.

“Because that’s not how things are done,” he said, slipping his hand around the back of my neck and easing me forward.

“Cord,” I whined without meaning to, lifting as he bent to kiss me.

He was not a gentle kisser, not yet. Everything between us was brand-new, so when we connected, it was explosive. He drove his tongue deep, dragging it over mine, and I opened,

loving the feel of him, his taste, wanting to get closer, my body pressed tight to his.

I wanted to go to bed with him, feel his weight on me, holding me down, and have him buried inside my body as hard and deep as he could. When I whimpered in the back of my throat, he tore free, pressing his lips on the side of my neck before shoving me out of his reach.

“What?” I rasped.

“God, you’re cute,” he said, smiling quickly, then leaned in and kissed my forehead.

I was what?

“I’m sorry?”

“When I get back, you better be ready for me,” he said, taking the first step down.

“Maybe I’ll be asleep already.”

His laugh was lusty and rich. “You’ll be pacing the floor.”

“You’re so sure?” I said to his back, watching him descend to the first landing.

“I’m sure.”

My jaw muscles tensed. “Fine.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.” He snickered, turning to look up at me.

“You’re so smug.”

“Only ’cause you’re lookin’ at me like you’ll die if you don’t have me.”

“You’re such an ass.”

“Don’t forget it,” he said, and I could hear him chuckling as he went down the second flight of stairs, where he called out to me, “Hey!”

I moved quickly down the first three steps so I could lean over the railing and look down at him.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can. Do what I said and stay here.”

“If you’re so worried, maybe I should come with you.”

His eyes, the way he was staring at me... I really had no idea anyone would ever gaze at me like I was simply too dear for words. The urge to keep him, put a ring on his finger, took a deep bite out of me.

“I’ll be back soon.”

I nodded.

“I’m taking your scarf ’cause I like it better’n mine.”

“Yes, please.”

He gave me a grin that made his dimples pop, and then he was gone. It was probably good he was leaving me for a little while. I had lots of calls to make.

It took the better part of two hours to talk to my dad, Alex, Evan, and Matt. I talked to Dimah as well.

“You are fine?”

“Yeah, I’m good.”

“Thank you for putting in payroll.”

“Of course.”

“When will you be home?”

“Hopefully someone will try and kill me quick.” Long silence, and I knew I screwed up. “I’m sorry, that was really dumb.”

“You think you are funny, but you are not.”

“Yes, I know. It was a bad joke.”

He was quiet for a few moments. “You like your inspector very much, yes?”

“What?”

He chuckled. “You are bad actor.”

I grunted. “I’m going to see if I can invite him to my house when I get home.”

“That sounds promising.”

“Thanks.”

After I hung up, I decided to read for a bit, since I had no intention of going downstairs and seeing or talking to Breckin. I tried really hard not to fall asleep.

I WOKE up starving because the time was off by three hours. Eight in Vermont was only five at home. Cord still wasn’t back, and when I tried his cell, it went straight to voice mail. After changing into a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, I went to find something to eat. Michelle had told me earlier that her leftovers were my leftovers and to help myself to anything else as well. I appreciated that now.

Downstairs in the kitchen, I rummaged around in the refrigerator until I came up with jelly and milk. I checked the pantry and found peanut butter and honey-wheat bread. I was standing beside the counter, having my little feast, when Breckin came in. He didn’t stop when he saw me, walking straight up to me, and would have wrapped his arms around me if I hadn’t darted around the island, the one with copper pots hanging over it, putting that between us.

“I’m so sorry,” he beseeched me.

Was he kidding?

“Baby,” he said softly, taking a step toward me. “Forgive me.”

I moved quickly, keeping distance between us, brandishing the piece of silverware I was holding like a knife. “Jesus, Breckin, back off, or I’ll cut out your heart with this spoon.”

“Why a spoon, cousin?” Brian asked, chuckling as he walked into the room.

I grinned at him, finishing the Alan Rickman quote, “Because it will hurt more!”

He laughed, I laughed, and in the midst of us being stupid, he suggested I have some homemade potato chips with my sandwich.

“You make your own potato chips?”

“I don’t, but my aunt Paula does, and they’re really good.”

“I would love some.”

He went to another pantry that was behind a door next to the refrigerator, which I had completely missed, and got them for me.

They were excellent, like salty kettle chips. “Thank you.”

“You’re so welcome,” he said, leaning beside me, having some as well.

After a moment, we both became aware that Breckin was still standing there like a statue, arms crossed, glowering at us like we were in trouble.

“What’s going on?” Brian asked his brother.

“I wanted to talk to Tracy.”

“What’s stopping you?”

“Alone.”

“Oh, shit,” Brian rushed out, straightening up from where he was leaning with me on the island, ready to move. “Sorry, let me get out of—”

“It’s fine,” I assured Brian, giving him a pat on the shoulder. “Breckin was just talking to me about my ex.”

“Tracy,” Breckin warned.

“Weren’t you?”

“I—”

“What about your ex?” Brian wanted to know.

“Breckin thinks I should give the guy another shot even though he cheated on me.”

“Well, how do you feel about—”

“Twice.”

Brian hissed, looking over at his brother. “Twice? Really?”

“Who cheated twice?” Bethany asked, joining us in the kitchen, looking adorable in pink and white bunny print pajamas, and a matching head band that had fuzzy pink rabbit ears.

“God,” Breckin groaned.

“Tracy’s ex,” Brian told her.

“Shit, that sucks. I’m sorry,” she said kindly and then suddenly brightened. “You want a chai tea? I have this amazing blend, and I have it down to a science.”

“It really is good,” Brian vouched for it.

“I would love one.”

“Me too, please,” Brian said, raising his hand.

“Breckin?” she asked cheerfully.

“No, I just came down to talk to Tracy.”

“Should Brian and I—”

“About his ex,” Brian told her, reaching out to take hold of her arm so she’d stay. “Tracy’s not really up to hearing about it.”

“Probably because of the double cheating, am I right?” she asked me, then went to the pantry I’d found, not the secret one I’d missed.

“Correct.”

She popped back out. “Wait, your ex isn’t the yummy detective you were kissing earlier, is it?”

“No, ma’am.” I loved her face and the pixie haircut that looked so good on her. “He’s the old, new guy.”

She exhaled sharply. “That’s fabulous. I love his vibe.”

“Me too,” I said, grinning at her before she leaned back into the pantry.

“So, Breck,” Brian began, “why’re you pleading this guy’s case if he cheated on Tracy?”

“Breckin’s friends with my ex too,” I told him.

“Ah. Got it. Well,” Brian said with a yawn, “it’s really nice of you to try and talk the guy up, but Tracy’s your friend too, so you might have to pick sides.”

“That’s true,” Bethany agreed, bringing a plastic Ziploc bag of herbs over to the kitchen island where Brian and I were still eating chips.

“There’s sweet potato ones too,” Brian offered. “I don’t care for them, but Bethie loves ’em.”

I looked at her. “Bethie is really cute.”

She gave me a big cheesy smile. “We used to be Bethie, Breckie, and Bri-Bri before Breckin left and never came back.”

We all looked at him.

“I...listen, things were different then.”

“I know,” she assured her brother. “So now, chai tea?”

“No, I—I just wanted to tell Tracy that Cord—the inspector,” he clarified for Bethany, “is not a good guy, and Tracy wouldn’t even be giving him the time of day if his ex hadn’t trashed his life.”

Brian squinted at me. “Is your life trashed? Because other than the bruises I can see, you look okay, and you sound fine.”

“Thank you, Brian.” I patted his arm.

“Wait,” he said quickly. “The ex didn’t hurt you, did he?”

“No, sir.”

“Well, that’s good at least.”

Breckin moved over in front of me. “Your ex still loves you.”

“How?” Bethany chimed in as she put the kettle on the stove. “I mean, really. If this guy loved Tracy so much, why did he cheat?”

“Love and sex are two different things,” Brian said.

“I’m not arguing that,” she conceded. “But I’m just saying, if you love someone, before you put your dick in another person, maybe you should pause and think, *Is this the best choice? Is this what I should be doing? Is this a good decision for my long-term happiness?*”

“Hear, hear,” I agreed.

“You just want Cord,” Breckin told me.

“Of course he wants Cord,” Bethany replied. “Have you seen him, with the shoulders and the eyes that light up when he smiles?”

I wasn’t going to say anything and agree, even though his eyes did sparkle. It wouldn’t be nice in front of Breckin. He’d cheated, yes, but he was already up to his eyeballs in karma, and being mean didn’t do anyone any good.

“I’m not gay, or bi like you, Breck,” Brian said, “but even I can tell that Cord Nolan is a handsome man.”

Bethany gestured at Brian. “Truer words and all that.”

“Do you think you would want Cord if your ex hadn’t cheated?” Brian asked me.

I thought a moment. “I think I would have always wondered what could have been if I’d just had the balls to start something with him. But he was never ready, and then there was my ex.”

“So now Cord is in a place where he can appreciate you, and you’re free because of your ex’s infidelity, yes?” Bethany questioned me.

“Yes. Exactly.”

“Well, it sounds to me like everything worked out the way it was supposed to,” she said with a shrug. “And maybe even, in the long run, for the ex. I mean, everything happens for a reason—at least, that’s how I see it. You have to trust the universe.”

“That’s true,” Brian affirmed, smiling at his sister. “For example,” he continued, gesturing at Breckin, “look at this mess you and Celia are in. We probably wouldn’t even have you home right now if this psycho wasn’t after your wife.”

I nodded in agreement.

“So see? Things happen when they’re supposed to.”

I looked at Breckin. “They really do.”

“Ridiculous,” he muttered.

“Celia seems lovely,” Bethany said, smiling at Breckin.

“She really does,” Brian agreed.

“And a doctor,” I chimed in.

“Oh my God, I know,” Bethany said, widening her eyes. “I feel like a total washout next to her.”

“No. Remember what you just said about the universe? Your path is your own.”

“Thank you, Tracy.”

I waggled my eyebrows at her.

I was enjoying Breckin’s siblings so much, and then *boom*—suddenly the ground fell out from under me because there was a face at the window. “Oh shit!”

“What?” Breckin yelled, spinning around, frantic because I’d startled him with my yell.

Just for a second, I had seen a white mask in the darkness. “Someone was there.”

“Outside on the deck?” Brian started toward the sliding glass door to the patio.

“Don’t you dare go out there!” I roared, and he instantly froze. “Have you lost your mind? What if they have a gun?”

Bethany got down behind the island.

“What did you see?” Breckin rasped.

“A mask. A white mask.”

We all went still, glancing from the glass door to the large windows until the floodlights suddenly went on because some motion outside had triggered them. That was the scariest part of the whole thing—knowing for certain that I had not imagined it, that someone had been looking in at us.

By the time Officer Cumberland came rushing in from the living room, gun drawn, I had already calmed and moved across the room so I could see outside to the now-empty deck. There were two police cars outside in the grass, both with their red-and-blue lights cycling.

“Are you all okay?” Officer Cumberland asked, checking on the four of us.

“We’re good,” I answered quickly, and he opened the door and went outside.

“Tracy,” Breckin said as I followed the officer toward the door. “Maybe you should stay away from the glass door, huh?”

If the intruder had wanted me dead, I would already be dead. I dismissed his concern. “I’m fine.”

I got a pained look from him before I went outside, walking to the edge of the deck and looking out at the dark grounds beyond the glow of the lights. There was nothing, no movement other than the officers. Turning back, I saw that his parents and Celia had come into the kitchen, and now everyone was clustered around Breckin, who was hugging Celia close. His parents rubbed his back, offered to get him something, anything. He stroked Celia’s hair, shushed her gently, told her he was okay. The way Michelle looked at the two of them together was really sweet. They all made a lovely picture there together and—

“Tracy!”

Everybody started, Michelle even gasped, and I smiled without meaning to because, really, who came into a house and bellowed like that?

Cord charged into the room, his Glock drawn, scanning the space until his gaze met mine. He was holstering the gun as he reached me out on the deck.

“You all right?” he barked, sounding scared. I opened my arms for him, and he grabbed and crushed me against him. And I wasn’t so much smaller than him—he only had five inches on me—but still, when he hugged me, I felt the strength and power in his hard, muscular frame and loved how I was being held. “Trace?” he whispered hoarsely, close to my ear.

“I’m fine,” I assured him, clutching at his coat.

“What were you doing down here?” he asked, leaning back far enough to see my face without letting me go.

“I was hungry.”

“But you ate dinner, didn’t you?” he asked as though that were logical, leading me inside and then into the living room.

“I was peckish.”

“What?”

“It’s only, like, five our time now. I normally eat dinner around nine.”

“You’re not supposed to eat after seven.”

“In what world?”

He grunted.

“I eat late,” I said.

“You do?”

I nodded.

“You usually eat out? Or do you grab something and go home?”

“Either. It depends.”

“Where do you go?”

And that fast we were having a conversation.

“Sometimes Rosamunde,” I told him, only peripherally aware that people and cops were moving around us. “I like the andouille or the chicken habanero sausage.”

“Oh yeah?” The smile he gave me was gorgeous and made his eyes glitter as he gently slid a hand around the side of my

neck.

“I like Kvetch in Crocker-Amazon too. I always get the lobster mac ’n’ cheese or shrimp and grits.”

“I’ll take you over to the Swan Oyster Depot when we get home.”

“It’s a date,” I said, grinning, hands on his hips.

“So you were hungry is what you’re telling me.”

“Yeah.”

He sighed suddenly, both hands on my face. “There are footprints out there in the mud.”

“Big ones, little ones, what?”

“Big.”

“Okay, so, a man.”

“Yeah,” he said, and I heard him purposely trying to infuse his tone with normalcy.

“I saw someone at the window. It freaked me out.”

“I bet. I’m sorry I wasn’t here with you. It won’t happen again.”

“You were doing your job.”

“My job is you,” he said, drawing me back close. I curled my arms up under his and put my hands on his shoulders as I rested my head on his collarbone. “I’ve been waiting so long to get you. I don’t wanna lose you now.”

I put my nose up to his throat and inhaled his warm male scent, and he chuckled, which I felt more than heard. I almost purred.

People got closer, Breckin and his family crowding toward us, probably wanting to talk. Cord didn’t want that, as evidenced by him pulling away from me only to tug me after him.

“Come over here and siddown,” he grumbled, but I heard the smile in his voice as he led me to the great room and took a

seat beside me on the couch. “So what were you eating down here?” he asked casually.

“I was having a PB and J with homemade chips, and Bethany was supposed to be making all of us chai tea,” I said as seriously as possible.

“All of us?”

“Yeah. Me, Brian, Breckin, and her.”

“Breckin was with you?”

“Just for a minute until his brother and sister joined us.”

He nodded. “Did he talk to you before they got there?”

I grinned at him. “Why?”

“These questions are important to the investigation. I would appreciate your cooperation and truthfulness.”

“Yes, soon-to-be ex-Inspector.”

He growled at me.

I cleared my throat. “He wanted to tell me he was sorry for earlier.”

“And?”

“And that I’m making a huge mistake with you.”

“I see.”

“I explained that he didn’t have to worry about me anymore.”

“How did he take that?”

“Does it matter?” I reached up to trace my fingers over his stubble-covered jaw.

He was quiet a moment. “No, it doesn’t.” He smiled shyly, looking pleased. “Not at all.”

“I didn’t think so,” I murmured. “And something occurred to me that I wanted to tell you, but I got distracted when you hugged me.”

“I distracted you?”

I nodded.

“Well, that’s not terrible,” he said with a grin. “But what were you thinking?”

“That it was strange that the floodlights here didn’t work the same as the ones at my dad’s house.”

“How so?” He pushed my hair back from my face as he looked at me.

“The lights didn’t come on until the guy was leaving. He was all the way up here on the deck, and they didn’t come on. That’s weird, right?”

Cord nodded. “That is weird. That means whoever the guy was, he knew where to walk so he wouldn’t trigger the lights, or the lights were on a timer, or—I should check. I’ll be right back.”

I greedily accepted his kiss before he rose and strode from the room. It was strange, but as surreal as the situation was, being with Cord was the opposite. In the middle of the craziness, I was okay because he was there. I could look at him and be reminded of who I was, of my life and my family and my friends. Never had I thought he would provide grounding for me in the middle of a storm, but he certainly could, and was.

“You’re deep in thought.”

I was surprised he was back already. “I thought you were checking on something?”

“I did.” He chuckled, sitting back down beside me, too close for us to be anything else but lovers. He took my hand in both of his and stared at me.

“Cord?”

“Sorry,” he said quickly, clearing his throat. “I just can’t get over it.”

“What’s that?”

“That you see me, that I have your attention.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No. No reason to be sorry.” He lifted my hand to kiss the back of it, and then went back to holding it in both of his. “So it turns out that the lights aren’t set to go off with movement. They’re on a timer.”

“Then it was just time for them to go off when they did.”

“Yeah.”

“Just luck, then.”

“Yes.”

“That’s stupid.”

“I agree, which is why now they’re set on the motion sensors.”

“So the security company did their part—”

“But John got tired of the lights going off for foxes or stray dogs, cats, or whatever else, and has changed them to go off at specific times.”

“That’s great,” I said sarcastically.

“Yeah, it is,” he rumbled softly, pressing his face down into the crook of my neck and opening his mouth on my skin.

I made a noise I didn’t intend, a groan, moan, whimper all rolled together as he kissed up behind my ear.

“It was good that you noticed—that it struck you as odd.”

“Was it?” I asked, fishing for the compliment.

“Yep. I would have never known otherwise.”

“I should be rewarded, then.”

“Uh-huh,” he said, pulling me into his arms for a hug.

So fast. I could get used to being crushed against him very, very fast.

He let me go after a moment, but not without a kiss on the forehead. Everyone else slowly trickled in, until they were all there.

“You should probably bring us up to speed, Inspector,” John suggested.

“There’s nothing new to tell,” Cord informed him, retaking my hand in his.

A knock on the door sent Officer Cumberland out to the foyer, and a moment later we were looking at Fieldcrest’s chief of police, Martin Riley. Cord got up to go speak to him, and then, when Chief Riley came to talk to John, Cord gestured for me to come over.

I crossed the room to him, and when I was close enough, he grabbed my hand and yanked me forward into the foyer and into his arms.

“What are you doing?”

“The chief’s gonna talk to the Alcotts, but there’s no news.”

“Okay,” I said, waiting for more.

“So this is your point of no return.”

I smiled at him.

“No, don’t just jump in,” he cautioned. “You need to really think about this. We’re moving really fast, and if it’s too—”

His protest was cut off when I leaped at him, wrapping my arms and legs around him tight.

“Tracy...” He was scolding me and smiling at the same time.

“You have a really odd idea about fast,” I said hoarsely, tightening my legs, wriggling against him. “And all I want to do is go upstairs and put you on your back.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes,” I said, uncoiling, regaining my feet before I took his hand in mine. When I turned to tug him after me, he didn’t move. “What’s the holdup?”

He cleared his throat. “We don’t— We could take—”

“Stop,” I whispered, lifting his hand to my lips and kissing his knuckles. “You’re scared. I promise not to hurt you.”

“Don’t you think that should be my line?”

I studied his face. “I think you’re the one who’s worried.”

“How can you not be worried?” he groused.

“Because I’m not,” I said simply, drawing him after me to the stairs and up. At the door to my room, I told him to go to his, lock it, and then come through the adjoining bathroom and meet me in bed.

“Just like that.”

“Yeah,” I said as I slid a hand around the back of his neck and pulled him down to me. “Just like that.”

He kissed me, and I sucked his tongue into my mouth, stroking slowly, seductively, running my hands all over him, then tugging his shirt up and exposing all that warm, sleek skin. I mapped the rippling muscles of his chest and abdomen with my palms, missing nothing as I broke the kiss and pressed my open mouth to the base of his throat.

“Tracy,” he rasped, shoving his hand down the back of my jeans and sliding his index finger over my crease.

“Go do what I said,” I croaked out as I pushed back and saw how ravished he looked with his lush, swollen mouth, blown pupils, and bated breath. “Hurry up.”

I didn’t give him time to answer, instead leaving him alone in the hall as I went into my room and locked the door behind me.

It was strange. I’d been so worried about being in the home of my ex’s parents, but now it didn’t matter. No one was coming up to bother us or talk to us, and we were alone on the third floor. It was like we were actually at the bed-and-breakfast all by ourselves.

In moments he was there. He opened my bathroom door, then quietly shut it behind him and turned to face me.

“You have a concussion,” he announced like that was news. “We need to be careful.”

“I have a mild concussion,” I corrected him. “I think we’ll be just fine.”

He didn't look convinced.

I smiled. "Come here. I won't bite."

"You can bite," he rumbled as he crossed the floor to me.

As soon as I could touch him, I pulled his sweater up over his head and off, followed by the strangely sexy white T-shirt he wore underneath.

"God, look at you. You're so beautiful," I groaned, putting my hands on his massive chest and sliding them over the hard pecs and pebbled nipples.

"Take everything off," he ordered, going to work on his belt as he toed off his biker boots.

I watched him, mesmerized by how quickly his jeans were being shoved down his long, muscular, fuzzy legs.

"What are you doing?" he snapped, looking up at me from where he stood bent over, taking off his socks.

"I've never seen you naked before. I wanna look at you."

Straightening to his full towering height, he spread his arms wide so I could look at all of him. The man was a gorgeous carved specimen of heavy cut muscle, roping veins, and dark golden skin. Even his feet were stunning.

"You about done stalling?"

"I am so not stalling," I said as I stepped forward, took hold of his long, thick cock, and squeezed.

"Oh fuck," he growled, instinctively shoving into my fist.

I went to my knees.

"No, I want you in bed. I don't—Tracy!"

He knew me, but he had no idea what I was like behind closed doors, and licking over the flared head of his rigid shaft had been enough to tear a deep, guttural moan from his chest.

"You can't just...oh God," he moaned, low and deep, tangling his fingers in my hair as he stared down at me.

I swallowed his crown, and he tightened his hold on me.

“I’m not selfish,” he rasped. “I can take care of you too.”

He smelled good, like musk and faintly of soap, and he felt good on my tongue, his silky flesh and the thick vein that ran the length of his rigid shaft, so swallowing him down the back of my throat took no effort at all.

“Tracy!”

Pulling back, making the suction strong, I wrapped my hand around his base and licked and laved, swirled my tongue over his length, and showed him how desperate I was to taste every last inch of him.

“No,” he growled suddenly, shoving me off the end of his dick, panting as he stood there.

“No?” I teased him.

Grabbing me under the armpits, he yanked me to my feet before giving me a gentle shove down onto the bed. He opened his mouth to say something, but I lifted my arms to receive him, and I watched, amazed, as the man’s eyes turned black, his pupils dilating instantly.

“You like to be wanted,” I whispered hoarsely, “so come here.”

He dived onto the bed, scrambled over me, crossed my wrists over my head, and held them pinned to the mattress with one hand. He used the other to tug and rip at me—my belt, trouser stays, and zipper surrendering fast. When he smoothed a hand up my abdomen, I arched up under his touch.

“I wanted”—he gasped—“but you fight me all the time.”

I did. “Not anymore,” I promised, starting to shake, my body heating. “Get the lube from my bag.”

“Yes,” he agreed, but instead of moving, he bent and slanted his mouth over mine in a long, hard kiss.

I fought because I wanted to touch him, and he released my wrists. He took my dick in his hand, stroked and squeezed from balls to head.

“Cord!” I pleaded, breaking the drowning, devouring kiss, needing to speak to him but wanting him all over me at the same time.

He wrenched away from my clawing hands, rose off the bed, strode over to my duffel, and dug around until he came up with my lube. I enjoyed watching him move, the fluid roll of his hips, the muscles rippling under his sleek gold skin, and the wicked grin when he noticed my gaze on him.

“You love looking at me.”

“Yes,” I agreed.

“This is it for you,” he promised gruffly. He fell back into bed, then rose over me, put his hands on my thighs and parted them. Then he snapped open the cap of the tube, and a moment later pressed slick fingers inside me.

I had always imagined that being in bed with Cord would be rough and bruising, with power I had guessed at but never seen. Yet the deliberate movement, paired with his words, told another story altogether. I would be taken, yes, but not with any kind of force.

“Please,” I whined as he rolled me to my hands and knees and pressed against my entrance.

“I won’t move,” he promised, curling over me, plastering his chest to my back, coiling his right bicep around my neck and closing his other, lube-slicked hand around my cock. “You take me inside when you’re ready.”

It was up to me to lean back and impale myself on his thick, leaking dick. The control he was giving up to me, the caring, the tenderness, all of it was a wonder to me. And as I sank slowly over him, feeling the burn and stretch, how full I was, I couldn’t keep from trembling in his embrace.

When I had swallowed him to the hilt, I leaned forward and then pushed back, rising and falling, realizing instantly that I needed much more.

“Cord,” I husked, turning my head, twisting as far as I could to offer my mouth.

“If you give me permission, you can’t ever take it back. You’re done, and I’m moving in, and you’re getting a ring. You’re stuck with me till you’re dead, so you better think.”

“How come I can’t just get laid?”

“Because that was never you, and now it’s not me. So let me love you or I’ll go.”

“You don’t play fair,” I gasped, trembling, my body having broken out in a cold sweat as he began a slow, deep thrusting that I never wanted to stop. He was nailing my prostate each time he shoved inside, and the burn was gone; only the sensation of his long, thick cock pushing in and pulling out remained.

“I wanna hear your answer,” he said, increasing his speed, thickening inside me, my muscles clenching around him.

“Cord,” I choked out, barely able to hold myself up as he took my mouth.

“Tell me now,” he demanded, breaking the wet, hungry kiss just long enough to speak before sealing his lips back to mine.

It was all too much: he rubbed his tongue seductively over mine, shoved my cock in and out of his hot, slippery fist, anchoring me to him with his arm, pressed himself along the length of my back, and drove his enormous dick into me again and again. I had never been used so hard in my life, and I could feel my balls tightening, the familiar buzzing and the tingling roll begin shooting down my spine. My orgasm was building, and I had only seconds of lucidity left.

“Oh fuck,” I cried out as he fisted his fingers in my hair, releasing my dripping cock, and shoved me facedown into the bed.

“*Now*,” he said, hammering into me, gripping my hips tight, allowing for no wiggle or squirm, no movement of any kind. “Do you want me to love you? Yes or no.”

“Sex talk means nothing,” I reminded him even as my voice cracked.

“It means everything,” he roared back. “Now, Tracy!”

“Yes,” I whispered brokenly, tears there before I even realized. “Yes, Cord, just don’t break my heart.”

“Never,” he promised, and then he reached under me and tugged on my dick, his grip almost painfully tight, and just that stimulus sent me right over the edge into a splintering orgasm that flushed my whole body hot and cold in a matter of seconds.

It was ridiculous that at thirty-three I had just discovered what sex could truly be. Every muscle in my body clenched, and the ones in my ass clamped down hard on his cock.

“You’re so tight and hot, and I am going to fill up your sweet little ass.”

I spurted hard under me on the bedspread as I felt warm liquid fill my channel. I hadn’t thought to ask for a condom, my brain short-circuited with heat.

We froze together, a study in sated lust, until he grabbed me and we rolled sideways, the man still buried to the hilt in my ass.

He wrapped his left arm around my stomach, slid his right hand under my arm and across my chest, then closed it around my throat, tipping my head back. “You swore, Trace, and in bed is where promises are made.”

I was trying to start breathing regularly again. “Actually, lying is what usually happens in bed.”

“No. Not with us. Never with us.”

And he was right. My soul had been on display moments before, more naked than I had ever been in my life.

“Say it,” he prodded me, nuzzling his face into the side of my neck. “Tell me you’re gonna keep me.”

I chuckled softly and felt him tense behind me.

“Trace,” he growled.

“Of course I’m keeping you,” I soothed him, clutching his forearm, turning my head so his lips touched my cheek. “I

want you in my bed and in my house as soon as we get home.”

He hugged all the remaining air from my body, but that was okay; I didn't need to breathe. I had just claimed the man I'd always wanted. Body, soul, heart, head, all of him belonged to me. Oxygen was a secondary consideration.

MY PHONE BUZZING woke me up, and I realized my cheek was plastered over Cord's heart. Somehow, I had wound up draped on top of him with his arms wrapped around me. And while it could not have been comfortable for him, I'd slept like a rock, which was probably what I felt like on his chest.

Gently, slowly, I extricated myself from his arms, rolled free, and reached for my phone on the nightstand. It was late, four in the morning, and I had a text from Ira telling me I needed to call him and give him an update too. Apparently, secondhand information from Matt was not making him happy. I noticed I had a new email as well, something that had come in hours before. When I checked, it was from Cord, his test results, dated a month earlier. It was sweet of him to have sent it. I too had a document at home that proclaimed me disease-free, mine from when I got myself tested after Breckin cheated on me. And as there had been no one since him, I knew I too was in the clear.

“What are you doing?” Cord rumbled sleepily.

I turned to look at him and smiled before leaning close and tracing a finger down the long, straight line of his nose.

“Don't worship me now, Trace. Close your eyes.”

I snorted out a laugh. “Worship you?”

“Yeah, well, you think I'm gorgeous, so it's gonna happen.”

Grunting, I bent and kissed him. He opened for me, sliding one hand in my hair and using the other to untangle the blankets and sheets between us until we were once again skin to skin.

“I have a piece of paper at home too,” I said between kisses, “just so you know that what we did wasn’t dangerous.”

“It never crossed my mind to worry about you. You’re too much of a Goody Two-shoes.”

“I beg your pardon?”

His husky chuckle was very sexy, and when he rolled me to my back under him, I parted my legs so he could slip easily between my thighs.

“You’re not a fuck-around kind of guy, Trace. It’s never been you.”

I would have argued, tried to make myself sound more adventurous, but I had a sneaking suspicion my need to have more than five minutes of connection before fucking in a bathroom stall was something he liked about me.

“So that’s how I know taking you to bed without protection was no big deal,” he husked.

“It’s a big deal to me.”

“You know what I mean. Don’t bait me.”

“Okay,” I relented.

He cleared his throat. “Are you sore?”

“No,” I answered, wiggling under him, edging up enough so that the head of his cock bumped against my hole. “Why?”

“Don’t tease,” he groaned.

“Who’s teasing?”

Even in the darkness, he easily found the lube, and I heard the cap open with a loud *snap* in the quiet room.

“I’ll be gentle this time.”

“I don’t remember complaining.”

“I just—the first time had a five-year buildup. Now I know you’re not going anywhere.”

“No,” I whispered. “I’m not.”

My body didn't tense with the breach, just took him in as he pressed forward slowly, steadily.

"Trace," he breathed, then opened his mouth on the side of my neck and sucked hard as he slid out of my clasping channel, only to slide back in, the motion smooth and languid. "I have wanted for so long to sink inside you and just be. I feel like I'm finally home."

Never would I have guessed I could be Cord Nolan's whole life or, even more, that I would ever want to be.

TWELVE

Cord had to leave me first thing in the morning, but he kissed me breathless before he left, and having him all dressed and me naked under him, rubbing his thighs with my hands as he straddled my hardening groin, was absolute agony.

“Stay here.”

“I gotta go,” he grumbled, mauling my mouth. “But I don’t want to.”

“That’s a nice thing to say.” I fisted the lapel of his suit jacket with one hand while I slid the other up into his hair.

“There’s extra security around the house,” he said softly, kissing along my jawline. “Do not leave. Stay here until I get back.”

“Isn’t the point supposed to be to lure this psycho out?”

“The point is to make him so nuts over not being able to get to you or Celia that he messes up. I need you to wait here and not leave.”

“All right,” I agreed. I took his hand and slid it down my abdomen to my dick. “But before you leave...”

The deep, filthy groan from the man as he squeezed my cock made me buck up off the bed.

“Nobody’s ever wanted me like this.”

“I don’t get that at all,” I replied truthfully because, really, given his moss-green eyes, chiseled jaw, and big, hard body,

how was that even possible?

“Don’t”—he gasped—“change.”

“I promise,” I said before I went to work on the buttons of his dress shirt.

I GOT up from my postcoital nap, showered, and went downstairs, which was when I realized there were a lot of visitors in the house.

“Good morning, Tracy,” Brian greeted me. “I’m sorry you didn’t sleep well.”

“What makes you say that?”

He pointed at my eyes. “You have some serious baggage there.”

I had, truthfully, not gotten much sleep, but the reason was not to be shared. “So what’s going on down here?”

“My folks are hosting a brunch for some of Breckin’s old friends.”

“Got it.”

He leaned in close. “Is it smart to have lots of people in the house when you and Celia are being guarded?” He scrunched up his face. “It seems counterintuitive to me.”

“Right?” I agreed.

He stepped back. “Feel free to mingle, and there’s food and drinks out on the deck.”

“I like this undercover thing you’ve got going.”

“I’m trying to go along even as I take pictures of everyone.”

“Smart,” I praised him.

I got a smile for that. It was weird; he looked so much like Breckin. Not quite as handsome, but very close. It was strange to like him and be completely and utterly not a fan of his brother.

Walking through the house, I saw that Breckin stood with Celia, his parents, and friends in a small huddle. When I drifted by, I heard him sharing stories. Celia was holding his hand, and when she saw me, she gave me a smile like she was so very glad to see me. It was nice, and I smiled back instantly. She was in a good place, and so was I. Everything felt so very normal, which was odd in the middle of the two of us still hoping to lure a murderer out into the open.

The spread, out on the deck, was enormous, and it was monitored by a whole host of catering personnel. It was a security nightmare, and I wondered vaguely if Cord knew.

Hungry, I filled a plate and took a seat at a small table by myself. A member of the staff came by, dropped off a goblet of water, and asked me if I wanted anything else.

“Ice tea?”

“Flavored, sweetened, or non?”

Dear Lord. “Just regular unsweetened black, if you have it.”

“Of course.”

It was impressive, really.

“Hello.”

My head snapped up because I had been totally focused on eating—voracious sex created quite an appetite—and met a pair of soft dark-blue eyes.

“I’m Lucien Ritter, an old friend of Breckin’s, and I understand you’re a new one?” He held out his hand to me.

“I am,” I said, smiling at the handsome man as I shook his hand. “I’m Tracy Brandt.”

“It’s a pleasure.”

I invited him to sit with me since he was holding a plate in his other hand. Once he was seated, the waiter delivered my ice tea and asked Lucien what he wanted. After he’d ordered a gin and tonic and we were alone, I asked him how far he and Breckin went back.

“To high school, actually,” he said, smiling at me. “It was me, Breckin, and Turi.”

“Who?”

“Turi Carrera. The three of us all swam together, played soccer, and ran track.”

“Oh. Like the three musketeers.”

“Precisely.”

“And where is Turi now?”

He cleared his throat. “He died”—he caught his breath—“is easiest to say.”

“What’s harder?”

His gaze met mine. “He committed suicide.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah... Right after that, Breckin left for college without a word. This is the first time I’ve seen or talked to him in eighteen years.”

“I’m so sorry,” I said sincerely, reaching across the table to squeeze his shoulder briefly. “Not only did you lose Turi, but Breckin too. That had to have been so hard.”

“You’re very kind. No one ever said that to me before.”

I was surprised, and my look must have conveyed as much.

“I think it’s because we’re guys, right? I mean, how connected could we have been?”

“That’s nuts.”

“It was, but no one knew until Turi’s funeral that he and Breckin were in love.”

I leaned forward, grabbed his hand, and held it tight. He rolled his hand in my grip so he was holding mine back. “Is that when you found out too?”

He shook his head. “No. It was when Turi’s mother sent me to his room before the funeral to get what clothes I thought

he should be buried in.”

“What *you* thought?”

“Yeah,” he replied softly, squeezing my hand tighter. “She was...she was upset because in his note... She’d had no idea he was gay.”

“Oh. What did she do?”

“Almost all his stuff went to Goodwill the following day. I took his journals, his letters, his drawings, some of his clothes—everything I could grab when I left.”

“And then what?”

“I took the clothes to the funeral home.”

“Fuck, I’m sorry.”

His eyes had filled and were sparkling with tears. “I saw the rest of his things getting picked up the next day.”

I sat quietly, listening.

“She saw me out there, in my car, watching, and when she came to the window, she gave me his gold St. Christopher medal.”

“That was nice.”

“Yeah, I’d wondered where it was, but I guess he had taken it off before he hung himself in his closet, so she had it. She told me she was glad that he died because his choice to love men went against God’s law, but that she knew I wasn’t filthy like Breckin, so she wanted me to have it.”

“Oh. So no one knew about him and Breckin?”

“No. Nobody did except Breckin’s folks. He told me he came out to them a week before, and then at the reception after the funeral at the country club, he came out to everyone.”

I could only imagine how hard that had been for Breckin.

“You know, Mr. and Mrs. Carrera would have disowned Turi if he’d lived, so it was so hypocritical to see them at the reception, talking to me and all his friends, other parents, acting like they gave a damn. I hated every minute of it.”

I cleared my throat. “So he left a note, and in it he said he and Breckin were in love.”

“Yes.”

“Then I don’t get why he would kill himself, since Breckin loved him back, right?”

Releasing my hand, Lucien leaned back from the table. “Like I said, Breckin had told his folks about Turi a week before, and they dropped a bomb on him.”

“Which was what?”

“They told him if being gay was his choice, he could pay for college on his own because they certainly wouldn’t. They didn’t approve of what they felt was his lifestyle choice, so they were cutting him off.”

“But Breckin paid for college himself. I know he did. So what happened?”

“Apparently, he and Turi had this big coming-out planned at Breckin’s graduation party, but Breckin broke up with him instead.”

“Why?”

“If Breckin wanted to go to school, he needed his parents’ money.”

“But wait.” I had to get it straight in my head. “Breckin broke up with Turi, Turi committed suicide because of that, and then Breckin left anyway and hadn’t seen his parents in eighteen years, until now. And he didn’t take their money.”

“He couldn’t, not after Turi died.”

“Oh my God.”

“Yeah. I remember he called me, told me he was sorry he and Turi had kept their relationship a secret from me, but now that Turi was gone, he couldn’t live a lie. He owed it to Turi not to do that.”

“I wish he would have had that revelation when Turi was still alive. That’s so sad.”

“Yes,” Lucien agreed, nodding. “I’ve always thought the same thing.”

“That’s a horrible story.”

“I’m sorry to have—”

I stopped him. “No, no. Thank you for sharing it with me. I just... I feel so bad for you and for Turi.”

“Not Breckin?”

“Yeah, Breckin too,” I said thoughtfully. “I mean, the guilt had to have been staggering.”

“I think it was for a while, but now, with friends like you and his relationship with Celia, maybe he doesn’t think about Turi much anymore.”

I was about to argue when he said, “Has he ever mentioned Turi to you?”

“No. This is the first I’m hearing of this.”

He nodded. “You see?”

“But I don’t think it’s because he forgot him. You know Breckin, he’s not like that.”

He was quiet.

“Lucien?”

“Sorry,” he said quickly, forcing a smile.

“May I ask you a question?”

“Please.”

“Were you in love with Turi?”

He wiped at his eyes. “How did you know?”

I shrugged. “It just seems like it.”

“I was, very much.”

“Did Breckin know?”

“Yeah, he did because I told him.”

“It must have been hard to find out they were in love.”

“It was. And with Turi killing himself because of Breckin...”

“I don’t mean to be insensitive,” I said gently, “but Turi killed himself for his own reasons. I’m so sorry that happened, and I wish Turi had a better support system so it wouldn’t have even occurred to him, but no one can *make* you kill yourself. It’s not Breckin’s fault.”

“Of course not,” he agreed.

“I’m sorry you didn’t get the chance to tell Turi you loved him.”

“Me too. I was waiting until after graduation. I wanted him to come with me when I left for Cornell. He was accepted to the University of Vermont, but he told me he had other plans. I had no idea he meant leaving with Breckin. I thought he could come with me. He was so smart. He could have done the community-college thing for a year and then gotten into Cornell, or done something else. I just wanted us to be together.”

“I have no doubt you did,” I said, sighing deeply. I got up, walked around the table, and hugged him. He looked startled, but then hugged me back.

“Tracy, you have a really soft heart.”

Pulling back, I said, “It’s a tragedy, and I hate those.”

He patted my shoulder, and I retreated to my seat.

“You must have been furious with Breckin.”

“I was too devastated over losing Turi. Breckin was the last thing on my mind for so long,” he explained, the sadness radiating off him. “I thought, if only I’d been brave enough to tell Turi, maybe he would have fallen in love with me instead and still be alive today.”

“It’s not your fault. It’s nobody’s fault. It was Turi’s choice to take his own life. I wish he’d talked to you. Even if he was done with Breckin, he still had you to turn to. I so wish he had.”

“Yes. If only.”

“So was it hard for you in high school? Being gay in this small community?”

“No one knew, so no, it wasn’t. I was a big jock, right? So were Breckin and Turi. And like I said, we were always together, and there were always cheerleaders.”

“Was Breckin bi then too?”

“Yeah, he was.”

“You and Turi too?”

“No, just Breckin. But Turi and I dated a lot of girls. Both of us just made sure we picked the ones we knew were saving it for their husbands, or at least college.”

“So not only did Breckin have Turi, but cheerleaders as well.”

“Yep. You know him—he likes to have his cake and eat it too.”

“I wouldn’t know,” I lied.

He lifted his eyebrows. “No? You’re gay, Breckin’s bi... Not once?”

“How did you know I’m gay?”

His smile was sheepish. “I saw you kiss the inspector in the foyer last night.”

“You were here last night?”

“I was.”

“I don’t remember seeing anyone but Breckin’s family.”

“I’m a little invisible,” he teased me. “But I’m also in private security here in Fieldcrest and work closely with the police.”

“Oh.” I chuckled. “Well, that explains it.”

“Yes. I’m under contract with the police department. The chief hired my company to do backup surveillance for them since he has a total of himself and four officers.”

“That makes sense.”

“We’re supposed to be walking around, checking out all the guests, but since there are enough of us here, I thought, I’ll go sit with Mr. Brandt. I apologize for the subterfuge—I already knew who you were when I walked over here.”

“That’s okay.”

“And I didn’t mean to burden you with my ancient history.”

“No, thank you for telling me.”

“You’re welcome.”

“So you went to Cornell, then came back here to work in private security?”

“No. First I got a master’s in chemistry at Cornell, then a PhD in chemistry at Dartmouth.”

“And came back here to do what?”

“I tried teaching in Burlington at the University of Vermont, but it just didn’t agree with me. Then I tried teaching high school, and that was worse.”

“You didn’t want to get a job at a lab somewhere?”

“No.”

“So you came back to Fieldcrest.”

“I did, and after taking a look around, I decided private security was what was needed in this town. I mean, it’s a small community, but we get a lot of tourists, a lot of people coming through all the time, and people need to have their homes protected.”

“Sure.”

“I’ve been back about seven years.”

“And is there anyone in your life?”

“Not yet.”

“Because of Turi?”

He looked pained. “There have been a few people, but...no one important.”

“I’m really so sorry.”

“My whole life just stopped that summer. I’ve done things, gotten my degrees, traveled, but as far as…” He trailed off, his gaze flicking to me and then away.

“What?”

“I’m rambling, and you’re a complete stranger. I’m surprised you haven’t gotten up and run away yet.”

“No,” I said, reassuring him. “I feel privileged that you’ve trusted me with this.”

He was silent for a minute or so, and I stayed quiet, giving him time. “You know, his parents never once went to his grave.”

“That’s awful,” I said sincerely.

“It was their choice.”

And then it hit me that there was something odd about his sentence. “Went? Did they move away?”

“No, they died.”

“Oh, that’s terrible.”

“Yeah. Seven years after Turi died, I guess they hit a patch of black ice and went right off the road. I heard they both died instantly, so that was some comfort at least.”

“Was that before you moved back or right about the same time?”

“Right around the same time. I didn’t go to their funeral.”

“I think it would have been hypocritical if you had.”

“Thank you. Some people thought it was odd of me.”

“Oh, I don’t,” I assured him.

His gaze locked on mine. “You’re a very understanding man, Tracy Brandt. If you weren’t already involved with the inspector, I would ask you to dinner.”

“And I would have accepted.” I smiled at him.

He was a handsome man with his short blond hair and expressive blue eyes, but sadness clung to him. His regrets would never go away.

Changing the subject then, he asked me what I'd seen of the town, and I gestured around me.

"You haven't been off the property?"

"No."

"There are some lovely covered bridges to see, and just walking down Main Street is a treat. You should let me take you and the inspector out."

"I'll ask him."

"Excellent. Let me give you my number."

He excused himself a few minutes later, and I wandered the grounds, sat in the gazebo, and eventually drifted back into the house and through the crowds. I went into the great room and took a seat on the couch, and I was just about to get my phone out when Bethany took a seat beside me.

"Oh, hey," I greeted her.

She was studying me.

"What?"

"You know, I was really surprised by you."

"Sorry?"

"I just—and please don't take this the wrong way, but when I first saw you, I was certain my mom got it wrong."

"Got what wrong?"

"She told me what the inspector said on the phone, but when I saw you and Celia, I thought maybe Mom misheard and that you were Breckin's husband and Celia was your friend who was also your surrogate or something like that."

"That's an interesting assumption to make," I teased her.

"I know, but..." She cleared her throat, leaning forward, closer to me. "When he was in high school, he told me he was bi, so I've known forever."

“Ah.”

“And you’re totally his type.”

“His type?”

“Well, yeah. You look just like *him*. You must know that.”

“Like who?” I asked, even though, after talking to Lucien, I could hazard a guess.

“Turi Carrera. He was this guy Breckin fooled around with in high school.”

“And what happened to him?”

“He killed himself because Breckin wouldn’t come out to, like, the whole town.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. It was really sad. I guess he thought Breckin was going to take him to college with him, but that wasn’t going to happen if Breckin wanted my folks to pay for it.”

It was interesting, the little differences and nuances in the story. “Go on.”

“But my folks didn’t know that Breckin borrowed money from my grandparents against his trust fund. Plus, he had a couple of scholarships for track.”

“So he had the means to go to school when he left.”

“Yes.”

“Do you think he had the means when he told Turi he wasn’t going to take him with him?”

“No. I think he was still working it out when he told Turi he couldn’t come with him. That was before the graduation ceremony. At that point, he must’ve still been thinking all he had was our parents, so what they said went.”

“Too bad he didn’t wait to talk to Turi until he actually knew something.”

“Yeah. I think so too. But I also think, maybe either way, Turi wasn’t going to get taken along, you know?”

“What makes you think that?”

“Because when Breckin used to talk about college with me, he never talked about taking Turi along. I caught them a million times kissing, all hot and heavy, and it looked like love to me, so when Breckin started talking about California, I was like, what about Turi?”

“And what did he say?”

“He said Turi would be okay with or without him. He told me they weren’t serious.”

“Turi must have thought so.”

“Yeah, he did, poor guy. The note he left was heartbreaking. Lucien—he was another friend of Breckin’s that used to hang out with him and Turi—he was given the note by Turi’s folks, and then he gave it to Breckin.”

“What did Breckin do?”

“He left the next day without a word to anyone.”

“I feel bad for all of you.”

“Thank you,” she said, giving me a bittersweet smile. “I mean, we’ve been in touch like I told you yesterday, it’s just not like it was before he left. I think of him like some distant cousin now, not like a brother. Not like how I think of Brian.”

“I get that.”

“I mean, I know everything that’s going on in Brian’s life, but Breckin is a cipher. Like he never mentioned either Celia or you, so this all just came as a bit of a shock.”

“I bet,” I replied, even as I thought that Breckin and I had been together for two years and he hadn’t mentioned me to them. That said so much about my lack of importance to Breckin.

“And like I said, I was so surprised when I saw you. Yesterday when you came downstairs and took off your scarf and hat and your sunglasses, I said to Mom after, *Doesn’t he look a lot like Turi Carrera?* Mom was amazed at the

resemblance too. I bet if Lucien saw you, he'd be blown away."

Funny that Lucien had not mentioned it. I was betting that maybe the similarities were superficial—maybe the same brown eyes, brown hair, tanned skin.

"Turi was really stunning, and so are you, Tracy."

"That's nice of you to say."

"I'm not trying to flatter you. It's true. I wish my nose was that perfect and my eyelashes that long, and I would need implants to have cheekbones as high as yours."

"I actually met Lucien," I said, ignoring her comments.

"And did he say you reminded him of Turi?"

"No."

"That's so weird, because like I said, the first thing I thought when I saw you was how funny that Breckin found a new friend who's the spitting image of Turi."

"Do you have an old yearbook? I'd love to have a look."

"We do," she said slowly, and I could tell she was mulling over something. "I just have to figure out where they are."

"Well, if you can."

I hoped she could because my mind was reeling, wondering if that was what this was, the reason Breckin had been attracted to me in the first place—my resemblance to Turi Carrera.

"I'll look tonight after everyone leaves."

"Great."

"So tell me, Tracy, what do you do?"

We had a nice talk. I told her all about bookkeeping, and she told me all about her party-planning business. She had event coordinators working for her, and she put on big, extravagant parties for a thousand people as well as lavish, intimate gatherings for ten. Brian had gone into the family business with his father, which was maple syrup.

“Really?”

She smiled and nodded. She walked me to the kitchen pantry and pulled a bottle of Alcott Farms maple syrup from a shelf and gave it to me. The glass bottle was heavy.

“It feels expensive.”

“Twenty bucks a pop,” she said, wagging her eyebrows at me.

“No shit.”

“We ship it all over the world.”

“Nice.”

“I’ll ship a case home for you,” she said cheerfully. “They make good gifts for people you gotta buy for but don’t really want to. Tie green and red ribbons on the top and stick them on people’s desks. They work great.”

“Thank you.”

“No problem. Text me your address.”

“I will.”

“Do it now,” she ordered.

“Oh, okay,” I agreed, chuckling.

We were standing there, Bethany giving me her number, me texting, when Breckin reached us.

“We’re all going to an art exhibit in town,” he said, putting his hand on the small of my back. “You guys should come with us.”

“Cord told us to stay here,” I reminded him.

“He said for us to all stay together and listen to the police,” he argued. “And since they’re coming with us, we’ll be fine.”

“Where are you going?” Lucien asked as he walked up beside me.

“To the old dairy they converted into an art gallery,” Breckin informed him. “Please come. I’d love to get a chance to talk to you.”

Lucien smiled at Breckin, who suddenly grabbed him and hugged him tight. “I missed you too, buddy.”

It was nice to see them hugging, and when Breckin saw the look on my face, he smiled the smile I had fallen in love with, the one that made his eyes glow.

“You come too,” he said gravelly, and when he touched my face and I let him, he got bolder and slid his hand to the back of my neck and dragged me close. “Say yes.”

And I did.

Once we were all piled into the car, I called Cord.

“What?”

Really, the man’s social skills were for crap. “Meet me at the old dairy that was converted into an art gallery. Everyone is going there now.”

“What did I tell you to do?”

“Yeah, but, I mean, the whole place is emptying out. There would be no one home to guard me against crazed psychopaths.”

“Are you kidding?”

“Nope.”

He growled on the other end.

“Meet me.”

“Fine.”

“And don’t be mad.”

He grunted. “No promises.”

THE GALLERY HAD a rustic feel to it, and it was really big. As soon as we got there, Breckin and Celia were swarmed by people. I noticed two policemen hovering close to them, which reminded me that I wasn’t at home meeting Cord out on a date. Someone was actually trying to kill me.

But no matter how I tried to stay on guard, I wasn't scared. It seemed like ages since the bathroom incident and the intruder trying to leave me a dead rabbit. Seeing someone outside the window had been alarming at the time, but not really that scary in the bigger picture. Logically I knew that whoever had killed Tim Stanson was dangerous, but if whoever it was had really wanted to hurt me, he could have shot me right there through the glass. Everything I knew about the case was running through my head, and so I decided to remain vigilant, thus turning down the champagne flutes the waiters floated by with.

"So? What do you think of the gallery?" Lucien asked.

"It's nice," I said, looking for Cord, hovering close to the front door so I wouldn't miss him.

"I wish I could ask you to dance," he said, smiling at me.

"Well, that would be odd in the middle of an art gallery."

He was staring at me.

"Lucien?"

"I'm sorry. You just look so much like Turi."

"You didn't tell me that when we talked."

He nodded. "I should have."

It hit me then that waiting for Breckin's little sister to find an old yearbook was a waste of time. Surely Lucien was a quicker source. "Lucien."

"Yes?"

"Would you happen to have a picture of Turi?"

"I do. I always keep it with me."

Of course he did. "May I see it, please?"

He pulled his wallet from the breast pocket of his suit jacket. Inside, tucked in the compartment right behind his driver's license, was what must have been a senior-class picture of Turi Carrera.

The tuxedo jacket Turi was wearing was terrible: dark royal blue with a black collar. Underneath, the pale-blue ruffled shirt was even worse, but the teenager himself was very handsome. He actually bore more of a resemblance to my brother Alex than to me, but even that was merely superficial, just as I'd assumed. He had dark eyes and brows, strong features broader than mine, and thick black hair. Had he allowed himself to become a man, he would have been gorgeous. He was one of those guys you knew would get better with age. The awkward duckling would have become a swan. It was quite a compliment to be compared to him, but the similarities were fleeting.

"He had a nice face," I said gently, smiling at Lucien as I returned the picture.

"Yes, he did."

I cleared my throat. "But I'm not him, no matter how much you might like that."

He furrowed his brows. "No, I know."

"I just want you to be sure you see me and not him."

He nodded. "I do."

"Okay." I squeezed his shoulder.

Lucien turned sideways then and put his arm around me, clutching my waist. I was going to say something, but Cord did it for me, appearing out of thin air.

"Move your arm," he warned coldly.

Lucien stepped back. "I apologize, Inspector. I didn't mean anything by it."

Cord nodded, but he took hold of my wrist and drew me close, turning me into his larger frame. I put a hand on his abdomen and leaned my head into his shoulder.

He rubbed his chin in my hair as Lucien excused himself.

"You scared him," I whispered, inhaling deeply, drinking in the smell of soap and a trace of rain and musk.

“I don’t give a fuck,” he grumbled. “He should never think that touching you is okay.”

“This possessive side of you is kind of hot,” I teased. “But with me, you never have to worry.”

“I know,” he said softly, his voice husky.

Looking up at him, I saw his jaw muscles flex. “So, what did you have to go over with the chief?”

“I just wanted to make sure he vetted everyone who’ll be working with him for the next couple of days. There is other crime going on, even in this tiny little burb, so he’s bringing in outside help.”

“I see.”

“So, have you seen any good art?”

“Nothing I feel the need to take home.”

“I’ll walk around with you.”

I took his hand and led the way, accepting a glass of champagne now that he was here. “First one of the night, you know.”

“Cause you didn’t want to get tipsy without me?”

“That’s right.”

“But now it’s okay?”

“Yeah,” I said, shrugging, “because you’ll look out for me.”

“Yes, I will,” Cord growled, taking a step forward so I had to tilt my head back to see his face. His gaze was locked on mine, and the intensity of the look made me squirm. “Always.”

“That a promise?” I asked, smiling crazily up at him.

“Yes, it is.”

He put his arms around me then, one on the small of my back above my tailbone and the other around my shoulders. He pressed me gently to him, and I put my hands on his chest. We stayed like that in our cocoon of two for a few moments

until he walked me around one of the movable walls in the gallery and up against an exposed-brick one that was just as solid as he was.

“You’re shitty at protecting Breckin and Celia,” I accused.

“True,” he admitted, taking a deep breath and then dropping his mouth to my ear. I felt him wedge his leg between mine, and his breath on my skin caused goose bumps over every inch of my body. “But I don’t care.”

“Cord,” I said, and then I looked up.

He bent and kissed me until I was vibrating under him, clutching at his dress shirt, trying to get closer to him.

“We need to go.”

“Yes,” I said, rubbing against him.

“Stop, or you’ll get attacked in the car.”

“The car sounds good,” I husked.

He scoffed.

I instantly scowled at him because I knew exactly what he was going to say.

“So lemme get this straight: now doing it in the car is fine, but five years ago—”

“Five years ago you didn’t want to date me, did you?”

He squinted like he had to think.

“Nolan?” I teased him, using his last name.

“No, I didn’t.”

I grunted.

“Fine. I was a jackass back then.”

“And?”

“And now I’m not. Now I’m serious.”

“Which is why *now* you get to have sex with me in your car.”

His laughter was deep and husky and a little dirty, and I liked it a lot.

I was going to say something else, but he walked away then, and as he had my hand, I went with him. He laced my fingers with his and led me through the crowd, past everyone else and out into the afternoon sun. A car was parked next to the curb, right in front.

“Get in.”

“Where did you get this?”

“I borrowed it from the impound yard, courtesy of the chief.”

“Isn’t that bad?”

He glared at me. “Get in the car.”

I opened the door and slipped into the passenger seat, but once he got in, he didn’t immediately start the car.

“You okay?”

“Yeah,” he answered flatly.

But he wasn’t. Something was wrong. The silence became oppressive after a few minutes, but then he reached for me and put his hand on the side of my face. I climbed over the emergency brake and fell into his arms. His mouth was hot on mine, and I kissed him and kissed him until I was out of breath. When I pulled back to look at him, he told me we had to go. He started the car as I rolled off him.

“Why did you do that, Trace?”

“I wanted to.”

“And what else?”

“You looked like you needed me.”

“I always need you.” He took my hand, laced his fingers with mine, and held tight.

When he pulled up to a motel, I understood. “I thought you were taking me somewhere romantic,” I teased him.

“This’ll be romantic,” he grumbled.

“I thought everything was filled up because of the cheese festival.”

“Not the by-the-night places.”

I started laughing.

“What?”

“Your idea of romance is a little twisted, Nolan.”

“Do you care?”

“No,” I replied honestly. I unlocked the door and opened it.

He got out fast and came around the car, and when he stepped in front of me, I reached up and slid my arms around his neck.

“What’s wrong?” I asked him.

“I want this to be over,” he said, his voice catching. “I want to go home, and I want you to fall in love with me. I’m frantic for my life to start and terrified that it won’t.”

“It will,” I promised, drew him close, and thrust my tongue inside his mouth. I was thorough, forceful, all hunger and heat as I tasted him, dragging a ragged moan deep from the man’s chest.

He wanted me. It was there in the way he dug his fingers into my ass, wrapping my legs around his hips, and the way he coiled his arms tight around my back.

“Tracy.” He cried my name as I writhed in his hold.

He was so mine. All I had to do was say the words. No matter what he said, whatever protest he could come up with, the truth was here between us, and it was surrender. I would stop running from him, he would stop hiding from me, and we would truly begin. I couldn’t remember ever wanting anything or anyone more.

I was vaguely aware of moving inside, carried and clutched tight to his chest, the jingle of keys and locks clicking beside me before I was put on my feet. When he tried to pull away, I caught his face in my hands and pulled him back down

to me. He pressed his lips to the side of my neck and opened them on my skin. My knees barely held me up.

“I’m sorry it took me so long to tell you the truth,” he croaked out, unbuttoning his overcoat and then letting me slide it off his shoulders.

“I’m sorry I didn’t really see you,” I soothed him, draping the lovely piece of outerwear over a chair beside the small desk.

“But you do now.”

“I do,” I assured him. I unzipped my jacket and dropped it onto the seat of the same chair.

“Maybe we should talk about—”

“No,” I insisted, chuckling as I toed off my shoes before going to work on my belt. “I don’t wanna talk. Take off your clothes.”

He raised one eyebrow. “I’m not that easy.”

“The hell you’re not,” I teased, leaning close and kissing his throat, chin, along his jawline, and finally his ear, flicking my tongue over his lobe.

“Oh God.” He groaned like he was dying.

“Strip now,” I commanded, tugging on his bottom lip, nibbling, trying to get him moving.

“Tracy,” he moaned, and the sound, ragged and full of ache, broke through my carnal haze.

I stopped unbuttoning my shirt. “What’s the matter?”

“I just—you have no idea how much I...” He bent and kissed me.

I was lost in it, the slowness and the build, but I cleared my head because this was important. He was important. Taking hold of his face, stilling him, I stared into his eyes. “Tell me what you’re thinking.”

He looked pained.

“Please, Cord.”

“It’s fast,” he said simply, his voice husky. “This is fast.”

“Yes and no.”

“Yes and no? It can’t be both.”

“It most certainly can, and is.”

“How?”

“This, between us, has been simmering since we met, coming out from time to time in stupid fights, sexy banter, you brooding and me being furious with you.”

“I don’t brood.”

I scoffed.

He furrowed his thick brows, and I traced over one of them with my thumb.

The man was adorable.

“Stop worrying, Cord.”

“I can’t help it. I only have you by default.”

“What’re you talking about?”

“If Breckin hadn’t messed up, where would I be?”

“Seducing me at a Christmas party?” I teased him.

“Like you’d have let me seduce you.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I’ve always had a bit of a soft spot for you, Cordell Nolan.”

“Shit,” he grumbled miserably as he dropped his head onto my shoulder.

After sliding a hand behind his neck and holding him there, I whispered into his ear, “Listen, I didn’t know why Breckin cheated on me at the time. It made no sense. But now I understand. He needed something I couldn’t give him.”

“What?”

“Excitement.”

He lifted his head and scowled at me. “Do you even know what you’re talking about?”

I nodded. “Breckin likes diversity. He likes the thrill of newness. I got old, and so he went on the prowl for something fresh. I have no doubt there would have been another after Sean. There would have been a whole string of people.”

“You can’t know—”

“I think Breckin likes the idea of being monogamous, but it’s not his natural state.”

His gaze searched mine.

“And it wasn’t yours either.”

A quick nod from him.

“But that’s changed, yeah?”

“Yes,” he said, swallowing hard.

“And you want to come home to me every night, don’t you?”

“More than you know,” he ground out.

“No more running around for you.”

He shook his head.

“Gonna settle down with me,” I murmured.

His lunge made me laugh as he wrapped his arms, corded with thick muscle, around me, crushing me against him. “I’m keeping you, Trace. You need to get it right in your head.”

I already had. Fast had never scared me, only indecision.

When I eased back, he was smiling lazily, the laugh lines in the corners of his eyes crinkling, and all of it, just him drunk with me, was simply too much to resist. I kissed under his impossibly square, sharp jaw. “Don’t be scared anymore. There’s no need.”

“Okay,” he said, resigned, as I leaned back, finished unbuttoning my shirt, and slid it off, then put it on the chair, on top of my leather jacket.

He yanked off his tie and shirt, dropping them on the floor.

“Gimme all that,” I directed, pointing.

“Really? We’re calling off the seduction to tidy up?”

“If you’re not still hot for me after I pick up your clothes, we’re doomed.”

Moving quickly, he grabbed his discarded button-down oxford and draped it over the back of the chair, over his coat, before turning on me.

I snorted out a laugh as he pounced on me.

“You’re a slob,” I protested as he wrestled me into his arms, carried me to the bed, and fell down with me on top of him.

“Yeah, so what?” he teased, wiggling under me.

I grabbed his hands, pinned him to the mattress, and straddled his hips.

“You’re gonna be taking care of me from now on, right?” he said.

“Doesn’t make me your damn maid,” I said, trying not to laugh.

“Manservant?”

“No,” I insisted.

He huffed out a breath.

“What?”

“I don’t wanna...play.”

I bent and kissed his collarbone. “Why not?”

He moved fast and rolled me to my back, covering my body with his. “Your eyes are so dark and wet.”

I shivered under him. “I had no idea you were like this—could be like this.”

“You’ve turned me into a sap.”

His disgust made me laugh as he bent to kiss me.

“It’s not funny,” he grouched softly.

“No,” I agreed as he sealed his lips over mine.

The kiss was hard and slow, and I took my time because all I really wanted was to taste him. He closed his eyes, and I kissed his throat and his jaw before returning to his mouth. He moved his hands over my chest and down across my stomach to the snap on my jeans, tugging it open roughly. I dug my fingers into his shoulders to bring him close, and he smiled, covering me with his big, hard body, crushing me under him.

“I’m lucky you finally saw me,” he whispered against my mouth.

“Why?” I asked, threading my fingers through his hair, savoring the silky feel.

“Because I was fuckin’ miserable without you,” he confessed, obviously unhappy about coming clean.

“Talk to me from now on, huh?”

He grunted, and I couldn’t help smiling as he covered my throat with hot kisses and then moved slowly downward.

“Cord,” I pressed him.

“I swear,” he assured me, and with that I felt him relax in my arms.

His easy grin flushed me with heat, his contentment palpable. He got up just long enough to strip out of his suit pants, and I did the same with my low-rise jeans, grabbing the cuffs and yanking them off.

“They’re on the floor,” he announced evilly before tossing a small tube onto the bed beside me. “Should I fold them?”

“Try not to be such a wiseass.”

He shrugged, and I got a trace of a very wicked grin.

“Always come prepared with the lube, do you?”

“For you? Yeah.”

I was laughing as he flipped me over on my stomach but stopped instantly when he pressed his hard, muscular chest along my back. He felt too good, too hot.

“You want me?” he checked.

“Oh yes.”

“You know, I had no idea your voice could sound like that.”

“Like what?” I asked as I heard the pop-top snap open.

“Like sex,” he rumbled, sliding his lubed middle finger deep inside my ass.

“Cord,” I rasped, bucking under him.

“I was gonna take my time, but I want you too much,” he said, adding another finger and scissoring them.

“Yes,” I whimpered, writhing as he wrapped his left hand around my throat and tipped my head back, curling his fingers into my mouth.

“So you have to take me in.”

“I want to see you.”

When he rubbed his chest over my back, I realized I was slick with sweat that fast, flushing hot and cold as he pressed against my entrance.

“Please, Cord.”

“Trace,” he moaned, his breath rough in my ear before he rolled me to my back and lifted my calves to his shoulders.

As he pushed forward, the slight stretch burning, sucking all the air from my body, I begged him to hurry.

“I don’t wanna hurry.”

“Cord!” I yelled.

“I like this brand-new Tracy who’s crazy about being in bed with me.”

I couldn’t stifle the whine.

“And being out of bed with me.”

He was making a point about how things could be.

“Just with me.”

He was everything I wanted.

“You trust me to be that guy, right? The one for you?”

I understood. I couldn't hold back. I had to trust him completely. “I do.”

“I've waited so long. I wanted it to be me.”

His heart was wide open, and he was inviting me in. “It's you,” I cried out, knowing I was going to explode if I couldn't have him. “Cord!” He slid a fraction farther, and I wanted him deeper, harder, faster, and my frustration erupted in a snarl of craving need. “You belong to me now,” I croaked out. “You're mine.”

“Yours,” he echoed, and thrust home.

The breach took my breath away. I flung out my arms and fisted the blanket in my hands, twisting it tight as he slid almost free and then hammered back inside, over and over, in and out, the press and retreat annihilating any thought but him. There was only Cord, the focus of my world.

He changed his grip, milking my cock with one hand, stroking, squeezing, tugging, keeping the other on my hip, holding tight, lifting me into a position of absolute submission.

He was so big, so strong, and being in his hands, under his power, held, dominated, was something I'd only ever dreamed of.

“I'm gonna come,” I cried.

“Now,” he commanded. “Because you feel so fuckin' good, I can't...now!”

My muscles clamped down around the long, hard, hot length of him, and I yelled his name as I came hard, spurting over my abdomen.

He pounded me through my orgasm and the aftershocks, keeping his hands anchored on my hips when he pulsed deep within my body, filling me, my name bouncing off the walls.

I loved the kissing and licking over my throat as he stayed buried inside me, his dick still rock hard as he stroked over my ribs.

“We’re never gonna be apart,” he said softly, gently.

I lifted my gaze to his. “No?”

“No,” he said confidently, then suddenly smiled. “Look at your beautiful dark eyes,” he whispered, leaning down and sealing his lips over mine.

I started shaking then, and he eased from my still-clasping channel, careful with me. After falling down onto the bed, he opened his arms wide. “Come here, honey.”

“When you decide on something, there’s no halfway, huh?”

“Nope,” he said, patting his chest. “I wanna hold you.”

I lifted up and then dropped into his waiting embrace and coiled around him, holding on as tight as I could. He rubbed his chin in my hair as he wrapped me in his strong arms.

“Don’t fall asleep, Trace.”

“No,” I said even as my eyes drifted closed, the man’s warmth irresistible. I found it impossible not to snuggle up into his shoulder.

“Are you listening to me?”

I was. I so was.

THIRTEEN

I was dying of thirst, so I got up, dressed, and went in search of a vending machine to get us both some water. I only found snack machines, though, so I came back, prepared to drink out of the faucet in the bathroom. Hand on the doorknob, I was about to go back inside.

“Wait.”

Whirling around, heart in my throat, I was surprised to see not a madman with a gun, but a very ordinary-looking guy with a ball cap pulled low over his eyes. He had a barn coat on over a hoodie, and what looked like painter pants and heavy work boots. There was nothing even vaguely threatening about him except that he was there.

“Sorry?” I asked, taking a step toward the door.

It was then he withdrew a gun. “No, you can’t go back in there. He said there’s a cop with you, yeah? I’ll go back to prison for this if I run into a cop.”

I stopped moving and waited.

“All I’m supposed to do here is make sure you don’t go back in.”

“What if I hadn’t come out?”

“Then I was supposed to knock until someone answered.”

“And if the cop had answered instead of me?”

“I was supposed to shoot him.”

My stomach clenched tight just thinking about Cord hurt.

“But really,” he said quickly, “I don’t wanna shoot anybody. I will, but I don’t want to.”

I nodded.

“I just gotta give you the phone in my pocket, tell you what number to dial, and then we go for a quick walk.”

I nodded.

“Come away from the door.”

I could have yelled. If I did, Cord would wake up, grab his gun, and fly out the door to save me. The stranger who didn’t want to fire his weapon would, in fact, shoot the man I was planning a future with. I wasn’t ready to roll the dice on my happily ever after, the one where I got to eat dinner every night with Cord Nolan.

“Tell me what you want me to do.”

“Just come with me.”

“Okay,” I agreed quickly.

We walked together through the open-air corridor between the doors and the parked cars until we reached the dumpster. It was there that he passed me a tiny flip-top phone. He recited a number, and I punched it in.

“Do you want me to put it on speaker?”

He shook his head. “No. I know where I’m supposed to take you after.”

I pressed the phone to my ear. It only rang once.

“Hello? Tracy?” It was a woman’s voice.

“Yeah, who’s this?”

“It’s Celia. Is Cord with you?”

I was surprised because she didn’t sound like herself at all. I was guessing the fear was doing something to her voice.

“No, not at the moment.”

“Good. You need to come to Auto Haus Garage right now.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know, but he says you have to, or he’s going to hurt me.”

And suddenly what was happening started sinking in. “Oh shit.”

She whimpered.

“Celia, where are you?”

“I’m here at the garage.”

“But not alone.”

“No.”

I was so cold, inside and out, scared for the first time, but not for myself. I was worried about Celia and her baby, and terrified for Cord. If anything happened to me, he would never forgive himself, and that made my heart hurt.

“Tracy?”

“Celia, are you okay?”

“So far,” she answered, the catch in her voice making it wobble.

“Good.” My throat was dry, and I couldn’t stop shaking.

“But he will, Tracy. He said he will hurt me if you don’t come now.”

“Who?”

“Please. Come now.”

“Celia, if I go wake up Cord, he—”

“No. Tracy... He... I have a baby.”

I knew she did. “Okay. I’m coming right now.”

“Just you, no Cord.”

“Understood.”

“The man with you, just do what he says.”

“I will.”

“He says nothing will happen to either of us if you follow directions,” she said slowly, her speech measured.

She knew as well as I did that the man’s words were a lie. We had reached the end of the cat-and-mouse game. “Okay,” I said, and took a breath. “So he’s right there talking to you?”

“Yes, and I’ve been told to hang up. I’ll see you soon.”

The line went dead, and I had a moment to imagine how terrified she must be. I turned to the man beside me and placed the phone in his outstretched hand. “So I guess I’m coming with you.”

“No trouble? You’re not gonna fight?”

I shook my head. “I promise.”

His quick nod told me he was almost as scared as I was. He put a hand around my bicep and shoved the one holding the gun into his coat pocket. “Good,” he said with a deep, relieved sigh.

It was very early in the morning, so there was no one at all on the road. Added to that was the temperature, right above freezing, so it was just me and my kidnapper walking side by side out of the motel’s parking lot.

Once on the sidewalk, we took a right, walked a half a mile down the road, and then took a left at the first stoplight. I could see the auto shop as soon as we made the turn.

“He told me to take you around to the back.”

“Okay.”

“And so you know, he promised he had no plans to hurt either you or the woman.”

But those were lies. Hurt, torture, maybe not. Kill, yes. “He who?”

“Lucien Ritter.”

I WAS AN IDIOT.

If I'd listened to clues, I would have figured it out. The man was a chemistry teacher; he would know how to mix up a batch of C-4. And Cord had said that the chief was starting to vet people to help them with surveillance; he didn't say there were people already on the job. Lucien had lied to me. If only I'd been listening closer... But Cord had all my attention, as I had his. It was why we were both caught off guard.

Conversely, there were police officers stationed at the house, with Celia and me, at all times. With Cord and I gone, it should have been even easier to guard just one person. I had to wonder how Lucien was able to grab her. And yes, he'd said he was in private security and working with the police in town—if that hadn't been another lie—but even with inside information, he couldn't call the officers away from their detail. I really wanted to know how he'd managed to kidnap her, but what was killing me at the moment was Cord.

As I walked away from him, the action felt both stupid and wrong. The only thing that kept me moving was my concern for Celia. I was freezing after just minutes outside, not to mention that trying to calculate how long it would take Cord to realize I wasn't in bed with him was problematic at best. Hopefully he'd miss me sooner rather than later. But if I was about to be shot in the head, time wasn't on my side.

When we reached the garage, we went around to the back, and I saw that the door was open. As we got close, Lucien stepped out from the shadows, a gun in his hand.

“Why are you doing this?” I asked immediately.

“I think you know,” he said calmly, then lifted the gun and shot the guy who had brought me there.

The suppressor on his gun had made it quieter, but it was still loud in the quiet space. The blood wasn't what I imagined—only a small amount leaked from the hole in his forehead as he staggered back and fell to the ground.

“Lucien!” I yelled. I turned to the fallen man but was stopped by both Lucien's order and the high-pitched scream

from inside.

“He’s dead,” he snarled at me. “And the way I shot him, you shouldn’t have gotten anything on you.”

His concern was that I didn’t have any blood on me?

“Who,” I gasped, “is he?”

“No one. He’s nothing.”

I gaped at Lucien, not stunned or surprised, just unsure who he was. This was not the same man I’d spoken to over lunch; he was completely altered in both thought and action. The man I’d met would hurt no one.

“*Tracy?*” came a cry from inside.

“You better get in there,” Lucien said calmly, the murder weapon trained on me. “I think Celia thinks I killed you.”

“And if I say no?”

“That’s not an option for you,” he replied simply.

Exhaling sharply, I took a good look at him. The man did not look like himself. His pupils were fully dilated, and he was sweating.

“After you,” I said softly.

“Oh no.” He gestured toward the door with the gun—a Glock. I knew that because I’d seen my brother’s and Cord’s. “You first, Tracy.”

He waited silently for me to make my decision, and I began walking.

“How did you get Celia?” I felt bad that Cord hadn’t been there to protect her, even though she’d had an officer with her the entire time.

“I work with the police, Tracy. I just went to the house, told the officer on duty that I was taking over, then woke her up and had her leave with me. No one questioned it.”

“I’m surprised Breckin didn’t come with you.”

He scoffed. “Breckin’s never been the type to inconvenience himself.”

Once I reached the front door of the business and stepped inside, I immediately saw Celia on the other side of the shop bay, standing beside a Volkswagen Bug. I rushed to her and cupped her face in my hands.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes,” she whimpered, and I saw she’d been crying. I was surprised when she brushed my hands away and lunged at me, grabbing me tight.

“It’s okay,” I promised. “You’re gonna be okay.”

She nodded frantically. “I thought I heard a shot. I thought he killed you.”

“You did hear a shot.”

She clutched tighter, the information scary. I knew because it was for me as well.

After a moment I turned to face Lucien, nudging Celia behind me. “What’s going on?” I asked him.

“I think you know,” he repeated, still holding the gun on me, lifted now to chest level.

“I don’t.”

He huffed out a breath. “About six months ago, I started looking for the people Breckin loved.”

“Why?”

“Because it was finally time.”

“I don’t understand,” I prodded him. “Help me understand.”

“He took Turi away from me.”

And that fast, everything made sense. “You blamed Breckin.”

“Of course,” he said flatly. “It was his fault, after all.”

Celia slid her hands over my back and grasped my jacket.

“Why did it take you so long?”

“What do you mean?”

It was imperative that I keep him talking, the longer the better. I needed to give Cord time to wake up and find me. “I mean,” I said, clearing my throat, “why did it take you so long to go after Breckin?”

“I wasn’t after Breckin,” he said tightly. “Don’t you understand?” His voice was pitched high and angry.

Celia’s breath caught.

“Sorry,” I soothed him. “I misspoke. I meant, why did it take you so long to go after the people Breckin loved?”

“You mean why did it take me so long to formulate what I needed to do and exact my revenge?”

“Yes. That’s what I mean.”

He exhaled, and I saw him visibly calm. “I tried for so long to let it go, to get over it, to be okay.”

“But you just couldn’t.”

“That’s right. It was the first thing I thought about in the morning and the last before I went to bed. It was always there, in the back of my head, playing like a movie on an endless loop,” he said, his breath catching. “It was like being suffocated slowly, and no amount of trying to forget about it, trying to be normal, helped.”

“So you finally gave in.”

“Yes,” he confirmed. “Six months ago I started looking for everyone he’d been to bed with since Turi.”

I panicked hearing that, thinking of how many people that could be, imagining that Lucien must have dropped a lot of bodies. But then I realized, that couldn’t be right. “Not that he’d been to bed with, but that he loved. Isn’t that what you mean?”

“Yes, it is.” He smiled at me. “You understand.”

“It must have taken a while to dig through the people who meant something to him versus those who simply came in and out of his life.”

“You have no idea,” he replied, and I saw his stance relax further; we were just chatting, after all.

I was taking small breaths to make sure my voice stayed flat, no ups or downs. Celia’s hands were fisted in my coat now, and I could feel her shivering.

“So you combed through his social media, I expect.”

“Yes. I had to go back over all of it, all his history, look at who was there and then gone.”

“Smart,” I praised him.

“I thought I found a few he might have been serious about, but really, he was so busy becoming a doctor, rising in his field, there was no time for anyone until Tim Stanson.”

I coughed softly. My throat was just so dry. “But he broke up with Tim before he even met me. That was over and done. He didn’t love Tim anymore, so why go after him?”

“Because he truly cared for Tim. It still counted.”

“And so you killed him.”

“I did,” he admitted but stopped meeting my gaze, more interested in the floor.

“But?” I prodded him, needing to keep him speaking. It was imperative. “I feel like there’s more to the story, Lucien.”

His head snapped up. “You’re a very intuitive person.”

“Thank you,” I said, forcing a smile. “Tell me what happened.”

“I went to Tim’s house—at that point I just wanted to meet him—so I went there on the pretext of speaking to him about an article I was writing on Breckin for a prestigious medical journal.”

“Clever.”

“I thought so, but as he was walking me to the door, he said he’d be sure to call Breckin and tell him about the interview.”

“But it was supposed to be a secret.”

“That’s right. So I said, oh no, it’s a surprise, and he said he wouldn’t tell him then, but he would call anyway, as he’d been wanting to reconnect.”

“Which you assumed meant Tim still had feelings for him.”

“Precisely.”

“And then?”

“Well, then I said something like, it must have been quite serious between you two if you still think of him so fondly, and he was adamant when he said that, oh yes, it was quite serious. He told me they’d been in love.”

I took a breath. “How long after that did you attack him?”

“A week later.”

“I understand he was killed in his home, though.”

“Yes. I couldn’t let it go, so I went there again, knocked him out, and then the fire did the rest.”

I didn’t react, and neither did Celia. She was smart; she understood I was playing for time. “And afterward, you found me.”

“Yes,” he said, smiling suddenly. “And I was jealous, because really, he replaced Turi with you.”

That was hard to hear, though in retrospect, with my new knowledge, I was fairly certain it was true. The reason Breckin had responded to me the way he had was because I reminded him of his first love, his dead lover. Everything clicked into place.

“But I was going to walk away,” he insisted, and I heard the truth in his voice. “I was. Killing Tim was so much harder than I thought it would be, and when Breckin learned of his death, I was certain it would hurt him, and that was enough. It felt like it was enough.”

I understood, clear as day, what happened next.

“When I saw you two together, Breckin looked so good, so settled, so happy. And so did you. I hung around just to watch

you, to revel in Breckin's happiness, live through him..."

It was strange to hear him speak about Breckin like he loved him and hated him at the same time.

I said, "Until he cheated with Celia."

"Yes," he whispered.

"You were enraged for me."

"I was. And worse, you had no idea."

"No."

"And then he cheated again, with Sean Granger, and you caught him."

I nodded.

"None of it made sense to me. He was in love with you. I watched him, night after night, miserable without you, and I understood then: he was in love. Truly, deeply in love."

"And you got angry all over again."

"I did. The rage was overwhelming," he told me, his voice flat, dead. "And it hit me that you might forgive him, and he'd have his love like I never would, and a child that I never would. His life would be perfect because no one says no to Breckin Alcott. He always gets everything he wants, and how the fuck is that fair?"

"Most of all, though, you were still mad about Turi, weren't you?"

"Yes," he conceded, looking tired suddenly. "I mean, how could he ever get over Turi to begin with? I know not everyone mourns forever, but to take so much for granted—you, his child, even his family... Why does he get to have it all?"

"I don't think he does."

"You mean Turi."

I didn't, but that was okay. He could make his own decisions about what I meant as long as he kept talking and not shooting.

“Which is true,” Lucien said. “He loved Turi, and he’s gone forever.”

“I suspect you’re the one who loved Turi. I can’t speak for Breckin.”

He shook his head. “Whatever the case, he killed Turi, and now I’m going to kill what he loves—you and the child Celia is carrying.”

“But—”

“*Shut up!*” he roared, striding toward us, gun raised, ready to kill.

“Didn’t Turi kill himself?” I asked because I needed to give Cord more time to find me. I knew he was looking; I had been gone too long. He would have woken and called out for me, and when I didn’t answer, he would have gotten up. When he tried to call me and found my phone still there in the room with him, that would have tipped him off that something was really wrong. He was a cop, with a cop’s instincts. I prayed I was right.

“I told you the story,” he snarled at me, unhinged again that fast. “Breckin left him behind, and Turi lost hope.”

“No. Turi lost hope before Breckin left town. He killed himself because Breckin told him he wasn’t taking him with him. That’s what you told me.”

“Yes, but—”

“So isn’t it actually your fault? I mean, if Turi had known you loved him, wouldn’t he have lived for you?”

“No. It was Breckin, Breckin and Turi’s parents, who didn’t give a fuck about him.”

It hit me then. “You killed them. You killed Turi’s parents.”

He nodded. “They had no brakes when they hit that patch of ice.”

Jesus.

“All I wanted was to live my happily ever after with Turi, but Breckin took that from me, and now I’ll take from him. He’s been living on borrowed time.”

“Why can’t you just walk away?”

“Because Breckin needs to be punished,” he explained, as though it were logical. “He can’t just go on having a happy life. I mean, I know he doesn’t get to have you anymore. It’s obvious you’re in love with the inspector, but why does he get to have a baby? Why does he get to have a practice? Why does he never have to pay for Turi?”

“If you know he and I are over, why do you want to hurt me?”

“Because he still wants you!” he barked. “This isn’t about you, it’s about him.”

Of course it was. “But I don’t understand why you blame Breckin,” I said, though I did get it, as faulty as his logic was. “It was Turi’s choice to take his life. Breckin made mistakes, but do you truly believe that was one of them?”

“I do,” he confirmed, sounding apologetic. “I was happy when Turi was alive. I was different. It’s like how you were happy before he cheated on you, but now you’re not.”

“I am very happy with how things turned out,” I said honestly, thinking of Cord. “And if I can be happy, so can you, Lucien.” And it would have been true before Tim Stanson. But maybe years from now, if he ever got out of prison... “There can be a new life for you. I’m sure of it.”

“I tried,” he said tiredly. “I did. But there’s nothing left, Tracy, and I’m sorry about that.”

“Why are you sorry?”

“Because I wish I’d met you before Breckin did.”

I smiled at him. “But you would have only seen Turi in me too. Cord’s the only one who just sees me.”

“I hope he can forgive me.”

“Please,” I pleaded with him, wondering where the hell Cord was. “Don’t hurt me. Don’t hurt Celia.”

“No one walks away,” he assured me, then suddenly yelled, “*Breckin needs to pay for Turi! He destroyed him! He destroyed me!*”

“Turi took his own life,” I argued quietly, trying to lower his volume by speaking softly. “He made the choice, no one else.”

“He was only eighteen! What the fuck did he know about the rest of his life? He had no idea he could ever get over Breckin.”

“You were his friend. Why didn’t you tell him you were there for him?”

“I couldn’t!”

“Because you were scared he’d reject you.”

“He wanted Breckin!” he screamed at me. “Breckin was his love.”

“But you never even gave him the chance to choose you. He never knew you loved him. You can’t blame Breckin if Turi never knew.” It was hard keeping my voice low and even when I was this terrified.

He took a deep, settling breath as he lifted the gun. “You’re right. Logically I know that, but my heart will never agree,” he said calmly. “So let’s see how Breckin likes losing his love and his baby.”

“Freeze!”

Oh thank God.

“Drop the weapon!”

The relief was so overwhelming that for a moment I thought I was going to do a face-plant.

I heard a shot, like a *pop*, and stood there, frozen, before I heard another, and Lucien screamed as he went down, suddenly buried under three policemen. I was startled when

Cord appeared in front of me, holstered his gun, and ran his hands frantically over me.

“Honey, are you hurt? He shot at you point-blank.”

But I wasn't hurt, and when Cord grabbed me and hugged me, almost too tight, squeezing the breath out of me, I had enough presence of mind to ask him to check on Celia.

He manhandled her, spinning her in his hands, checking everywhere, and when she smiled at me before she fainted, I knew we were both okay.

“So he missed,” I said to the man I loved as he held Celia in his arms like she weighed nothing at all.

“Yes,” he agreed, and then his mouth dropped open.

“What?”

He tipped his head at me. “Look at the collar of your jacket.”

Turning my head, I noticed when I pulled on the collar that right above a riveted snap was a perfectly round hole.

“Motherfucker,” I groaned. “This is one of my favorite jackets.”

The muscles in Cord's jaw clenched.

“Aw, c'mon, that was funny,” I teased him as Lucien was dragged to his feet. “Give me a kiss.”

He looked like he wanted to punch me.

I puckered up. “Please, baby.”

He didn't move.

“Because I'm no one else's love but yours.”

I got one for that even with him holding Celia between us.

THE CHIEF and two of his deputies met me, Cord, and Celia at the hospital. I was fine, but we had to make sure she was okay. Plus, there was the fact that the woman did not want to let go of my hand. She was certain I had saved her life. And though I

knew that was crap, she insisted on telling anyone who asked that I was a hero.

When Breckin and his family arrived, Celia was lying in a bed, and I was sitting on one chair, my legs stretched out on another. I was pleased to see him go right to her. I was an afterthought, and I found that fitting. When he finally checked on me, all he got for his trouble was Cord in his face. He would have retreated quickly, but I stopped him.

“I need to ask Breckin a quick question,” I told Cord, and he stalked a few feet away, out of earshot but facing us.

“Trace,” Breckin rushed out, leaning toward me, hands out, ready to touch me.

“No,” I said quickly, which drew him up short. “Just be honest with me right now.”

He crossed his arms.

“Lucien thinks that what you saw in me was that I reminded you of Turi. Is that true?”

He scowled at me. “What?”

I exhaled sharply, not in the mood to go back and forth with him. “Please just tell me. I won’t be hurt or upset or broken. I would just like to know if that’s what first drew you to me. Was it the memory of Turi?”

“What are you talking about? You don’t look anything like Turi, other than you both have brown hair and dark eyes. But that’s where the similarity ends. I don’t even know where Lucien was getting that. Have you seen a picture of him? Of Turi?”

I nodded.

“And you think you look like him?”

“Everyone around here does.”

“No, that’s—that’s all just superficial bullshit. I’m sorry Lucien even brought that up to you. No matter what else happens between us, don’t think that. Don’t ever think that.”

“Okay.”

“I have never once looked at you and thought, I get a second chance with Turi. That wasn’t it. And I wish he hadn’t done what he did, but we were never riding off into the sunset together anyway. He knew that.”

“Because your parents threatened that they wouldn’t send you to school if you came out as bi and—”

“No. Did Lucien tell you that?”

“Your sister too.”

“Absolutely not,” he assured me. “I didn’t need my parents to send me to school. I had my trust fund that my grandparents set up for that. I ended it with Turi because that was high school, and I was going off to college. That’s all it was, and I was never anything but honest with him about that.”

Holy. Crap. “So everyone got it wrong.”

“Apparently so from what you’re telling me,” he said, sounding exhausted.

“How come you never told me any of this?”

He shrugged. “Why? The past is the past. You have to live in the present.”

I tipped my head and looked at him. “I’m sorry about Turi.”

Quick nod from him. “It was a long time ago.”

“Thank you for answering.”

“You’re welcome,” he said kindly, then returned to Celia.

Cord was back, hovering over me, and I leaned my head back and stared at him.

“Why’re you looking at me like that?” he muttered.

“Because I kind of like you. Why don’t you hold my hand,” I suggested.

“I should go over there and explain to Breckin’s family that he cheated on you, and that’s why they have a grandchild on the way.”

I grunted.

“He’s a piece of shit, and because of him, you were almost fuckin’ killed!”

“That’s one way to look at it.”

“What’s another way to look at it?”

I shrugged. “Breckin cheated, showing me the kind of man he really is, and because of that, I finally realized that the right guy was here for me the whole time.”

Moving quickly, he crouched down beside me, took my face in his hands, and kissed me long and hard. I wrapped my hands around his wrists, and when he finally eased back, my eyes drifted open, and I smiled at him.

“You freaking out yet?” he asked me.

“About us?”

“No,” he said irritably. “Why would you be freaking out about that?”

Giving him something new to worry about was not a good idea. “I wouldn’t be.”

“Then why would you—”

“What were you going to ask?”

“Well, I was thinking that almost getting shot might have given you a slight scare.”

I chuckled because his voice could not have been dripping with any more sarcasm if he tried. “No, not me, I’m a rock.”

“Is that right,” he said drolly.

“I am,” I insisted, noticing how focused on me he was. “I swear.”

He didn’t seem convinced.

“I promise.”

“Okay, fine. But after this, after we talk to the police, and after I talk to my captain again, you’re going back to the motel. I’ll go get our stuff from the Alcotts’. We’re not going back there.”

“That sounds good,” I admitted.

He drew me close, and the solid strength of him grounded me. I was working really hard not to lose it, but as my adrenaline waned, I started to shake. What I wanted was to sit in his lap, but I burrowed against him instead.

AS CORD MANDATED, I didn't go back to the Alcotts' house. Three hours later, he drove me to the motel, and though I was barely coherent, Cord put me in the shower. He brought me a large bottle of water, and I hydrated some more, despite drinking what seemed like a gallon at the hospital. And then I collapsed in bed, fell asleep with my head on Cord's chest as he talked on the phone.

I woke up because my phone was buzzing. I answered it blindly.

“Hello?”

“I know you are fine, but how do you feel?”

Dimah.

“Okay,” I told him.

“Good.”

“I should be home tomorrow, so I'll be at work the day after. What's today?”

“It is Thursday, but do not worry. You will be back when you are ready.”

Something occurred to me, even as fuzzy as I was. “How'd you know I was fine?”

“Danya told me.”

I coughed. “You sent him here to watch over me?”

“Da. He and Vassi are both there.”

“I haven't seen them.”

“I should hope not.”

“Well, you know, they kind of suck at their jobs,” I told him, sitting up in bed, not happy to realize I was the only one in it. “I almost died last night.”

“No, you did not. Danya said your inspector had everything under control.”

“Oh, did he?”

“He said he found you with no difficulty. Danya stayed with him, Vassi trailed after you.”

“He shot at me, you know. Lucien, the guy who was trying to kill me,” I explained. “He shot at me.”

“Vassi said he was poor shot.”

I growled at him. “Tell Vassi I’m gonna kick his ass when I see him.”

The low chuckle made me smile in spite of myself. “I will, dorogoi, I certainly will.”

Clearing my throat, I was finally getting up the guts to ask, after so many years of friendship, what the Russian term meant. And yes, I could have googled it at any point or asked any of the other people I knew who spoke the language, but I’d always wanted to hear what it meant from the man who used it specifically for me.

“What?” he asked me.

“Dorogoi. What is that?”

“Dear,” he said flatly. “It means dear.”

“So...you like me a lot.”

“Da.”

And that was all I needed to push further into his life. “We should hang out more once I get home. Like, you should come over, and we’ll have dinner, and you can meet Cord. All right?”

“I would like that.”

“It’s long overdue.”

“Agreed.”

“Not this Saturday, but the one after that, I want you to break bread with Cord.”

“I will hold you to this,” he said hoarsely.

“You won’t have to. I’ll make sure it happens.”

“Good.”

And it would be.

WHEN THE DOOR opened two hours later, Cord walked in with pepperoni pizza, a six-pack of Pepsi, and peach cobbler. If I hadn’t been in love with him before, that would have sealed the deal.

“I’m gonna have Dimah over for dinner when we get home,” I announced as we both sat down at the table.

“That sounds great,” he said, grinning before he leaned sideways and kissed me.

I wanted that to keep going, but his stomach growled, so I pulled away. “Food first, then more fooling around.”

“Definitely.”

“Hey, what time is it?” I asked while we were both shoving pizza into our mouths.

He muttered something I missed over the chewing.

“One more time, Nolan.”

“It’s evening.”

“Oh shit, I lost a whole day.”

“You were wiped out after that ordeal. You needed the sleep,” he informed me, reaching out and touching my cheek.

We ate more, and finally I asked him what was going to happen to Lucien.

“Well, first off, he’ll be extradited to California, and second, he’ll be evaluated to see if he’s fit to stand trial or if he’s too much of a whack job.”

“What do you think?”

“I think he’s good to go.” He passed me another napkin before placing two more slices of pizza on my paper plate. “I don’t think there’s any problem with his reasoning. He knows what he did and why. He killed Tim Stanson with malice and forethought. That right there tells me he was very much aware of what he was doing. Mark my words, they are gonna lock Lucien Ritter up for the rest of his life.”

My eyes flicked to his. “But if they don’t, they’ll tell me before they let him out, right?”

“Baby, if they let him out, you don’t have to worry. I’ll be right there with you.”

I nodded.

“You trust me?”

“Absolutely.”

He looked quite pleased. “Good.”

“Do you know the name of the man Lucien shot?”

“I do. His name’s Michael Ivory, and he was a handyman here in town. Nice guy, from what everyone’s told me. He just had some gambling debts that Lucien had been good enough to pay off for him in exchange for a favor to be named later.”

“And last night he called it in.”

“Yes.”

“Poor guy.”

“Yes and no. I mean, baby, come on.”

“What?”

“No matter what someone does for you, you don’t let them put a gun in your hand and agree to kidnap someone. This is not *The Godfather*, yeah? This is real life.”

There was that.

“He had other choices besides doing exactly what Lucien Ritter asked of him.”

“Yes.”

“Running, going to the police,” he said, listing them for me. “Really, there are lots of alternatives to perpetrating a federal crime if you’re a rational human being.”

“Maybe he felt he had no choice.”

“I promise you, there is always a choice.”

I was too tired to be logical. “Okay.”

“Okay, Cord, you’re right? Or okay, Cord, I’ll do anything if you just shut the fuck up?”

“Both?” I smiled at him. “Somewhere between the two?”

“I’ll take it.”

“So when can we leave?”

“Tomorrow morning. I already have the tickets.”

I got up and tackle-hugged him, falling down into his lap.

“God,” he groaned, and I felt a tremble run through his long, muscular frame. “Please don’t let this change. Please like me this much when we get home.”

But he didn’t have to worry.

FOURTEEN

Cord moved in with me, and his name went on the deed of my little house in Noe Valley. My craftsman bungalow, which fit in with the other eclectic homes in the area, was, Cord promised, just what he'd always been looking for. So he happily took on the responsibility of the remaining twenty-six-year mortgage with me. I'd been paying on the loan for the house for four years on my own; it was nice to have help. At the same time, he left the San Francisco Police Department and became the lead investigator for Stone Markham Wainwright. He had his own office and staff, and even Alex had to agree that life looked pretty good from the thirty-fifth floor. He told my father all about it at Sunday dinner. My dad loved having Cord there, I loved having Beth there, and Alex worked really hard at warming up to her. When Evan flew out the following weekend, I had to explain everything to him, which almost made me homicidal.

“Who’s Lucien again?” he asked for the fifth time.

I rolled my head on the back of the couch and looked at Cord for help as he proceeded to choke on his beer.

“You should make flash cards,” Alex singsonged under his breath. “He’s a visual learner.”

I took a breath and started again.

“So, are you guys gonna get married?” Evan asked my dad and Beth out of the blue.

It was her turn to choke.

Alex gently patted her back, and the look she shot him was the beginning of the thaw for him. He couldn't help but smile back.

THE WEEK BEFORE CHRISTMAS, on Saturday evening, Cord came home from running errands, sneaked quietly into the kitchen, and got down on one knee, right behind me. I almost tripped over him. I was making spaghetti for me, him, and Dimah, as it had become a regular thing after the first time. I needed mushrooms from the refrigerator, and when I turned, Cord was there, on the floor, and I walked right into him.

“Cord, what are you—”

He held up the small black velvet box, and I went mute.

“I want everything with you, Trace. And even though we already have the house, I want the babies too. I want all of it. So marry me, okay?”

All I could do was stare.

“Please, love.”

And I loved him, there was no doubt, but did I trust him? Would he always be true?

“Trace...you know I'm good for the happily ever after, yeah? I'm your guy.”

It was the little things that told me I could place my faith in him: The way he always had to stand close to me, in my space. How he tracked me with his eyes whenever we were out, and when I glanced up and met his stare, it was always heated and possessive. Mostly his hand in mine, all the time, walking, sitting, driving, whatever it was, he had to touch me, and that spoke not of his need for me, but his want. He wanted to have me with him, close by, never beyond his reach.

He deserved my trust, and I would give it to him, along with my vow to love him and marry him and stand at his side. Forever.

“Trace?” he asked, his voice pitched low, worried, I was certain, over my silence.

“Yes.” I held out my hand, and he slid onto my ring finger the heavy platinum band with a channel-set two-carat diamond.

“And we’re partners, fifty-fifty. I don’t expect you to do more with anything than I will. We’re the same, and I love that about us.”

I did too. “I love you,” I said, and tilted his head back for my kiss.

His deep, contented sigh was very sweet. “I love you back.”

More words were unnecessary.

OUR SPRING WEDDING, in March, was small and intimate. We tied the knot in my dad’s backyard in Sausalito, overlooking the bay. Cord wore a brown tuxedo that made my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth, and I wore my black one.

“You’re gorgeous,” he husked when I was standing beside him in front of the minister.

All I could do was smile. No words were happening besides vows and *I do*. Everything had happened so fast, and while I was happy to ride the whirlwind, it caught up with me while I stood there looking into the eyes of the man I loved.

“Just hold my hand,” he whispered, leaning forward, his breath warm on the side of my face. “Don’t let go.”

I didn’t ever plan to.

The reception followed, and I was touched at how beautiful the house looked with all of Matt’s thoughtful touches. There were branches in clear glass vases with floating candles on top, small white lights strung in every tree, as well as decorative lanterns as centerpieces on each picnic table. There was a canopy of lights over the outdoor dance floor, and between the breeze outside, the flowing white-wine sangria—Matt’s favorite—the small acoustic band, and my father’s amazing food, it was wonderful. Everyone loved it, and I was so happy. Evan said I was glowing.

I'd been watching my brother the DEA agent meet Dimah, and it had been fun. They'd circled each other like sharks, but at the same time, having me in common drove them closer. Later I teased Alex about it as the two of us sat together by the pool.

"Maybe Dimah does have a brother," he conceded.

"You're being recorded," I informed him.

"Shut up."

I chuckled.

Alex said, "I'm sorry Cord's folks didn't show up."

"Yeah," I agreed. "He says they love him but don't get the gay part."

Alex scoffed. "Basically, they love themselves more than him. Otherwise they'd find it in their hearts to accept, love, and support their son unconditionally like, say, our father does."

I smiled at him.

"They love the parts of him they agree with, and that's bullshit."

"It is," I concurred.

"Hopefully, someday, they won't keep hurting him and will instead accept all the parts of the man that he is. He's their only child, so with any luck, they'll come around eventually."

"I hope so."

"And if they do, I will try and forgive them for missing this important moment with him right now."

"You're not normally the forgiving type," I reminded him.

"True, but for Cord, I'll try."

"You're a good friend, Alex Brandt."

"I try to be, and in the meantime, he has us, our family. Now his."

"Yep."

He sighed deeply. “Fuck, I’m so glad this worked out.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you and Cord, of course.”

“I got that, but what’re you talking about?”

“I’m just happy, is all.”

I turned in my chair, wanting to see his face. “Speak.”

“Look, I can’t say for sure when it was that he first started loving you, but I will say that he carried it around for a while but kept it to himself. And the absolute restraint he showed while you were with Breckin was really something. I couldn’t have done it. I would have had to come clean.”

“He knew I wouldn’t have believed he cared for me.”

“Because you didn’t trust him.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“But now you do?”

“Yeah, now I do.”

His smile was huge. “I’m glad the part of you that always wanted him finally kicked in.”

I snorted. “I’m not sure that was it.”

He reached out and tousled my hair. “But so you know, one thing you should never concern yourself with, or wonder about, is whether he adores you or worships you or thinks about you or whatever, because there isn’t a guy who could love you more than he does. You take up so much space in his head, and I have seen him carry that shit around, and now it’s time for you to feel that same way about him.”

“I do,” I promised, staring at my brother, who I never thought would be talking to me like he was in that moment. “I love him, and I’ll take care of him, I swear.”

“Good. You’re my brother and he’s my best friend, so this has to work or I’ll be in a world of shit.”

It was all about him, as usual. “Of course.”

“Excellent,” he said, looking very pleased with himself.

“Ask you a question?”

He grunted.

“How come you were okay with me and Cord being together?”

“I don’t get what you mean. I just told you that he’s my best friend and—”

“No, I get it now, but back when we first met.”

“I wasn’t okay with it, not initially,” he confessed. “When he first noticed you, I told him to forget it. I would have put a bullet in him myself if he got anywhere near you.”

I couldn’t keep from chuckling. “Oh yeah?”

His gaze locked with mine, and his tone was flat, serious. “Yeah.”

“So what changed?”

He shrugged. “Cord did. The way he was when it was just the two of us, he became like that with everyone—he got serious. He went from being a guy who didn’t care to a guy who could be counted on.”

“Explain.”

“Well, like, I always knew he was dependable and loyal and all that, but no one else ever saw it, least of all you. He fucked around, never followed through, and nobody trusted him.”

I nodded.

“But then he turned it around. It was time to grow up, so he did.”

Cord’s transformation had been lost on me. I had completely missed it.

“And when I saw him making an effort to be a better guy, him wanting you became an okay thing.”

“You could trust him with your brother.”

“That’s right.”

“I see,” I said with a sigh. “Thank you for explaining.”

“You thought I wasn’t protective.”

“I just wondered.”

“Well, I am. And you know better.”

He was right. I really did.

SIX MONTHS LATER, Cord and I were still getting along, my stomach still flipped over when I saw him at the end of the day, and he still held my hand when we went anywhere together. At the moment, we were walking up Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley toward Moe’s Books. I was looking for a gift for Beth for her birthday. She had shared a fondness for Elizabethan poets, so I was going to poke around and see what I could find. I only had an hour to put into my search today, so I’d likely have to come back, as we were supposed to meet Dimah for dinner at a new place he wanted to try.

“Alex is gonna meet us there too,” Cord announced as we crossed the street.

“He’s coming along because he misses you. I mean, I basically stole his best friend,” I finished with a snicker.

Cord glared at me.

“What? It’s true.”

“Be nice.”

“I invited Matt and Eric too,” I informed my husband. He stopped moving suddenly in the middle of the sidewalk, looking absolutely stricken. It was like he couldn’t think of anything worse than spending time with my friends. He seemed on the verge of puking. And instantly, I was upset.

“Cord?” I said defensively. “Since when don’t you like Matt and Eric?” I was also concerned I’d missed his apparent dislike of two of the most important people in my life. How did my husband not like my best friend?

I'd thought we were all getting along amazingly well. Even better, we didn't have to go out clubbing anymore. Everyone, including Ira and Courtney and her friends, liked coming over to our place for dinner and game night. A lot of times the games were forgotten, and we ended up lounging around our house, talking, drinking, and cementing what I felt certain would be lifelong friendships. It was different with Cord. We didn't have my friends and his friends. We had *our* friends, and that was even better. Plus, I got to add my brother and my business partner permanently to the mix.

And speaking of, the most interesting thing about having Dimah in my friends circle was how well the DEA agent and the importer/exporter got along. The first time Alex told me that he and Dimah were hitting the bars together, alone, I nearly passed out.

"Why're you surprised?" Cord had asked me. "I can't be his wingman anymore, so he needs a new one. Hot Russian guy with the killer accent is an excellent choice as a substitute."

I'd stared at him like he'd gone right out of his mind.

"What?"

"You think Dimah is hot?"

He squinted at me. "It's not a question of do I or don't I. Empirically speaking, he's gorgeous."

"What happened to 'Dimah's a bad guy, and none of us should go anywhere near him'?"

"I was wrong about him, and so was Alex. We know that now."

I'd taken crap about it for years, and I was just supposed to let it go? How was that fair?

"It's not like we're wrong often."

The things you learned when you weren't even trying were astounding. But now, to find out that inviting two of my oldest friends out to dinner with us that evening was this upsetting to him left me stunned.

“Cord, why—”

“Did you replace the couch?”

I was lost. “I’m sorry?”

“I remember you telling me you came home and found Breckin fucking Sean Granger on the couch,” he said, his gaze locked on mine. “Did you ever replace it?”

Was he serious? “That’s what you’re upset about?”

He nodded.

“Not our friends?”

He shook his head.

My smile broke free. “What *precisely* led you from thinking about Matt and Eric to the couch?”

“It just, um—” He coughed. “—it popped into my head. I didn’t even hear what else you were talking about.”

I chuckled. “I see. Well, you’ll be relieved to know that I replaced the couch the day after that happened. I got the one we have now from an arthouse in Soma.”

His relief was apparent. I was grabbed and kissed and hugged and finally tucked up against his side.

“So,” he began slowly, “I saw Breckin’s wedding invitation on our refrigerator. Are we actually going to that?”

“Oh no, I just wanted to remember to call and congratulate him.”

“And did you?”

“I didn’t, but I don’t have to now because I ran into him last week when I was picking up Thai food from that place you like. He was coming out of the Italian restaurant across the street.”

“You didn’t tell me.”

I shrugged. “It wasn’t important. We talked for maybe five minutes.”

He arched an eyebrow and waited.

“What?”

“There’s a reason you didn’t tell me. I know you.”

I sighed deeply, and his eyes widened comically.

“Are you kidding me?”

My groan was loud as I started walking away from him. He caught up easily and swung me around to face him. “He was with somebody else?”

I let my head fall back.

“Holy shit, Trace. Man or woman?”

“Man,” I said, meeting his gaze.

“So lemme see if I got this: he’s getting married in a month, he’s got an infant son, and he’s already sleeping around on Celia.”

I made a disgusted noise in the back of my throat. It had been so embarrassing. Brekin had grabbed my arm and dragged me halfway down the street, explaining that he and Celia had an understanding. He was allowed to sleep with men but not with women. His bride-to-be was apparently quite accommodating.

“So what did *you* say?” Cord grilled me.

“I said we weren’t going to the wedding.”

“Did he hit on you?”

“No,” I said, almost with a straight face, tipping my head forward. “He complimented me on my ring and asked how long we’d been married.”

“Does he know you’re married to me?”

“Yes, dear.”

“And did you tell him that it’s already been six months?” he growled, taking my chin in his hand, making sure I was steadily meeting his gaze.

“Yes, I did.”

His grunt was adorable. “I know he asked how it was going with me.”

What Breckin had indeed inquired about was how serious my relationship with Cord was. I told him about our plans to move into a bigger house, since Cord had one of the senior partners at his firm beginning to work on an adoption for us. As expected, this—more than the fact that we were married—had led Breckin to conclude that it was serious between Cord and me.

And it was. It had been from the start and would continue to be so, till death do us part. I was never giving Cord up, and amazingly, thankfully, he felt the same about me. I thought I’d been in love before, but it turned out I’d had no idea about anything until the day the floodgates finally opened my eyes to the possibility of me and him.

“What did you say?” Cord pried, his voice hoarse. He was fiercely territorial, and I had found that I loved how possessive he was.

My attention grabbed by his anxious tone, I took hold of Cord’s Henley and tugged him close. “I told him I love you and that we fuck like bunnies whenever we get a chance.”

His smile was huge before he kissed me. “Yeah? You love me?”

“You know I do.”

He was so smug. “Yeah, I know. And the bunny part was a nice touch.”

Only he would think so, and that was why we worked. He got me, and I got him. It was all we needed.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR



Thank you so much for reading my second edition of **Floodgates**. If you read it before, I hope you enjoyed the expanded and updated edition. If this is your first time meeting Tracy and Cord, I hope you loved them as much as I do. A second-chance at romance is my favorite, and (not exactly) friends to lovers, is the best. If you enjoyed the book, please consider leaving a review on Amazon, it's so helpful for the book's visibility.

Another book with friends to lovers is **More Than Life** and that one has a ranch and lots of snarky cowboys.

Be sure to **follow me on Amazon** to stay up to date on new releases and don't forget to sign up for my newsletter **here**.

Please pop by my **website** or visit me on social media to stay in touch. I have some really cute pics of my furry ninja on Instagram. And if you like to listen to your books as well, you can find me on **Audible** as well.

I hope to see you soon!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Mary Calmes believes in romance, happily ever afters, and the faith it takes for her characters to get there. She bleeds coffee, thinks chocolate should be its own food group, and currently lives in Kentucky with a six-pound furry ninja that protects her from baby birds, spiders and the neighbor's dogs. To stay up to date on her ponderings and pandemonium (as well as the adventures of the ninja) follow her on Twitter Facebook, Instagram and [subscribe to her newsletter](#).

