

Floodgates by Mary Calmes published by Dreamspinner Press

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 it having.

I dove under the desk and crouched there, hearing men going from room to room, yelling out that there was no one there to whoever was still in the room with me. I knew they were waiting, hesitating, because they weren't sure 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 at this point that they'd made a mistake. They would, and there would be hell to pay on their end, and 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 going out the window or out the back. I had seconds to decide. The window would be faster, but it had a frame, 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. Plus, I didn't have much space to build up momentum, and there was the glass to consider. The back door was safer all the way around... if I didn't get shot. The "if" was kind of funny since, when we moved to our office from the old one close to the Embarcadero, and I had brought up his infamous brother to him, Dimah Mashir 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. As I ran around the office, a lamp exploding beside me, papers blowing up 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, turned, and saw a guy running in with what looked like a semiautomatic pistol in his hands. I wheeled around and took off in the opposite direction, toward the back. The only advantage I had 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. 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 hard, bounced, and then slid off into gravel. Normally, I was a bit more coordinated than that, but as I had been in the process of making coffee since the cup I'd had on the way in wasn't enough, I was not at the top of my game.

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Hearing sirens in the distance, I covered my head with my arms as I ran, completely missing the calf-high chain sectioning off the parking lot. I tripped forward down onto the hood of a parked black Mercedes Benz. It was lucky I fell, though, so that the bullet 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, of course, 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. So the officer nodded slowly before turning away and yelling over his shoulder, “Call Brandt over at DEA!”

The whole time I sat in the back of the ambulance getting checked out, answering 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.

Checking my left bicep, I looked where she was pointing. “Bullet must have grazed me.”

“We need to get you to the hospital.”

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

The look she gave me was funny. 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.

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I WAS sitting on the little bed in the ER, 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.”

Just the sound of the man’s voice, his accent, told me who it was. “Dimah.”

“Are you hurt?”

“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 out on maternity leave so she wasn’t in the office with me. I think—”

“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, right?”

“Your brother is no concern of mine.”

I sighed deeply. “I’ll come by around five.”

“It is ten in the morning now. Do you expect me to wait hours to see you?”

“I—”

“No,” 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.

“Tracy?”

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Looking up, I saw Katie Crenshaw, one of my ex's best friends. They had come to the program at County together. I had thought we were also better friends, but when he and I separated, she had disappeared from my life.

"Hello," I greeted her.

She rushed across the floor, but when she reached for my face, I tipped away from her touch.

"I don't deserve that," she said flatly, and I saw how wounded her eyes looked.

"I have a doctor," I informed her.

She took a quick breath and thrust a cordless phone at me, probably the one from the nurse's station that I had seen my ex use. 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."

He caught his breath. "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."

"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 even with a four-month moratorium.

"I want to come home."

I cleared my throat, and when I did Katie drifted away from me across the room, 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.

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“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, all over again. But I stopped myself before it escalated. “I don’t think—”

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

He diverted me, and I let him because it was the polite thing to do and I was my father’s child. “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?”

“Of course I’m here on business!” he snapped defensively, and that was new. It had never happened before I came home early from my five-day family reunion in June and found him fucking his friend Sean Granger on our couch. I had left my dad and my brothers in Tahoe because I had missed my boyfriend. 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*. On some couples it was easy to spot the connection, but not us. And I loved that. I loved the way eyebrows would raise when the most breathtaking man in the room passed everyone else up to reach me. I got a charge out of it every time. Sometimes after a few drinks—bravery by bottle—we would get asked. How? What 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 run his fingers through my hair. “It was his sense of humor. I’m a slave 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.

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

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recognizable, as well as the victim. In our case there were five of us. The car rolled over what felt like seventy-five times but I guess 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 is, 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 were presently 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 reminded him, putting the leer in my voice, “with the hot sportscaster.”

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

I shook my head at him slowly, wanting him to be less screechy—small area and all that. “It’s, like, my eyebrow or something. 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 though my right wrist was going numb. Better numb, though, than the shooting pain that had been happening before. “Hurry up and talk, though, so I don’t fret back here.”

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

“Morning, folks,” came the interruption as a man poked his head in the broken-out window.

We both looked at the man at the same time, and he started laughing. Breckin told me later he had never seen two people who were 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 came to the door over and over and told you that they were working on it, I just 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 some strain on where I am and I get crushed, and if you pull me out, the same scenario plays itself out for him. Is that the gist of it?”

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“Yes,” he said cheerfully.

“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?” I asked. “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 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 from Georgia, sir,” he informed me.

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 have never been to Georgia,” I said and 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.”

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

I turned and found Kevin Baylor, 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?”

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

“Fabulous,” I said cheerfully, looking at Matt. “A crane. Maybe we’ll make the evening news.”

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

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

“Damn right,” Matt agreed wholeheartedly.

“Did you call his boss like he asked you to?” I asked my new friend.

“What did the bitch, I mean my boss, say?” Matt asked after a deep intake of breath. “Am I in trouble?”

“She said that you were excused from work today.”

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

“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 nodded, scowling. “I was a little, if I’m being honest.”

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

I was chuckling. Matt was giddy and cackling.

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

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

“And you?” the doctor asked me, his voice 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?”

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“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 braver than he felt. 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 now,” I assured him. “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 then, 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 seatbelt, 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 grinned at me, and for the second time I noticed his warm eyes that were a gorgeous dark indigo, almost violet. They sparkled when he smiled. “I think you probably have a concussion,” he answered gently, “and you—” He indicted Matt with a jerk of his head. “—I think you’ve got a concussion as well. You’re both obviously 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 and left.

“Oh, he’s a dish,” Matt said as soon as the doctor was out of earshot.

“He’s from Georgia,” I told him. “He’s a peach.”

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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," I agreed. "What would you like to know, Doc?"

"Names would be good for starters," he said warmly, 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 both of y'all," he said, and I noticed how his gaze never left mine. "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 informed him, "I think Breckin's a fabulous name."

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

"That's good," Breck said, and I saw that he was really, *really* looking at me. "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.

"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."

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“Groovy,” I told him. 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. “You don’t get to 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.”

He squinted at me.

“Yes,” I teased him. “I work for Dimah Mashir.”

“Didn’t he go to prison?”

“In fact, he did not,” I informed him haughtily. “All charges were dropped.”

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

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

“Wasn’t there some informant that they found with a Columbian Necktie?”

I gave him the most pained look I could manage.

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

“You heard wrong.” I was adamant.

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“Okay,” 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 were closed until I opened them back up to look at him.

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

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

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

“And you smell really... good, and well, I’m really a smell 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 that all a lot,” he teased me, tilting my chin with his hand 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 then placing my palm flat against his cheek. “Men—and woman—dig the whole southern-gentleman thing.”

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

“Why? Is it working?”

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

He held tighter, and I asked him to call my brother 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.

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“You’re not going to die,” Breckin 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 as he gazed at me. “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.”

“So that’s a real thing? Bi?”

He started laughing.

“I just—all the guys I know who swear they’re bi are just plain old gay.”

“Oh yeah?”

“It’s not funny.” I was indignant.

“Well, honey, I promise you that bi is a real thing.”

I considered that.

“Now, what were you going to ask me?”

“Not sure I want to after the bi thing.”

He snorted out a laugh. “Please.”

“Fine. Would you go...,” I started, but then I trailed off, suddenly remembering who I was. I was not as beautiful as the 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.”

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

“You’ll live,” he assured me. “And we’ll go dancing.”

“Dancing,” I sighed 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 my brother were there in the hospital room with me. My brother 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 was standing beside my bed, looking down at me.

“Hey, Doc,” I croaked up at him.

“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 mild concussion, broken right wrist, broken ribs, two in all, the cut above my left eyebrow, and a gaping one in my left wrist that had needed fourteen stitches to close.

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

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

He leaned down on the bed 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 awhile 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 sit around with me?”

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“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 the back of his neck. 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?”

“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.”

He nodded. “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; I sighed 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 changed. As days went, it had been one of my worst. The relationship ended as it began: surprisingly.

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

“Sorry, my mind wandered.”

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

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“It’s fine, but I was just making conversation,” I explained. “I wasn’t accusing you of anything.”

“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 softly. “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.”

“Oh?”

“Did you follow that?” I teased him.

“I did. I speak Tracy. Can I come?”

“Sure,” I replied after a minute. “But you have to remember that Matt’s still Matt, right?”

“Meaning he’s still pissed at me,” he stated.

“Yes.”

“And will probably always be.”

“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 what was up.”

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

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“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, we’re 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. When he had first moved out, there had still been hope, but now, after four months, 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 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 for the type to forgive an infidelity, but it turned out that trust was the bitch, not the actual act. I could forgive him fucking his friend on our couch, but wondering if he was going to do it again, that was where the problem lay. Out of sight, I always wondered what, or who, 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 wasn’t possible. “I gotta go. Do you want to talk to Katie again?”

“Please,” he answered, and I was going to pass her the phone, 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 that he had no say in—where I worked and with who—that I didn’t have the energy to deal with. “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 just 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.