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Call to Love

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Publishing History

Prism Edition, 2019

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-9866-0 Published in the United States of America

Chapter One

Tracy Cassidy's life plan read like a doctor's script: wear lead apron over heart and manage affairs on own. If Plan A fails and pain persists then, and only then, a shout-out to God would be considered. After all, life was a vapor.

Hungry as Tracy was following a twelve-hour shift in the emergency department, the area outside Joe's Hot Dog Shack needed to clear out *stat*. The command rose in her throat, but she reasoned that having to wait in line when hungry didn't justify an irritable disposition. Mom said it marred the beauty of Biblical femininity.

The hot dog stand, the likes of a tiny, roofed house, sat square in the parking lot of a small shopping strip. Cars whizzed along Highway 127, the four-lane, divided road beside it. Burning tobacco wafted from the customer ahead and tinged the air. Like those Atlantic league baseball games with her father. She pivoted toward a distant siren wail. Could be her brother Jack on patrol. Faithful to a family ritual, Tracy prayed. *Keep him safe. Always safe.*

Beneath summer's sun, Tracy's feet marinated inside her neon pink Nike's. She slung her stethoscope behind her neck and inhaled the calming scent of Appalachian handcrafted rose and jasmine shea butter soap on her skin. A 'just because' gift from Mom, likely meant to dissuade Tracy's consideration of leaving her hometown of Laurelton.

An older couple sat at one of two pine picnic tables beside the food stand. Tracy peered at them over her shoulder. A cheery yellow umbrella shaded them from the gauze of August heat. Their shoulders touched, eyes brightening like jewels. The gentleman tucked strands of graying hair behind her ears. He reached a napkin to her mouth. "Marilyn, whadya say we get married?"

The woman angled her face away then returned his smile. “Oh, Wilburn. You’ve been proposing since our wedding day sixty years ago.”

He cupped her cheek and kissed her lips. Jeremiah Clark’s classic, Trumpet Voluntary, sounded in Tracy’s head and drew her thoughts to the unquenchable power of her parents’ love. Their story could have looked the same. *If it hadn’t been for Dad’s badge.*

Tracy gazed across the sloping Catawba Valley foothills that rose into indigo waves of sculpted Appalachian Mountains. Artistic brushstrokes of white cloud streaked an azure blue, mid-afternoon sky. Summer would soon give way to the glory of fall with sugar maple leaves, a sheer radiance of golden yellow, amber, and ruby red. A metal street sign colored in patriotic shades and anchored in the fertile road verge along the main road boasted Laurelton as an All-America City winner.

Yanking her thoughts back to business, Tracy considered her options. “So if Cheryl tells me I got the promotion, I’m meant to stay in Laurelton and support Mom with Safe Shores Women’s Rescue Mission. But if not, I’ve got that dream job opportunity as assistant manager at Duke Regional Medical Center in Durham.” Sure tasted sweet. And she could forever darken the images of her fallen father that mocked her pain at every corner.

Her cell phone vibrated inside the pocket of her purple scrubs and disrupted the review of her carefully planned agenda. Another text from Robbie, Tracy’s former high-school sweetheart turned gorgeous-and buff-pharmaceutical rep. They’d been dating for over eight months since he’d first called on Dr. Rainer at the hospital.

Where are you?

“Persistent man,” she muttered.

Joe cupped a hand behind his ear. “Excuse me?”

Slipping the cell back into her pocket, Tracy advanced to the open, sliding glass window only to draw back at the pungent smell of chopped onion. She flapped her hand. “It’s nothing.”

Now, review agenda. Quell hunger, return home by close of business day, and contact Joanna Graves in Human Resources at Duke Regional Medical Center. Then she’d figure a way to wrap her mind around trading the beauty of the mountains for flat, granite landscape. So not the picture of an All-America City. No matter. She’d make life work.

“What’ll it be, same?”

Hunger gripped her insides. “Actually, no. Could I have three hot dogs? Plain. And a large cup of ice water.”

Joe, a burly, bearded man with a pencil propped behind one ear, thrust his head through the open window. He pressed his palms against the metal counter, his eyes rounding. “Sheesh, three? And don’t you mean a diet soda? Your usual?”

“Yes, three.” She wagged a finger. “No soda. But thanks.”

He pinched the hot dogs from the grill with metal tongs, stuffed them into buns, and wrapped them in foil. He plucked a plastic cup from the dispenser and filled it with the clink of ice. Water gurgled.

Tracy extended a five-dollar bill. “Keep the change.”

Joe eyed it. “Change? You owe another buck, sweetie.” He rolled his eyes to the green and red menu board. “I’ve increased my prices.”

A weighty breath drifted from her lips, sending rebel strands of hair from her face. She set a guard over her mouth as she yanked a dollar from her wallet and forced a proper grin. Mom's wisdom again, minus the sugar-sweet 'thank you, kind sir.'

Okay, so leaving Laurelton. Tracy ticked off a mental to-do list. The move meant selling her three-bedroom house, giving notice at the hospital, enduring a bittersweet parting from family and friends. And there was Cruiser, the white gelding, a treasured tenth birthday gift from Dad, sold to Phillip Emmet five years later. True, she'd long since buried her desire to ride after Dad's death. Along with her trust in God. But following a recent clandestine drive-by past Phillip's property, Tracy experienced a stirring in her soul. A beckoning.

Her phone vibrated again. She fished it from her pocket. Robbie, still persisting.

Call me. I love you.

No time to respond to his sappy pleading. She gathered her hot dogs and plopped onto the bench at an unoccupied picnic table. The printed lettering across the pale blue umbrella was barely visible. Rotating her ankles relieved the ache of swelling. She tucked a thumb inside her waistband and tugged it away from her abdomen. Moisture sluiced down her back. She sipped the soothing ice water then peeled the wrap from a hot dog and bit off the end. Taking her phone, she set it on the warped oak plank and eyed it. *C'mon, Cheryl. Call. I need to plan my life here.*

At the Sherwood Forest ring tone, she fumbled with her phone, and tapped the screen.
"Hello?"

"You're alive. My next call was going to be the police. Why aren't you answering?"

"Robbie. Yeah, it's just that I'm waiting to hear from Cheryl."

“So how’d your interview with her go?”

“It went well. But listen, we’ll talk … later, all right?”

“Sure. Love you, babe.”

The L-word. “You, too.”

Her phone rang again. She answered. “Tracy? It’s Cheryl. How are you?”

“Fine.” No, not fine. *Stay, go, stay, go.* Anticipation pinged options back and forth inside her brain.

“Well, you know why I’m calling, so I’ll get right to it. I’ve told you for several years your professionalism is above board, patient care outstanding, your compassion and quick-thinking skills are a huge asset to our trauma team.”

“Thank you.”

Oh that annoying fake-cough when Cheryl struggled to state truth.

“Unfortunately, we won’t be offering you the promotion at this time.”

Tracy pressed her hand to her forehead, placed her elbow on the table, and exhaled. Calm thyself, Nightingale. Plan B, remember? “Who got it?”

“Sawyer—” Fake-cough again. “Davenport.”

“Sawyer?” The insult nearly choked her speechless. “But I have far more experience than he does.”

“It wasn’t in my power to overrule. I fought for you. Honestly, I did.”

Tugging at her waistband again, she considered the cost. “Even the hot dog man raised his prices,” she muttered.

“The who?”

“Never mind.” Tracy slapped a hand on the table. “I’ll manage.”

"I know you will. You always do."

Growing cloud cover hid the sun, mirroring her confusion. Dumping Plan A, she considered the reality of Plan B. It held promise of freedom. A flicker of hope, thrill of a new start, steering the distance away from her hometown. Although sweetly saturated with Cassidy family memories, Laurelton remained Dad's law enforcement playground. Surely, Mom, a cop's widow, would understand that.

Tracy tapped a finger to her temple. Though still in the courting phase, that dream job in Durham awaited, the excuse—c'mon, now—the *reason* she needed.

An unexpected shadow hovered behind her. She jolted, nearly coughing up a bite of lukewarm hot dog. As a possessive arm snaked around her shoulders, a warm breath feathered her ear. "Hey, babe."

She twisted at the waist to see Robbie and cupped a hand to her mouth, swallowing indelicately. "You scared me," she reprimanded, catching his eyes.

Straddling the bench beside her, a cocky grin rose on Robbie's clean-shaven face. "Sorry, babe. I was headed to the medical center, saw your red Cruze parked out here, and...Hey, where's my 'Hello, handsome' greeting?"

Who cared about those dreamy, amber eyes? Or that he was beyond dashing in his pressed khakis, blue Armani button-down shirt, silk tie, and Italian leather shoes? Okay, she did. And the captivating mint, vanilla, and cedar scent of his cologne. Did he have to smell so nice? *Stop it!*

Tracy patted her lips with a wadded napkin and returned a smile.

"Hear back from your boss yet?"

With effort, she shrugged nonchalance. "It went to Sawyer."

He arched a brow. “Serious? Man, did they choose poorly.”

Tracy nodded.

Robbie regarded her, circling her face with his eyes. He traced her cheek with a finger.

“So, eating alone?”

Alone. She shot him a glance. “Actually,” she said, rising from the bench, untangling herself from the conversation, “I’m running a little bit—”

When Robbie’s hand caught her arm, she sat back down. “You’ve become distant. Tell me why.”

Averting his gaze was no easy task. “It’s complicated. Life isn’t easy for me right now. I’ve got some decisions to make.”

Big ones.

Robbie slipped his arm around her waist. “You’re not ticked about having to end that, you know...” He pressed closer and whispered near her ear. “pregnancy?”

She shook her head. “No, no. In fact, I’ve been meaning to tell you,” The truth landed on her tongue and burned a bit. “I kept it.”

Tom DeLaney slipped into his idling cruiser in the shopping center parking lot and peered at his mobile laptop. Stephen’s text urged him to bring his afternoon shift to a rapid end. *When you comin home? Game at 6.*

A tight-lipped grin stretched across Tom’s face. Nothing was going to stand in the way of attending his son’s football scrimmage. They’d relocated from the Lone Star State seeking a manageable pace of life in a smaller community, quality time as father and son. He’d just have to pursue advance in rank without sacrificing superhero Dad status.

Soon. Let Sig out. Keep door locked.

Stephen responded. *10-4 pops.*

Tom turned his attention toward raised voices belting through his open car window. A man and woman, maybe late twenties, early thirties, stood beside the hot dog stand near the main road. He scrubbed his hand down his face. “Almost wrapped it up without incident,” he groaned. If Tom had shoved his vigilance aside, he’d have enjoyed an end to a grueling shift. But proactive cops earn the respect of peers and rise more quickly in rank. He redirected his cruiser and assessed the couple through squinted eyes.

The sleek, silver sports car parked beside a red sedan likely belonged to the suited professional with resolute stance who maintained his grip on the woman’s arm. A disturbing image of the guy whom mom once hooked up with surfaced in his head. And despite Tom’s efforts to shoo her from an abusive mess, mom’s stubborn will had her returning to it like a fly to a summer watermelon.

A knot tightened in his gut. Tom climbed out, hiked his gun belt, and adjusted his shades over his eyes as he trekked toward them.

The man tugged at his tie, stared across the parking lot, his eyes contemplating. He leaned back on one foot, anchoring splayed hands across his hips, opening the front of his gray suit. He shifted to face her. “So then marry me. I mean, you know I love you. Ever since I laid eyes on you in high school, strutting down the hall past my locker, a dimpled, blue-eyed blonde bombshell.”

Ah. Tom had stumbled upon a proposal, albeit it, a substandard one.

The woman shimmied her shoulders, as though he'd asked her to take a sip of turpentine. A troubled countenance emerged through a crimson flush. "That's not necessary, really. I've got this."

"Are you seriously refusing my proposal?" he barked, angling his stare.

Silence thickened the space between them.

He widened his arms. "Let me in, for crying out loud, babe. I'm offering my hand in marriage here." He pressed a hand to his chest. "You can't do life alone."

Babe jutted her chin with a challenging gaze and speared a finger. "Watch me!"

Empathy for the jilted professional billowed within Tom. He stepped near and switched his eyes between them. "Is everything all right?"

The woman whirled and faced Tom, her blond ponytail smacking her cheek. *Begin profiling.* The damsel in distress was insanely beautiful ... despite the distaste Tom had for scrubs. Or anything associated with a hospital.

Suit and tie turned to Tom, his smile empty. "There's no problem, Officer. Unless stubbornness is illegal. In which case, I strongly suggest you arrest this woman. She's as guilty as they come." His sardonic tone suggested he'd had enough of her resistance.

The woman's expression darkened, ushering any trace of compassion stage left.

The guy jangled his keys, stomped toward his car, and exited the parking lot.

Tom turned to address her. "You OK?"

She nodded then coughed. "I'm good. Thanks."

Her voice came out clinical. She smelled of antiseptic softened with ... gardenia? "You work at a hospital, a clinic?"

"ER nurse. Laurelton Regional."

Tom thumbed over his shoulder. “The one down the road a few miles?”

The woman tilted her head. “You’re new to LPD.”

He squirmed at her directness. “Hired three months ago.”

She regarded him, nodding stiffly. “Well then, congratulations. Ten percent of candidates don’t survive training.”

Uneasy with the interrogation shift, Tom furrowed his brow. “How is it you know the PD?”

She turned an aimless gaze toward the busy street. “My dad, brother. Cops. Both of them.”

At her clipped response, Tom stepped closer. He interlaced his arms above his gun belt, widened his stance. “Who’s your dad?”

Pain crept across her countenance, blue eyes now dull. “He was shot in the line of duty. Thirteen years ago.”

Tom’s heart ached at the loss of a fellow officer, the hardness of the profession he loved so much.

She glanced at her phone, then back at him. “Look, I’ve got a call to make.”

Tom studied her face. “You’re sure you’re all right?”

“I’m good.”

Not buying it. Resentment squeezed Tom’s chest. Here stood another woman who refused help. Let her sleep in the bed she makes. *I’m done.* “Have a good day, then,” he said, shaking his head to dislodge her image as he turned back to his cruiser. He slipped his phone from the shirt pocket opposite his badge. Stephen had texted again, this time a brief narrative.

When r u coming home? No food in the fridge, I'm starved. Like hurry home Dad. You promised

Tom responded. *On my way*

When Tom returned to their two-bedroom apartment, he removed his gear and collapsed on the bed. Delirium pulled his eyes into his head, draped them behind heavy lids.

Stephen hammered steps down the hallway. “Dad. What gives? We’ve got to go in an hour.”

Tom opened his eyes to slits. “Gimme thirty, son.”

“If you have what it takes to perform the Heimlich on a guy choking on a chicken nugget, you can handle a little sleep deprivation.”

The corners of his mouth inched to a grin. “How’d you get so tough?”

“My dad’s a cop.”

Stephen spun on his heels and gave the door a forced shut.

However brief, the restorative sleep prepped Tom to engage with his rascally fourteen-year-old, to focus, to be all there. He edged off the bed, ambled down the hall, and sank into the sofa beside Stephen in the family room. The light of the TV flickered across his face, drawing him into a catatonic state.

“Your favorite animated race car show, huh?”

“You tell the guys at school, and I’ll never speak to you again,” he growled without flinching. “It’s hard enough being the new kid with a dad who’s a cop, living in a culture that hates authority.”

Tom raised a three-finger salute. “And you won’t tell Officer Cassidy I’m watching it with you.”

He leaned in and clapped Tom’s hand in a high five. “Secret’s safe.”

“Good. Because I’ve got my eye on special ops team, and I don’t want anything standing in the way.”

“It’s about time.”

“I couldn’t before now.”

Stephen wagged a finger. “Correction. You wouldn’t before now since she threatened to leave if you did.”

Tom’s stomach churned at the thought of opportunities he’d sacrificed to save his marriage to Deborah. And for what? But the move from Texas offered freedom. He’d no longer handcuff himself to a woman who’d only make a fool of him. That was, if he’d even consider love again. Some calls came with too great a cost.

Leaning toward the coffee table, Stephen reached for his water bottle. “Know what I like about this show?” The lilt in his tone hinted at an incoming lecture.

“Uh uh.”

“It’s the second place driver. He’s really the better racer, but he sacrifices winning to protect the lead guy from other drivers who might harm him. That’s why he wins.”

The truth seeped into a tiny crack in Tom’s heart. He shifted his gaze toward Stephen, gently shoulder-shoved him, and tousled his hair. “You amaze me.”

“I amaze me, too.”

“I’d give my life for you.”

Stephen turned his gaze back to the screen. “Yeah, well, don’t go getting any heroic ideas. I kinda like having you around.”

Tom laughed.

“Although...”

Wait for it...

A saucy grin flickered across Stephen’s face. “A mom would be great, you know.” Stephen shrugged. “Just sayin’.” He jumped from the sofa as if to avoid a swat with Tom’s belt. “I’ve got to get ready. Fast food on the way?”

Tom shot a weary thumbs-up. “Anything but chicken nuggets.”

“Deal,” he answered with a grin. Stephen padded down the carpeted hallway, clicked his door shut, and cranked the volume on his music. A mom? The thought clenched Tom’s brain. He longed to offer his active, six-foot athlete something more to eat than packaged noodles and corn flakes. But a mom?

The August sun slit through the blinds, highlighting swirls of dust. Tom stretched his long arms toward the ceiling, fighting the lure of deep cushions. He stepped to the window and gazed at his hefty white Ford 150 parked beside his LPD cruiser. Number 19 marked the front side above the wheel.

Thirteen years in law enforcement had been rewarding. And costly. But he’d kept his most precious possession when Deborah left. He’d do anything to protect Stephen from her darkened influence, anything to keep his son from making his same mistakes.

He jerked at the ring of his cell. Unknown caller. San Antonio area code. His heart drummed. That eliminated Grandpa Landon who already put in his weekly call. It wasn’t Dad’s number either, unless he was calling from a different city government office. Mom?

Possibly. Because he never knew where she kept her bed. He tapped the screen to answer.

“Hello.”

“Tom. It’s Deb.”

His frame stiffened as though staring into the wrong end of a Remington. Access cop-mode. “Surprised to hear from you.”

“Yeah, it’s been awhile. I figured you might be out patrolling around or whatever.”

Career still in the whatever category, like it had no more significance than a trip to Wal-Mart. “I’ve got a few minutes. About to head out with Stephen. He’s got a game.”

“Stephen’s the reason I’m calling, actually. Since ya’ll left a few months ago, I’ve been thinking that I’d really like to spend time with him. Reconnect.”

He pressed his cell against his ear. “You’re kidding, right?”

“He’s my kid too.” Her edgy tone sandpapered his ego.

“Good that you’ve finally recognized that.”

“Clearly you’re still hardened and skeptical.”

The accusation twisted inside his gut.

“I’ve always loved Stephen, Tom. It’s just you and me. We weren’t working out.”

A fire burned inside his chest, His forehead moistened. “One half of ‘we’ fought to work things out.” Over and over and over. “How much love for Stephen did you have when you were in my partner’s bed, huh?” he challenged, spearing a finger toward the floor.

“That resentment you carry. It’s toxic.”

The belly punch sucked the wind from him. He scrambled for air. “I don’t need your psychoanalysis. Especially coming from one who was supposed to be at home with our sick kid.”

“That was, what, eight years ago? All kids get fevers.”

As though nearing an assailant in a foot chase, he closed in. “Pneumonia, Deborah. Stephen had pneumonia. If you’d been home where you belonged, you’d have known. The hospital staff said Stephen was darn lucky I got him to the hospital in time.”

“Love keeps no record … Look, just know I’d like to see him again, maybe head your way.”

“You come anywhere near my son, and I’ll put out a restraining order, Deborah Moretti.”

Deborah exhaled. “People can change.”

No. They. Can’t. “I deal with repeat offenders every single day who bang their head against the wall of their cell, wondering why they’re still in a mess.”

“Is that how you view me, a repeat offender with no hope of redemption?”

“I did the honorable thing by marrying you. Even talked you out of getting rid of our baby,” he seethed, pacing the floor. Turning back toward the hallway, Tom’s steely gaze collided with the scrutiny of Stephen’s glare when he exited his bedroom. He paused then stepped away, muffling his voice through clenched teeth. “Stephen doesn’t need emotional disruption and neither do I. If you love him, you’ll leave him—leave us—alone.”

“You tell me how being raised by a bitter man is assuring his emotional stability.”

A non-answer won over further rebuke.

“I’ll be seeing you, Tom.” Deborah ended the call, gutting his heart.

Once again, he’d scrambled to right the wrong, but she left first. Beneath the weight of defeat, Tom’s shoulders drooped as he expelled a labored breath.

Stephen propped a foot on the kitchen chair and bent to tie his laces. “Geez, Dad. Way to maintain composure. Who the heck was that, Hitler?”

“Nope. Your mom. She wants to see you.”

Chapter Two

The emergency department settled to an atypical hush, a welcomed pace. Tracy tossed her gloves into the trash and ran her hands beneath the cool water at the faucet. She yanked a few brown paper napkins from the dispenser on the wall and turned to her elderly patient. “That nose clip worked magic, Mrs. Van Deventer. Stopped the bleeding.”

A head crowned with tight, silver curls, the toothless woman nodded. “You can take dis ham ss-and-with away. Dey didn’t tink to gwab my teef before whisking me out of da nursing home.”

“Care for something else, maybe canned peaches?”

“If it’s not too much trouble.”

Yay for problems easily fixed. “Be right back.”

Closing the patient’s door, she brushed past Sawyer Davenport, proud recipient of her promotion. But she was leaving Laurelton, so he could have it. “Hey, Sawyer.”

“You hear about that fat man in renal failure? The nitrogen levels in his blood could freeze dry the T-bone steak I got marinating in my fridge. It’d keep for centuries,” he guffawed, turning to his work station.

Leave it to Sawyer to dismember a patient with his words. Maybe he’d skipped the class in nursing school on how to show compassion to those in crisis.

After delivering the peaches to Mrs. Van Deventer, she slipped into the breakroom and pulled out her cell. Mom handled the news of Tracy’s unexpected pregnancy with grace. She’d even agreed to list her house once readied for market. Of course, the favor hadn’t come without a maternal lecture and choked back tears.

As God would have it, cop blood coursed through her older brother, Jack, too. No other career would do. And Jack Cassidy had taken seriously his father's promise to oversee Tracy's well-being. The thought of telling him she was leaving—with baby on the way—had Tracy quivering in her pink Nikes. *God give me courage.*

"Jack, you busy?"

"Never."

"Liar." Humor arrested her nerves. "Listen, I'm at work but wanted to let you know I'm...leaving. Leaving Laurelton." Jack's silence set her heart to drumming. "Moving to Durham. Another job. In the emergency department at Duke Regional..." Still nothing. "Mom's listing my house. At her recommendation, I've got to give the thing a paint job and tackle some repairs." Leaving no sliver of space for argument, she'd spit her words like a nail gun.

"You can't leave Laurelton. It's home. We're family. You agreed to support Mom with the Safe Shores women's rescue deal," he shot back.

"And I have. In three years we've acquired a foreclosed home for the day shelter program, established the non-profit creative resource center, snagged several corporate sponsorships, have our website up and running, received approval from the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability, and have a solid board of directors on which I've served."

"You and mom have been involved with this ministry for nearly five years. How can you walk away from that?" His tone intensified above muffled radio traffic.

"Mom's got board support. She doesn't need me."

“Remember Rachel’s expecting our first. She’ll need you if things go wrong or if the baby gets sick.”

“We’ll Skype.”

“Great. Raising my kid via the Internet.”

“She’ll be fine.”

“Is this about that head charge nurse promotion to they wasted on Sawyer?”

“Jack, this wasn’t an easy decision.”

Marry me. Robbie’s proposal coursed fear through her veins. She pressed an imaginary gas pedal headed east, a girl seeking a new life, miles away from the risk of loss. “I’ll only be two hours, eighteen minutes away.”

At the sound of his labored sigh, Tracy pulled the phone from her ear.

“You given this gosh-awful news to Wes and Abigail?” he asked.

“Not yet. They’re performing at that music festival in Asheville.”

“I assume you’ve already checked into churches in the area?”

His question came out more like a statement, collecting clues from a suspect. Tracy leaned against the Formica, kitchenette counter. Her gaze rolled toward the fluorescent light. “I’ll get around to it.”

“How do you plan to get your house ready, pack your belongings, and secure a safe place to live?”

“I’ll find a way.”

She pressed a palm to her abdomen. Her heart fluttered inside her ribs like a caged hummingbird. “Listen, Jack. There’s—there’s something else I need to tell you.”

“Tracy!” She startled as Cheryl bellowed into the break room. Her phone slipped from her fingers and dove into the front of her scrubs. “You administer IV fluids to your patient in room two?”

Tracy spun to face her boss, her posture ramrod straight. “On it.”

Jack’s muffled interrogation burned through the fabric. “Something doesn’t add up. What are you not telling me?”

Eyeing her surroundings, Tracy rolled her shoulders forward and dug out her phone. “I’ll have to catch you later, Jack. We’re knee-deep in accreditation assessments.” She ended the call and scuttled out of the breakroom toward the nearest medical record data screen. “A Mrs. Linda Cummings, admitted for possible rib fracture, non-acute ankle sprain...” Huh. Could it be? Tracy verified the patient’s age. “Fifty-five, a Laurelton local...” Yep, the wife of her former youth pastor, Luke Cummings of Garden Place Church who now served as head pastor. Linda was also feature writer for the *Laurelton Daily Record*, a woman who knew community happenings.

The thick breakaway door with glass panel was ajar. Tracy tapped on it and found Linda with her head resting back against a pillow, eyes closed. Her shoulder length, auburn hair now held streaks of gray. Tracy crossed over, approached the right side of the bed, and touched Linda’s arm. “Linda?”

Peering through slit eyelids, Linda regarded Tracy a moment. Shortly, her smile brightened the room. Just like it had in high school. “Tracy? Tracy Cassidy?”

“Good to see you again, despite the setting,” Tracy said with a twisted smile.

Linda winced, wriggled in her bed, and pulled the woven, white blanket to her chest. “All my own doing, honestly.” A chagrin deepened lines around her twinkling eyes. “Luke would be here, but he and the church elders are at a men’s retreat up in Boone.”

Glancing at the IV bag, Tracy noted the volume, penned a reminder inside her palm for more saline. “Want to tell me how you sprained your ankle?”

“Sure. If you’re in need of a laugh.”

“Around here? Always.” Tracy lowered herself to the edge of the bed.

“I’d just completed an interview with the Ridgecrest High School girls’ volleyball team and saw no harm in joining them on the court for the back-to-school midnight rally.” Linda laughed low, shaking her head. “Silly me, attempting a spike attack at my age.”

Tracy wrapped a blood pressure cuff above Linda’s elbow and pumped, keeping an eye on the manometer needle. “You still got it, Linda.”

“I’d heard you became a nurse.” Joy glinted in Linda’s gray-blue eyes. “It’s wonderful that the Lord put me in your care.”

Tracy extended the thermometer probe with an open mouthed ‘ahhh’. “I hope you’ll feel the same after I dope you up a bit.” She steadied Linda’s arm, targeted a viable vein in the bend of her elbow, and swiped the area with rubbing alcohol.

“One can—*ouch!*—always trust a Cassidy.”

Trust. She’d tried to grab hold of it, but it slipped from her fingertips like a tomato seed on the bottom of the sink.

“Seeing you reminds me...I’ve needed to ask someone from your family about the spring Cassidy reunion. The date in April falls on the same as your father’s death thirteen years ago, is that right?” Linda said.

“It does.”

“And there’ll be live music?”

“That’s right. I’ve agreed to sing a few with my younger brother, Wes.” Songs Dad loved. He’d also roped her heart with the ‘Do it for Dad’ line and wrangled her into singing ‘O Come Emmanuel’—Dad’s favorite—at the Christmas Eve service this year.

“Fantastic. Well, when it gets closer to time, I’d like to do a feature article in the *Record*, ask you a few questions.”

“Sure. Be glad to help.”

“I’ll never forget you and Rodney Sanderson … or, wait no, Robbie. Inseparable sweethearts in high school.”

Tracy’s stomach twisted.

“Yours and Wes’s leadership was such a blessing, participating in praise band, rallying the youth to take a stand and wait until marriage. Not a popular notion anymore.” She swished a finger near her face. “But you and I know godly morals don’t come with expiration dates.”

So long poster child for moral purity.

Linda’s eyes danced. “And just look at you now. Such a beautiful woman.” She raised her brows. “You’ve got to be married. With at least two kids?”

Tracy shook her head. “No, ma’am, not married. And no kids.” The lie tasted like arsenic.

“Some men don’t know a great catch when they see one,” sighed Linda.

Or my heart isn’t up for the risk.

“Mark my word, you can count on a full page spread the minute a ring is slipped on that finger of yours. And plenty of men will be beating themselves up for having missed an opportunity. Because when love comes calling, a person’s got to have the guts to answer.”

Fear curled like a fist and punched the pit of her stomach. “I’ve got to move on. Buzz me if you’re experiencing pain.” *Said the unwed liar with baby on the way.* After returning to the glass partitioned nursing station, Tracy entered patient data on the keyboard with rapid clicks. An angry summer rain pelted the darkened windows. Would early morning bring an end to the rain when her night shift ended?

With the burn of indigestion and a flush of a mildly elevated temp, Tracy placed one hand on her abdomen, the other on her forehead. To be expected in the first trimester. Or so she learned from Michelle Ramirez’s dog-eared copy of *What To Expect When You’re Expecting*. Her trusted girlfriend and co-worker had slipped it into Tracy’s purse a month ago. From an adjacent corridor, the sour scent of ammonia escaped the filthy gray water of a janitor’s yellow housekeeping bucket. The pungent smell soured her stomach. Masking her mouth with her arm, she smothered a cough.

Michelle lugged an armload of soiled hospital linens, dumped them into a laundry hamper, and sidled up to Tracy.

Grasping her sagging ponytail, Tracy parted it into two thick strands to secure a slipping, elastic hair tie. She cupped a hand over her mouth and yawned. “Hey, there. Co-Zee’s Coffee Shop at shift’s end?”

Michelle shook her head. A Peruvian beauty with flawless, dark complexion, and black, cropped hair angling her face. “Ay. Would love to, *amiga*, but Marcos has the day off.

We've got to prepare for Anna Maria's fifth birthday party. A *casa* full of giggling girls. And we foolishly promised her a sleepover." Michelle's grin betrayed the tinge of irritation in her large, cocoa-brown eyes.

Norman Rockwell images of family gatherings rudely pried the lid from Tracy's desire, one she'd long-since buried at Dad's funeral. She nodded understanding, forcing a smile. "Next time. I'll check with Ronni." Veronica Murray, or Ronni, was Tracy's saucy, southern Mississippi girlfriend. With her chic clothing, pearly smile, and voluminous head of coiled black locks, she'd easily grace the cover of *Essence Magazine*.

"Don't bother. She and LeShawn went to the mountains this weekend. Seven-year anniversary. Romantic getaway."

That twinkle in Michelle's eye tugged at a longing. Tracy moaned and glanced back at the screen. Coffee had lost its appeal anyway. Still, disappointment twisted in her chest like knives. Or was it envy? Ha! Both her girlfriends married cops. Why would they sign up to become Laurelton's next police widow? Like Mom.

"Hey. That reminds me," Michelle said. "I know it's a little early to be planning a baby shower, but I need you to make a guest list for me and Ronni."

Tracy switched her eyes toward Linda's room then turned to Michelle, her heart tapping a nervous rhythm. "A shower?" she whispered low. She waved a dismissive hand. "No need for a shower. I'll just pick up a few things from Wal-Mart."

Sounding a huff, Michelle angled her stare and narrowed her brow. "Are you *loco*? The daughter of Laurelton's most heroic cop isn't going to be disregarded like that."

"I'm moving, Michelle. Once I sell my house, then me and..." she leaned in and hushed her voice, "the baby are outta here. A shower is unnecessary. But...thanks."

Candace Menard sashayed past, her man-catcher perfume hanging thick in the air like a San Francisco fog. She paused and wedged a shoulder between them. “What patient needs a shower? If he’s hot, I’ll take care of it.”

Tracy exchanged glances with Michelle then back to Candace. “Sorry to disappoint, but no one is in need of your nursing skills at present.”

“Well, anyways, I’ve already got a dashing darling in room 7. Male, mid-thirties. Football injury. Perfect specimen.” As she turned away, she beamed over her shoulder and fluttered her lashes.

A low growl rumbled inside of Tracy.

Michelle poked a finger at Tracy’s abdomen. “You’re not getting away with this do-it-yourself Wal-Mart nonsense,” she barked low. “Once this accreditation craziness is over we’re throwing you a shower and that’s that.”

Inside the market of a corner gas station, Tom inhaled the scent of brewed coffee and snapped the lid onto the cup. He reached to his back pocket for his wallet.

The cashier twisted her lips into a grin. She leaned over the counter, squinting her eyes at his gold name badge. “Officer, er, DeLaney? I caught that news report about you the other day.” She floated a hand to her chest. “So touching the way you saved that boy’s life. He coulda darned near killed hisself choking on that chicken nugget. If you hadn’t done that, whatcha call it, hemlock trick on him aside the road, why...”

Awash with humility Tom nodded and grinned.

She waved him off. “Coffee’s on me, sir.”

“Thanks, ma’am.”

The tear that dribbled down the cashier's cheek suggested she appreciated Tom's investment. A refreshing change from being put upon, cursed at, or threatened with knives. Made the fool. He returned to his cruiser, slipped behind the wheel, and sank into his seat. The sun had climbed to hail the onset of a new day, erasing the subtle brush of lavender, blue, and peach that earlier streaked a dawn sky above the distant mountain ridge. A far cry from his native, San Antonio, with its dusty level plain, hillsides dotted with Juniper Ash and Live Oaks. Hard for a place to compete against the beauty of the Appalachian foothills.

He fired his engine and lunged his cruiser out of the parking lot. Deborah's desire to reconnect with Stephen had been a wicked intrusion that robbed him of peace, a peace he sought to acquire when they relocated nearly a day's drive east. He'd rather trip over his bootlaces during foot pursuit than repeat past mistakes.

At the chime of his phone, Tom snatched it from his shirt pocket and palmed the wheel northeast toward his apartment. "Hey, Sergeant Cassidy. What's up?"

"To you, it's Jack."

"Merely respecting rank, sir."

Stiff-toned radio traffic sounded through the phone. "I need a favor and figured you might like to earn a few bucks."

The sun's glare spilled over the dashboard. Tom donned his shades. "Not if it's illegal. My supervisor wouldn't go for that."

"Do all Texans have a smart mouth, or is it just you?"

"Sharp wit is a difficult thing to corral. So, what favor?"

"It's a Cassidy family matter, actually."

Family. The word settled on Tom's tongue and tasted sweet.

"My younger sister Tracy announced she's leaving Laurelton ... which is a story for another time." A sharp cough hacked through the phone. "She says she's going to put her house on the market, no thanks to my realtor mom who agreed to list it."

Easing along the main road, Tom's eyes scanned the shopping complexes. Even signed-off, his brain stayed on duty. "Sounds like you don't want her to leave."

"I don't. Why leave family and a perfectly good job for another one nearly three hours away? Makes no sense. Anyway, you mentioned you'd just spent months prepping your own house in Texas to sell, right?"

"Correct."

"Well, Mom says she'll need the interior painted. And there are repairs that she doesn't have the time, expertise, or energy to tackle."

"Can't her husband or a boyfriend take care of it?"

"Nope. No husband. And the so-called boyfriend doesn't know the difference between a hammer and a riding lawn mower."

Entering his apartment complex through the black, iron-spiked security gate, Tom saluted the uniformed guard. "I'm good with a paint brush. My grandfather taught me to handle every tool imaginable." He followed the iron fencing that encased the complex until he came to his front door.

"Perfect. So you'll give her a call, tell her I sent you?"

"Sure. Under the condition that she's agreeable and willing to pay." Positioning his cruiser, front end out, beside his truck, he silenced the engine, got out and unlocked his front door.

“Absolutely. This is strictly business, Tex. You’re a man I can trust. And, just to be clear, she’s not on the market.”

“Neither am I,” he answered curtly.

Crossing into the kitchen, Tom sank into a chair at the round table. He flicked what looked to be Stephen’s vocabulary test across the oaken surface and grimaced when it stuck. Probably pancake syrup.

Terse radio call sounded from Jack’s cruiser. ‘This is Laurelton, reporting patient complaint of theft, Laurelton Regional.’

“This is Baker-97. 10-4 on that call, I am 10-17, be there in five.” Jack expelled a weighty sigh. “Listen, got to catch another bad guy before shift’s end. I’ll text Tracy’s contact info to you. Get back with me to confirm the arrangement.”

“Yes, sir, Sarge—“ Tom caught himself. “Uh, Jack. Will do.”

Following initial call to Jack’s sister, he obtained her address and arranged to meet on a week day when they’d both be off. His GPS led him to a modest one-story, red brick home in a low risk neighborhood, close to Highway 127. He verified the address of the residence and parked along the curb near a sidewalk that hemmed the front yard. Jagged granite stepping-stones lead from the top of the inclined driveway to her front door. Two white columns adorned a shady front porch. Aside from a lawn that begged for crab grass killer, the landscaping boasted several mature, flowering bushes lacing the front windows, a couple of maples, and a Dogwood tree.

“Nice place. Should sell easily.”

Tom knocked gently. No answer. He peered through the gauze of fabric covering a sidelight window beside the polished front door and knocked again. Behind the door, soft

footsteps shuffled on hardwoods. A woman, possibly late twenties greeted him, wearing denim shorts, a gray, baggy top, and flashy sandals. He made mental note: *Occupant did not check first to see who was knocking*. Blond hair framed her smooth complexion and draped over her shoulders. Her jewel blue eyes and dimples were striking. He disregarded a nagging familiarity and extended a formal hand. “Afternoon. You Tracy, Jack Cassidy’s sister?”

“Yes. And you must be...” She pulled a tattered piece of paper from her shorts pocket and glanced at it. “Tom DeLaney, the painter, handyman guy. With what company?”

“No company. Jack’s my supervisor. Said you needed help.”

“Wait.” She narrowed her eyes, gathered her hair and bunched it on top of her head with a hair tie.

“You’re a cop?”

Her caustic tone slammed against his chest, striking his memory. Ah. The ‘I don’t need any help’ hot dog woman. Thunder rumbled within the haze of gray-white sky. Tom stiffened his posture, curling his fingers to a fist at his side. “I am. Is that a problem?”

“No. No problem.”

She lied poorly. Her brisk response singed his pride. He scrambled for an escape from his obligation. But no way could he expect to advance in rank if he refused to help his superior officer’s sister. Even if she was the hot dog woman. At least Tracy was easy on the eyes.

Strictly business, DeLaney. The inner reprimand slapped him hard.

With a toss of her head, she motioned for him to follow her inside.

“You work at the hospital?” he asked, studying her confident stride.

She stopped, turned on her feet and faced him. “I do. How’d you know?”

Their eyes tangled. “We’ve met.”

Those jewel blues peered through slits as she angled her stare. “Met?”

“The hot dog stand.” He riveted out the facts. “You and some guy were arguing. He proposed. You refused his offer. He got angry and peeled off.” Wise move.

She leaned back on one leg, tapped her toe, and interlaced her arms high at her waist.

“That was you?”

He nodded.

“You remember all that?”

“I’m a cop.”

“Yeah. A cop.” Her sardonic tone spoke of something buried deep. He did the mental profiling...a brother-in-law enforcement, a cop father slain in the line of duty, as she’d so curtly already informed him. If he’d said he was a carpenter, Tom bet she’d not have hacked at him with the same saucy response. The cost of the badge.

As she spun on her heels, her lengthy, ponytail snapped over her shoulder as though she’d tried to clear the air. Her flip flops punctuated an annoyed stride.

Following her lead, Tom trudged through her entry way and shadowed her while she showcased both the outside decking, rotted windowsills, and the interior. Stepping into the guest bedroom, Tracy smoothed her hand along the wall. “My mom—who’s also my realtor—claims I need color around here, but nothing flashy, garish, juvenile. Keep it tasteful, warm and inviting. Like what a family might like, I guess.” She shrugged and bit her lip.

The white walls piqued curiosity. Almost seemed clinical, a woman afraid to let life inside. “Understood. You in a hurry to sell?”

He followed her subtle movement as she pressed a hand to her abdomen. “Somewhat. I’ve been approached about working at an emergency department at a hospital in Durham. They’re creating a position that won’t begin until first of March, but with this sluggish market, I want to list my house long before that.”

“I see. But why leave your family, your hometown?” Tom said, assigning Jack’s questions.

“Laurelton is a great community, a wonderful place to raise a family. Commerce is strong and growing, recently awarded All America City. But it’s time to make a new life for myself.”

The cop in him knew she wasn’t spilling all. Her answers sounded rehearsed. But there’d been no crime committed. He’d not earned the right to pry into private affairs. Back to business. “You consider what you’re willing to pay for painting the interior, securing planks in the deck, and replacing window sills and we’ll go from there.”

She returned a pensive nod and escorted Tom to the door. Turning to leave, he traced the lines of her beautiful face with his eyes and waved a subtle good-bye before traipsing down the driveway to his truck.

Starting his engine, he hissed and fumed, unleashing a reprimand. “You’ve done it again, become obligated to a woman with keep-out issues, who refused the suit and tie’s sincere, but sloppy proposal. As concern for Tracy’s well-being niggled its way into his heart, he donned that virtual Kevlar, clenched his hand on the steering wheel, and gunned

his engine...clipping the back bumper of another vehicle as it rounded the corner at the end of her street.

Of the nearly one hundred twenty LPD cops on staff, why did Jack have to be the first responder?

Chapter Three

Lingering clouds blanketed an expansive mid-day September sky following a brief, early morning drizzle. The haze of sunlight sliced refractive rays through the cloud cover, creating a gauze of moist heat. Another text from Robbie. *Marry me, babe.* He'd persisted like a hound dog since early that morning before his flight out of Charlotte whisked him out west to a pharmaceutical sales conference. The tension of being unable to accept twisted into a cruel knot. Unraveling it, she renewed her own vow. *Do life on your own. Love can't be trusted.*

On her day off, her task list shoved aside all non-essential activity. She could hardly justify the time to cheer on Jack and Wes, along with Marcos and LeShawn, while they played a friendly game of football at the rec center soccer field. But Jack insisted. At least Tracy could enjoy the company of Michelle, Ronni, and Jack's pregnant wife, Rachel, who was free to discuss the joy of new life.

A few yards from the perimeter of the soccer field, Tracy flapped a quilted blanket across the grass and laid it flat. "Good to see you, Rachel."

Beaming, Rachel hugged her neck. "You, too."

Hiking the hem of her jersey knit, high-waisted maxi dress, Tracy sat on the blanket. Leaning back, she stretched her legs long.

"Sure we can't talk you out of leaving?" Rachel pouted.

"Afraid not. Plans are firming up." Not quite, Nightingale.

Tracy straightened her back. Was she showing? Though she'd shared the news with Wes, Jack still didn't know. Guilt sandpapered her insides. He'd invested the last thirteen years as stand-in Dad, honoring his promise to protect Dad's only daughter, Sweet Stuff, a

nickname duly assigned for being sweetly sandwiched between two brothers. If only she hadn't disregarded Cassidy family values, but she and Robbie, well, they'd messed up.

Directing her stare at Jack, center field, Tracy rolled onto her knees and stood. "Be right back. I've got to talk with Jack a minute." Emboldened by Michelle's nod and Ronni's wink, she tramped across the flattened field grass. The hem of her dress brushed the gold rhinestones of her sandals.

She tossed a wave at Wes in the distance. That endearing, wide-mouthed smile of his stilled the pumping of her heart. Little bro, a musician married to his sweetheart, Abigail, embodied a teen idol persona with gelled and spiked, bleach blond and natural brown streaked hair, shaved close along the sides.

Wes jogged her direction and embraced her. "Hey, T. How're you doing?"

"Good, uh, thanks. Concert in Asheville went well?"

"Fantastic! At the altar call, dozens of people came forward. Abigail and I sold nearly fifty copies of our CD. We're pretty stoked." Gratitude filtered into his velvet brown eyes as he leaned back and laughed easy.

"That's awesome." She peered over his shoulder, targeted Jack who stood several yards behind him. "Listen, we'll catch up later. I've still got to tell Jack that I'm...about the..."

She raised her brows. "You know." Nerves snatched her words.

"Oooo-hhh, that," he said, nodding. "Gotcha. Praying he receives it well."

Praying. Always praying.

Crossing the field, Tracy approached Jack from behind and placed a gentle hand to his back. Tossing his head her direction, he spit and darkened the front of her dress. He jerked back, his eyes rounding. "Oh, man. Didn't see you coming."

Remembering her need for grace, she choked back a rising expletive and relaxed her tone. “No, no. My fault entirely. I should’ve given you a heads up.”

He leaned in to kiss her cheek, upping the difficulty of exposing her pregnancy. “I guess you heard about Tom’s little mishap with Mom’s sedan on his way out of your neighborhood yesterday?”

She hadn’t. But she sure welcomed the comedic relief as Jack described the scene. “You let him off, right?”

“No way. Failure to control vehicle, improper turn infraction.” Narrowing his stare, Jack rubbed his chin. “The thing is, I was Tom’s secondary training officer. He’s a meticulous driver. He had to be preoccupied when he left your place. Any clues?”

“None. But speaking of Tom … I do wonder why you left out the little detail about your so-called repair guy being a co-worker.”

“So what?”

She leaned back, flickering her eyes. “What do you mean, ‘so what,’ Jackson Garrett?”

He raised his hands in surrender. “I plead innocent.”

“You send me a law enforcement officer recognized for, among other dangerous acts, dragging a woman out of a burning vehicle during his thirteen-year service with SAPD, though sometimes hesitates at domestic calls. And *deee-vorced* after a measly eight-year marriage, raising a rascally-brained, fourteen-year-old son. What does that tell you, huh?”

Jack grinned, stepped close. “It tells me two things. One, you’ve gone to extreme measures to study this guy, which suggests strong interest, and—”

She squared her shoulders. “It does no such thing, I simply—”

Mimicking a traffic cop at a snarled four-way intersection, Jack flipped a palm and turned his deep hazel gaze away. “Hup. Don’t interrupt interrogation proceedings.”

How’d he overtaken the wheel of conversation?

“And two, you maintain the false assumption that a divorced guy has something dreadfully wrong with him before you know all the facts.”

A rebuttal seeped through Tracy’s clenched teeth. “You know very well I’m not a fan of becoming a widow.” She fluttered her hand over her shoulder. “Bye-bye, dear. Hope you survive your shift today’. Whoo-hoo. Real romantic.”

“Mom knew what she was doing when she answered the call to love Dad. She has no regrets. Besides, you’ve got Robbie. Perfectly safe.” A pensive gaze dawned. “Impulsive, prideful, and stupid, but safe,” he smirked.

The distant, jagged mountain scape drew Tracy’s gaze. She released a breath. Silence filled the electrified air between them.

Jack dipped his head, piercing her with a quizzical stare. “Am I right?”

“Yes. I have Robbie.” The lie churned her stomach. “But listen, Jack, about that, there’s something I need to tell you.”

“Hold up.” He turned to LeShawn. “You three yayhoos get to practicing. I’ll be there in a minute.” He tossed the football to LeShawn with a swift underhand then turned back to Tracy. The cop in him searched her eyes again. “What is it?”

“I’ve been meaning to tell you … well, it turns out I’m—” A sharp car door slam chopped the fat off the weighty sentence. *Pregnant*. The word pinged inside her brain, begging for release. She turned and shaded her eyes with her hand.

Tom, her six-foot-two, Texas repair guy, approached center field in knee-length, black athletic shorts and a faded maroon T-shirt. Corded muscles rippled along his forearms. Wisely restrained by a leash, an intense and stout dog with tan and black fur trotted in step at Tom's feet, its sharply pointed ears pricked forward. Tom fastened reflective shades over his eyes, a blueish green as she recalled. *No, a captivating blueish green.*

On the other side of the dog a younger version of Tom ambled in step beside him. He stood nearly as tall but with leaner muscle build. A ball cap shadowed his eyes. Tracy's typically cool temperature warmed to simmering. She faced Jack, thumbed over her shoulder. "You invited him?"

Jack's eyes blazed. "The man has a name."

She stiffened. "I'm well aware of his name." And his thick, raven hair, the slight dusting of whiskers, broad shoulders and strong build ... and that maverick smile. *Enough, Cassidy.* The guy wears a badge for a living.

"He also happens to be a friend, so watch your disrespect. I'd trust Tom with my life."

Tracy knew that honor wasn't easily bestowed.

Jack turned to flash a smile and waved them over.

"Fine. But he's also an employee who's being paid to work on his days off so I can sell my house."

Jack touched her arm. "Take it easy. He'll get it done."

Curiosity eased her stiff shoulders. "Who's the handsome kid?"

"Stephen. His son."

Spitting image.

As Tom, Stephen and the dog approached, the overhead sun awakened, spread like a cotton comforter across the field, and drew their shadows long behind them. The dog stood unflinching with its body rolled forward, tail raised, and mouth shut as if processing information.

She lowered the back of her hand in front of its snout. The dog sniffed and relaxed his stance. Its cautious gaze languished to tender melancholy. She glanced at Tom, “Retired narc agent?”

Tom exchanged a look with Stephen who returned a grin.

“Yes. His name is Sig, a Belgian Malinois,” Tom said.

She gingerly fingered the thick, wiry fur at his neck. A long, pink tongue drooped from his unhinged jaw, exposing sharp teeth to form a crooked smile.

Jack swiped sweat from his forehead with the sleeve of his T-shirt. “So, what’d you need to tell me, Sweet Stuff?”

So much for unleashing the weighty news.

Deflated, Tracy stood, distanced herself from Sig, and rolled her gaze at Jack, “Nothing. It can wait.” She lumbered back to her shady spot along the perimeter of the field, her confession hardening to cement inside. Settling onto her quilt beside Ronni and Michelle, she shook a silent head, leaned back on her hands, and sighed.

Slouched in a camp chair, Rachel secured a straw hat on her head with her hand and rotated her ankles.

Sitting upright, Ronni shook a manicured fist in the air. “I come to see you whip some butts, babe. You de man!”

Michelle cupped a hand around her mouth. “*Si, si! Marcos es mi guapo hermoso!*”

“Jack, Jack, he’s the man! If he can’t win, no one can!” Rachel cheered.

Arcing the football far and high in the air, Jack found no receivers. The ball thudded to the ground, pinged, and teetered across the field, and landed at Tracy’s feet.

Stephen raced after it.

She stood, scooped it into her hands, and planted her feet into the ground.

Stephen’s rapid clip slowed to a walk, his breathing labored.

Tom hastened steps and hurtled beside him.

Tracy traced the shape of Tom’s jaw, his neck, thick arms. “Hello, Tom.”

He returned a wave. She switched her eyes to Stephen. Passing the ball between her hands, she inched closer, scrutinizing. “What’s your name, kid?”

She knew.

“Stephen.”

With the face of an angel.

Tom leaned into Stephen’s ear and whispered. A knowing grin rose on Stephen’s face as he fixed his gaze on her. “She’s the one.” He raised his palms to Tracy. “Pass it here?”

Eyeing Jack over Tom’s shoulder, Tracy coaxed a mischievous idea. “Do me a favor first.” A rebel grin tipped the edges of her lips.

Beneath the clumps of thick, black hair brushing Stephen’s forehead, his face went blank. Like computer screen blank. “Not if it’s illegal.” Father and son exchanged a knuckle touch.

Passing the ball between her hands, Tracy smirked. She stepped closer and directed a finger at Jack.

Stephen followed it with his eyes.

"I'll throw the ball to Officer Cassidy," she instructed. "When he reaches for it, give him a good, hard tackle."

Stephen examined the sodden grass beneath his laced, athletic shoes then searched Tom's eyes. "This won't earn me a grounding, will it?"

Tom shook his head and laughed low. "No, but considering he's my supervisor, it might earn me one."

"Well, you did smash into their mom's car ..."

Pride squared Tom's shoulders. "I didn't smash it, son. It was unsafe movement."

"Which earned you a citation."

Tom set his jaw in a hard line. "I suggest you quit while you're behind."

"Yeah, whatever. So, can I tackle Officer Jack or not?"

The father-son banter swept a sweet breeze through Tracy's soul, stirring it awake. "Listen, just let him know it's a gift," she interjected. "From me." She placed a hand to her chest.

"Count on it, Miss Cassidy."

Satisfaction rippled through her. She spotted Jack center field. "Hey, Sarge!" she called, waving the ball overhead. When Jack met her gaze, she thrust it toward him with a high, spiraling arc.

Pumping his arms, Jack jogged hard after it.

Eyes locked on Jack, Stephen lunged at his waist, leveling him to the ground, then scrambled to his feet, clearing space between him and Jack. He promptly aimed a finger back at Tracy. "Her idea, Officer Jack."

Jack moved his fiery gaze from Stephen to Tracy. "You'd better watch your back, Sweet Stuff."

Undaunted, she snickered. *You think that's a tough hit, wait till I tell you I'm pregnant.*

Sucking in hard breaths, pain darkened Stephen's countenance. Concern raced up Tracy's spine.

Tom squeezed Stephen's shoulder, angling his stare. "What's the matter?"

He stood erect, lifted a water bottle to his mouth, and guzzled. "Just a little dizzy, short of breath. It's nothin'."

Unusual behavior for an athletic kid who, like his father, appeared to spend a good bit of time in the gym. And Mom always said nothing means something. Especially when spoken by an adolescent. A few diagnoses flicked across her brain. But this wasn't the emergency department. And the kid wasn't her patient. She reprimanded herself for caring.

The early morning fall sunrise eased over the rise of distant trees and traced patches of white clouds smattered across a blue sky. Nearing the end of his night shift, Tom pulled out of the trailer park, and peered into his rearview mirror.

A haggard and disheveled female sat in his backseat, wrists handcuffed behind her back. In the call for service, the woman had given her name as Therese Cayden. Dark circles hung like crescent moons beneath her eyes. Smokey smudges stained her lids. The smell of nicotine in her clothing and breath wafted from the back of his squad car. Disinfectant spray needed.

She complained that her old man had mistreated her, supposedly stolen her cash, personal belongings, and verbally abused her two kids.

“I told you, it ain’t my fault. My old man, he—”

“Save your story for the magistrate.” *People. Don’t. Change.*

Tom hastened his cruiser to headquarters and escorted the woman through the bay into booking with a firm grip on her gangly, upper arm. Leaving her with the officer in the two-cell holding area, he shut the hefty, secure door and lumbered down the hall to his open mail slot. He retrieved a paper addressed to all available officers in Patrol Zone D, scanned it, his eyes snagging on key words.

... officers will be expected to participate in the November outreach, a partnership with Safe Shores Woman’s Rescue Center, an effort for law enforcement to have a positive impact on distressed woman in our community ...

PACT commanders, Lieutenant Hildebrand, Sergeant Cassidy

Twelve years of law enforcement cynicism banged inside his chest. He listed with his back against the wall, eyes rolling upward. If only these women didn’t remind him of his own mother. As if being San Antonio’s city manager wasn’t challenging enough for Dad, Randall DeLaney had also endured the humiliation of a wandering wife.

To show his thanks to Chief Bernhardt for hiring him upon Dad’s recommendation to Laurelton’s city manager, Tom thought he could stomach a few volunteer hours of sacrificial service. Returning to his apartment, he sank headlong onto his bed and fell into a deep sleep. When he woke four hours later, he scrounged a measure of compassion about the whole volunteer thing and turned his attention to Tracy. The hot dog woman had hired him to prep her house for market. Time to get started.

He pulled on his paint-splashed denim shorts, an old T-shirt, and worn shoes and drove to Tracy’s house. From inside his pocket, he pulled out the extra house key she’d left with

Jack to put in Tom's box at the P.D. He let himself in, hauling paint supplies, a gallon of pale, meadow green paint, and drop cloths to the guest bedroom. A country western tune played from his music app playlist on his phone. He propped his cell on an open windowsill, then moved furniture to the center of the room and draped it with sheets. After scrubbing the walls and applying blue paint tape along the edges, he climbed the stepladder and angled the dipped paint brush into the corner near the ceiling, stroking the bristles down the wall as if the house were his own.

Outside the front window, the sound of tires pinched against cement.

Tom peered through the window.

A ruby pearl sedan scudded up Tracy's inclined driveway. Mrs. Cassidy exited the vehicle, the woman whose car he damaged. In one hand, she balanced a small plate. Her bobbed, silver and gold hair enhanced her soft, deep brown eyes. Matching her sunny countenance, she wore a short-sleeve, pale yellow shirt tucked into a fitted, knee-length skirt, and low-rise heels. Professional, crisp, and confident. Like fine whiskey in a teacup.

A 'yoo hoo' sounded outside the bedroom.

Tom stepped down the ladder to silence his music.

"No, no, Officer DeLaney, you don't have to hush that on my account. Douglas and I have always enjoyed cowboy music." Her smile brightened the room as she entered. "Tracy told me you'd be here. I hope I'm not intruding."

Tom flashed a palm. "Intruding? No, ma'am, not at all." He balanced the paint brush on the edge of the can. Green paint dribbled down the side.

"Listen, I won't keep you. I've got houses to show but wanted to bring you a little something."

Mrs. Cassidy extended the plate. The sweet smell of baked goodness drew him close, stirred a dormant need. "They're my prize-winning banana muffins. My husband Douglas said they made him feel like a ten-foot cop."

The taste of grace. "Thanks. I appreciate that."

"My pleasure." She offered the plate. He took a muffin, wondering at the pale-colored dots sprinkled throughout. "What are those?" he asked, pointing to the crusted top.

"Millet. A smart carb with lots of fiber, low sugar. Should keep you and your son in tip-top shape."

He bit into the muffin, savoring the sweet taste of banana and crunch of millet. Her feminine nurturing satiated his hungry soul. "But you didn't have to...after I—"

Mrs. Cassidy shook her head and clucked her tongue. "Oh, nonsense. That little scratch? It's just a car, for heaven's sake. I insisted Jackson drop charges. And please, call me Cate."

Behind Cate, Tracy entered the doorway wearing purple scrubs and a puzzled expression. As she edged in, overhead light caught her eyes, flashing them crystal blue. Her blond mane was secured in a tie at her neck. Turning her stare to Cate, relief swished across her face. "Mom. I'm glad it's you. I saw an unfamiliar car on the driveway and kinda freaked. That must be your rental ... because of the ..." Her eyes grazed Tom's face, one brow arched in judgment. "wreck."

"It is." Cate patted Tracy's shoulders. "But all is well. Thank God for manageable problems." Before she turned to leave, she finger-wiggled a wave. "Bye now. Tom, you and your son enjoy the muffins."

"Yes, ma'am. And thanks again. It means a lot. Really." *More than you know.*

Cate smiled. "I'll leave you two," she said, scooting out the door.

Interlocking her arms, Tracy leaned on one leg. "Huh. Mom baked her prize-winning banana muffins, did she?"

"Howdy," said Tom.

A nonplussed stare froze on her face.

"Howdy is what we Texans say when greeting someone."

"My apologies. So then, howdy back." She circled her gaze, scanning the wall. "Wow, Tom. This isn't the Biltmore Estate. It doesn't have to be perfect."

He shook his head. "Anything worth doing is worth doing right."

"Yeah, but you're making my house hard to give up."

Her words nipped at his heart.

She placed a fist to her mouth, coughed, and steadied herself with a hand against the wall.

His inner-cop closed in. "You all right?"

"Sure. Why?"

He stepped closer. "Because you don't look it."

She shrugged. "It's nothing."

Not buying it.

"Tracy, what's wrong?"

With the toe of her shoe, she drew an invisible line across the rippled drop cloth. She sucked in a breath and patted her stomach. "The paint fumes irritate my lungs and ... they're not good for the ... baby."

He narrowed his eyes, dropped them to her abdomen, and jumped back to an unflinching gaze. “The marriage-proposal guy?”

“Robbie. And yes.” Lowering her head, her weathered voice splat onto the floor.

“What did Jack say about this?”

She bit her lip. Guilt filtered into her jewel blues, dimming the intensity. “He doesn’t know yet.”

The acrid taste of duplicity burned Tom’s throat. Her fear, like an assailant, edged him closer. “Why not?”

“I’ve tried. Twice. But because I’ve dishonored Dad, I’ve dishonored Jack. He won’t take this well.”

A small dose of compassion trickled into his heart, landed on his tongue. “I see your dilemma. But when he finds out you’re pregnant—and he will—did you think about how dishonored he’ll feel that you kept this from him, denied him the privilege of taking care of you?”

She raised her chin and nodded gently, the vulnerability in her eyes loosening a brick from the wall around his heart. She stepped close, nearly toe to toe, and scraped something from his unshaven chin with her fingernail. “Looks like you’ve got a bit of dried paint here.”

“Thanks, nurse.”

Withdrawing her hand, she smiled easy, then gazed away, contemplation shaping her profile. “Would you, you know, go with me when I tell Jack?” Her pleading gaze feathered his heart.

A call to assist another stubborn soul? What if she made a fool of him? Like Deborah? Like Mom. Trapped between a call to assist or keep the pieces of his heart safely guarded behind his Kevlar. He was already obligated to participate in the Safe Shores event. Why should he risk more?

Sacrifice. Protect. Serve.

“Sure,” he nodded.

And there he’d gone and done it, allowed this girl with keep out issues to slip beneath his Texas-sized wingspan. As if standing so close to her neck, inhaling her gardenia scent, hadn’t been enough to make a mess of his brain.