

In a Moment

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PREFACE

“Come on, Lindy, come on!” a voice commanded. “You can do it. Breathe! You can start again. I know you can!” I felt nothing as I hovered above, watching the doctor tape a device around my mouth, the cord stretching to a machine. The upside of having my spirit separated from my body was freedom from the pain I’d experienced during the accident.

My hand received a squeeze and I turned to my Grandfather who had been beside me since my death, moments before.

“Now I’m not so sure I want to return,” I admitted. My body was jolting, blood was on my forehead and cheek, my ribs were black. Lines and pricks marked locations where glass had hit and embedded themselves in my skin.

But that was nothing compared to the images I’d seen. The quick, staccato spurts of disjointed visuals scared me more than a damaged body. A woman leaning on her side on a gurney, frozen with grief. Another being held down against her will, her back to me. A man, sitting in an elegant office, torn apart inside but pretending to be in control. A heavy-set woman behind a wall of glass, on the phone, counseling someone in a low, concerned voice. Me, walking beside a man on a beach, the sunset fading as the moon rose on the horizon. The faces were blurred, but the feelings were acutely clear; grief, heartache, pain, but also compassion, joy and love.

The soft, loose skin on Grandfather’s cheeks dropped into his lips as his eyes glimmered.

“That’s a common feeling when it comes time to reenter the body,” he said as though I’d be comforted. I wasn’t, and he seemed to know this. “I

can tell you that your physical self will be just fine.”

“But the inside? My emotions and those who I saw?” He smiled, the hand that was holding mine started to release.

“Come on Lindy!” urged the doctor with such force I looked down at him. A flood of information passed to me from the doctor who feverishly worked on my motionless body. I could sense him using all his known techniques and skills in this moment to bring me back from the dead. He was fighting for my life in a way I though was admirable.

As if sensing my mood, Grandfather squeezed my hand again, his gaze firm and endowed with a faith far greater than what I possessed. “You are necessary. It is part of why you’ve made your choice.”

I wanted to protest that I wasn’t strong enough to endure what I saw before me, but didn’t have the chance. The warmth of my Grandfather’s hand slipped away with his image. That instant, the doctor shouted and I felt a coldness followed by excruciating pain; a million nerve endings manually reconnecting.

“That’s it! We have her heartbeat,” the doctor said triumphantly. I was lying on the operating room table, looking up at a silhouette of my Grandfather’s face.

“Be patient and trust your inner promptings,” he said faintly. “The noise of your life will try to down them out, but *listen*,” he emphasized. “And Lindy. You will find love again, I promise.” As I strained and tried to cry out for him not to leave, another face came into focus; a man with white hair and green eyes.

“That’s right. You’re getting stronger by the second. In, out, in, out.” He kept coaching me, drawing a hand over my eyes as I tried to open them. “Don’t try to look now. You will see soon enough.”

Pain raced through my body and I heard myself choke, then scream with agony, the point where my eternal self made peace with my physical shell. Gradually, my aching eased into an exhausted, but stable state, the words of my Grandfather echoing in my mind.

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“You’re going to make it, Lindy,” the doctor said confidently, as if he knew what I was going through. “You’re right here with us, and you aren’t leaving.”

I was returning to a world unlike the one I left, and I had asked for it. He said I’d find love *again*. In my haze of pain, I wondered why would I need to find something I already had?

CHAPTER 1

“Well, Lindy Gordon, are you ready to hear what happened?” It was my doctor, Jake Redding, the one who’d been on call during my accident. I nodded, trying to focus on his face. I wondered if his insistence at using my first and last name was to keep reminding me of who I was.

“Please call me Lindy,” I said, my voice rough, hoping to reassure him—and myself.

“Of course,” he answered politely. “Focus on me so I can watch your eye movement as I speak.” I did. The doctor had smooth skin and linen white hair, coarse and thick on the top and the sides, like he’d forgotten his last appointment with the hair dresser.

“To start, a car struck the cab you were in and your head smashed the window. Do you remember that?”

“Not the hit,” I answered slowly, starting to move my head.

“Don’t,” he cautioned, but his advice came too late. A spike shot from my shoulder blade to my temple. “When you came in, you were in pretty bad shape and we wanted to prevent you from going into cardiac arrest. We put you in a blue suit to cool you down, like an ice pack. You had it on from head to toe.”

“You refrigerated me?” I asked.

Dr. Redding chuckled. “In a manner of speaking, yes. No one knew how long your brain had been without oxygen, so we attempted to cool it down. It’s quite evident you have one that still works.”

A functioning brain was good. A working body was better. In a panicked rush, I twitched my fingers, then my toes. I inhaled to speak, and caught myself.

“My chest,” I gasped, feeling like I had a boulder sitting on top of me from my sternum up.

“Two of your ribs were cracked, but they will heal. Your body should recover without long-term effects.”

Thank you, Lord. Thank you, *thank you*.

“My head,” I groaned.

“You hit so hard that technically, you died.” He paused.

I had a fleeting image of seeing him, standing over me, working so hard. “You told me to stay with you. To breathe.”

“That’s right.” The doctor held my eyes and to my relief, didn’t give me a look as though I’d lost what was left of my mind. “Do you recall much else?”

“My Grandfather,” I answered automatically. “He was...I thought he was holding my hand.”

“I imagine he was.” I glanced around. It was dark outside, black almost, even with streetlights on. It was also quiet, as though it was the dead of night.

“How can you be so sure?”

“When you work in the trauma unit of a city like San Francisco, you see, hear, and experience things that can’t be fabricated.” He stood, telling me he was going to check my forehead. I winced, and he apologized, but continued working. “Your husband kept vigil during the six hours after you arrived, but then we forced him to leave so you could rest. I liked him, by the way. Anyone with grey hair is a kindred spirit.”

I tried to concentrate, worried my mind wasn’t functioning. “Grey hair?” It was my doctor’s turn to look at me, a concerned expression on his face.

“Yes, Alan. White hair, short, trim and fit looking man.” I continued to stare at him. “If he wasn’t your husband...” I could see the anxiety on his face, worried he’d allowed an individual in the room that didn’t have my approval.

“Yes—no, I mean, it was fine he was here. He’s my CFO, not my husband, who is Patrick.” I could read the man’s face as clearly as if he said the words. He was wondering why Alan was at the hospital instead of Patrick.

“Normally we don’t let anyone in who can’t produce documentation of their relationship to the victim, but this is the city, and to a degree we take people at their word. In this case, Alan said he didn’t know if you were going to live or die, and he wasn’t going to leave your side.”

Nice of him. I could just see him going toe-to-toe with Dr. Redding. “How do you think Alan knew about the accident?”

Dr. Redding slid the notepad into the pocket of his white smock. “The news. Apparently, you’re an important person in this little town of ours. Give me your husband’s number and I’ll have one of the nurses call him. If we do hear back from him, I’ll let the nurses station know he can see you, even if it’s during the off hours.” The doctor walked to the door and asked if I wanted the lights on or off.

“Dimmed,” I told him, “not completely off.”

He adjusted the light to my preference, pausing as his fingers rested on the light switch. “I’ve seen a lot of people die in this hospital, and those who survive usually have good stories to tell. Tomorrow I’ll return and see how much you remember.”

#

The next day my head still hurt as I focused on Dr. Redding. He’d asked me to recount everything I remembered from the day of the accident. When he sat beside me, notepad in hand, I was worried of failure before I even began.

The morning began with Patrick teasing me for changing outfits because they were tight, while I’d ribbed him back for spending money on clothes. Granted, he was a vice president of sales at a software company,

but he spent twice as much as I did, I had a public relations company to run. My attire wasn't discretionary, it was required. He argued otherwise.

"Not a new wardrobe every quarter," I'd muttered.

After the mini-argument, I'd also been searching for a missing purse or something else. What was it, I tried to remember.

"My watch," I said, relieved. My Rolex was gone and I knew it was around the house—somewhere, along with the purse. When I asked Patrick about them, he blamed the cleaning people. Another argument, but I refrained from telling that part to Dr. Redding, because it led into a third conversation. My mind was blank for a minute, then it came to me. "I received another request from a woman to help her non-profit."

"Do you remember her name?" prompted Dr. Redding. He was vitally interested in the details, no matter how seemingly insignificant. I felt my eyes squint with concentration.

"Yes. Kay Abrahms. Patrick was adamant I not sacrifice a non-profit account for a paying client. Sorry," I said self-consciously, glancing at up at him. "TMI."

He smirked. "I'm not going to record the content," he assured me. "It's the details and quality I'm worried about. What next?"

"I think normal work stuff until I got a boot on my tire late morning. I had to go pay a fine during lunch." That raised another image. "The parking ticket lady," I semi-groaned, a rush of anger heating my cheeks. "I begged her to let me have my car and get the boot off before the end of the day."

"And she refused your request, I take it?" he asked with humor and sympathy.

"It's San Francisco," I said dryly. "On my way out, I called Patrick to see if he was in the city, because I thought he said he had a meeting. I wanted to go to have a late lunch," I continued, trying to recall why. "He couldn't. His voice message said the client was running late." I paused, trying to recall what came after. "I listened to a voice message from my brother Charlie."

“Very good!” Dr. Redding said. “Did you call him back?”

“I don’t think so,” but I couldn’t recall why. “I do remember calling my cousin Ann, and another friend Vanessa.” The recollections were coming faster now and my talking kept pace. I left messages, reminding Vanessa to avoid this guy we met at a conference and telling Ann I was worried I hadn’t heard from her. “Oh! And my banker, Darcy. She’d invited us to an anniversary party of some sort.” And on this, I was crystal clear. I declined because Patrick refused to go. He hated events where he didn’t know anyone and the objective wasn’t closing a new account.

“All of this happened in the cab?”

“The car is when I make a lot of calls.” He nodded, gesturing for me to continue. “The cab moved through the intersection, turning onto Market as a trolley cleared the view. Out of the corner of my eye, a red dart zoomed directly toward us. The cab driver didn’t see it. I yelled at him to stop and to swerve...and the bus came right for my side. That’s it.”

The doctor made notes on his paper. As I watched him, I felt dreamy. “My Grandfather...he took me away from all the people. I think my Grandma Ovi was there, and others, but it’s blurry.” I blinked a few times, trying to clarify the image, but it was gone. “I’m sorry. I hope that doesn’t sound silly.”

“No need to apologize to me,” he said with an easy laugh. “From what my peers in the psychologist ward say, the mind needs to be able to handle what is locked inside, conscious or subconscious. If it can’t, it simply chooses to ignore the information that exists until you are ready to accept it. I will say this. You are one lucky woman. Few survive the type of head trauma that you endured without significant lasting damage.”

Dr. Redding had been gone only a few minutes when a female nurse in her late fifties entered the room. Her dark, wiry hair was pulled back in a modified French twist, the bun sitting to one side of her neck. She checked the drip hanging from its long, metal pole.

“By the way, your wedding ring had to be cut off right before you were

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put on ice. It's in the safe waiting for you." I touched the indentation, the ghostly white line on my ring finger visible in the darkened room. It always received more attention than I did.

I'd made it through a horrible accident alive with mind and body intact. I'd been given a second chance at life.

Yes, I was a very lucky woman.

CHAPTER 2

Sunday morning, Patrick's face was the first thing that came into focus.

"Nice to see you," he said softly. In his hand, he held a cup of coffee. His perennially tan face looked a little pale and he had missed a spot or two shaving.

"When did you get here?" I asked, my voice groggy.

"Just a few minutes ago. Coffee's still hot," he said, raising his cup slightly. "Can I get you anything? Some water?" I nodded, my tongue covered with a pasty film that the nurse said was a side effect of the medication I was taking. He gave me a cup and I gratefully took a few sips. "I came by after I got the message last night and stayed for a few hours, but you slept right through it."

"These drugs wipe me out." Which was good. My chest started aching when I tried to inhale a deep breath.

"Dr. Redding seems competent," Patrick remarked. "He told me about the ice."

My husband looked every bit the part of a successful professional, even in his casual, meridian blue Armani sweater. When my cousin Ann, my girlfriend Vanessa and I had first spotted him at a restaurant at The Boulevard down on the waterfront, he'd been having a business meeting and we were having a girl's lunch. After his guest left, he'd walked over, handed me his card, and we had our first date the next week. Six months later, we married in the penthouse suite of the Hoffman Hotel, the affair my wedding gift to him, a no-expense spared event that represented all that I'd come to love about San Francisco—good food, exquisite ambience and fun friends. Today, five years later, the only noticeable difference in the

man before me was the slight grey that had appeared above his ears and the softness of his belly. He wore both well, and I still found him as attractive as I did the first time I saw him.

I sipped the water as Patrick related what he'd been told, holding my free hand only by the fingertips, his palm damp.

“Why don't you take your jacket off?” I suggested.

“The doc doesn't want me to stay long.” Perplexed, I explained Dr. Redding relaxed the visiting hours just for him, but he shook his head. “I don't want to keep you from getting better.”

He sat forward in his chair, crossing his legs, bouncing one on the other. When he noticed me staring, he stopped jiggling. “Sorry, Lindy, I'm just so disgusted at myself for not being here for you the night of the accident. Tell me what happened.”

I related the entire sequence of events, from the time I left the house to waking up in the hospital. Patrick alternated running his hands through his hair and rubbing the tips of his fingers on his pants, the linen-cotton blend wrinkling a bit more each time.

“The whole thing makes me want to kill the guy who hit you. And what an idiotic cabby for not swerving in time.”

“He couldn't have. He turned but it was all over.”

“Just like you to defend the guy,” he said. “You're lying here having literally died, and he's roaming around without a scratch on his body.”

“Dr. Redding said the other driver did have some injuries.”

“But left the hospital that night,” he said, continuing to fume. “What planner in his right mind would put a turn lane where buses are waiting to come into the street?”

I encouraged him just to sit and hold my hand. He flapped his palms in the air and I retracted my request. He didn't want me to share in his anxiety. “How did your meeting go?” I asked. After all my trauma, it would be a double tragedy if the reason for him not picking me up had been a failure.

“Brad said we'll receive bonuses for exceeding the numbers.”

“That’s great,” I responded with as much enthusiasm as possible, my breathing shallow.

“It’s nothing compared to this,” he said, glancing at the IV. I tugged at his top, wanting him closer. He looked great and I told him so.

“Well, I couldn’t have you waking up to a frump.” He leaned forward, a look of contrition and guilt on his face. He explained his business meeting ran late because the client dickered over the last three percent he wanted off the sales price, his cellphone was off and he didn’t know about the accident until the following morning when he listened to the answering machine. Urgent messages had been left by the hospital, Alan and the cops.

“It’s okay, Patrick,” I consoled him, finding it funny that I was the one doing the comforting.

“It was so stupid of me,” he said. Then he went on again about the city planners. I let him rant, his words fading to background noise.

“I could use a hug,” I said, extending a limp hand.

Patrick rose, touching my shoulder lightly. “The doctor said to be careful about your upper body since it will take a while for it to heal.” When he pressed against my leg, my stomach clenched.

“What’s wrong? Do your legs hurt?”

I shook my head. “I feel more nausea than anything. Like being on a wretched sailboat. Must be the drugs they’re giving me.”

Patrick leaned against the bed, touching a bouquet of lilies and hydrangeas with blossoms the size of cantaloupes. Without asking, he picked up the card and read it. “She’s still after you?”

“Who?”

“Kay Abrahms, the woman you said has the children’s center over by the Potrero District and wants you to do the work for her center for free.”

“It’s called pro bono,” I interjected.

“Semantics. This one is from her, Adi and John. Who’s John?”

“Her son, I believe. A nice thought,” I said absently. Something struck me about the bouquet and senders. What was it?

The door opened and Dr. Redding entered. “The recent tests look good. Your heart is like a racehorse, Lindy, but we’re not taking any chances. We’re going to keep you a few more days.” I tried to feel the stitches on my temple through the bandages, but raising my arm pulled at my chest so I dropped it.

“You shouldn’t even be able to tell you were ever in an accident, and the cracked ribs didn’t puncture the skin so you can still wear your bathing suit.” The thought of being impaled by my own bones made me even more nauseous. “Other than the obvious, how are you feeling now?”

“Sick to my stomach.”

“Pregnancy will do that.” He glanced down at my wide eyes, divining that the news came as a surprise. He turned to Patrick, who sat stone-faced, his hands and eyes motionless.

“Lindy is pregnant?” Patrick asked, his voice flat. The man glanced between the two of us.

“I didn’t think to mention it before,” apologized the doctor. “It’s standard procedure to run a pregnancy test before we prescribe any medications.”

“But I’ve been on the pill for years,” I said automatically.

Dr. Redding raised a finger. “Most people aren’t aware birth control pills expire. That’s why they are only given out a few months at a time. Also, alcohol and some recreational drugs have been known to interfere with its effectivity. Of course, fate can also play a role.”

Unbelievable. It was a halo on the misfortune of the accident. “Any idea of how far along I am?”

“According to the hormone levels, I guess month three or four. But it’s only that, a guess. I’m no OB.”

As Dr. Redding left, he told Patrick that the pills were going knock me out, his subtle way of encouraging we end the conversation. After the door shut, Patrick leaned towards me. “Well, what are we going to do?”

“Okay, I’ve had zero time to think about this life-changing event, but

off the top of my head, I'll continue to work. I'll figure out a transition plan for the day-to-day work with Alan and the other managers, who have been leading the client accounts for years anyway. Your job won't be affected in the slightest, until after the baby is born, when sleep might become an issue." I started to smile but then saw his face.

"No," he said, interrupting me, his face anxious. "I didn't mean about work. I meant about your pregnancy."

"I've just started to answer you," I said calmly. "There is nothing to do but eat healthy and watch the baby grow."

"We can't have a child Lindy. Not now."

"Look," I started, mustering as much humor as possible. "It's not like we were planning on doing this, not until we purchased a house, but we've saved more than enough for that, so it's fate taking control, as the doctor said."

He stood, arms folded, staring me in the eye. "It's stupidity, Lindy. Not fate."

"Don't even go there, Patrick. I've been consistent about birth control and you know it." It was true. I shrugged, the lilt back in my voice. "Couples face unplanned pregnancies all the time and make it through."

"We have a lot of choices," he continued, the tenor of his voice changing to consultative, as though he were the hired expert talking reason to the belligerent client. "It's not our time, Lindy. Not now. We have another five or six weeks before it can be taken care of."

I jerked my hand away. "What you're suggesting isn't an option," I whispered, fighting back tears of anger.

A knock at the door was followed by a nurse who politely noted the time.

Patrick bent over me, whispering in my ear. "Look, we're dealing with a lot," he said. "Get some sleep."

I nodded, gulping down the air that had stuck in my throat. "Please call mom and dad, and also Charlie and Ann when you can. And Alan," I added

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as an afterthought. He agreed, giving me a kiss on the forehead.

The pills fell like rocks going down a barren hill as I swallowed. The man I loved, the man I married, was asking me to destroy a part of us.

CHAPTER 3

One week after the accident, I came home from the hospital. The rooms of the one-floor flat were warm and I went to the sliding glass doors to open them but stopped the moment I felt the pressure from my hand go to my arm then pull on my ribs. I had no idea how much I used my chest and mid-section before now. I stood there, looking down. The view was a rare one; unobstructed by trees or buildings, stretching from the top of Noe Valley looking over the colored rooftops of the homes below that spread like stepping stones down to the Mission District.

I had a whole new appreciation for what was before me.

It was just before ten, but the morning fog had already risen, revealing a neighborhood defined by the thin rim of homes overlooking art deco galleries, Asian food restaurants and hair salons. To the left was Capitol Hill, Russian Hill, Cow Hollow and the Presidio, each subsequent community more expensive than the last.

I'd be back to work starting on Monday and I was looking forward to it. The silence on the topic of my belly was oppressive.

"I can see your ribs now," Patrick remarked as he unrolled the bandage that circled my chest, his face changing from autumn pale to wintergreen as I lifted my arms. Between sleeping and the pain medication that curbed my appetite, I'd lost another ten pounds. He finished applying the bandage and left. I stayed in the bathroom, observing myself. I noticed the skin on my face was a shade lighter than my tan Coach bag, a bit sun weathered, with a few crows feet in the corner of my eyes and some vertical lines above my lips if I pushed them together.

I patted my cheeks. Somewhere underneath this layer was an attractive

person who used to regularly get compared to a tall Eva Mendes, the actress. A thick lock of brown hair fell across my cheek, curling under my chin. It could be my imagination, but my hair appeared lush, the amber highlights mixing with the brown as it did its best to cover my shoulders.

Joining Patrick in the kitchen, I scanned the counters and the dining room. “I don’t suppose you found the brown purse that went missing before the accident?” I asked, recalling my conversation with Dr. Redding, and the argument I’d had with Patrick the morning I was hit.

“No, and I called the Prada store to make sure.” Leave it to Patrick to mention the brand. Before I met him, I was brand clueless. I bought what I liked and what fit, as long as it was classic and well made. Once I mentioned to Ann and Vanessa that Patrick was my personal style director and Vanessa quipped Patrick did it for the appreciative stares, not the quality of the goods.

“You’re a trophy, face it,” she said.

I’d rolled my eyes. “Patrick loves me no matter what I wear or how heavy I am,” I’d responded at the time. As Patrick finished his cup of coffee, I wondered about those words. Heavier, yes, pregnant, maybe not so much. Our sex life had taken a hiatus over the last few months, which I attributed to our off-cycle work patterns, not my pant size.

“Take a look at that get-well card,” he said, pointing to the wall. Propped against it was a poster, covered with small handprints and scribbled, illegible names. I could see from my position it was from Kay Abrahms as well. “I’m glad you took my advice and turned her down, but if I recall correctly, you also turned down another potential client that same week, one that was paying.”

“That was John, her son.”

“One in the same?” he said, biting an apple. “Huh. Well, whatever. Tell me again why you wouldn’t take the project on?”

I pursed my lips at him. “Because corporate public relations and crisis communications are two very different things,” I reminded him. “One is

company launches and product introduction with all the basic, non-scandalous new hires and partnership announcements. Crisis communications is a niche market. Big issues, major damage to stocks, the pace is intense and failing to address the crisis in a timely manner can make or break a company.”

“Companies in a desperate situation will pay dearly for help.”

I nodded. “Yep, but I want to have a life and honestly I don’t need that kind of stress.” The few people I knew in the business were adrenaline junkies and single, the all-nighters and constant travel brutal on relationships.

“Crisis’ probably pay really, really well,” he mumbled, turning away, taking the card with him.

“Like I said, I want a life, not discussing why a new building cracked when we had a slight earthquake.”

“That’s what this John wanted you for?”

I laughed. “Yep, well, sort of. His family owns the building, but another construction firm built it. They were both in some hot water and he wanted PR help.” Patrick gave me a look that I interpreted as not understanding my rejection. “It all worked out, because I followed the story. It wasn’t structural, but cosmetic. The press had made it out to be more than it was, so their regular PR agency took care of it with a few on-site interviews.”

“Did you ever follow up with the guy, just to keep you in mind for the future?” I inhaled deeply, shaking my head, ending the discussion.

“Go the office,” I encouraged him, joining him by the front door. “I’m going to catch up on email.”

“Do that, and check up on Alan. Make sure he hasn’t stolen the company while you were in the hospital. It’s probably why he stood vigil over you.”

“Sure. I can just see Alan plotting the takeover as he hovered above my swollen face, looking down over his steel-framed glasses.” It was a ridiculous image. Maybe Patrick was suffering from residual guilt he felt

about not being at the hospital. The thought gave me a simple pleasure. He should feel bad.

I nudged him with my hip. “Go on.” When he left, I went back to bed, nestling under the covers as the cats pawed the comforter, kneading their own comfort zones. Getting a second chance at life had minimized the anxiety I used to feel at the notion of facing Patrick’s displeasure.

An image of my Grandfather’s face came to, and consciously or not, I felt my unborn child was the reason I was still alive.

My optimistic outlook continued throughout the weekend and increased when Patrick didn’t bring up the pregnancy. In fact, he went out of his way to go out and pick me up an order of meatloaf and potatoes from Fog City, explaining his elongated time away on a few errands he had to run, including the dry cleaners and post office. I’d not minded. I’d fallen asleep with Remus my black cat joining me, his purring near my neck as good as a lullaby.

Monday at 6 a.m., my chest felt fifty percent better, only hurting when I over extended myself. Patrick was by the door, briefcase in hand, anxious to leave. I’d delayed us because I spent extra time looking for my chocolate-colored sheepskin coat I’d purchased at Barney’s the year prior and which had inexplicably gone missing.

“It better not be with my purse and watch,” I muttered. Fall had officially arrived, misty, wet, fog dense and bone-chilling. Patrick heard my statement, reminding me he’d taken it to the dry cleaners before the accident.

“Sorry I haven’t picked it up yet. I’ll do it next time I’m in.” I took my black trench out of the closet, grateful for the fuzzy liner, getting us on our way. With luck, I’d have at least 45 minutes to go through my emails before the rest of the group arrived.

#

“Surprise!!”

A flash to my right confirmed that Samantha had captured my shock with her digital camera. The reception area was draped with streamers from the ceiling, and the floor of my office was covered with balloons. Alan held a box of Krispy Kreme doughnuts. Eng-kee, Anita and the others wore buttons with my photo and name at the bottom.

This wasn't a welcome-back party. It was a national political convention.

“You only come back to life once,” Sam said, relieving me of my briefcase. “We couldn't help ourselves.”

“I'm sorry, Lindy,” Alan said, with a broad smile that confirmed he didn't feel an ounce of regret. He opened the box and encouraged me to take a glazed donut while it was still warm. “Aren't you supposed to be pasty and grey after being at the hospital?”

“And fat from the hospital food?” Sam added, scoping me from top to bottom. “I want to die, too, if I can come back looking like someone on a magazine cover.”

“Raises for all!” I said happily, ignoring the pang as I lifted the donut to my mouth. The group asked about the wounds, the recovery and we all ate doughnuts until the phones started ringing. Two hours later, I wandered by Samantha's desk, stretching my wrists. The ligaments on the top of them were tight, unused to typing.

“Are you actually loitering?” Sam asked without looking up. I peered over the privacy ledge of her desk. The 25-year-old UC Berkeley graduate's appearance was more Starbucks barista than corporate executive assistant.

“Stretching isn't loitering,” I replied. Today her purple-and-black hair was pulled back into a tight bun, revealing her multi-pierced ears, complete with a black javelin on one side and an orange and purple hoop on the other. The fuchsia liner around her eyes matched her lipstick and complimented the earrings. At least she was color coordinated.

“Any word from Monson while I was out?”

“No, but Alan might have news” she answered, squinting in the late-morning sunlight. “The latest bill I sent out was up to forty-thousand, not including interest.” And it’s not getting any smaller, I thought to myself.

“Since you’re here, I do have something for you. While you were out, I dug up some information on Kay Abrahms, on the off chance you got Patrick to change his mind about. Did you know that she was from a prominent family and she married Adi Abrahms, as in—the Abrahms family who owns half the real estate in this town. They moved into a large home in Seacliff and had four children and all seemed perfect until her youngest son was kidnapped right off his bike in front of her home. A neighbor saw the whole thing.”

The last part of her revelation took my breath away. I stopped stretching and placed my elbows on the counter top. “Did they ever find him?”

Sam shook her head. “But it was that event that caused her to establish the center for kids who have no place to go afterschool, to get them off the streets. Here,” she said, handing me another print out. “They have a daughter and two sons who still live in the area. One of which you have met, I understand.”

As she spoke, I gazed at the picture. It was John alright. He was the opposite of Patrick, light brown hair with blond on the top, a few lines at the corner of his eyes, but the kind that were caused by sun, not stress. His gazed was straight into the camera, as though he’d been caught off guard and had been in the middle of a conversation.

“Is he that handsome in person?” Sam asked a lilt in her voice.

“More so, and I think he’s single too, though maybe a little old for you. How do you know I met him?”

“Because I spoke to him on the phone last week. He requested a meeting with you.”

“What for?”

“Perhaps he’s going to ask you about his mom’s project. He’s going to

show up in about five minutes.” My stupefied stare was interrupted by the dinging of the elevator to my right. Sam’s eyes brightened and she shrugged. “You were saying that we needed another account to take on Kay’s center, so when he called, I did what you would do: I took advantage of the opportunity.”

“Thanks for not telling me,” I said pleasantly, adjusting the paperwork on the counter, pulling my stomach muscles inward to stop the nervous contractions.

“Don’t mention it,” she quipped, unrepentant.

The next moment, John Abrahms was in front of me. Faded jeans, dark blue sports coat and an open-collared shirt, his relaxed confidence consistent with his manner at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. He and the modern structure were alike in many ways, sleek and contemporary, but solidly built and unbending.

“Good afternoon,” he said pleasantly, glancing at me with a smile. Gracious, I thought instantly. Much more so than I deserved after declining to take his company on as a client, although, that part wasn’t what I regretted. It was how I’d communicated the rejection that had nagged at me ever since.

“A pleasure,” I said politely, extending my hand. “We just happened to be here chatting and you—”

“Arrived early,” Sam finished for me, walking around the deck to introduce herself. John impressed me by not registering the javelin in Sam’s left ear or the hoop in her nose.

“Thank you for arranging this,” he said to Sam, shaking her hand. Turning back to me, he took in my face in an investigatory way. “You don’t appear to have been in a car accident. From the way it was written up, I didn’t know if you would look like the walking dead.” His dry tone struck me and I laughed, walking him into the conference room.

“Take the good side,” I offered. “Guests always get the best view, at least on the first visit.”

“And if you take me as a client, only brick walls?”

“Exactly, but that presupposes the outcome of this conversation, but typically, me or the team will go to the client.” Something about his look told me that such a visit wouldn’t entirely be unwelcome, and I felt an uncomfortable spread to my neck. Although the bantering was good natured and professional, a part of me knew my emotions weren’t as smooth as I sounded. The moment he’d approached me at the Gala months before, I’d felt insecure, causing me to turn down his client project in a manner far harsher than was necessary. *Furthermore, had I been single, I probably wouldn’t have denied the project.*

“Great, because I’m here to ask you to be on my radio show.”

Of all the things I’d been expecting, an offer for publicity wasn’t one of them. “Radio show? I thought your profession was real estate.” Had he gotten fired over the incident with the building? He must have divined my concern because he cracked a smile.

“It still is, but I’m on the commercial side, which is rewarding but sometimes rather dry. I started a radio station a few years ago that began as a hobby and is now something more.”

“You’re not launching the station but you want me on the show? I’m confused.”

He gave me an inquisitive smile. “Your PR agency only takes on start-ups and sometimes those entities who aren’t given a chance to succeed and yet somehow, they do. I think you and your firm play a big part in that. Plus, you are never personally profiled in the press, a rarity in this town of extroverts. I might get an insight into your world no one else has yet seen.” The heat from my neck now shot down my spine.

“This is what almost dying got me. A shot at my fifteen minutes of radio fame.”

He moved a disobedient lock of sandy blond hair from his forehead, pushing it back and to the side. It fell over, and he repeated the movement. “You didn’t have to be so dramatic to get attention.”

I raised an eyebrow skeptically. “Seriously John. You’re telling me the reason for the visit isn’t your mom?”

“Is it wrong to try a ploy to get your time for her center?” he asked. The almost playful way he asked the question caused me to stare longer at his hazel eyes than I normally would have. I brought it down a notch, in both my expression and tone of voice. General bantering during a discussion was appropriate, but it didn’t need to be more than that.

“Look,” I said, leaning forward, then feeling pain, stopped, pausing for a second. He noticed, and his countenance changed instantly.

“Are you okay?” he asked, concern in his voice. Behind him, I saw Sam raise her head again. I shook mine, and she nodded.

“Yes, I think so.” I stared at him, hand on my side as I breathed through the discomfort. “Sorry,” I whispered. “Just a few, ah, after effects of the accident.” He had leaned forward, one hand already across the table as if to help me.

“Are you sure?” When I nodded a yes, he leaned back, but only halfway. “Maybe this isn’t the right time.”

“You didn’t cause me any pain,” I said, trying to smile. After a few moments, I sat back. “The truth is, we aren’t in the position to take on a non-paying entity until we can get another client, maybe two.”

“The truth is,” John said, his voice kind, “I’m not sure you should be here, at the office, so soon after the accident.” It wasn’t his words that struck me, but his tone. It was full of caring that should have come from Patrick, and hadn’t. “What if I find you a paying client or two? Then will you take on the center?”

“You don’t give up, do you?”

He pushed his lips out at the challenge. “Does a gallery or restaurant opening count as a new product launch?”

I considered his comment. “It does.”

“Good, then we have might have more to discuss in the near future. Now that the business topic is over, are you really okay?”

Patrick always told me I couldn't lie if my life depended on it, and for some reason I didn't want John to think me dishonest, which he might if I dodged his question.

"In confidence, I do have some internal issues, but they will pass in time," I answered, purposefully rising.

"Don't overdo it okay? And I appreciate knowing you're open to new clients." He shook my hand, smiled and left.

"That was decent," Sam remarked, her eyes barely glancing up from her screen.

"What part?"

"The conversation and the way he acted toward you." My eyes narrowed as I smiled but said not a word as I walked away. Now and then it didn't hurt to have a client that was both engaging and attractive. Of course, he wasn't a client, and from his comments, wouldn't become so. But perhaps I'd be able to chat with him every now and then as he referred other entities to me with legitimate needs. With his family connections, I could easily see him sitting on the boards of privately-held companies, and those likely had money to hire us for an actual project. It would allow us take on Kay's organization without charge and Patrick couldn't complain. Everyone would be happy.

Once or twice during the afternoon, I looked up at Sam. She continually fielded calls, assisted clients who needed a person tracked down or a document template sent over. All the while she handled the staff's questions, and diligently completed the tasks I gave her.

After lunch, I stopped by her office on the way back from the kitchen.

"Sam, our client roster could change with short notice. Why don't you take the first step by calling Kay to schedule a meeting?"

"You think John might come through with a client or two?" I was right. She'd overheard the entire exchange through the thin walls.

I nodded. "Furthermore, while we don't need the press and we can't be bought, he doesn't strike me as a man who makes flippant promises.

Besides, conversations are free. If that comes to pass, we'll need a liaison and project manager with the center. Do you think you could pull double-duty for a time, just in case?" Sam was left momentarily speechless then gave a little squeak of delight.

Little things, little changes, I thought sitting down. I glanced up and out of the windows. I liked what my near death experience had done to me.

CHAPTER 4

That night, I had my first dream.

An old, withered hand pulled me through a translucent, white sheet of light, willing me to follow through to the other side.

A face came into focus.

“Grandfather?” His big, crooked smile cracked his face into wrinkles, rippling like a wave on the ocean.

“Welcome back, Lindy.” Grandpa opened his arms to encircle me. When he stepped back, happiness glistened from the corner of his eyes. “You have others waiting to see you as well.”

Beyond him stood my Grandmother Ovi, who died when I was fourteen. Her shoulder-length, white hair was thick and luxurious, the way it was before the cancer took it in clumps. As I leaned towards her for a hug, the aroma of my favorite molasses cookies hovered over her faint, yet present. She gave me another squeeze and hurried off before I could say a word. My great-uncle Andrew, towering at nearly a foot above my 5’8 frame, looked every bit the 94 he was when he died. He bent over, placing a kiss on my forehead before making way for another person I remembered fondly.

“Mr. Bennett?” He’d been my eighth-grade Spanish teacher at Walker Middle School. His smile was broad and lopsided, his hair still in the wild comb-over, the same mid-50’s paunch overhanging his skinny legs.

“You can call me Frank now, Lindy.” He’d been my favorite teacher, always taking the time to answer my questions and tolerating me passing notes to my friends. One day while I was in the gym I’d heard sirens. He’d had a heart attack and died on the way to the hospital. I’d never seen him

again. “You grew up to be as pretty on the outside as you were on the inside,” he remarked, and I smiled. “What are you now? Late twenties?”

“Thirty-one,” I answered, pleased. He embraced me again before he moved on. Most of the dead I could see were elderly, although a group of teenagers passed by. A bus crash? They ignored their elders in death as they probably had in life.

“Why is everyone rushing around?” I asked my Grandfather.

“A world is swirling around us, and we’re constantly working. You’ll see.”

I thought of myself as a religious person. I believed in God. But I never thought about the afterlife as anything more than good or bad, heaven or hell. I never thought about what one actually did in either place, as if there was something to do.

He paused before an ornate door. “We’ll start here the next time you visit.”

The following day at work, a knock was preceded by Alan entering my office, interrupting my tenth replay of the dream from the night before. It had been floating in and out of my mind, feeling real in a strange way.

I’d mentioned it to Patrick that morning, who suggested rather sarcastically I was having notions of the afterlife that didn’t exist. “Except in science fiction books or by those crazy religious freaks.” I’d nodded, thinking his point had some merit. Who knew what the subconscious kept inside that came out only in the quiet of a dream state?

“Still no sign of life from Monson,” Alan said, disgust in his voice. Alan didn’t have the flair or vitality of a salesperson, but clients liked his straight-shooting style, as did the employees.

He set a balance sheet front of me. The accounts receivable report showed nearly a \$100,000, \$40,000 of it from Monson. No single account should be worth nearly half the revenue, but I’d let it happen.

“Consider these minor cash-flow issues helpful growth experiences,” I said, not too worried. We had a line of credit to cover any unforeseen lags in client payments.

“I call it the life of an entrepreneur,” he said dryly. “Something I’m glad to revert back to you. Remember our deal when you hired me? You bring in the money and I’ll count it. And on that note, I want to sue Monson. The New York Times article is on the edge of running and we can use it as a lever.”

“Force his hand?” Alan nodded. He was asking me to kill the story we’d pitched unless the man paid up.

“Lindy, he went on a cruise to celebrate the last piece we got him in Fortune. Payment to us? Nope. Boat ride for a hundred people, of course.”

I gnawed the inside of my cheek. I stopped when I remembered my aesthetician said that habit was causing my smile lines to prematurely deepen.

“Maybe someone else footed the bill?” I suggested, feeling like Charlotte holding on to her web of hope in a windstorm.

The three lines on Alan’s forehead, one representing each decade of his 30 years in finance, pushed together. His thin, angular face was set in a concerned mold, his full lips pressed. I’d never been sure of Alan’s nationality, although I guessed Eastern European from his arched, thick eyebrows, flat ears and light-brown eyes, pierced with intelligence. His cashmere sweater stretched perfectly across his chest and hung loose at his waist. Alan’s figure was a testament to his triathlon training and a rigorous weight lifting routine. The combination dropped ten years off his age.

He tightened his lips. A ray of light hit the brick wall on the inside of my office, bouncing off the bay and shining between The Transamerica Pyramid Building and the Embarcadero Mall.

“It’s what he would do if the shoe were on the other foot,” Alan said.

I nodded, but felt uneasy. This wasn’t normal behavior for Monson, a self-made millionaire with a track record of successful manufacturing

businesses a page long. After a long look at Alan, my advisor and the financial arm of the company, I acquiesced. “Have Henry draft a letter dropping the account with a time limit for payment.”

Alan nodded approvingly. “You’ve kept the faith with this guy for a long time.”

I’d kept hope alive, was what I’d done.

The word hope made me think of Patrick. I was hoping his heart and mind would open up to having a baby. I was hoping he’d give me a big hug when I got home tonight, with a bunch of flowers and have dinner made. I was hoping he’d do all the things that a soon-to-be-father would do for his wife of five years.

I glanced up. Alan was observing me. Alan hadn’t had hope that I would return from the hospital. But he’d acted as though I would, and he’d kept the company going in my absence. It suddenly occurred to me I’d been holding him down in the same way I’d done with Sam.

“Now I have another item that needs discussing,” I began, the thought forming a moment before I said the words. “I believe the timing is right to structure the business from a sole proprietor to an LLC.”

Alan blinked a few times. “You’re thinking of bringing in a partner?” Inside, a bubble of giddiness threatened to crack a smile on my face, but I nodded solemnly.

“I’ve found the right person, too.”

“Okay.” He coughed, recovering his brisk tone. He opened his tablet, maintaining his professionalism. I could practically hear the engines turning in his mind. He had to be thinking that he’d finally had the chance to prove himself but I’d completely overlooked him as the first candidate. “Do I know the person?”

“Intimately.” His fingers stopped, an intense look on his face. “No. It’s not Patrick.” A brief wave of relief broke his frown. I would have laughed but the instantaneous reaction gave me a pang of regret. “But he’s extremely bright, came out of finance and services, and has worked in the

technology field for about fifteen years. Lots of fun, too. Peers and subordinates rave about him.”

“Sounds like a good fit. When do you want the start-date to be?”

“Well,” I said slowly. “Assuming he accepts, I’d like him to start tomorrow.”

“Are you saying you haven’t offered him the role yet, but we’re drawing up the paperwork anyway?”

“Yep. I think I know this guy pretty well.” My eyes purposefully wandered to the window. “I mean, am I wrong? Don’t you want to move into your new role immediately?” I slid my eyes back to him, forcing my lips flat.

“You are an evil woman.” His lips were level, but his eyes were bright and lively.

I grinned. “I couldn’t help it. Beyond how you handled everything while I was gone, you hung out at the hospital when no one else was around.”

“Don’t go doing this out of guilt.”

“You know me better than that. But while I’m in the mood for changes, what do you think of me shifting to working on books and on-line templates that we could sell on the Internet? You know, taking the documents we use for launching a product or going out on a press tour and making them into templates. Instead of hiring us, which many small companies can’t do, they could buy the template for a few bucks, insert their information step-by-step and be self-guided.”

Alan tilted his head in remembrance. “And thereby save tens of thousands of dollars. I liked it when you first brought it up a year ago, and still do. But if I’m not mistaken, Patrick hated the idea.”

“I think it was because he didn’t want me to take on another project that was going to keep me out of the house. I could think of worse things for a spouse to say.” Alan’s facial expression told me that he disagreed with some part of my statement, but he didn’t clarify which one. “And the

reason for bringing this up now is a very good one.” Alan leaned back, his hands on the armrests as if to steady himself, eyes wide. “There’s really no good way to say this, so I’ll just come out with it. I’m pregnant. And to preempt you, I’m not kidding. I found out in the hospital.”

I told him about the blood tests, the doctor who assumed Patrick and I knew, and the indelicacy of the moment.

“Are you — is it, okay?” Nodding, I explained I’d been a bit more tired than usual, uninterested in breakfast. “You shouldn’t be traveling too much, or stressing out.” He sounded like my mother and I told him so.

“Another reason for the products. As the pregnancy progresses, and then maternity leave, I see myself gradually shifting my time to less client engagement and more consultation.”

“And that’s why me becoming a partner made sense.” His phone rang and I checked my email as he took the call. Moments later, he had a grin that threatened to crack his face in half.

“Well, fortune is on our side. Our former client GeorgiaLiman has filed to go public.”

My pulse slowed one beat then skyrocketed. “Seriously?”

“The news just hit the wire.”

I floated through the rest of the afternoon, feeling like this was a divine balance. My pregnancy and issues with Patrick were on one end of the see-saw, while the opportunity for bringing our proven methodologies for creating media attention and associated revenue for small companies were on the other end. The bonus was GeorgiaLiman going public, an event that would make life easier for so many of my staff members, some of who weren’t all that long out of graduate school.

Life did have a balance. I’d just have to find mine, like the kind I had prior to the accident.

Or maybe the balance I thought I had, but didn’t.

CHAPTER 5

I waited until just before the day was done to call Patrick. I relayed how well Alan had been working with clients and also about John dropping by, summarizing his well-intentioned ploy to give me publicity as a means to get me to take on Kay's account.

"You don't think it's a problem that Alan's working directly with key customers?" Patrick asked.

"No. Not at all. The transition of him including client relations in addition to finance is a natural one."

"And what's with Kay's son having the balls to approach you directly?" Patrick asked. "Wasn't your no at the Museum of Modern Art enough for him?"

"I guess I wasn't rude enough." Patrick agreed, completely oblivious to my sarcasm.

"I'm working late tonight," he said abruptly. "Meetings in the valley." Convenient. Regardless if it was real or not, I'd enjoy the alone time.

Just before I rose from my desk to leave, the phone rang through on my land line. Seeing the number, I picked up.

"Ann, how are you?" I asked, happy to hear her voice. "Have you been out of town or something?"

"What are you talking about? I've called and left a million messages on your cell phone. I called Patrick but no word from him as well." I was momentarily speechless.

"Ann, something must be wrong with my phone. I haven't received any messages from you, or really anyone for that matter. I was beginning to wonder if I had a friend in the world. Patrick hasn't said a word."

“Patrick has hated me since shortly after you got married, but we won’t digress into that right now. Tomorrow night,” she said forcefully. “Your place. I’ll feed Jared and the kids and be at your house before six so we can be by ourselves.” I agreed and hung up.

On the way home I picked up a to-go order from Fog City Diner and ate my crab cakes and banana bread pudding alone. Before I went to bed, I checked my phone messages again, thinking about Ann’s comment. Not a single message from her, Vanessa, Mom, Dad or Charlie, all of whom I’d asked Patrick to call. One by one, I dialed their numbers, receiving nothing but voice mails. Loneliness prompted me to have another slice of bread pudding, but the sugar was unable to give me the emotional pick-me-up I so desired.

Wednesday Patrick was up and gone before I rose, which left me standing in the bedroom in an all-consuming moment of frustration. I had to get my car from the impound and Patrick was to have been my ride.

One cab ride later, I admitted to myself it worked out for the best. I wanted the mental acuity to focus on the backlog of items sitting in my inbox and ended up getting quite a bit of work done. Not long after arriving at the office, Patrick sent me a text, informing me of another dinner in the valley.

Really? I wondered to myself. Convenient. Time away from me meant no opportunity to talk about uncomfortable subjects.

When Ann came over, we ate dinner on the patio under the heat lamps. I summarized the chain of events, listening to her gasps and an occasional “ow.”

“Tell me again why Patrick wasn’t at the hospital?”

“He didn’t know about it until the next morning. Apparently, he had a late meeting and turned his cell off like he always does.”

“Well, that doesn’t excuse him for not calling me the moment he saw you! And you? Why didn’t you call me and ask for help? I could have been doing your laundry or bringing you food.” She sounded as disgusted with

me as she was with Patrick. “The cat boxes were probably overflowing and the dishes were piled up. And don’t tell me Patrick’s doing it, because I’ll know you’re lying.”

I laughed, admitting she was right about Patrick. “You have your husband and children and your baby to worry about.” At that, she stopped and looked down. Only then did I realize she looked a little smaller in the middle, but I thought it was her shirt camouflaging her belly.

“Can we go inside?” Once we were settled on the couch, a throw over our legs, she opened up.

“About two weeks after my six-month checkup, I noticed the baby hadn’t been kicking. By noon I called the nurse. She said to push the baby around, get him moving, since he might be asleep. I tried everything. At 2 p.m. she said to come in. She put the stethoscope to my belly, said nothing, but then called the doctor in. He hooked me up to the ultrasound and we looked at it together. There was no heartbeat. Nothing.”

My heart felt like it had stopped, gripped with the hand of grief I saw on her face.

Tears filled Ann’s eyes and she nodded. “It happened sometime during the night, they don’t know when. I wanted to die, Lindy. If the baby inside me was going to be taken, I wanted to be taken too.”

I pressed my lips together and swallowed against the rising tide of sorrow. Then an image—a woman, on a gurney, turned on her side, her head faced away from me. It was one of the visuals I’d had when Dr. Redding was trying to keep me alive. It matched what Ann was telling me now.

“I’m so sorry, Ann,” I whispered, my voice hoarse. “We don’t have to keep talking about it.”

“No, it feels better to get it out. Maybe I’m in denial, but honestly, I feel like this was meant to happen, for whatever horrid reason.” She paused, collected herself and started again, brighter. “Are you okay?” I shifted in my chair. Telling someone who has just lost a child that you are going to have

one might hurt.

“I have some news, but I don’t want to hurt your feelings.” My cousin cocked her head and then she leaned forward.

“Are you pregnant?” she whispered. I nodded my head while biting my lip. Ann let out a yip of excitement and gave me a big hug. I promised to make her a bigger part of my life from that time forward, with or without Patrick’s support.

I was already in bed and half-asleep later that night when Patrick came in the bedroom. I didn’t have the energy to bring up Ann, or the fact that he’d not called her. The mystery of my phone not taking her calls hadn’t been solved before she left and I made a note to talk to Alan about it. He could figure out my phone when I couldn’t.

The following day, I had my appointment with Dr. Redding. He removed the remaining stitches from my forehead, reminding me to continue sleeping on my back until the bruises were gone. The attending nurse teased Dr. Redding about the personal attention I was receiving.

“It was recently pointed out that I was lacking an emotional connection to my patients,” he remarked dryly, casting a glance to the nurse.

“You seem to be doing fine with me,” I’d said thoughtfully, feeling the tips of his fingers as he applied a small bandage. I couldn’t help comparing his world to my own. He has patients, I have clients. When I had a task, it’s all that mattered to me, not what occurred yesterday or what was going on tomorrow. Did I come across the same way; focused but emotionless, saving the patient but ignoring the person?

“I’d like to see you in another few weeks,” said Dr. Redding, stepping back, scanning me top to bottom with an inquisitive look. “You are healing just fine, but I’d like to run another full checkup to be on the safe side. Besides, I’ve noticed that most patients who experience death for even a short time have their lives dramatically altered in the first thirty days or not at all.”

“You have no idea,” I said quietly, meeting his eyes as I heard the door

open behind me, signaling that our appointment was finished.

In the parking lot, I called Patrick and left him a message that all was well, and that I'd stop by the post office to get our mail on the way back. I'd been missing a stack of magazines and wanted good bathtub reading. By the time he called me back, telling me he'd do it, I'd already been.

I was in the living room, enjoying the oranges of the setting sun on the bay when Patrick arrived home. In my hand was a package, the return address from Canada. The handwriting on the note was a distinctive cursive, the blue ink from a thick-nibbed fountain pen.

I saved this for you Lindy. We had it buffed and a new strap put on for your wrist. It's yours, if you'll have it. I love you, Dad.

Sliding my fingers into the drawstring bag, I felt a smooth metal band. It was a watch. I stared at the vintage Omega Seamaster, the rounded face of the men's stainless steel and gold version was in perfect condition, the corners etched with the fine indentations of wear.

I reread the note: *If you'll have it.*

Patrick saw me holding the note and the watch. "You're not going to wear that, are you?" An unconcealed edge in his voice told me he didn't have an interest in the object.

"It's a classic," I half-mumbled to myself. An image of John came to me. I doubt he'd be so snobby as to imply the watch had no value. And Sam? She'd tell me it was retro.

I checked the date on the package. Dad had sent it the week before my accident. "Did you call Dad's cell?"

"Of course. Like I said, no answer and the account said the voice mail account wasn't set up." I groaned. I'd repeatedly told him to get the darn thing set up when he first got it—not long before we stopped speaking to one another—requiring that he actually pick up. Given our estrangement and by association, Patrick, who was the cause, it was not entirely surprising

Dad didn't take the call. He probably took one look at the caller ID and walked away.

The sigh that escaped felt as heavy as the history with my father. The push and pull between a headstrong, determined daughter and a selfish, self-made man who were too much alike.

Maybe forgiveness is why I'm here. That's four reasons now. First I thought I was here because I was pregnant. Then it was to help Sam and Alan progress. Those things could be, and were being rectified. Dad, on the other hand, required an actual conversation.

"Can we have a talk this weekend, Patrick? When we have some time to relax for a real discussion?" I intended to raise the prospect of moving outside the city, closer to his work, perhaps a more reasonable option than asking he give up the second bedroom, his dedicated music room.

"I'm out at the off-site team-building activity in Sonoma, remember?"

"Oh, right." He'd told me about this a month ago and I'd forgotten. "What time will you be back?"

"It's really late Friday night—you will probably be in bed, then overnight on Saturday. I should be home Sunday afternoon, maybe earlier if we finish up."

"You know, most companies have team-building outings during the week. Why are yours always on the weekends?"

"Look, if you aren't up for me going and want me to stay here with you, I'll cancel. They'll understand." It was what I wanted him to say, but he'd be irritable that he missed it, and the conversation I planned would be that much harder.

"Absolutely not. Go and get stuff done. But I want to go to Fog City on Sunday." Patrick suggested we try someplace different for a change, maybe in the Sunset District. I shook my head. Fog City was where I wanted to eat. Besides, I wanted Doug and Stacy to see how good I looked before I started gaining back the weight I had just lost.

Patrick told me he was going to work in the second bedroom for a few

IN A MOMENT

hours and I went to our bedroom, making a straight line for the pull-out drawer under the bed. I knelt and retrieved box. A lock of hair from my first haircut, a little shoe I'd made out of clay in third grade, year books, a few letters, my ski passes. Down at the bottom, in the very back, I found what I was seeking. I curled my fingers around it, feeling the leather. My Grandfather had given it to me as an early graduation gift my senior year and was in the same condition as when he gave it to me, scratch free and shiny.

Two hours later, my eyes burned. I set the Bible on the end table and turned out the light, an uncomfortable feeling that if I'd opened it once or twice before now, I wouldn't be sleeping alone.

CHAPTER 6

The white door opened and Grandfather walked me into an open space defined by rows and rows of pedestals. Each one had a book on top, in varying thicknesses; some were slender while others resembled encyclopedias the width of an outstretched hand. A few didn't appear to have any pages at all.

As we walked down the nearest row, golden letters streamed onto pages as though an invisible hand were inscribing the words. When a page was full, it turned over, with the writing starting again at the top.

"Each book represents an individual's time on earth," Grandfather explained. "The pages contain the actions of the person." My heart pounded. A flash of regrettable actions filled my mind like a bullet train in a dark tunnel. The time I took a pair of fake turquoise-and-silver earrings from a drugstore on a dare; making out with my best friend's boyfriend. Thankfully I'd done nothing like that in years, living the past two decades as a relatively responsible, honest adult. "We use the books to refresh our memories about what we need to work on."

"Not really helpful when a person must be dead to read it," I observed, thinking it odd my dry sarcasm came through in my dream.

Grandfather tilted his head slightly. "Sometimes. This is a dream for you, but your eternal self is very real, just as the information in those books is real."

"You mean...?" I left the question hanging.

"Yes. Just like in the Book of Revelations, but it's also in the Quran, Torah and other books of enlightenment across cultures. All people deserve the right to the knowledge."

Maybe that was the reason I was dreaming about this. Tonight, I'd opened the Bible and read. My subconscious was coming out again.

As he spoke, hundreds of books kept appearing on pedestals while just as many books closed. One book near us shut without a sound. A cover and one or two pages was all that represented the life of the person inside. Was it a baby? How much of a person's life did one page represent? I contemplated the possibilities as the book lifted off the pedestal, passing above the others, moving to our left.

"Now it goes into the archives," Grandfather said, motioning for us to follow the floating book.

Unlike the quiet, empty serenity of the first room, the archives were crowded to capacity. People stood in groups of two or three reading individual books, others were alone, reading in quiet contemplation. I gulped.

"Can anyone read about my life?"

"Once you're here, the books are open to everyone." He patted my arm. "The mistakes you took care of were erased. Those you didn't do anything about remain on the page. That," he winked, "and the good things."

Every last deed recorded in gold calligraphy. I hoped these would be balanced by my good actions, like the time I was driving away from a store and discovered a cashier had overlooked an item. I returned and paid for it.

Grandfather led me to a book in the corner, two rows back. It stood alone, the area around it vacant of onlookers. The cover was in my favorite hues of blue and green, the colors that shimmer in shallow, tropical waters. How could a static book reflect the shapes and colors of an ever-moving, changing sea floor? I was about to find out. My Grandfather looked at me then opened the cover to the final page from the book of my life.

All morning long, the dream replayed in my mind. I wish I'd seen what was

in my book! How cool would that have been, even if was only a dream. Maybe I'd see things from a totally different perspective.

It was Friday, exactly two weeks after the accident. Over a bowl of cereal, I brought up the topic of Alan, unable to stop from praising his ability to move the company along. In the process, I slipped in that I'd made the promotion official and also related my plans to start the product line. While I wasn't expecting him to be elated, I was fishing for some level of support.

Patrick's fingers turned white around the coffee mug. "Did it ever occur to you to have a conversation with me about it before you went off and made it legal?"

I cocked my head, stymied. "How does changing his role from a chief financial officer to a partner impact you, or us, for that matter?"

"Percentage of ownership in the business, that's how," he answered, his cheeks drawn, his voice flat. I ignored his look and processed the response. It came from left field. Only in the cases of divorce did percentage of ownership matter, and in California, a fifty-fifty state, only when it applied to joint assets.

"Ownership?" I repeated, incredulous. "You've maintained your stock is one hundred percent yours, no matter what happened, all the while reiterating that my company is mine, from the time we were dating, then engaged and for the last five years. It's "clean," I said, putting the word in air quotes, mimicking his words. "What's mine is mine, and yours is yours, the way you've always wanted it."

He quickly picked up the mug, the black liquid slopping over the side, coating the lapel of his jacket. Furious, he took the jacket off, marching down the hall to the bedroom. I followed him, continuing to speak.

"I'm rewarding a very capable, deserving person, Patrick. Why aren't you more supportive?"

"Because you go and give away a chunk of the very company you created, leaving yourself vulnerable to Alan. What next?" he turned

abruptly. “You’re going to start reading the Bible and give everything away?”

So, he’d noticed the book on the night stand either this morning or last night when he came to bed. It didn’t matter. His thoughts regarding what I chose to read was irrelevant.

“You’re just mad I didn’t take your advice,” I said objectively, unable to keep the lilt of humor out of my voice. His attitude about Alan was absurd.

“Of course I am!” he exploded.

I suddenly realized I needed to put new will in place. If anything happened to me, I didn’t want Patrick ousting Alan or shutting down the business.

I was two steps behind him, stalking him back to the kitchen. “As Alan takes over the day-to-day client operations, I can focus on products. That way I’ll have the flexibility to work from home when I want.”

“You don’t need to be home,” he argued. “All you have to say is you miscarried and continue on.”

With that one statement, I took on the protective instincts of a lion in the wilderness.

“I’ll be home around six tonight and we can talk about it then,” I said flatly, turning towards the door.

He grabbed my arm. “There’s nothing to talk about, Lindy,” he said. “I’m not having this baby.”

“You’re right,” I responded, shrugging him off, gritting my teeth. “You’re not.”

Leaving him with his mouth open, I returned to the bedroom, slamming the door. I heard the sound of him trotting down the outside stairs and the garage door open.

Not possible, I mentally shouted to myself, my breathing uneven. Flashes of our life to this point appeared like a slideshow projected in front of me. At a park, talking of having two kids, a boy and a girl, moving from downtown to the South Bay or up in Sausalito, closer to the mountains.

That was before we were married.

I threw my stuff in my car, trying to remember the last time we had spoken of kids. One, two years ago? Or was it right after we were married?

Preoccupied with my worries, I downshifted into second on the steep hill when a black and white dog darted into my peripheral vision. I slammed on the brakes, swerved to the right, just missing a trashcan. The pug darted under the car and onto the sidewalk, where it came to a stop, yipping at me.

Stifling a frightened expletive, I recognized the dog as Bondo, far from home and obviously now frantic.

I looked at the time on my watch. I'd never make the conference call Alan had set up with a prospect based on the East Coast. I vacillated between rushing to make the meeting and rescuing the cute little pug. Then I remembered Patrick's recent comment about his hope the dog would get run over and stop its incessant barking. I'd replied the owner would simply replace it with a new one, further irritating him.

I sighed, dithering. Patrick hadn't started out minding dogs, but over the last few years, his desire for quiet and the solitary confines of his stereo increasing in direct correlation to his patience level with outside distractions.

I got out my phone. "Alan? Is it really critical I'm on this call or am I right in saying you are just being nice?" When he laughed, I knew I'd been spot on. "You're superb on your own. I'm going to go save a dog."

After resisting several calls, Bondo finally came toward me. I placed him on the passenger seat hoping to heaven he was car trained. I flipped the car around and moments later pulled into our neighbors' driveway. His owner wasn't going to be happy to see it was me who retrieved him. Holding Bondo in my arms, I rang the doorbell and after waiting five minutes, gave up. I scribbled my name and number on a piece of paper, wedging it in the doorjamb where he'd see it, and got back in the car.

"Guess you're going to be my shadow today," I told Bondo. I arrived at the office, the pug in my left arm, purse slung over my shoulder.

Samantha cooed in delight at my furry package as I looked her over. She had her hair down, parted to one side. The nose ring was absent, as were the black rings around her upper and lower eyelids. A pale, neutral color on her lips touched off a natural rosy glow on her cheeks.

“Do I see actual heels?” In the twelve months she’d been on staff, I’d never seen her in anything other than flats.

“We have the meeting with Kay today, remember?”

“I think you look beautiful and Bondo approves.”

“Are we going to keep him?” Sam asked rubbing the back of his neck, his rumbles of appreciation echoing down the hall.

“Only for the day. The owner wasn’t home and I didn’t want him getting run over. I’ll keep him in my office with the door closed so he won’t bother the team.”

The owner, I sighed, turning towards my office. Another person Patrick had alienated. The morning before the accident, he and I had been on the porch, overlooking the bay as he drank his coffee. We’d seen Bondo running through the backyard of a home down the hillside, above Noe Valley where we lived. A man had come out to retrieve the animal, scooping him up in his arms like a baby. Patrick had made a disparaging remark about animal and gone inside. The man loved to give parties, and the music often drifted upwards, to our home. Had we actually been invited, perhaps he wouldn’t have minded so much. But we weren’t, and Patrick thought it his responsibility to call the cops. It took him two times to learn that the police officers of San Francisco had better things to do than chase down noise complaints.

Bondo broke free of my hold, diving for the floor before racing toward the conference room. There he inspected the legs of the table, zipping to the bookshelf and then around to Sam’s desk.

“I think we should let him run around,” Sam suggested, as if we had a choice. “The worst place he’ll end up is in the bathroom.”

Bondo darted down the hall. Surprised, happy voices called out

welcomes to the new companion, taking turns vying for Bondo's attention. I was standing at Sam's desk, reviewing the agenda she'd prepared for the meeting with Kay when Alan walked up.

"You okay?" he asked, holding the dog in his arms. "You look pale."

"Physically, I'm fine." Either my voice or expression caught his attention, for he tipped his head towards my office. I took the lead, sitting down my desk, expecting him to join me, but he hesitated at the door. "Coming or going?" I asked him, an attempt at humor.

"Well, normally you would ask me if I had something to do and then I'd leave. This confirms something is up."

"I really say that?" He nodded, and I waved him in, more disturbed at his comment than what I was about to disclose. After he shut the door and sat, I gave him the news.

"Patrick wants me to get an abortion," I said without fanfare.

Alan's face flushed, a pinkish-red moving up his neck to his hairline. His lips twitched, bound by the conflict over a professional barrier he wasn't comfortable crossing.

"You want to take the day off?"

"Leaving here won't accomplish anything," I replied. Since hyperventilating in my bedroom, I'd gotten a firm lasso around my emotions. "Bondo will keep us occupied, and I'm going to be meeting with Kay shortly."

Alan continued to stare at me, a worried expression plain on his face. "You're a lot calmer than someone else would be in your shoes."

"Speaking of shoes, did you see what Sam is wearing today?"

"As unbelievable as her hair," he said, taking the hint. "Suggesting her as the program coordinator is a great idea. She's fired up."

Alan rubbed his knuckle against the dog's flat face, between the chin and cheek. Bondo flattened his ears in appreciation, his tail wagging so furiously it slapped against Alan's forearm. "Snorts like all get-out. Want him?"

“Sure,” I said, opening my arms.

“So...” Alan drawled. “Is something else up?”

“What makes you ask? Wasn’t one bomb enough for day?”

“You brought a dog to work. And we are taking on Kay Abrahms’ center, our first non-paying account since you founded this company, and I saw the outline for products on the printer.”

Alan’s observation was another sorry statement on my interpersonal skills. Bondo thrust his chin toward my chest, the soft nuzzle causing a twinge of pain, not all of it physical.

“Are you suggesting that I’m a different woman?”

“It doesn’t take a genius to draw the conclusion you are back from the dead and perhaps feeling a little more charitable than normal.”

“I was uncharitable before?”

Alan cocked an eye at me. “No, actually you are incredibly generous. You gave all of us some of the personal stock you had in your clients, even GeorgiaLiman. But generally speaking, I’d characterize you as all-business.”

“Maybe I needed a wake-up call to make me more human.”

“I’m not sure,” he answered. “No human I know of would be so calm sitting here, pregnant and on the verge of being a single mother. They would be breaking down. That’s pretty all-business to me.”

“Who said I was going to be single?” Alan’s expression was a mixture of disbelief and regret.

“Lindy, you are a smart, pragmatic woman,” he began, his words purposeful and firm. “Patrick has effectively issued an ultimatum: it’s him or the baby. You are showing no intention of backing down. Do you expect him to just wake up one of these days and say he’s on board?”

I reluctantly nodded. That’s exactly what I thought.

Alan blew out a whiff of air through thin lips. “What’s your favorite phrase?”

“Hope is not a strategy,” I said, my voice flat.

“Correct. As your new partner, might I suggest you prepare yourself for

the worst while you expect the best? That way you aren't caught off guard.”

It was too late for that, I wanted to tell him. Of all the scenarios I'd envisioned since waking up in the hospital, being alone—for real—as a single mother, hadn't been one of them.

CHAPTER 7

The South Potrero Youth Center was on a flat stretch of former landfill covered with row houses, storage facilities and tenement buildings. It was a pale-green cement block of a building covered with street art, the colorful illustrations depicting life on this side of Potrero Hill, far from the pristine homes of Cow Hollow or the views seen from the marina. Inside the youth center, a moldy smell accompanied the heat in the reception area.

A man in his early 20s greeted us, extending a well-worn clipboard to Sam. “Visitors sign in, please.”

“I pulled in behind a white pickup if that’s okay.”

“No worries. No one leaves for lunch.” He gestured for us take a seat on the chairs lined against the wall. “I’ll let Kay know you’re here.” We’d just finished filling out the passes when Kay appeared.

“I’m so glad you could make it, Lindy,” she said, embracing me warmly as though I were an old friend. She gave no indication of knowing about my conversation with John, and I guessed she’d be mildly upset if she’d been made aware about his not-so-subtle offer. I introduced her to Sam.

“Let’s go find an empty space to chat.”

She led us down a hallway to where two older women sat, making phone calls while working on ancient computers. Patrick would grimace with disdain if he saw the state of this facility.

Kay described the fundraising efforts led by volunteers, and how the kids waited for hours to work on the computers, the rows of devices donated by local software companies. A small room full of books served as a reading room. A purple Barney beanbag with a green patch lounged in front of a French-country-print loveseat. “The local shelter is willing to

trade some furniture for things we need, like this couch.”

We moved on from the small room to an open area. “This is where we eat and put on plays,” Kay explained. “Fabricland donates returned materials, and what we don’t use, we give to the art center.” Storage bins overflowed with scrap materials and beside it sat a bookshelf with paint and brushes. Two easels leaned against the wall, the leg of one held together with duct tape.

She pulled down a chair from the stack along the wall while Sam and I did the same, joining Kay at a round table. “We’ve gotten by for years through creative horse trading, but we’re out of time. In sixty days, we’ll close. The owner of this building has never wanted to sell, but now, they don’t even want to lease to us.”

“Let me guess,” I interjected. “They want to tear it down and build condos?”

“Anything will pay more than a non-profit.” The area had views of the south bay, home to Saturday sailboat racing, the blue towers of office buildings gleaming even now through the dirty gymnasium windows. “The voices of parents barely able to afford to live in this part of San Francisco aren’t as loud as the interests of developers looking to flatten the buildings, especially a mile down from the Giants’ stadium.”

“Could you gather investors and buy out the owner of this building and the ones on either side or write a check yourself?” Sam asked bluntly.

“If it was only the money, perhaps,” answered Kay with grace. “The problem is I’m not going to be around forever. This organization needs an entity that’s invested in seeing it succeed for decades, not months or a few years.”

“You now need a strong public relations campaign to create pressure against tearing this down in favor of condos,” I surmised.

“That, and perhaps turn up an angel who’s currently hiding under a rock somewhere.”

Just then we were interrupted by a young man who pushed his way

through the door, using his shoulder to wedge it open as he cradled a large, outdated computer protectively in his arms. His chestnut-colored hair had streaks of sun-kissed blond at the edges, touching the tops of his ears. Freckles dotted the back of his neck, ending at a pronounced, curved line that followed the rim of his T-shirt.

He stopped, mid-push, seeing that he'd interrupted a meeting. Kay motioned him in, introducing us as she walked him to a location in the corner of the room.

"I knew you'd come through, Greyson," Kay said, patting him on the shoulder and offering to take the newer-looking flat-screen monitor. Greyson wiped his hands on his khaki pants, extending one to me as Kay told us he was a pre-med student at the University of California San Francisco Medical Center.

"And you find time to work here?" I asked.

"I volunteer," he answered. "I spent a lot of time here growing up and Kay's like my adopted Grandma."

"Over there, on top is fine," Kay directed, unbundling the cord. Greyson was a half-hand taller than Kay, and his shoulders were only slightly wider, his tan, tone arms visible underneath his casual t-shirt.

Sam asked how he finds parking around here and at med school.

"I like taking the trolley," he told her.

A noise like a herd of stampeding buffalos rumbled through the doors.

"Get ready. School's out," Kay announced.

As the kids came through the hallway and into the gym, they dropped their bags on the floor by the chairs and ran toward their preferred activities. Several came over to Kay, giving her happy bear hugs and showing her report cards or school assignments.

"Where would they all go if the center closes?" Sam asked, her voice lowered.

"The streets. A lot of them are latchkey kids. The closest YMCA is down on Market Street and caters to the adult professional crowd, not the

at-risk group. Parents can't get off work to come home, so these kids will be wandering around, at home alone or getting into trouble."

I thought of all the reasons why the public relations aspect of this would be appealing to the media. Big corporations wanting to displace the kids and Kay's own personal story lent itself to communicating her bigger objective of making the prospective buyers back down.

Kay interrupted my thoughts. "So what do you think, Lindy? Is this something you can work on?"

Rule number one for a public relations firm was to work with profitable companies, followed by rule number two, never work with nonprofits. On top of her needs, I have my own life that includes contending with Patrick and a pregnancy. All these concerns flashed through me in an instant.

Even so the media coverage might change hearts and it was worth a try. I already knew what I was going to do. I told her yes, we'd take on the project.

On the drive back to the office, Sam couldn't stop talking about the project. "We're not that invested in the community ourselves, are we, unless you count our annual donation to the Chamber of Commerce? It seems to me," she continued, before I could get in a word, "that if we're perceived as a caring agency, we will differentiate ourselves in a positive way."

By the time we were in the elevator, Sam had almost convinced me the entire project would be fun, as she called it. "And the more clients we get, the more money comes in our doors. That would cover the costs of our nonprofit work, right?" Sam asked abruptly as the doors opened and we walked into the foyer.

I paused by her desk. "Sam, the only way this will work is if you take the lead, not me." She'd been the receptionist, executive assistant and all-around sponge in black eyeliner, absorbing the subtleties of operating a public relations firm. Sam chirped out her delight and default acceptance of the task. "I'll take that as a yes. Just promise you'll help me write the classified ad for someone as qualified as you to take your place at the front

desk, because if this goes where I think it will, you won't be there for long."

Sam rose, giving me a hug. "Do you think I'll be making many on-site visits?"

"I don't think the trolley goes that way, but maybe Greyson can correct me on that one."

Later that afternoon, I sent a text to Patrick; a reminder about the appointment with the OB/GYN. His reply was fast and short.

I'm not bothering neither should you

I deleted his text. He would change his mind. I remembered when my brother Charlie's girlfriend became pregnant. He freaked out and went into denial for almost six months until she started to show. Then he got excited and by the time the baby was born, he seemed more energized and enthusiastic than she was. Of course, by that time they were married, and he was having a family. Patrick just needed...perspective. Mine had changed, dramatically. So would his.

As I sat alone in the waiting room of Dr. Michael Kustin's office, the preeminent OB/GYN for high-risk pregnancies and those with infertility problems, I turned my attention to the waiting area. The dark wood and soft suede chairs were staggered in twos around the room, separated by square end tables. Brushed copper lamps with soft dual-tone shades provided subdued lighting, the overhead illumination from recessed lighting more fit for a high-end bar than a doctor's office.

The man across from me flipped through BusinessWeek as the woman next to him rubbed his neck. To my left, a woman in a beautiful sari, orange and red flowers on her top, peered down at her sandals. The man with her wore a tailored shirt and slacks. Gold bracelets around her wrists rested against his gold watch.

I glanced at the clock. Thirty minutes past the time of my appointment. Alan couldn't stay at the office forever and Bondo needed to be returned. I prayed for tolerance and patience.

The door opened with a snap and a woman emerged, her face a lifeless

grey. The man wasn't much better, as much as he tried to maintain an appearance of control. An even stronger silence fell on the room as they left.

Instead of blaming the doctor's appointment desk for squeezing in too many patients back to back, I should be considering alternative reasons for a delay. Not everyone was having their dreams of a pregnancy realized.

I took out the demand letter for Monson. My stomach hurt as I read and re-read it. Two times I wrote the lines to Alan telling him the document would be signed and on his desk this evening, and two times I deleted the message. What was stopping me?

Pausing in confusion, I sent a text to Ann.

In my OB appointment, alone

Next time ask me to come- I'll be your stand-in husband

Not long after that, my name was called. The thin white paper covering the examination table crinkled beneath me as I sat down on it. On the ceiling was a picture of a newborn, its small, delicate eyes closed, and thick, dark lashes forming a line resembling two smiles on either side of a flat pug nose.

Dr. Kustin entered, and in his thick Australian accent, apologized for the delay. He informed me the samples I'd given were being analyzed and that he'd reviewed the documentation provided by Dr. Redding. To begin, he had a few questions for me. How often did I travel? How many hours a day were I on my feet? What did I do to relax? I answered, attempting to keep my irritation to a minimum. None of the questions had to do with my pregnancy and I had a company to run.

He remained standing while I spoke, his large, wide frame made even wider as he folded his arms across his chest. Bushy white eyebrows furrowed, creasing his tan skin as now and then he asked me to elaborate. Finally, he sat down on the round stool next to the examining table.

A knock at the door was followed by a nurse. "Doctor, here are the blood sample results," she said, giving him the paperwork. Kustin grunted.

“Problems?” I asked.

“We should know more in a minute,” he said. I eased myself down on the table, grimacing once at a sharp pain. “Still hurts quite a bit, I imagine.” He placed a strong hand behind my upper back, his nurse placing hers below my lower back. Then he turned on the ultrasound and asked me to relax.

He moved the ultrasound wand around with one hand, his other on the keyboard, pointing and clicking as the screen captured a moment in time. “I’m measuring right now,” he said. The screen was clear enough to see a sack with a peanut inside.

“Look here,” he said, pointing to the monitor. “I’m estimating you are at week 10, which means your baby is eight weeks old and the embryo has officially become a fetus.” My heart jumped. “Let’s see now, the heart is almost developed. Maybe we can hear it.”

He turned a dial. The sound came through loud and clear. It was very fast, sounding irregular, as if it was bumping over itself. I looked at his face for a reaction. Instead of concern, I felt him adjusting the wand inside me, switching the screen from a 3-D view to a flat view. I inhaled sharply from relief and fear. We both heard two distinct heartbeats.

“I thought so. Twins,” he said with satisfaction. “It’s why Dr. Redding thought you were further along than you are.”

I forced myself to breathe through the tightening in my throat, dizzy with a complex set of feelings. I was excited to hear the news after years of wanting to become pregnant. But twins? That was more than I could handle.

“But this black here? That’s blood. Too much of it is going to cause the body to push out the babies. You’ll have a self-induced abortion.” He turned the screen off and sat back.

“Are you are prepared to do what it’s going to take to have the children?”

“Absolutely.”

“You’ve got to increase the thickness of the uterine wall. Travel is out. Lifting, bending and all those things you take for granted and do a hundred times a day are also out, as well as exercising. It all creates pressure on the uterus. You will go on progesterone and I’d recommend you start eating spinach and eggs in the morning. The spinach causes the stomach muscles to relax and the egg whites will provide the protein you need.”

“So much for hot dogs and ice cream,” I quipped.

“Don’t worry. You’ll get plenty of that in too. Taking the progesterone is going to prevent your brain from realizing you’re full of food.”

“Okay, I got it,” I said breathlessly. As long as I knew the ground rules, I could adjust my life accordingly.

“Now, before you get dressed, I have one more thing for you to think about. Do you know much about zebras?” he asked, the question causing my lips to part. What in the world... “When zebras are being chased across the Serengeti, with lions nipping at their heels, they don’t get pregnant. The body doesn’t allow it. Instinctively, the zebra knows carrying a child on the run can’t be sustained. At some level, that female zebra knows it will be slowed down and die, or a calf will be born and quickly eaten. Mind you, the zebra is fulfilling her instinct to mate. Her body just doesn’t allow conception.”

This was the craziest thing I’d ever heard from a physician, but he was talking with such conviction that I couldn’t help but listen.

“What I’m saying is the body knows when it can get pregnant, just like the zebra. Follow me? From what you’ve described, your life has been like that zebra’s, seventeen-hour days for nine years, am I right?” He barely paused for my acknowledgement. “You said your travel slowed down about four months ago and the body figured it was in a safe environment to become pregnant, like that zebra. But you’re still running a business, with every intention of running full tilt until the day you give birth.”

“Well it does seem to make sense.”

He wagged his finger at me. “Not if you want to keep the children. I’m

speaking to you as I do with all the women who come into my office, who tell me about lives that would make an emergency room physician tired, and then they wonder why things aren't working out so well. This is the only way for someone like you to hear me. I lay out the realities and let you decide. I'm your doctor, but most of the responsibility is on your shoulders, not mine."

When I emerged into the waiting room, I turned to the appointment desk, oblivious to the others in the room.

I'm having twins. I needed drugs. I was going to be eating enough for a tribe. I was a zebra in the Serengeti who took a pause and got pregnant.

I hoped the dizziness passed before I started driving.

In my car, I sent a text to Ann. It was one word. *Twins*. I got an immediate call back, with Ann talking over and under my answers, barely allowing herself time to ask one question before she had another.

"What did Patrick say?"

"He doesn't know yet."

"Give me a heads up when you're going to drop the news and I'll be your back-up plan." I promised and hung up, lingering on the thought that requiring a back-up plan for my family was disturbing.

CHAPTER 8

On the way to my car, I was conscious of every step I took. Not knowing what constituted strain on my abdomen, suddenly every movement seemed to use my midsection: putting my purse on the passenger seat, taking my blazer off, laying it on the backseat. I bent my knees in an attempt to avoid bending my middle. The act was unnatural, but I'd get used to it. Just as I'd learn to love spinach and egg whites.

By the time I arrived back at the office, it was a quarter past 6. Alan was in the kitchen, feeding Bondo Fritos and part of a sandwich. He was the only person left in the office.

"How'd it go?" he asked me. As much as I wanted to keep the information to myself, I had to tell him.

"You know how I told you the emergency room doctor told me that my life was either going to be back to normal thirty days post-accident or be completely different? Well, let me just say this. It can't get any more different." He looked at me expectantly. "Twins," I blurted.

Bondo's snorting punctuated the silence until it was broken by Alan's chuckling. "Never do anything halfway, do you? What'd Patrick say when you told him?"

"Haven't yet," I answered, staring at Bondo taking a bite of stale pastrami sandwich. I didn't need telepathy to know I was being watched. "Right now, I've got to get this little guy home."

Twenty minutes later, I pulled up in front of Bondo's home. Ringing the doorbell produced the sound of footsteps. I saw the curtain pull back and the face of a man peered out before the door opened.

"Bondo!" he exclaimed, his voice full of love.

I released Bondo into his arms and couldn't help but notice the muscle rippling under his striped, short-sleeved oxford shirt. I'd seen it before, as well as the tailored herringbone pants that were doing nothing to hide his muscular thighs.

As they loved on one another, I looked around, appreciating the green-and-grey stamped pavement. Small archways of climbing roses lined the path to the front door, the flowers carefully cut above stems with five leaves, a trick my grandmother taught me just before she passed away.

"Jackson Matthews," he said, stretching out his hand with the introduction. "Where did you find Bondo?" His hand was warm, thick with calluses at the base of each finger.

"A few blocks south, roaming in the flower plants. I nearly hit him with my car. I'm Lindy. We live above you," I said, turning and pointing. "A few houses up." Our deck with the barbecue grill was clearly visible from the driveway.

His demeanor changed once he made the connection. He withdrew his hand, as though a disease had jumped from my fingers to his. Sure enough, Alan and Ann weren't the only people Patrick had managed to alienate.

"I left a note on your door," I said, attempting to bridge the gap that had opened between us. "Bondo is adorable. I was worried he'd get run over or stolen so I thought it was better to take him with me."

"I didn't see a note," he said blankly.

I looked around the small lawn. The trashcans were set out, standing beside recycle boxes. Wedged in between two empty blue plastic containers was a yellow piece of paper. Taking my time, I bent, making sure to use my knees, to pick up my note.

"The wind must have gotten it," I said, walking back to him. "By the way, is that shirt from Billy Blue? I got one for my husband this spring. Brushed cotton like that is wonderful for this weather." I had no problem using a bit of flattery to thaw the guy out.

"It is," he smiled, my comment having the intended effect on his

attitude. “With you bending like that, you should see a chiropractor.”

“What I have won’t be that easy to treat.” Over his shoulder, I saw golden candelabra on a marble-topped credenza in the entryway foyer. The curved legs looked 17th century, though I wasn’t a furniture expert. My knowledge was strictly from the pages of *Architectural Digest*.

“I should warn you that the entire staff at my office fell in love with him. When I got back from an afternoon appointment, an associate was giving him a pastrami sandwich. I’m just glad it wasn’t Krispy Kremes.”

“You took him to work?”

“I had no choice. My two cats wouldn’t have been too good with him.”

“Was Bondo okay? I mean, he didn’t have an accident in front of the boss, did he?”

“I own the company, so it was like a free day for the team and Bondo was perfect. The only worry we had was if he was going to take the elevator down to the first floor.” Jackson laughed. “Take care of yourself and Bondo,” I said, giving the back of Bondo’s ear a final rub.

Jackson watched me place my hand on the back of the seat as I got in my car, putting one leg in before sitting, then lifting the other. “You want the name of a good chiropractor?” he asked, a hint of concern in his voice. I shook my head.

“My doctor just told me I’m having twins. The condition is temporary.”

His eyes told me I’d given him way too much information. “That’s some news.”

A man’s voice called from the doorway. Jackson turned, waved, motioning the other man to come out to join us. In an instant, I knew at least one of the reasons Patrick called the cops when they had parties, and it had nothing to do with the noise factor.

“Ronnie, meet Lindy. She rescued Bondo this morning and had him all day at the office. No — don’t get out,” Jackson said, placing a hand on my shoulder. “She just learned she’s having twins,” Jackson said by way of explanation.

“Congratulations,” Ronnie said, his voice thick and deep. The r rolled slightly, the t spoken with a clear emphasis and enunciation.

“Singer, or do you have an exotic background?” I asked, taking in his broad shoulders and deep chest.

His eyebrows rose approvingly. “Opera. Though I dabble in the jazz department for extra cash. You have a good ear.”

“No, I can’t take any credit. I grew up going to opera, symphonies, lots and lots of concerts. My mom’s a classically trained pianist.”

“Then you saw ‘Madame Butterfly’ last year?”

“Unfortunately, no. My husband loves strings, not arias. I haven’t been in a few years.”

“I’ll tell you what. You saved little Bondo here. Anytime you want to come to the opera house, I’ll get you some great tickets.”

Thanking him, I put on my seat belt. “My sister had twins. You shouldn’t be moving at all,” Ronnie said. He looked at Jackson for confirmation.

“I know, but I’ve got to get home somehow. I’ll feed my cats and then gear up for telling my husband the news.”

“They live up there,” said Jackson, pointing to our balcony apartment.

“Really?” asked Ronnie, as surprised as Jackson was.

Thanks again, Patrick, I thought miserably. “I’m sorry about my husband calling the cops. He’s a light sleeper and has this thing about noise. The good news is that the cops don’t pay attention to him anymore.” The men shared a smirk. “I’ll give you a tip. Have a party Saturday night. Patrick won’t be home.” I winked and shut the car door. They both seemed like decent individuals who certainly bestowed as much caring and affection on their dog as I did my cats. Certainly more than Patrick did, even in his best of moods.

That night, I turned off the lights at eleven, wondering if Patrick’s off-site included a comedy club or other entertainment. The last time I’d joined him for a retreat, it had been at the Ritz-Carlton in Half-Moon Bay and his

company had brought in a stand-up act who was playing in the city the following weekend. How long ago was that? Eighteen months?

Remus lumbered onto me, this time followed by Romulus, his brother, curling his two tone body down by my feet. Soon I drifted away.

Grandfather stood beside me as he looked at my book of life, waiting patiently as though the last dream had never ended.

“It’s here for you to read,” Grandfather said.

“But I am alive,” I said, knowing this was a dream and that my physical body was lying in bed. “Why do I want read about what’s already happened?” The future was far more interesting, but that hadn’t yet occurred.

A smile pushed up his wrinkled cheeks, crinkling the corners of his eyes like an accordion.

“Perspective,” he said. “The last day of our life can be very enlightening.”

Realizing we weren’t going to leave until I did as he wanted, I reluctantly looked down.

I skimmed several paragraphs of my life, reading the emails I’d written that morning, along with accounts of the phone calls common to the life of the CEO of a small business.

I scanned the page until I saw Patrick’s name, going slower. I was intrigued with the replay of our life together, although the recollections weren’t positive.

“What about merging your taxes with Patrick’s?” Bruce, my accountant asked. “It would mean a big tax break for you this year.”

“You’ve been telling me this for five years, Bruce. And I’m sure it’s great advice. But Patrick feels strongly he wants our tax returns separate. So, I’ve got my S-corporation and he has his own tax forms. You know how it goes Bruce, you’re married. You choose battles worth fighting.”

“I’m not in a position to judge. Maybe next year,” he finished, his tone conciliatory.

My finger scrolled down the page. Sam was in my office, pointing out the window. It was still the last day of my life, the morning of the accident. I read about myself watching a member of the San Francisco parking police locking a gigantic, yellow, metal boot on the front, left tire of my car. I’d let too many tickets amass and now I had to pay up.

“Does that make two times or three?” Samantha asked in the way only a twenty-five-year-old could.

“Three, but who’s counting?” I asked, biting my fingernail.

“I was kidding, Lindy,” she said, responding to my sour tone.

“Sorry, Sam. Going to City Hall is the last thing I want to do right now.”

“The whole Monson thing is a real bummer,” she observed, offering me a piece of gum, squinting in the late morning sunlight. “Read this before you go. It will make you feel better.” She handed me a small envelope. The card was heavy, the return address on the back of the envelope printed in raised, formal cursive, the color a soft lavender.

“Thinking of you and all that your organization could do for our youth center. Perhaps you would reconsider? Have a wonderful day. Kay.”

I sighed. “If I could have one Kay Abrahms for every Monson, life would be a lot better.”

The page in my book of life turned over and I paused to look at my Grandfather.

“You are starting to listen, Lindy.” I nodded, grateful. What I was reading took place two weeks before, and since then, I’d taken action with Kay. It felt good to think I was making progress on my own.

He gestured my attention back to the page.

“Lindy, it’s Jacob from Chanel. Your watch arrived in today’s shipment. It’s boxed, wrapped and ready for you to pick up.” I’d spent an outrageous amount of money for a watch I’d been wanting for a year and for no good

reason, other than it was a shiny object I thought was attractive. I promised myself to save more and spend less of my income in the future.

Spotting a cab on the corner I waved my hand in the air. I jumped in and said, “City Hall, please.”

The street signs dotting the side roads of Market came and went, just like my family, I mused. I couldn’t help thinking about Mom and Dad. I hadn’t talked with Mom since their wedding anniversary, eight months ago, and Dad far longer. I took a deep breath. I’d give her a call later today, after work.

The cab slowed to a halt, allowing for a trolley to pass in front of us, across Market. The avenue was crammed with out-of-towners wandering around the shopping district. No doubt half of them were from the convention taking place over at the Moscone Center. Seeing them reminded me of another call I’d put off.

“Hi Vanessa. I got your message regarding that guy from the conference on Wednesday. Okay, he’s gorgeous, and even though he says he’s single, he still seems slimy. You asked for my opinion, there it is. I’m sorry I didn’t call and tell you earlier. Call me later.”

As I continued to scan down my page, it seemed I didn’t notice much other than my cell phone. According to my book, I didn’t pay much attention to the streets or even the town I lived in. I’d become blasé, my mind singularly focused on succeeding to the exclusion of all around me.

Grandfather touched my forearm, love and compassion in his eyes. “A different lens, isn’t it?” I only nodded, disturbed by what I’d seen. “That is all for now.”

CHAPTER 9

At quarter past 10 on Saturday morning, the Eastern sun streamed through the window, hitting my legs. Both cats were lounging on the bed with me, splayed out, their bellies elongated to capture as much of the warmth as possible.

Patrick had been invisible, coming home late last night. Only the vibration of the garage door under the bedroom told me he'd been in the house. He must have slept on the couch in the living room and was gone before I got up. If only he displayed a fraction of the enthusiasm John had shone in my office, or even the first time I met him.

Enthusiasm, or interest?

Rolling back the duvet cover, I turned on my side, propping myself up with my elbow as I sat up straight. It would be good for my ego to think that a man of John's looks could possibly be flirting with a woman like me, a married, slightly overweight one at that, but not realistic.

"Realistic is getting my prescription filled," I muttered to myself.

My stomach grumbled and I made a breakfast of egg whites, hating the texture and taste until I added salsa. I compared Patrick's absence to what I thought the 'normal situation' would be for newly pregnant couples. I imagined the husband at home, doting on his expectant wife, taking the day off, proudly stating it was family time.

But no, I sighed, making my way back to bed, avoiding thoughts of him and our situation.

Lying in the half-light, I thought of my conversation with Alan and his perspective about my office behavior. That couldn't have been me, thinking of my phone calls and interactions with others. *Wasn't me.* Well, but then

again, it was and perhaps still is. I thought of Alan and how he conducted himself with others. He was focused and all-business while at the office. It didn't make him a bad person, just professional. The question was whether or not this alternative view of reality was going to remain, or if I was going to change it.

I'm already changing it, I thought, closing my eyes. I cared about people and sent good thoughts in the direction of someone in need. I expected that my friends did the same with me; those in my inner circle connected and elastic like a rubber band, sometimes it stretched when we weren't close or contracted when we were, but it never broke.

Restless, I got out of bed, wanting to take a shower, hoping the hot beats of water would eliminate my self-doubt. As I tilted my head back under the hot water, I went through my checklist of friends and family. Ann: I rarely saw her or her family, even before the accident. It had been over a year since I'd seen Charlie, and I only talked with him maybe once or twice a month. The last conversation with mom had been eight months prior on her wedding anniversary and with my Dad had been even longer. They'd been financially stretched for money for so long....

With a towel still on the top of my head, I went into the living room. Gazing out over the rooftops below me, I thought further of my father and the watch I'd purchased. I'd wanted it, and completely, totally didn't need it. My parents on the other hand...

Two seconds later, I called the shop and had the funds put back into my account, apologizing to the manager.

"Don't worry in the least," said Jacob. "I have three other customers who are on a waitlist." A feeling of nervous joy coursed through me.

Vanessa was next on my list. I'd seen her a few days before the accident and left her a message. I could see her today. *If she's home.* Vanessa's lifestyle of retail fashion kept her on the road so much, I never knew if she was in town from one week to the next, but I called anyway.

"Of course I'm in town, but not for long." She offered to pick me up

before I asked and forty minutes later, she stepped out of her Lexus convertible. I was waiting at the bottom of my steps, smiling enviously at her figure. She was the epitome of San Francisco glamour, wearing a blue-and-black wrap cashmere top, black leggings, suede booties and a retro poncho.

Thanks to her parent's import business, Vanessa grew up knowing most of the owners of high retail boutiques in the city. As a teenager, she worked at Barney's, where she so impressed the manager with her taste and flair that she got an assistant buyer's position before she left for college. While attending NYU, she also managed a Chanel boutique, moving from merchandising to senior buyer as easily as switching majors. With her camera-ready confidence and three-inch heels, she was boosted to a model-ready 5-11 and traveled to and from the runway shows in Europe to New York as easily and glamorously as though she were one of them.

"Just another Saturday dress-down day?" I teased. She smiled and gave me a hug, but left her glasses on.

Once we were in the car, I pinched the protruding bones of her right knee. "And have you lost weight in the last few weeks?"

"Some," she replied. Her voice didn't have its usual bounce but I attributed this to jet lag. "You look like you've lost weight too," she said, giving me an approving look. "Do you have something new in your life you haven't shared with me?"

"Yes, but I'm not telling until lunch."

The first stop was the bank. I sent a wire to my father, who would be surprised and rightly so. It wasn't the amount he'd asked me to loan him a year earlier. It was double plus some interest, twelve-thousand, the exact amount I'd paid for the watch. I hoped it went a little ways to make up for my idiocy in siding with Patrick, who believed that a man old enough to make and lose a small fortune didn't deserve help. Who was I to have judged my father and his decisions? I had no idea what he'd been going through and should have stopped long enough to consider what might have

brought him to a point of asking his estranged daughter to help him out.

Then we hit the bookstore. Vanessa headed in a different direction, telling me she needed to search for a specific title. I found the pregnancy section, pouring over the rows of books. I must have looked lost as I stood vacillating with my hand outstretched.

“Go with ‘The Pregnancy Bible,’” said a man walking by. “We have three kids and my wife swears by it.”

“Thanks,” I replied. I flipped through the thick book, marveling at the pictures of the little black dot, morphing from a peanut to a seahorse. I turned to eight weeks. Sure enough, fingers and toes were nearly formed.

Vanessa scared me, peering over my shoulder. “Doing some research, or do you have something to tell me?”

“Both,” I said coyly. She gave me a tremendous hug. “What about you?” I asked, indicating several books in her arms. She partially covered the title of the book with her hands, but I saw the words *Recovering and Rape*. “Let’s get out of here,” I whispered.

We went to Demoiné’s off Chestnut Street. It was far enough from the main shopping strip for the tourists to miss it, and quiet enough at the lunch hour that we could have a private conversation.

“It was the guy we met at the conference on Wednesday, do you remember him?” I did. He was drop-dead handsome but gave off bad vibes in an undefinable way. “You called and left me a message, saying that even though he was gorgeous you had a bad feeling or something. I didn’t listen.” He’d asked her out, and she’d suggested going to Guyma’s in Tiburon. “We even had the tamales you always order,” she said. He’d expressed an interest in seeing her new house and offered to drive. At the door, he gave her the keys, and once they’d stepped inside, he’d pinned her from behind.

“I don’t really remember the rest of it,” she said, raising her water for a drink. “My therapist says I’ve blocked it out.”

“Do you think he’ll be caught? I mean, you know his name. Who he

works for,” I said, my feelings of remorse and distress turning to anger. Had I told her earlier, maybe she would have been less inclined to have gone out with him. I felt sick.

“It’s not your fault or responsibility,” she told me, sitting up a few inches. “Besides, I’m so headstrong, like I said, I would have done it anyway.”

Her words gave me no comfort. I still should have called the day before, not after. “I can give a description,” I offered. “We go straight up to his booth at the next trade and arrest him on the spot.”

She shook her head no. “He said he had a girlfriend, though they were in the process of breaking up.”

“So?” I hissed back. “Men and women who commit murders have spouses. Did you call the police?”

“I called the rape crisis center and talked to a woman. She told me to go to the hospital and get tested.”

“Did you?”

“Yes. Arlene, the counselor from the center went with me. My parents advised against the police getting involved.” She caught herself, hesitating. “They said...I’d invited it by bringing him over to my unfinished home in Sausalito.”

“You didn’t ask for this!”

“Arlene said it’s a common family reaction from parents or boyfriends who can’t deal with the situation so they blame the victim.”

“Vanessa,” I leaned forward to touch her hand. “You can’t let him get away with this.”

Tears flooded her eyes. “I can’t do it, Lindy. I can’t go to court and see him again. I just can’t.”

“What about the next person he does this to?” I asked fiercely. “You could be one more person in a long line. You need to be the last. If his soon-to-be-ex-girlfriend knew what he was doing, she’d throw him out or turn him in. For that matter, his whole story could be a fabrication he uses

to lull women into an unsuspecting sense of security.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” she said quietly.

I leaned forward, earnest and intent. “As your friend, I’m begging you, to track this man down and make sure this doesn’t happen again.”

Vanessa nodded reluctantly. She put her hand to her forehead, hiding her eyes. I reached over, touching her free hand. I held it tight. We were silent for a few moments before she composed herself.

“Now, can you tell me what’s behind the pregnancy book?” she asked.

“Well,” I began, “I’m almost nine weeks. I’m hoping for a boy and a girl.”

“Twins?” she whispered. I was starting to get a perverse sense of enjoyment each time I delivered the news to someone for the first time.

Her demeanor changed and I knew what was coming next. “I never thought Patrick was the kid type,” she said. Vanessa and Patrick had been at odds from the moment they met, not dissimilar from Ann, but more--obvious. I blamed it on their similar personalities. Now my analysis seemed naïve. She had seen something I hadn’t, long ago.

“I thought I’d get better informed before hitting him with the news.”

“Just leave the pregnancy book on the table or something, open to the section on twins,” she said, a wicked look in her eyes. “Hey,” she said, leaning toward me, her eyes gleaming with fun. “I’ve got an idea. One of the best maternity shops is less than two blocks from here. Let’s go get some clothes for you.”

“Not now.”

“If not now, when?” she persisted, a little life of color returning to her cheeks. “No,” she said, cutting off my protest. “This is going to be my gift to you, and if you don’t let me, I’ll just show up on your doorstep with a bunch of bags.”

Seeing her joyful smile, I set aside my pride and agreed to let her spoil me.

Vanessa expertly picked out the latest trends in dresses, shirts, shorts

and slacks, throwing in some sun hats and scarves, both of us laughing when a saleswoman had me strap a fake bump on my belly and wear a puffed up bras that would simulate the eventual size of my chest. The laughter continued on our way to the flower mart to get her bouquet, then diminished as we arrived outside the rape crisis center.

“You don’t have to come in,” Vanessa said, subdued now but not depressed. “I won’t be very long.”

But I insisted. My heart was full of gratitude for what a stranger had done for Vanessa. I wanted to meet Arlene at least, even if I didn’t have much to say.

Vanessa dropped me off and I waited in front of the door for her to park. Vanessa joined me and we went inside.

“Arlene! I wanted you to have these,” Vanessa said, hurrying toward a woman at a desk and handing her the bouquet of lilies.

“Thank you so much,” the woman whispered, obviously moved, standing to give Vanessa a hug.

When she pulled away and I got a look at her face, I was stunned. She was the parking ticket lady. It was she who had refused to release my car over the weekend so I had to take the cab and ended up getting hit.

All my anger at the role she had played in my current situation started up, then eased back down. It wasn’t just her fault; I’d not paid the tickets. Patrick hadn’t been available. She was just the last straw that made my present situation inevitable.

“Hi Arlene, I’m Lindy,” I said quietly, extending my hand, knowing that she’d already recognized me. Arlene returned my shake without a word. Her cool response didn’t bother me. She didn’t know me for who I really was any more than I’d seen beyond her rough exterior.

“Lindy insisted on coming in with me to meet you.”

“Really?” Arlene questioned, skepticism rich in her voice. “Did you have a life-changing experience?”

“Actually, I did. I was in an accident right after I saw you. The day you

counseled Vanessa,” I said without fanfare. “I just wanted to see the woman who helped Vanessa and say thanks.”

The woman’s craggy face softened. It was like I was seeing her for the first time.

“You were the friend in the hospital?” she asked me, incredulous. Acknowledging she’d heard of my situation, she wrapped a big arm around Vanessa again. “This girl’s going to be okay,” Arlene said in her gruff manner, which no longer put me off.

“Lindy is the one who helped me make the decision to be here,” Vanessa said, her voice gaining strength as she looked at me.

“I met the guy. If it’s helpful, I can give a description.” Arlene got a fire in her eyes. She asked Vanessa to sit down as she got a notepad.

Later, when we pulled into my garage, Patrick’s car was already inside. He was home early.

“Do you want me to leave the new clothes in the car?” Vanessa asked softly. Even without me telling Vanessa my worries about Patrick, she’d guessed. My father always said that what usually needs to be done most is what a person wants to do the least. What I wanted least was to go in the door with my arms full of bags of maternity clothes.

“It’ll be ok,” I said, hoping I didn’t sound as doubtful as I felt. We hugged, and I promised to call if I needed anything.

“I’m gone for a week, but I always have my phone.” I waved as she drove away.

“Patrick?” I called, walking down the hallway, my hands full of bags on either side. Fortunately, it wasn’t far and they weren’t overly heavy. He emerged from the music room, a pop tart in his hand.

“We ended early,” he said, eyeing the bag that read Baby Chic Boutique. I continued to the bedroom, dropping the bags by the bed then sitting. Patrick pulled out a maternity bra, holding it like a slithering snake at arm’s length from his body. “Aren’t getting ahead of yourself?” he asked, throwing the bra on the bed.

“These were a gift from Vanessa.”

He lifted a dress, glancing at the price tag. “A lot of money for a dress that may never be worn.”

“That’s a risk she was willing to take,” I responded, refusing to take the bait. He left the room and I heard him opening and closing the fridge. After a few minutes, I joined him in the living room. He was staring out the patio windows, a glass of wine in his hand.

I sat down on the white couch, under my favorite chalk drawing of a San Francisco roofline.

“Remus, come here,” I called to my black cat. “I saw the OB/GYN. Good news, bad news,” I chattered on nervously as Patrick took another drink. “The good news is that I’m at a little more than nine weeks and they are fine. The bad news is I’ve got internal bleeding but it’s manageable. He gave me a prescription and told me to stop exercising.”

Patrick turned toward me, his face red. “They?” he repeated. I scrunched my lips to keep from crying at his look. He gave me only silence, and the silence was deafening.

“Do you have anything to say?” I asked finally, the question emerging as a plea.

He turned his back to me, opened the patio door and walked outside. He leaned against the railing, gazing out at the city. Carefully lifting Remus off my lap, I joined him on the deck. The lights of the Bay Bridge were now reflecting off the water, the sunset casting an orange on the hills beyond Berkeley.

“I can stay in the second bedroom so you won’t miss out on any sleep,” I offered. He remained stone-faced, glaring straight ahead. I followed his gaze, and saw Jackson and Ronnie waving at me. I waved back, smiling.

“For as smart as you are, you can still be delusional. No matter how many times I tell you, you’re not listening, so let me say it again. I don’t want children. Not now. Maybe not ever. Period.” He abruptly turned and went back inside the house.

A sob caught in the base of my throat, momentarily choking off the air. This wasn't happening.

By the time I joined him, he was grabbing his coat. I didn't want to ask him where he was going, but couldn't help myself.

"Out," he answered flatly. "Don't wait up."

"But Patrick, we have to talk about next steps."

"I gave you the only option. Here's another: you can give them up for adoption, but don't expect me to wait around for the birth, because I won't."

CHAPTER 10

After he left, an emotional paralysis confined me to my chair. I couldn't call Vanessa—it was too humiliating. Ann? Yes, I'd promised to call her, but what was her 'back-up plan' going to amount to? Still, I promised.

The news of twins went over badly- we will talk later

I could see the text had been delivered and I guessed she was wondering what to write that wouldn't compound my agony. Finally, it came.

I'm here for you whenever you need me

It was the best thing she could have written.

John's smiling, tan face framed by his unkempt, blond hair appeared in my mind's eye. Why in the world had I thought of him?

Because I'm already envisioning what a future without Patrick would look like, as Alan had predicted. No adoption. Just me and my children.

Too upset to eat, I went back into the bedroom, looking at the sacks of clothes, another maternity bra half in, half out of the bag. In the midst of it, I reached for my phone. First I called my dad and a recording said it was no longer in service. Then I tried Charlie, but his phone went directly to voice mail.

With an icepack on my forehead, I turned on soft music, pulled my warm comforter over me and closed my eyes.

I found myself sitting in the middle of a white room that could best be described as a box. The chair I sat in was also white, as were the walls and floors. The room had no windows or moldings, nothing but an austere shell

with a single door. A second later, it opened and in walked my Grandmother Ovi. She wore an ankle-length white dress with gold trim around the collar and wrists. Her eyes found mine and never left. Her face exuded compassion, a trait she acquired from years of living with an unfaithful husband. It was also full of love, her eyes brimming with the memories of a life fulfilled by the purpose given to her by raising children.

She continued walking until she was almost an arm's length away from me, close enough for me to see every wrinkle on her lined face, but not near enough where I could touch her.

"You must leave him," she said quietly, though her voice was as strong as if it had physically touched me. Her message wasn't accompanied by an outstretched arm or tender hug. She repeated her message again, turned and walked out of the room.

I'd not had time to digest the strange encounter, when the door opened again. This time it was Aunt Mamee. Her grey hair shone as she shuffled towards me befitting her ninety-three years when she passed. She came across the floor just as my grandmother had done, stopped where Grandmother had and said clearly, "You must leave him."

There was only one "him" in my life; the man I was living with, married to and who had fathered my unborn children.

The dream did not end with my Aunt. She was followed by other female relatives, all who had important roles in my life. Each one said the same words. "You must leave him."

When the door shut for the last time, I sat in my white chair, unable to move, feeling as though all the strength of my body had left along with the hope that I'd been clinging on to. After many moments, the silence told me I'd heard all that was meant for me. It was time to wake up.

The cats complained as I moved. It was black outside and the clock read 11:12 p.m. The vivid dream replayed itself over and over.

It's my fears and paranoia about Patrick cutting through my defenseless subconscious.

It took a while, but I eventually went back to sleep, looking forward to a peaceful and dreamless experience.

During the night, the dream repeated itself again. When I woke, a strange, unearthly feeling of serenity accompanied the soberness of what I was experiencing. I felt as though a part of my reality had been left within that dream.

I made my way into the living room. Patrick was on the couch reading a book. It was cloudy outside, and he had the fireplace on, the flickers of light bouncing from the gold-rimmed glass coffee table to the large, gold-leaf-framed pastels and watercolors. I sat on the embroidered loveseat, delicately woven by master craftsman in 17th-century Europe, a treasure I'd found at Jamison's.

"Do you love me?" It was all I could think to ask. I hoped he would furrow his brows, curl his lips and give me a look like I had a screw loose.

Patrick looked me straight in the eye. "No." The word and delivery were so jolting my chest constricted. With effort, a second question came to mind. One I didn't want to ask, but I had to. It was now or never.

"Did you ever love me?"

"I'm not sure." The wall of emotional security I'd fabricated and held on to during our time together started to disintegrate.

"Do you think I'm attractive?"

"I did, at one time." Down to the ground went my image of who I was, splayed out in bits and pieces. It dawned on me that his rejection was not just about having children. The other part was about me. He didn't want to be *with me*.

I don't remember what words were said after that because Patrick did most of the talking. Last night, he'd consulted an attorney who told him a Dominican Republic divorce could be issued immediately, while California divorce papers were simultaneously filed. All he wanted was his clothes, music, one cat and a piece of art we'd purchased together in Sonoma.

Those items and a piece of paper releasing him from any obligation to pay the costs of raising the children in return for giving up his rights. I'd be free to travel with the children, remarry, move to another state and send them to church.

"If you sign, I'll forgo any claim I have on your business." But he'd never wanted a part of my business, so his bargaining chip was stupid.

"You're not a shareholder, Patrick."

"California is a communal property state," he responded objectively as though we were debating on where to eat breakfast. "What you earned over the last five years was stock in half a dozen technology companies. Half of that is legally mine." The GeorgiaLiman stock came to mind first, Alan's words second. Be pragmatic, he'd counseled. In other words, face the situation and deal with it.

"Draw up the paperwork." My words were barely audible.

Patrick began packing the moment the conversation ended. I called Vanessa who came over to pick me up. He didn't come out of the bedroom when the doorbell rang and I didn't tell him I was leaving.

Once at Vanessa's parents' home on the Marina waterfront, we sat by the pool until the evening sun set. We talked about Patrick and the what-ifs of my future life until the subject was exhausted. At seven forty, Patrick sent me a text message to say he was out.

When I arrived back home, silence greeted me. The master closet was three-quarters empty but the furniture remained. I called for our cats, knowing he was going to take one, though he didn't say which. Remus, my black cat came out from behind the couch, looking like a lost soul. It was a tender mercy, as he was my favorite of the two. He slunk around, as if he had noticed and felt the emptiness as much as I did.

I fell asleep with Remus curled against my stomach, my arm draped around him. I considered what had happened in the last eight hours. The dream had been just that, a dream, but in it had been enough of a trigger to cause me to ask a simple question; one to which Patrick could have said

many things.

The dream forced me to a point of closure. Another blessing, although awful to experience and hell on my life. If Alan ever asked, I'd be honest. Had it not been for the dream, I would have held onto Patrick, tightly and irrationally, until he pushed me away.

We were still standing beside my pedestal, as if we'd never left it and I had the distinct impression some of the men and women reading the pages were relatives or loved ones, looking down on another's life, praying fervently for their welfare.

"I don't think I want to see anymore," I told Grandfather, my fragile state manifesting itself by a weak voice. Knowing my dreams were having a very real impact on my life scared me.

"Are you sure?" The question, so soft and love-filled, resonated within my bones.

"Why am I having these dreams with you now? Is it because I died?"

"For you, yes."

"But not everyone?" I pressed. I had a very real surge of jealousy when he nodded. In my lifetime, I had asked for help a lot of times and got nothing in return. "But help doesn't always come," I said with frustration.

"Ah. Sometimes an answer is a long time in coming, and when it does come, those who are impatient are closed off from hearing the answer, especially if it's not what they'd hoped for."

"I'd been praying about Patrick," I said, closing my mouth the moment the words were out. I did get an answer, just not what I wanted.

"And sometimes, prayers given by others are heard and delivered by friends or relatives. In some cases, complete strangers. One must be sensitive to the input."

Grandfather flipped the pages of my book and I looked down. I was 18 and stayed too late at my boyfriend's house. Dad told me to be home by

midnight and it was already 12:30 a.m. I raced out of the house and into my car and was about to throw it into reverse when my boyfriend stopped me.

“Wait,” my boyfriend said, pulling my seatbelt in place. I harped at him, irritated at the delay. He ignored me, ensuring it was tight and I was secure before he let me leave. Seconds later, speeding down the gravel road, I took the sharp corner too fast. The back of my four-door Volkswagen Jetta slid out, flipping the car on its hood. When I awoke, my boyfriend was peering at me. I was hanging upside down from the roof like a bat, the seatbelt suspending me in midair. The lid of the car was crushed, the vehicle wedged in an irrigation ditch with water a foot deep. My boyfriend’s dad later said I’d have drowned if I didn’t have my belt on.

“Look here,” Grandfather said. He flipped to one page earlier. It was my father, on bended knee, audibly praying for his daughter. I hadn’t called and he was worried. He was praying for my safety.

I looked at my Grandfather. “That was you?” I asked.

“I came just as you got in the car. I was whispering for you to put on your seat belt. You were so preoccupied, you couldn’t listen. Your boyfriend, on the other hand, was receptive to the prompting.”

“I was so worried dad was going to be mad. My boyfriend, what was his name? Brandt Severson? He was more aware and sensitive than me.” Grandfather nodded. “What would have happened if my dad hadn’t said a prayer?”

“I can’t say for sure. Death. Paralysis. I don’t know. Some things aren’t supposed to be prevented. That’s where free will and choice come in to play, and it’s the way we learn and grow.”

I looked at him intently. “You were here all the time but I was too blind to see it.”

“Blind isn’t only a physical state,” he said informatively. “It’s mental and emotional. One must have the right view on life to be receptive.” I scrunched the corner of my mouth. Although I wasn’t perfect, and had been very focused on business. I thought I had a positive, open view of the

IN A MOMENT

world.

“We’re going to take a journey, Lindy, to visit those you encountered during your last day on earth. Perhaps then you will see what I mean.”

A curtain of light appeared, draping itself from an invisible hanger high above us down to our feet. He took my hand and we stepped through the veil.