

C. L. Kraemer

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DEDICATION

In memory of the four lost and twenty wounded, we won't forget.

One

Staring at the reflective elevator door, I didn't recognize the middle-aged face staring back at me.

When had I grown so old? When had gray become the dominant color of my dark brown hair? And please, tell me, where the hell had I picked up those doggie jowls?

Cassie Thorpe, my best friend since, well, what seemed forever, looked into the reflection.

"What are you doing?" She cocked her head in that funny way she always does when she's questioning my sanity. This time she added crossed arms and a hitched eyebrow.

"Wondering how age snuck up and attacked me without my knowledge." I peered at my likeness, my finger tracing a line from my nose to my chin around what used to be a full voluptuous mouth.

"Oh, God."

I watched Cassie roll her eyes as she uncrossed her arms and adjusted the purse on her shoulder. She shook her head and blew air between her lips.

"Lucy, just schedule a face lift. I told you I'd front you the money."

The elevator had reached the top floor of the Equitable Building in downtown Salem. The interior had recently undergone a major renovation and featured Italian marble in most of the lobby and down the hallways. Small areas of plush carpet covered the remainder of the floor. The new owners had muted the government gray walls with a faux Tuscan-inspired paint, adding art deco sconces to the walls. Bronze lamps hung from the cathedral ceiling adding a touch of elegance to the lobby area. Dark leather couches and chairs placed in comfortable conversation settings invited the visitor to stop and admire the effect. Every effort had been made to rid the visitor of the government feel of the square, granite and smoked-glass building.

"Where are we going again?" I followed Cassie out of the lift toward a hallway that wound to sculpted, cherry-stained office doors bearing the gold suite number.

She placed a hand on the gold-plated door handle and turned as she spoke to me. "My lawyer. Bobby's balking about handing over the chalet at Mt. Bachelor."

"Oh."

We entered an office painted in muted tones of blue. The money invested in the cherry wood desk occupied by the receptionist would've paid for that facelift Cassie had offered. The blue-gray guest couches were satiny soft and comfortable.

Speaking into her silver, state-of-the-art headset, the pencil-thin blonde at the desk announced Cassie.

I hadn't even transferred the latest issue of People magazine to my lap when a door, magnificently blended into the cool blue wall, opened revealing a young man wearing a fitted, black Baroni suit. A Rolex peeked from beneath the sleeve of a silk

dress shirt and Gucci loafers covered his feet. He lifted a manicured finger and beckoned us into the inner sanctum.

I would've been happy to stay and read the most recent dirt on the latest *it* couple, but Cassie dragged me behind her. My feet sank into the carpet. I swear. It was like walking on that miracle foam bedding. I turned to see if I'd left my footprints. Cassie cleared her throat and shook her head.

I shrugged my shoulders and stood awkwardly waiting for permission to seat myself.

The young man moved around the L-shaped desk made of Koa wood and seated himself in a large steel-blue leather chair. He motioned us to sit in the two upholstered chairs in front of his monstrosity of a desk as he perched straight backed and rigid in the chair. Behind him an impressive 10-foot tall, 30-foot long array of silver gray curtains waved slightly with the breeze from the rising warmth of the heater.

Once we were all settled and our roles firmly established; he moved to the front of his desk to languidly lean on the edge. Grasping Cassie's hand he placed a delicate kiss on the top of it, his steely eyes gazing into her chocolate brown ones.

"What can I... do for you?"

Cassie pulled a deep, shuddering breath in and blew out slowly.

"Donald, I hope you don't mind if my best friend Lucy sits in on this." She batted her eyes at him. "I think I'll need her before we're done."

Donald, I guessed that was his name, nodded his head so slightly at me I wasn't sure if I was being acknowledged or if he was flexing his neck muscles.

"Ma'am."

Okay. That's it; I've had enough. No one condescends to me. I don't have to take this.

I started to rise but stopped halfway up when Cassie laid a hand on my arm.

"Lucy, please? For me?"

What I do for my friends... I sat back down and folded my arms. This had better be good.

I watched my friend morph before my very eyes. Her shoulders sagged, bottom lip took on a quivering life of its own, and she again sucked a deep ragged breath into her lungs.

"It's Robert."

I lifted my left eyebrow. I'd *never* heard Cassie use her ex-husband's proper name.

The young barrister leaned closer concentrating all his attention on my well-endowed, and rich, friend.

"What has he done now, Cassandra?"

I choked, feigning a cough. If I'd called her Cassandra, I'd have worn the impression of her knuckles on my bicep for two weeks.

"I... I... I just can't take it." Cassie picked up her purse from the floor and pulled out a lace-edged hanky which she dabbed to the inside corner of her right eye.

I sat with my mouth gaping. I'd seen this delicate flower drag a 6' 2", *drunk*, rugby player to the front of the bar where we'd

both worked at the time and THROW him into the parking lot—by herself.

The person sitting next to me now was nobody *I* knew.

Donald leaned over and murmured just low enough I nearly missed it. "I know just what to do."

He gave a curt nod of his head and stood.

I panicked. There was *no way* I wanted to be witness to fooling around even if she was my best friend.

Donald turned from the desk to the wall of fabric behind him. Picking up a remote control from the desktop, he pointed it at the curtains. Slowly they slid toward the corners revealing a wall of glass from ceiling to the floor.

It was at that moment, I must have lost my mind.

Outside the sky was pewter-toned with horizon-to-horizon clouds pelting fat raindrops to the ground. Tiny rivulets ran down the outside of the glass wall. Even with the gloom of the rain, natural light from the sky brightened the space overpowering the subtle glow of the lamps in the room.

Donald turned to face Cassie and took his place in the leather captain's chair behind the desk.

"There. That should help. Now tell me everything that's happening."

Cassie launched into a diatribe about Bobby and his girlfriend, now his wife, and droned on and on.

It all faded to so much background noise. Something about the act of revealing the floor to ceiling windows set off a trigger in my mind.

The cloud-filled sky faded to darkness and city lights twinkled in the distance. I felt a thump, thump, thumping in my chest and vague strains of a Donna Summer song echoed somewhere in the distance. Tracer lights tracked around the floor, which was oak parquet now. Stale beer and cigarettes tickled my nose, and there was a subtle undertone of prime rib tinged with horseradish and baked potatoes. I ran my tongue over my lips in anticipation, the tangy bite of lemon tweaking my taste buds. The thrumming of the disco beat set my heart racing, and I found myself sweating. *Man, it's hot!*

Someone was tugging on my arm. I was not in the mood to deal with amorous drunks tonight. I was going to introduce his face to my tray if he didn't stop tugging on my arm.

"Lucy! Lucy!"

How can this drunk know my name?

"LUCY!"

Light slowly filtered through my fog. The thundering of the music was gone, and the obsidian night sky melted into the dreary, sullen gray of weeping clouds. Gone were the tracer lights on the floor. Carpet now covered the space and the bouquet of prime rib had fled the room. No stale beer. No stale cigarettes.

I glanced up into the worried eyes of my friend Cassie.

"Are you all right? You, like, *went away* for a minute."

I smiled weakly. "Yeah, I'm all right. How about I stop at the ladies' room while you finish up? I'll meet you by the elevators."

"Fine. I'll be done here shortly."

Donald rose from his desk and, coming around the corner, escorted me to the door.

I made a big deal of asking the receptionist to direct me to the little girl's room. It was all for show. I knew where the ladies' room was on this floor and every floor in the building. The new owners may have updated the furnishings, but the layout was still the same. I'd spent more time in these restrooms than I'd wanted.

As I entered my footsteps echoed on the tile-covered concrete floors, against the tiles on the walls. The air freshener squirted neutralizing spray into the air eliminating offensive odors.

So-o-o-o-o different from...back then. So different from when a dozen or more drunk, rowdy ladies crowded into a space designed for just four people.

I leaned my head against the cool surface and slowly brought myself back to the present.

I was sure Cassie was going to ask me about my mental vacation. She was just young enough, she'd not been clubbing around the time I was recalling - she would not remember this place or the Incident that made international news.

"You okay?" Cassie poked her head around the concrete dividing wall.

I looked at the worried brown eyes searching my face. She and I had been through a lot in the years we'd known each other. But even good friends had secrets from one another, right?

"Lucy, what the hell is going on? You're scaring me. Come on, you can confide in me. We are best buds, aren't we?"

I looked into the frightened eyes of my best friend. *Can I really tell her everything? Will we still be best friends when she finds out I was responsible for the deaths of four people?*