

*A friend is someone you can count
on when the chips are down....*



Fatal Fortune

A Psychic Eye
Mystery

VICTORIA LAURIE

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *DEADLY FORECAST*

"The connections of supportive friendship, effective teamwork, and tough love between Abby and Candice come through with sparkle and warmth." —Publishers Weekly

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Fatal F^ortune

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A Psychic Eye Mystery
.....

Victoria Laurie



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Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Group (USA) LLC, 375 Hudson Street,
New York, New York 10014



USA | Canada | UK | Ireland | Australia | New Zealand | India | South Africa | China

penguin.com

A Penguin Random House Company

First published by Obsidian, an imprint of New American Library,
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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA:

Laurie, Victoria.

Fatal fortune: a psychic eye mystery/Victoria Laurie.

pages cm

“An Obsidian mystery.”

ISBN 978-0-698-15250-2

1. Cooper, Abby (Fictitious character)—Fiction. 2. Women psychics—Fiction. 3. Women detectives—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3612.A94423F38 2014

813'.6—dc23 2014008293

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Version_1

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*For my amazing editor, Ms. Sandy Harding.
Abby wouldn't be Abby without you. 😊*

Acknowledgments

Jotting down the acknowledgments is always my favorite part of any book. And not because by the time I get around to writing them the manuscript is just about finished and I'm feeling pretty good, riding those "Whoooo! I'm DONE!" vibes. Okay, so it's mostly that. 😊 But it's also that I'm afforded an amazing gift in that I get to publicly state how grateful I am to all those people who help make my stories into books—actual *things* that you can hold in your hands, see in a bookstore, check out from the library, or download to your gizmo. Without these vitally important souls, all these stories that I've written, these worlds that I've created, these characters I've loved and made live, and, yes, even killed off (my favorite part) would simply sit idle in a file on my computer, and they and I would be deprived of *your* delightful company, and where's the fun in that? So I think that thanking these folks is pretty crucial to the process. I'm doing it to serve the higher good . . . that I benefit greatly from. But still, serving up some GOOD!

So! Without further ado, lemme get to those thank-yous!

First, I'd sincerely like to thank my amazing editor, the divinely sublime Ms. Sandra Harding. I often rave about Sandy. I suspect that all of her authors rave about Sandy. She's supremely talented, insightful, smart, charming, and utterly delightful, and in addition to being a schmabulous editor, she's also a wonderful person. I hearts her. 😊 Abby really wouldn't be as daring, bold, or human without Sandy's fabulous guidance and support. I think the very best books in the series have been written under her cool, calm, impeccable guidance, and for that I'm oodley grateful. You rock, Sandy. Thank you very much for all you do.

Next, I'd like to thank my literary agent, Jim McCarthy. I'mma be honest here and say that I'm running out of nice words to say about Jim. Like, *every single book* I just roll through all those adjectives, trying to fully describe how awesome he is and now, after a bajillion books together, it's finally happened . . . I got nothin'. Hence, as I've already used up all the good words to describe Jim, I'm left with only one option: I will now be forced to make up new words to express my devotion and gratitude. So, here goes: ahem . . . ahem . . . Jim, you're amazereat. No, really, you're fabredible. I can't fully express to you how wonderlar and specable you really are! So please, don't ever change. You're fantacerful just the way you are and I adorne you. 😊

Moving on, I'd like to thank the rest of my NAL team and they are: Elizabeth Bistrow, Kayleigh Clark, Danielle Dill, Clair Zion, Michele Alpern, Sharon Gamboa, and Monika Roe. These divinely talented women work so hard behind the scenes. They are my unsung angels and I'm so lucky to have each and every one of them along for the ride.

Last, but certainly not least, I'd like to thank my friends and family, who continually assert their love and support for me even when my blood-sugar levels drop to the danger zone. (Don't mess with me when I'm hungry, motherfinkers!) Brian Gorzynski, Sandy Upham, Steve McGrory, Mike and Matt Morrill, Katie Coppedge, Karen Ditmars, Leanne Tierney, Nicole Gray, Jennifer Melkonian, Catherine Ong Kane, Drue Rowean, Nora, Bob, and Mike Brosseau, Sally Woods, John Kwiatkowski, Matt McDougal, Dean James, Anne Kimbol, McKenna Jordan, Hilary Laurie, Shannon Anderson, Thomas Robinson, Juliet Blackwell, Sophie Littlefield, Nicole Peeler, Gigi Pandian, Maryelizabeth Hart, Terry Gilman, Molly Boyle, Martha Bushko, and Suzanne Parsons.

You may not all be related by blood, but you're my family all the same. Love you.

Chapter One

• • •

My eyes popped open just after three a.m. I'm not sure what woke me except that I had a bad feeling the second I sat up in bed and looked around. My hubby, Dutch, was sleeping peacefully next to me, the sound of his light snoring filling the room.

Instinctively I reached for my cell phone, which was facedown on the nightstand and turned to silent. I always mute my phone before I go to bed because anyone calling after eleven p.m. usually has only bad news to share, and in recent months I've had all I can handle in the bad-news department.

Focusing on the phone's display, I saw that my best friend and business partner, Candice Fusco, had just called—and she'd left a message. I pressed play and held the phone to my ear.

“Abby!” the voice mail began, and the urgency in her voice made my back stiffen. “You have to trust me. It's not how it looks.”

It's been my experience that *nothing* good ever starts with those words.

Immediately I paused the message and called Candice. It went straight to voice mail. “Shit!” I whispered (swearing doesn't count when you whisper), and tried calling her again, only to get the same result. I looked at the time stamp of Candice's call. Three oh four a.m. It was now three oh six.

I tried a third time to reach her and again the phone went straight to voice mail. Either Candice's phone was turned off or it had lost its charge, because otherwise it would've rung before clicking over.

“Where are you?” I muttered, tapping the phone to go back to that paused voice mail. “You have to trust me,” I heard the message repeat. “It's not how it looks. But it's gonna look bad, Sundance. Real bad. Listen carefully and whatever you do, don't share this voice mail with anybody. This is for your ears only. I need you to go to the office the second you get this and do something for me. In the back of my closet is a wall safe. The combination is Sammy's birthday—you remember it, don't you?”

Sammy was Samantha Dubois. She was Candice's older sister, who, tragically, had lost her life in a fatal car crash just outside Las Vegas when Candice was in her teens. Candice had been in the passenger seat at the time of the accident and had nearly died too. She'd pulled through after spending several months in the hospital. I couldn't imagine how difficult that time must've been for her, but I knew it still affected her deeply, because my best friend almost never talked about the accident. Still, I'd see the deep emotional wound appear in Candice's eyes twice a year on two specific dates: August 5—Sam's birthday—and June 17, the date of Sam's death.

I also knew that in years past Candice had kept a Nevada driver's license with her photo but her sister's information on it. As Candice was a private investigator by trade, she'd confessed to me that the fake ID came in handy on occasion, and it actually had come in very handy on one particular occasion that I could remember.

“Inside the safe you'll find a file,” Candice went on, and it was then that I noticed her breathing had ticked up—as if she'd started running. “Take the file and hide it. Don't show it or share it with *anyone*, Abby. No. One. Not even Dutch or Brice. I'll be in touch when I can.”

The cryptic message ended there. I replayed it and held the phone tightly, as if I could squeeze more information out of Candice's voice mail. And then I got out of bed and looked around the room trying to figure out what to do.

After a few seconds I did what comes naturally to me. I flipped on my intuitive switch and tried to home in on Candice's energy.

I'm a professional psychic by trade. I have my own steady business of personal clients, and Candice and I work private investigation cases together. We work so well together that we've nicknamed each other after Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. I'm Sundance, and, as there's nothing butch about Candice, she's just Cassidy. When I'm not working a case with Candice, or busy with my own clients, I also sideline as a psychic for the FBI—although my official title at the bureau is "FBI civilian profiler."

Kinda makes it sound like I have a fancy degree in psychology, doesn't it? For the record, I majored in poli-sci, and there wasn't much fancy about it. As long as nobody asks too many questions when they read my official ID, the Feds are happy.

My husband works for the bureau too. So does Candice's.

Brice Harrison, Candice's husband, is my boss at the bureau. Brice and Candice were married last month, when they eloped to Las Vegas and stayed there for a week and a half on their honeymoon. I wasn't invited to the wedding, but then, nobody else was either. I guess it's only fair, as Candice wasn't exactly present for my wedding to Dutch. And it was probably a little bit my fault that she hadn't gotten married locally. My sister, who'd attempted to orchestrate my wedding extravaganza, was still looking to exercise her wedding planner muscles on someone. The rest of us were just looking to exorcise my sister. She'd been like a woman possessed ever since Dutch and I had gotten engaged, and our wedding had hardly turned out like she'd planned (and planned, and *planned!*).

Still, it would've been nice to watch Candice and Brice exchange their vows. I'm pretty sure she thought the same about Dutch and me, which is why I pretended to be thrilled when she called me from Sin City to let me know they'd eloped. I think Candice knew I was a little hurt, but the weird thing is that ever since she got back from Vegas, she's been different.

Candice has always been a pretty cool cucumber—it's rare to see her lose her composure—but when she came back from her honeymoon, it's like someone turned the temperature of that cool demeanor down another few notches. She's become a little more withdrawn, and a little more—I don't know—*secretive?*

It's not anything I can put my finger on, but lately she hasn't been as open with me about what's going on in that highly intelligent mind of hers. I've been chalking it up to the fact that she and Brice have been busy house hunting and easing into their married lives. But deep down, no matter how I've been trying to rationalize it, I've been worried about her. And my radar has certainly pinged with a sense of urgency every time Candice and I hang out. I kept thinking a big case must be coming our way that just hadn't appeared yet, but now, in light of the voice mail I'd just listened to, I knew I'd completely misinterpreted the signal.

"Abs?" I heard Dutch whisper as I fished around on the floor for my slippers.

"Go back to sleep," I told him. The last thing I needed was for Dutch to get involved in whatever this was before I had a chance to figure it out.

The light on his side of the bed clicked on. "What's wrong?"

I hid my phone behind my back and adopted what I hoped was an innocent smile. "Nothing, sweetie. I couldn't sleep, so I'm just gonna go downstairs and watch some TV."

Dutch rubbed his face and yawned. "Is there any cheesecake left?"

“No,” I lied, willing him to roll over and go back to sleep.

Dutch blinked. “You ate six pieces between yesterday and today?”

My smile got bigger and more forced. “Yes. It was too tempting to resist.”

Dutch focused on me, his eyes narrowing. Instantly I could tell he knew that (a) I was a liar, liar, pants on fire, and (b) I was hiding something.

“Abs,” he said, his gaze traveling to the hand holding my phone behind my back. “What’s up?”

“Nothing.”

He sighed heavily. “So it’s bad, whatever it is.”

I opened my mouth to insist that there was nothing wrong when Dutch’s phone rang. He glanced at it, then looked back at me as if to say, “I knew you were hiding something.”

Heat tinged my cheeks, but I held my ground and motioned with my free hand for him to answer his phone.

“Brice,” he said as he picked up the call, and a shiver went down my spine. I knew Brice was calling about Candice, and if Brice was calling Dutch at three a.m. about Candice, whatever was going on was as bad as bad gets.

If I needed any confirmation, the expression on Dutch’s face said it all. As he listened, he visibly paled and then his jaw clenched before he said, “When?” followed by, “Where?”

I shoved on my slippers and eased out of the room. Rounding the hallway into our beautiful new kitchen, I didn’t even bother to click on the lights. I just navigated the darkness the best I could, muttering the occasional “Dammit!” (swearing doesn’t count when you bump into furniture in the dark), and making my way toward the counter with the little copper dish that held my car keys.

“Abby?” I heard Dutch call from the bedroom.

I ignored him and hustled to the door leading to the garage, so thankful that I didn’t require the use of a cane anymore. I’d had a nasty accident eighteen months before that’d nearly permanently cripple me, but with a whole lot of physical therapy (and maybe some tough love from Candice when I didn’t push myself to get off the cane), I’d finally gotten the full use of my legs back.

“Abs?” I heard Dutch call again as I slipped out the door, closing it as quietly as I could behind me. I tapped the button for the garage door opener, then hurried to the car, tucking inside my shiny new SUV with my pulse racing. If Dutch discovered that I was slipping away, he’d grill me for details, and I felt intuitively that I had to get to the office and retrieve that file for Candice because time wasn’t on my side.

I backed out of the garage and closed the door, hoping that Dutch wouldn’t see me leaving before the door closed. My hubby had coated the garage door with enough silicone to make a Slip ’N Slide look sticky. Dutch liked that it barely made a sound as it moved up and down, and at the moment I was really glad he’d used two spray cans of the stuff on the gears. It’d give me a few extra seconds before he gave chase, and I knew he’d give chase because that’s just how Dutch rolled when it came to me.

Crouched over the steering wheel, I navigated the dark neighborhood streets, for once ignoring the beauty and quiet of our lovely suburban Austin community, and drove to the office I shared with Candice. My phone rang through the SUV’s Bluetooth a couple of times, but I ignored the calls from my husband, focusing instead on getting to the office as quickly as I could.

Once I was within sight of the building, I circled the block, hoping to spot Candice’s yellow Porsche nearby, but there was no sign of it. I parked in the alley between two buildings a couple of blocks down from the office, guided by my intuition, which was sending me lots of “Danger, Will Robinson! Danger!” signals, and, after looking around the all but deserted streets, I got out and trotted toward our building.

Along the way, I paused once or twice to listen and look, every nerve tingling with trepidation, and at last made it to the front door. I peered through the glass, looking around, but the place was so dark that I couldn't see anything inside.

It took me a minute to fish around my key ring for the right key—no way was I going to risk using a light to find the key—and when I finally had it, the sweat from my palms made fitting it into the lock tricky.

At last I gained entrance and practically ran to the elevator, pressing the button a dozen times until the elevator doors opened. After selecting the fourth floor, I pressed the DOOR CLOSE button another dozen times, then tapped my foot anxiously as the elevator climbed its way up. “Should've taken the stairs,” I muttered.

The second the doors opened, I squeezed through and rushed down the hallway to our suite. The corridor was dimly lit—the main lights wouldn't come on for another two hours or so. Still, it was enough light to see by and I had no trouble getting in the door this time. The first thing I did was call out Candice's name on the slim hope that she was there, hiding. I felt my phone vibrate in my back pocket and I took it out to look at the display.

It was Dutch. Again. Trying to reach me for the sixth time.

I clicked the call over to voice mail and called out again. “Candice? Honey, it's me. Are you here?”

There was no reply and the office was eerily silent. The hair on the back of my neck stood up on end and goose pimples lined my arms. I realized I was alone and vulnerable.

Turning back toward the door, I checked to make sure it was locked, then squared my shoulders and got on with it.

Candice and I have shared the suite of three private offices and one central lobby for nearly two years. We had a similar setup even before that when we both lived in Michigan. The arrangement of sharing space together worked really well for us.

Like me, Candice had her own set of private clients—the easy adultery cases or background-check stuff—and she and I tackled the more difficult missing persons and such cases together. It was a wonderful partnership, as we each brought something different to the investigation process. Candice had a wealth of PI experience, smarts, and a handy assortment of deadly weapons. I had my intuition, my sunny disposition, and a cache of colorful expletives I'd been saving just in case of emergency.

Candice's office was just to the right of the front door, and my two smaller offices were to the left. Anxious to follow my best friend's instructions and get the hello Dolly outta there before anyone was the wiser, I headed to the right of the tiny lobby and found Candice's door closed. I tried the handle, but it was locked. “Son of a bitch!” (Swearing doesn't count when your best friend doesn't tell you she's locked her office door and you need to get a secret file from the back of her closet before the poop hits the fan.)

Standing back from the door, I thought for a second, then remembered that I had a spare key to her office hidden somewhere in my desk drawer. We'd exchanged keys just in case of an emergency right after we'd signed the lease, but I hadn't seen the key since I'd moved in.

Grumbling to myself, I moved back through the lobby to my office and over to the desk. Once there, I risked turning on the little lamp at the edge of my blotter and began rummaging around in the drawers when I felt that same prickly tension creep up my spine again.

I stopped rummaging and turned off the desk lamp, listening for any sound that might suggest I wasn't alone. The seconds ticked by without incident, but instead of feeling less anxious, I began to feel even more nervous.

Turning around, I moved to the window and peered outside, and that's when I saw a patrol car eas

its way down the street. “Shit!” I hissed. (Swearing doesn’t count when you’re creeping around in the middle of the night and you think the cops may be about to rain on your parade.)

As my heart rate ticked up, I swiveled back to the desk and used my phone to shed some light on the drawer, frantically pushing at all the odds and ends I’d shoved into my desk over the past two years. And then, miracle of miracles, I found the key. “Eureka!”

Clutching it to my chest, I hurried out of my office and back over to Candice’s door. The key slid easily into the lock and I let myself in, then tapped at my phone to listen to her message again. “. . . I the back of my closet is a wall safe. . . .” I paused the message and moved to the small closet to the right of the desk, pulling open the door. Candice had a large filing cabinet in the closet, which took up almost the entire space and would neatly conceal anything behind it. Still, seeing it there was enough to make me groan. “*Really*, Candice?” With a sigh I pulled at the back edge of the filing cabinet, but it was extremely heavy, and trying to twist it out of the way was much harder than it looked.

It took me a minute or two of pulling, twisting, and shoving to get the cabinet to turn sideways so that I could wedge myself inside the closet and have a look behind it. I saw the wall safe midway down, just like Candice had said. What struck me, though, was that when we’d first looked at the space two years earlier, I was certain there’d been no safe inside this closet. Candice must’ve had it put in without telling me.

Why she’d done that I couldn’t guess, but it bothered me because I was Candice’s BFF and we weren’t supposed to keep secrets from each other.

Still, my radar was telling me I didn’t have a lot of time to dwell on such things, so I hunkered down and stared at the dial. Putting the phone back to my ear, I listened to the next part of the message again. “The combination is Sammy’s birthday—you remember it, don’t you?”

“August fifth,” I muttered, but then my breath caught. I didn’t know the year. “Crap, Candice! What year was your sister born?”

In desperation I tried calling Candice’s cell again, but now, instead of going straight to voice mail a recorded voice told me that the voice mailbox was full. I had a feeling Brice might be responsible for filling it up, because if Candice wasn’t taking my calls, I doubted she was taking Brice’s calls either. That could only mean she was in *serious* trouble.

Frustrated, I stared at the dial for a few seconds when I realized I could probably come up with the answer on my own. I started to spin the wheel toward the digits I did know—eight, five—then talked the problem of the remaining digits out loud. “Sam was four years older than Candice and Candice was fifteen at the time of the accident, so that would have been in nineteen ninety-five, I think. . . . Ninety-five minus nineteen equals seventy-six. So, right again to nineteen, then left to seventy-six.”

Just as the dial landed on that number, I heard a noise from somewhere in the building. I froze and strained my ears to hear more. Faintly I could just make out the sounds of activity in the building and my pulse quickened yet again as my radar sent a little ping of warning. Crossing my fingers, I pulled at the handle to the safe and it popped open. “Thank God!” I gasped, and shone the light of my phone into the interior. There in the safe was a fat wad of cash, one of Candice’s spare handguns, and a manila file without a label to indicate what it might contain. I snatched the file and the cash. “Leave the gun, take the casholi,” I whispered, thinking that if Candice contacted me, she’d probably need the money. Then I closed the safe door and spun the dial to lock it.

Standing up again, I wedged myself back out of the closet and shoved the filing cabinet with my shoulder. Under the fuel of adrenaline, the cabinet moved back into place without nearly the trouble it’d caused me a few minutes earlier. I closed the closet door and hustled back out of Candice’s office.

Risking a few extra seconds to lock her door again, I made sure to keep the key close, tucking it

into my pocket before darting to the small window in the lobby overlooking the street. There were two patrol cars parked at the curb.

I didn't even pause to utter an expletive; instead I whirled around and ran for our front door. Putting my ear to it, I listened, but didn't hear anyone out in the hallway, so I undid the lock and eased the door open a crack. Putting my eye to the crack, I peered out and that's when I heard the faint ping of the elevator. "Time to go," I whispered, ducking out into the hallway. I paused only long enough to reach back and lock the handle on the door before closing it softly, then dashed off in the opposite direction from the elevators. There was a maintenance elevator at the rear of the building and I didn't slow down until I'd reached it. I thought of using the stairs, but the door triggered the fire alarm, and I rather liked the fact that no one knew I was here in the building . . . yet.

As I waited for the service elevator, I could hear voices back down the hallway, and I knew the cops had made it to our office. I wasn't totally convinced yet that they were looking for Candice, but I had a bad feeling all the way around and the last thing I wanted was to get caught up in some hot mess before I even had a chance to figure out what kind of trouble I was about to be swept up into.

The elevator finally arrived and I ducked in, pressing B for basement. The good thing about using the service elevator was that it didn't ping when it arrived like the central elevators. It simply did its work quickly and quietly. "Thank you, service elevator," I said once I was safely on my way down.

Once the elevator had stopped, the doors opened and I peered out. I'd been down on the basement level only twice, but I thought it a good idea tonight to avoid the lobby. There was a stairwell that led up to street level and out into the alley, but I knew that door was likely locked. I could only hope that my key for the front door worked on the rear door lock; otherwise, I'd be stuck.

It took me a little bit to find the stairwell door—the basement was a maze of corridors—but at last I was in front of the exit and with a little prayer I inserted my key. The lock turned and I wanted to whoop. Tucking through the door, I paused on the landing as the cool air from outside enveloped me. I couldn't hear any voices from up top, so I made my way to the street and ran to the alley two blocks down where my car was still parked, hidden behind a Dumpster. I smiled to myself when I spotted it, grateful I had such good radar. I knew that if my car had been parked in the street, the cops would've definitely run my plates. Here at least I was fairly certain they hadn't noticed the SUV.

I wasted no time slipping back behind the wheel and starting the engine, but I wasn't about to turn on the headlights until I was well away from the building. I could only hope the cops didn't look out one of the windows and see me inching away.

As I drove west headed toward home, I tried to figure out the best hiding place for the file and the money. At first I considered hiding them at my place, but I didn't yet know what Candice was up against. Whatever it was, it was bad enough for Candice not to want to tell Brice about it—that'd been made clear by her choice to call me to retrieve the file and not her husband.

I had to conclude that whatever was going on, it was illegal, and Candice didn't want Brice involved, and if it was truly that bad, then I sure as hello Dolly didn't want to get Dutch involved either. I was totally willing to go to the mat for my BFF, but I wasn't willing to suck Dutch into something sticky if I didn't have to. Therefore, I concluded, hiding the file in the house where Dutch could find it was out.

That left me with few options, though, because obviously the office was also out. I considered my car, but again I had to nix that idea because wouldn't that be one of the first places my hubby or my best friend's hubby, or some other law enforcement officer, might look?

And then an idea struck me and I tapped at the steering wheel nervously while I considered it.

Our next-door neighbors, the Witts, were out of town on a two-week getaway to the Greek isles.

They'd asked Dutch and me to watch the house for them, and I had their garage code for garbage day. Because Dutch had to work late, I'd been the one to pull in the Witts' cans two days earlier, tucking them neatly back into the garage, thinking of all the brownie points I was racking up. But now I was thinking that the Witts wouldn't be home for another ten days and who would think to look in their garage?

After considering all the angles, I decided that my neighbors' garage was clearly the best short-term option and as long as I could sneak in there without Dutch noticing, I'd be home free until I heard from Candice.

When I got to my subdivision, I took the long route around the north end so that I could approach the Witts' from the west instead of the east, as most of the windows I knew Dutch would be peering out as he waited for me to get home were at the other end of the house.

It was still dark out and I cut the lights on the car again as I came around the bend, parking between two houses midway down the street. As I cut the engine, I looked around, listening and watching for any sounds of approaching cars.

The sub was blissfully quiet and after waiting a few more seconds just to be sure, I opened the door and hopped out. Jogging along the sidewalk, I lifted my gaze to the upstairs windows of the houses I passed, nervous and jittery about being seen. At last I made it down the Witts' driveway and lifted the little panel of the garage door keypad before consulting my phone for the Witts' garage code. "Six-two-seven-four," I recited, punching in the code and hitting enter. The door lifted and I sighed in relief at the fact that they also had a wonderfully quiet garage door. (Maybe Dutch and Scott Witt had compared silicone notes?) I tapped my foot impatiently while the door rose, then ducked under it and hurried to the back to punch the button to close the door again before it fully opened. I didn't want anybody to see me fishing around in here. Still, when my phone vibrated in my back pocket, I jumped. Deciding it might be best to pick up the line before Dutch put out a BOLO alert, I answered the call with a cheery, "Hey, sweetheart!"

There was a pause, then, "You okay?"

"Terrific."

"Wanna tell me where you are?"

I poked around at some yard supplies on the Witts' back shelves. "Not particularly."

"Is Candice with you?"

I sighed. "No."

"Are you lying to me right now?"

Pulling at a small bag of potting soil next to the shelves, I said, "Not this time. Pinkie swear."

There was another pause, then, "You sound like you're in a cave."

I eyed the large three-car garage. I knew Dutch was trying to figure out where I might be. "I had something to take care of, but I'll be home very soon."

"How soon is soon?"

I smiled. "Sooner than you think."

"Good. The police are on their way. I'd turn that soon into quick if I were you."

My back stiffened. "Noted. See you in a few."

I hung up with Dutch and tugged again at the potting soil. There was a big terra-cotta flowerpot behind it that was large enough to conceal the file and the money, so without further delay I shoved the goods into the pot, then put the bag of dirt on top for good measure and punched the button for the door again.

I made it back to my car thirty seconds later but had to resist the urge to start the car and head

straight home. If I arrived too early, Dutch would know I'd been very close by when I picked up his call, and I wouldn't put it past him to connect the dots—after all, he'd been with me when the Witts had asked us to look after their place.

I waited three full minutes before pulling into our driveway, and immediately noticed Brice's black Volvo at the bottom of the drive. "All right, Candice," I muttered as I got out of the car, "let's see what you've gotten yourself into this time."

Dutch greeted me with an arched eyebrow. "Is there coffee?" I asked, ignoring the eyebrow.

"In the kitchen," he said. "Brice is in there."

I walked ahead of Dutch to the kitchen and the second I saw Brice, I came up short. He looked stricken, like he'd just lost his best friend, and more out of instinct than anything else, I went straight to him and gave him a hug. He stiffened against me—Brice isn't exactly the warm and fuzzy type—but then I felt his arms encircle me and he hugged me back hard. "Have you seen her?" he whispered as he let go and stepped back.

I shook my head. "No."

Brice's lips thinned and I could tell he didn't believe me. "Do you know where she is?"

I looked him in the eye. "No. I swear. I don't even know what's going on."

"You don't?" he said, looking surprised.

I shook my head and decided to be honest with him. Well, partly honest. "I got a voice mail from Candice at three a.m. She asked me to take care of something for her. That's why I went out, but I haven't heard from her or spoken to her since then."

Brice's gaze was searching my face for clues, and I could tell he suspected I knew more than I did. "Brice, I swear, I don't know where she is and I don't know what's happened. But obviously you do, so please tell me."

Brice continued to stand there and assess me, and I started to grow frustrated until Dutch moved to stand next to me and I felt him nudge my arm. When I looked down, I saw he held a cup of coffee. "Sit," he said.

I took the coffee but held my ground. "I think I want to stand."

"Dollface," he said gently, "trust me on this. You'll want to sit down."

I took a deep breath, and more to get on with it, I took a seat at the counter, cupping the warm mug with both hands as I'd suddenly gotten a chill.

For a long moment neither Dutch nor Brice spoke, but something seemed to pass between them and at last Brice said, "Candice didn't come home last night."

My eyes widened. "She didn't?"

"No. She called me yesterday around five to say that she had to work late and wouldn't be home for dinner and that she might not be home until close to midnight. She said she'd call me again around eight or nine, but I never heard from her. I figured she was running surveillance on somebody, and I wasn't too worried about it. I fell asleep on the couch and woke up around two a.m. She wasn't home and she hadn't called or texted, so I reached out to her."

"Did you talk to her?"

"No. Her cell rang, but she didn't pick up. I was about to head out to track her down when an APD detective showed up at my door looking for Candice. She wouldn't give me any information until I flashed my badge and then she told me what Candice had done. . . ." Brice's voice trailed off at that moment and I saw disbelief in his eyes.

"What Candice had done?" I repeated, looking from Brice to Dutch. "Guys . . . what'd she *do*?"

But Brice didn't seem able to say anything more, so Dutch reached for his iPad and handed it to

me. “Brice was able to get a copy of the tape,” he said.

My brow furrowed. “What tape?”

“Surveillance tape from a parking garage at the airport. I should warn you—it’s bad.”

I took another deep breath and tapped at the screen until it lit up and displayed a frozen image of a nearly empty parking garage. The camera was angled down—it’d probably been mounted to the corner of the building—and for the first five seconds or so there wasn’t much to look at, but then a yellow Porsche came into view and parked in the space almost directly across from the camera. I recognized Candice’s car right away. As soon as she parked, a man came into view at the opposite end of the screen. He seemed to be walking straight for the car, pulling his luggage with one hand and holding a phone in the other. As he got to within a few feet of the car, the door opened and out stepped Candice. I recognized the new Burberry white coat she’d brought back from Vegas, as I’d greatly admired it the first time she wore it to the office.

Candice stood next to the car and the man continued to approach. It seemed he was quite happy to see her. Or maybe he was relieved. The quality of the tape was good—much better than the grainy images one usually sees—and I was about to ask who he was when Candice reached inside her coat and withdrew a gun. In the next second there was a flash and a terrible spray of red as the man’s head snapped back, and then he dropped like a sack.

My hands came up to cover my mouth as I gasped in horror. And then my best friend in the whole world calmly lowered her arm, got back into the car, closed the door, and backed out of the space. She drove away without even looking back.

The tape continued to run for several more seconds and all I could do was sit there in stunned disbelief as a pool of blood formed all around the man lying flat on his back, so obviously dead. Toward the very end of the tape a security guard came running into view. He knelt by the victim, then reached for his cell to call it in. That’s when the tape ended.

I opened my mouth to say something, but my vocal cords seemed paralyzed. I tore my gaze from the screen and looked first at Brice, who was staring hard at the floor, and then at Dutch, whose face was pinched with concern. And that’s when I knew how truly bad this was. Dutch’s cop face is made of granite. He’s impossible to read even in the worst of scenarios because he closes down all emotion and it’s “just the facts, ma’am.” But here he was looking like he’d just been punched in the gut, much like I was feeling, and his expression said more than anything that our lives had all just permanently changed.

“It’s a mistake,” I rasped, willing myself to say something, anything, to reject what I’d just seen.

“It’s no mistake,” Brice said, so softly that I almost didn’t hear him. “That’s Candice’s car. Her coat. Her gun. It’s her.”

I turned my attention back to the video, blinking hard as I rewound the tape to just before the car door opened. I let it play and squinted at the screen. I watched the door open, and out came her left leg. I recognized her boots. They were new just like the coat. White calfskin Ferragamo boots. I’d drooled over them just the day before in fact. I’d seen Candice briefly in the morning when I’d gone into the office to pay some bills and schedule a few appointments. I hadn’t had any readings, but I’d stopped to chat with my BFF before leaving and I’d taken note of those gorgeous boots.

I’d mentally noted that Candice seemed to have spent a good deal of money in Vegas, but I hadn’t thought it was anything to be alarmed about because Candice had been left a small fortune by her grandmother, and truth be told, she was doing pretty well as a PI here in Austin. I knew for a fact that the shopping in Vegas was amazing, and it hadn’t surprised me that she’d taken advantage of all the designer-label stores on the Strip.

Besides, Candice always looked good. She wore nothing but the best—stylish without being over-the-top, flashy—something I'd always admired because, left to my own devices, I'd live in Lululemon yoga pants and hoodies.

So even more than the coat and the boots, the way she exited the car so smooth and catlike convinced me that my BFF had been the woman in the video. The woman who'd just murdered an unarmed man in cold blood. It left me stunned, and breathless. I turned to Brice again, imagining what he must be feeling. He looked gutted. Just gutted by the magnitude of what was on that video.

“Brice, I—”

“What did she say on the voice mail, Abby?” Brice interrupted before I could say anything more. “What did she want you to do for her?”

I bit my lip. Brice wasn't asking. He was demanding. And I couldn't tell him. As damning as that video was, I wasn't ready to throw away my faith in my best friend, the woman who'd saved my life on more than one occasion. “She wanted me to lock up her laptop.”

Brice's eyes narrowed. “Lock up her laptop?”

I nodded. I hadn't seen Candice's laptop when I'd entered her office. If she didn't take it with her, she always locked it in the top drawer of her desk, and that's where I assumed it might be.

“Did you?” he asked. “Did you lock up her laptop?”

I licked my lips nervously as both my boss and my husband eyed me closely. For the record I'm a terrible liar. Also for the record Candice can turn lying into an art form. She'd taught me that the secret to telling a lie is to pepper it with a little truth. So that's what I did. I peppered. “When I got to the office, I didn't see her laptop. It wasn't on the desk or anywhere else in the office that I could find.”

Dutch crossed his arms. I thought he might be on the fence about believing me. “Did someone take it?”

I shrugged. “I don't think so. The place was neat as a pin, just like she usually keeps it. Nothing has been disturbed that I could tell.”

Brice's gaze shifted to Dutch. “What could be on the laptop?”

“Don't know. But my guess is once APD is done tossing your place, they'll move on to the girls' offices.”

My eyes bugged. “Tossing what, now?”

“That APD detective who came looking for Candice also came with a search warrant. I heard her on the phone ordering a patrol car to head to your offices and stand guard until she could get there to serve out the rest of the warrant.”

My mind flashed to the two squad cars outside our office building. I figured I'd barely escaped their notice. At that moment the doorbell rang and I jumped.

“That'll be them,” Dutch said.

“Them?” I repeated. “You mean the cops?”

Dutch nodded.

“They'll want to talk to you, Abby,” Brice told me as Dutch turned toward the front door. “They're looking for Candice and they'll leave no stone unturned.” And then something flickered in his eyes and his gaze moved to my cell phone, which was on the counter next to me. “They'll ask you if you've heard from her. If you tell them about the voice mail, they'll want to hear it.” And then Brice gave me a meaningful look before turning away to go over to the coffeepot and pour himself some more coffee.

I didn't stick around for another hint. I grabbed my phone and hustled to the bedroom.

Chapter Two

• • •

After closing and locking the door, I ran to the master bath and closed and locked that door too. Then I tapped at the screen of my iPhone until I'd pulled up the voice mail, but suddenly realized that deleting the message wouldn't permanently remove it from the phone's hard drive. I'd seen the bureau's tech forensic specialist recall all sorts of deleted material off phones before. Still, I thought that might buy me a little time, so I went ahead and got rid of it and for added measure I turned the phone off completely. Then I looked around the bathroom for a hiding place. Opening the cabinet door, I got down on my hands and knees and angled my cell up to wedge it between the sink and the cabinet, then quickly backed out, stood up, flushed the toilet, and ran the water for a minute before opening the door. Entering the kitchen from the living room, I saw Dutch bringing in a woman with long black curly hair, wearing a blue blazer and dress slacks. I'd put her in her mid-thirties. She walked with confidence and there was an intelligence in her eyes that I knew I shouldn't underestimate.

Self-consciously I ran a hand through my hair and stepped over to Brice. "Good morning," she said, flashing her badge. "I'm Detective Grayson."

I shook my head and blinked. "Detective Grayson?" I repeated.

"Miss Cooper, I presume?" she said, a slight smile to her lips. "Or should I say Mrs. Rivers?"

I blushed in spite of myself. Although I'd only spoken to her on the phone, Detective Grayson had assisted Candice and me with an investigation into a series of suicide bombings that'd plagued the Austin area several months before. The case had very nearly blown up in our faces—literally—and although Grayson's assistance had been rather minor, it'd still proven to be a crucial piece to the puzzle. To think she'd be the one leading the investigation into the Candice mess seemed a crazy coincidence.

"It's nice to finally meet you, Detective," I said, sticking out my hand to shake hers. "And thank you again for helping us with the bombing case."

Grayson's grip was sure and strong, and I knew she caught the fact that my palm was sweaty. "I read all about what happened to you in the paper," Grayson said. "Sounds like it was quite an ordeal for you, and on your wedding day to boot."

I shrugged. It'd been the worst experience of my life, but I couldn't let myself be distracted by that awful day now. I was still reeling from what I'd seen on the tape, and wondering how much I should reveal to Grayson. "It wasn't my best day, that's for sure."

Grayson nodded like she understood completely. I'll admit I was a little thrown by her demeanor. She appeared far too congenial given the situation.

After letting go of my hand, she nodded to Brice. "Agent Harrison. I assume you've informed Mrs. Rivers of the events of this evening involving her business partner?"

"Her business partner and *my wife*," Brice said, his tone a little sharp. "She's aware of the situation."

Detective Grayson.”

Grayson’s congenial manner never wavered. “Good,” she said. “Then we can get down to brass tacks. Mrs. Rivers—or is it Ms. Cooper? Which do you prefer?”

I felt Dutch’s gaze land on me. This was a stupid bone of contention between us. I’d kept my last name because I was the independent, modern-woman type, and he really wanted me to take his last name because he was the traditional, caveman type. Right now, however, was not the time to pick a fight, so I settled for a happy medium. “We’re all friends here,” I said. “How about you call me Abby.”

“Okay,” Grayson said. “Abby, when was the last time you saw or talked to your business partner, Candice Fusco?”

“Yesterday morning.”

Grayson pulled out a sleek silver pen and began writing in a notebook that looked dog-eared and filled with other notes. “I see,” she said, laying the notebook on the counter for easier writing. And then she seemed to notice the countertop. “Wow. I love this granite.”

Dutch and I exchanged a look of surprise. “Thanks,” I said. Maybe this wouldn’t be so bad. Maybe I could be all friendly-like and dodge most of the incriminating questions.

Grayson focused back on her notes. “You say yesterday morning was the last time you spoke with your business partner?”

“Yes.”

“How did she seem?”

I shrugged. “Fine.”

“Fine?”

“Yes.”

“Define ‘fine,’” Grayson said, those intelligent eyes squinting a bit.

I shrugged again. “She seemed unfettered. Normal. Business as usual.”

“Are you two friends outside of work?”

“Yes.”

“How close are you?”

“Close.”

“Besties close?” she pressed.

I sighed. She’d find out sooner or later. “Yes. Candice is my best friend and she’s also my business partner.”

Grayson tapped her pen, and behind her I could see Brice scowling. He didn’t like her easy-breezy manner. I could hardly blame him given the circumstances.

“And what time was this meeting you had yesterday?” Grayson asked next.

I scratched my head. “It wasn’t a meeting,” I said, irritated that she seemed to be reading into my words. “I went to the office to catch up on some paperwork, and Candice was there. I poked my head in to say good morning and we chitchatted for a little bit before I left the office around eleven a.m.”

“And you’re sure that’s the last time you saw or heard from her?”

I swallowed hard but stuck to my guns. “Yes. Positive.”

Grayson cocked her head. “I see,” she said. “You didn’t meet up with her somewhere within the past hour or so?”

My brow furrowed and I felt my palms start to sweat again. “No.”

Grayson set down her pen, that easy-breezy manner becoming more serious. “The hood of your car is warm, Abby. It’s a cool night out, so I can only assume the engine was running not long before I

showed up.”

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Dutch edge a little closer to me. I knew he'd have my back no matter how I played this out. “I went for a drive,” I said.

“In the middle of the night?” Grayson asked.

“Yeah. I get insomnia and sometimes a car ride helps me relax enough to be able to get back to sleep.”

Grayson cocked an eyebrow. She didn't believe a word of it. “Where'd you go?”

“Around.”

“Around where?”

I shrugged for a third time. “I like to drive in the hills. The view is nice.”

Grayson blinked. “At four a.m.? What view can you see before dawn?”

I felt a blush touch my cheeks. “The houses are usually lit up. There're some really beautiful homes in this hood.”

Grayson smiled, but it wasn't an “I totally believe you” smile. It was more “Nice try, Miss Liar-liar-pants-on-fire.”

“What do you know about the vic?” Brice asked, and I was grateful for the redirection.

Grayson glanced his way and said, “All we know so far is that the vic was a sixty-three-year-old white male and a resident of Palm Springs, California.”

“That's it?” Brice pressed.

Grayson looked at Brice in a way that suggested she wasn't sure how much to tell him. True, Brice was FBI, but he was also married to the suspect in a murder investigation. At last she seemed to make up her mind and said, “No. That's not it. He was also an MD.”

My breath caught. Candice had killed a doctor? Up to that moment I had afforded my BFF some license in this whole murdering-a-man-in-cold-blood thing. I mean, I trusted Candice with my life because she was perhaps the smartest, most capable, most dependable person I'd ever known. There were even secret parts of me that thought I might perhaps trust her more than my own husband. And she'd really shot someone in cold blood, well, then I was willing to believe she'd done it for a very good reason. Like the guy was a serial killer. Or a child molester. Or a hit man who'd been contracted to kill Brice. Or a serial-killing, child-molesting hit man who maybe also abused puppies and kittens. The point was that I knew my best friend, and she wasn't a loose cannon. If she shot to kill, it was for a damn good reason.

But what reason could Candice have to kill an unarmed doctor from Palm Springs? My eyes searched Brice's face for an explanation, but he seemed as troubled and confused as I was.

Then Grayson pointed to me and Brice and said, “Does the name Dr. David Robinowitz mean anything to either of you?”

I shook my head. I'd never heard of the guy. Brice shook his head too. “What was his specialty?” Brice asked.

“We're not sure,” Grayson said. “My team is still trying to track down his next of kin, but we may have to wait until midmorning our time before we can find someone who's awake in California.”

“Candice hasn't been to California in years,” I said, knowing this all had to be one giant misunderstanding. “How would she even know of this doctor from Palm Springs?”

Grayson wiggled her pen. “According to the doctor's itinerary, he came into town on a direct flight from Las Vegas. His plane landed at eleven forty p.m. yesterday and he was shot at approximately twelve oh two this morning on an upper deck of short-term parking at ABIA.”

A chill went through me as I remembered something from the previous morning's conversation

with Candice. We'd been talking about our schedules and I'd asked Candice if she might like to catch a movie with me later that evening. She'd declined, saying that she had a busy night of work lined up and that she had to pick up a package at ABIA for a client.

I hadn't thought anything of it. Candice worked plenty of cases without me and lately she'd been working all of her cases alone. I'd assumed we were working fewer investigations together because my BFF was pulling back on accepting the more dangerous cases for a while to give us both a break, and I hadn't complained because I'd been settling into married life and building up my own private client list. The past six months had been a lovely vacation from all the mayhem and murder of previous years. I'd even been ducking my duties with the FBI because I just needed to step back and feel normal again. My routine had devolved into reading for private clients four days a week and puttering around our beautiful new home the rest of the time. It was wonderfully relaxed if also a bit dull.

"Abby?" I heard Grayson say, and I realized she'd asked me a question while I'd been thinking about the conversation with Candice the day before.

"Come again?" I asked.

"I said, were you aware that your business partner was meeting someone at the airport last evening?"

"No," I answered truthfully. I mean, I knew she was going to the airport, but I didn't know she was *meeting* somebody there. Somebody she was going to shoot at point-blank range.

"And you've never heard of this Dr. Robinowitz?"

"No. I swear. I've never heard of him. And I have no idea what his connection could be to Candice."

"And she hasn't been in contact with you since yesterday morning?"

Uh-oh. We were getting into tricky waters here. "I already told you," I said. "I haven't spoken to her since yesterday morning."

"No texts or phone calls either?" Grayson pushed.

I had a feeling she'd ask that, so I made a big show of going to my purse and digging through it. "If you don't believe me, you can check my phone. Wait. Where's my phone?" I dug through my purse with a little more urgency, then dumped all the contents out on the counter and fished around like I was frantic to find my cell. Then I looked up at Dutch and said, "Honey, have you seen my phone?"

There was a flicker of recognition in his eyes and he said, "Can't say I've seen it since yesterday, Abs."

"Hmmm. Maybe it's in the car," I said, and began to head for the door.

Grayson stopped me by calling out my name. "That's okay," she said. "You can check it later. Right now I have one or two more questions for you."

Those "one or two" questions turned into something closer to fifty and it was another two hours before Grayson finally wrapped up her interview. She'd asked me all sorts of questions: how Candice and I had met, what I knew about her family, where she might have gone in the hours since the shooting.

And that was the question that bothered me the most. I had no idea where Candice might be. And I could tell that Brice didn't know either. In parting, Grayson said that our offices were currently being searched, but the warrant didn't extend to my half, which was a relief. Still, the detective asked my permission to look through my suite, and I immediately declined. I'd seen enough search warrant aftermaths to know that tidiness and leaving things as they found them wasn't a priority. Plus, I had no idea what kind of incriminating evidence might show up in my suite. Candice had access to both of

my offices. She could easily have attempted to hide something on my side of our shared space.

Grayson also said that we should be aware that a BOLO alert for Candice had been issued, along with a press release about the crime that named Candice as a person of interest. The police and citizens of Austin were warned to be on the lookout for a woman fitting Candice's description, who was armed and extremely dangerous, driving a yellow Porsche. The public was urged to dial 911 immediately if she was spotted.

When Grayson finally left, I felt sick to my stomach. Brice looked white as a sheet, and even Dutch seemed shocked and troubled. "What do we do?" I asked into the long silence that followed Grayson's exit.

Brice moved over to the kitchen table and sank into one of the chairs. "What was she thinking?" he asked.

"There has to be an explanation," I insisted.

"She left you a message, right?" he asked. I nodded. "Get your phone and let's listen to it."

I bit my lip. "No," I said. When Brice's brow lowered to the danger zone, I added, "Brice, you have to trust me—it's for your own good."

My boss tapped his finger on the counter impatiently and then he tried a different tack. "Fine, then at least tell us the gist of what she said, other than asking you to lock up her computer." Brice's tone was sharp. He wanted answers and he wasn't going to be put off.

I glanced at Dutch, and saw that he was studying me closely. He'd let it be my call as to what I told Brice. I decided to confess the less important parts. "She started off by saying that it wasn't how it looked."

Brice's brow furrowed and in his eyes I saw a hint of hope. "She said that?"

I nodded. "Yeah. She asked me to trust her. That it wasn't how it looked, but she knew it looked bad."

Dutch motioned with his chin toward the iPad on the counter. "How else *could* it look?"

I shook my head. "I don't know. But Candice would never assassinate someone in cold blood."

"What did she say *exactly*?" Brice asked next.

"Well, like I already told you, she wanted me to go to the office because she was worried about her computer. Maybe she thought she left it out, or maybe she thought that someone might try to break in and take it."

"Candice usually takes that computer everywhere she goes," Brice replied. "I haven't seen it out of her reach in months."

"Well, maybe she had to leave it behind for some reason and couldn't get back to lock it up." I had no idea whether Candice had her computer with her, but it was a good decoy and cover story that I badly needed the boys to buy into so that they wouldn't press me for details of the rest of Candice's message. She didn't want me to show that file to anybody, and Candice was still my BFF. Until I had proof that she wasn't who I thought she was, I'd believe in her and help her any way I could.

"What else?" Brice asked.

I shrugged. "Nothing, really. It was short and sweet."

"What time did her call come in?" He wasn't gonna let me off the hook so easy.

"Just after three a.m."

"So, she shoots this Dr. Robinowitz at midnight and then lays low for the next three hours until she decides to reach out to Abby?" Dutch said. "That doesn't make sense. She had plenty of time to go back to the office and lock up her computer. What'd she do during those three hours?"

Brice shook his head. "She didn't come home. That's all I can tell you." Then he looked back at

me. "How did she sound?"

"Sound?"

"Yeah. Was she anxious? Upset? Scared?"

I closed my eyes recalling the message. "None of those, really. I mean, even when Candice is freaked-out, you'd never know it. But there was . . ."

"What?"

"I don't know. There was this note of . . . I guess . . . alarm, and maybe something else. Her voice sounded strained, like she was upset, or alarmed or stressed-out, and she was trying really hard to keep it together, but there was something uncharacteristic there too. It's hard to tell with Candice."

"Did she say where she was calling from? Or where she was going?"

I shook my head. "I know she was outside—"

"How do you know she was outside?" Harrison asked.

I closed my eyes to concentrate on the memory of Candice's message again. "I could hear the wind," I said. "As she was talking, I could hear the wind. And also, toward the end it sounded like she was running."

I opened my eyes to see Brice staring at me with that same stricken look on his face. "She was running?" he asked, and I nodded. "From whom?"

I sighed. "I don't know. There were no other voices or footfalls in the background. Just Candice."

Brice's gaze dropped to the floor, but I could clearly see the worry in the set to his shoulders.

"Abby, please, let us listen to the voice mail," Brice said next.

I shifted on my feet. "No, Brice, you can't." When his gaze lifted back up to me, I added, "I'm sorry, but I've already deleted it."

Brice's expression turned angry. "Why the *hell* would you do that, Cooper? Don't you realize you've just destroyed a key piece of evidence? There could be something on that voice mail that you missed! It could be the way to finding her! What were you thinking?!"

I took a step back. Brice had never lost his cool with me like that before. Okay, maybe once when we'd first started working together, but that was before I actually *liked* him. Back then I thought he was a serious douche bag and he thought me a serious fraud.

Dutch held up his hand and said, "Hey, lay off, Harrison. She's trying to help."

Brice's anger subsided, but only a fraction. He glared hard at Dutch, then back at me; then he seemed to settle for looking meanly at the floor again.

For a minute I debated coming clean with both of them. I mean, I'd done as Candice asked before she knew she'd murdered someone in cold blood. I just couldn't shake the image of Dr. Robinowitz walking up to my best friend looking so trusting and happy to see her. And that sparked a thought and I said, "Brice, in the video the doctor seems to recognize Candice. Did you ever hear her mention anything about this Robinowitz guy?"

Brice shook his head and sighed. "No. If she knew him, then she didn't mention him to me."

"Did she ever bring up the name to you, dollface?" Dutch asked me.

I racked my brain for any memory of Candice mentioning a doctor from Palm Springs. I came up with nothing. "Maybe it would help if we could figure out what kind of doctor he was," I suggested.

Dutch reached for his iPad. After a minute or two of tapping he said, "Robinowitz retired his practice in Palm Springs six months ago. The old site says he was a board-certified plastic surgeon."

"Why was he coming into Austin through Vegas?" I asked.

"Connecting flight?" Brice suggested.

Dutch shook his head, continuing to tap at the screen. "I don't think so. Looks like he might've

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