

*Just  
a Touch  
Away*



J A E



# Chapter 1

“THIS IS WHERE THE MAGIC happens.” Hannah unlocked the door to her apartment and stepped aside to let Dawn enter.

“Your neighbor is staring,” Dawn whispered as she squeezed past her.

Hannah sighed but didn’t even glance back. You’d think by now the stream of visitors would no longer raise any eyebrows. “It’s probably because most of my clients are men, and you are—”

“A woman.” Dawn nodded. “But your neighbors know what you do for a living, right?”

“Of course. I had to notify them of my business to get a home occupation permit when I first started my professional cuddling service.” Hannah barely resisted the urge to shoot her nosy neighbor a saucy wink. *Behave*. The last thing she needed was to add fuel to the apartment complex rumor mill. She firmly closed the door behind them.

Dawn walked past the kitchenette and looked around.

Hannah paused behind her and wondered what her studio apartment might reveal about her to someone with Dawn’s background. Probably a modest bank account and a blissful ignorance of interior design principles.

Finally, Dawn pointed from the far corner of the room, where Hannah’s bed peeked out from behind a curtain, to the huge chocolate-colored couch. It stood at an angle because Hannah had misjudged its size and hadn’t realized it wouldn’t quite fit the length of the wall until she’d dragged it to its intended place. “Bed or couch?”

Hannah clutched her chest with both hands and let out a scandalized gasp. “I’ll have you know it’s not that kind of service, Dr. Kinsley.”

“What? No, I—” Dawn burst out laughing. Her gray-green eyes lit up with mirth. “My wife will be glad to hear it. But what I actually meant is:

Where do you cuddle with your clients? The couch? The bed? Or do you let your clients choose?”

“No,” Hannah said. “The bed isn’t an option. Most people associate it with sex, and I’m trying to teach them that touch can be completely platonic. Sometimes, I make an exception and use the bed if the client is from out of town and has booked a hotel room for our session, but never for new clients.”

A visible shudder went through Dawn. “I don’t think I could do what you do—snuggle complete strangers.”

Hannah couldn’t imagine doing what Dawn did—counseling sexual abuse and rape survivors.

Before she could say so, Dawn added, “But I’m glad you do. I have several patients who would really benefit from a couple of sessions with you. They need a safe space that allows them to experience physical touch as something positive again.”

“Or not,” Hannah said. “If they decide they’re not ready yet, that’s completely fine too. We can spend the session sitting side by side, talking. I want my clients to know they can say no and speak up whenever something makes them uncomfortable.”

“And that’s exactly why I think it would be helpful. When I attended your workshop, I was very impressed with how much your work focuses on consent and communication. It’s a lot more than just spooning for an hour.”

Hannah beamed at her. Finally someone who seemed to understand what her job was really about.

Dawn smiled back. “So, would you be willing to take on my patients if they’re interested? You cuddle with women too, right?”

“Yes, of course. I cuddle with anyone, regardless of gender or sexual orientation. Everyone needs cuddles.” Cuddling with a woman would be a nice change of pace. Hannah flopped onto the couch, leaned her elbow onto the fuzzy thigh of Eddy the Teddy, and gestured at Dawn to make herself comfortable. “Just have your patients check out my profile on the Snuggle Experts website and—”

The doorbell rang.

Hannah glanced at her watch. She was expecting her first client of the day in half an hour, but he was a regular and knew not to arrive early. “Sorry. Be right back.” She jumped up to get rid of whoever it was.

When she opened the door, a letter carrier stood in front of her, mailbag slung over his shoulder. He held out a thick envelope. “I have a certified letter for Hannah Martin.”

Certified mail? That couldn’t be good. She hoped it wasn’t from her landlord. While he had reluctantly agreed to let Hannah run her cuddling business from her apartment, he still wasn’t a fan of her profession. He either assumed it was a cover for sex work or worried a professional cuddler wouldn’t be able to make enough money to cover the rent. Unfortunately, some months, there was more truth to the second assumption than she cared to admit.

“I’m Hannah.” She reached out to take the envelope, but the mailman held on to it.

“You need to sign for it.” He tore a green return-receipt card from the back of the envelope and handed it over, along with a pen.

Hannah scribbled her signature onto the line he indicated, took the envelope, and closed the door with a “thanks.” As she crossed back to the couch, she scanned the envelope to make out the sender.

*Phew.* The letter wasn’t from her landlord. The logo on the corner of the envelope said *Woodruff & Beck, Attorneys at Law.*

*Wait! Attorneys?* That wasn’t any better. She didn’t have any dealings with a law firm. Hell, she had never even gotten a speeding ticket. Was someone suing her or something? Her fingers went cold.

She slumped onto the couch and forced a smile onto her face as she turned back to Dawn. The letter would have to wait. Making connections with a well-established psychotherapist was more important for now. She tried to remember what she’d been saying before they had gotten interrupted but came up empty.

“Is everything all right?” Dawn studied her with a concerned expression. “If something came up, I can—”

“Oh, no. I’m fine.” Hannah slid the letter under one of the mango-colored throw pillows. Out of sight, out of mind. That’s how it usually worked for her. But not this time. Her gaze kept sliding back to the pillow.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. It’s just not every day that I get a certified letter from a lawyer.” Hannah chuckled. It sounded as convincing as it felt. “It’s probably nothing.”

“Open it and see what it is,” Dawn said. “I don’t mind.”

Hannah hesitated. Even though they had instantly hit it off, Dawn was still someone she hoped to work with, not a close friend. But in her job as a professional cuddler, she had learned to trust her gut, and now her instincts told her that Dawn really didn’t mind...and that whatever this envelope held was important.

“Or we could cut this short if you’d rather open it by yourself,” Dawn added.

“Nah. Like I said, it’s probably nothing.” Yet as Hannah reached for the envelope and tore it open, her hands shook. She pulled out several sheets of paper and unfolded them. The page on top was a letter printed on expensive stationery.

Hannah scanned it, then read it again more slowly to make sense of the legal jargon.

*Dear Ms. Martin,*

*On behalf of Woodruff & Beck LLP, I wish to express my sincerest condolences on the recent passing of Julian P. Lambert. I am writing to inform you that he set up a living trust before his passing, which became irrevocable upon his death. The trust document names you as one of the beneficiaries of the Julian P. Lambert Trust. As the successor trustee, I am tasked with managing all trust assets and distributing them to the beneficiaries, and I will do so as soon as possible.*

*Enclosed is a copy of the trust document so you can familiarize yourself with the details.*

*If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at 503-595-7025.*

*Sincerely,  
Craig Woodruff*

Hannah stared at the words until they blurred before her eyes. Julian P. Lambert Trust? She didn't know anyone by that name...did she?

"Bad news?" Dawn asked.

"No." Well, it was certainly bad news for Julian P. Lambert, whoever he was. "At least I don't think so." Hannah shuffled through the rest of the papers—about ten pages of legal gibberish. She scanned them until her own name popped out at her, then backtracked to the beginning of the section.

*Upon the death of the grantor, unless otherwise specified, all trust assets listed in Schedule A shall be divided in equal parts between the grantor's daughters, Brooke Geraldine Lambert and Winter Louise Sullivan.*

*The right, title, and interest in and to the real estate located at 19460 SW East Side Road, Lake Oswego, Oregon, shall be given to Brooke Geraldine Lambert.*

*The right, title, and interest in and to the real estate located at 1405 SW Park Avenue in Portland, Oregon, shall be given to Hannah Elizabeth Martin and Winter Louise Sullivan in equal parts, provided that they live there, rent-free, for a period of ninety-two consecutive days.*

Hannah pressed one shoulder against the back of the couch to ground herself. *Real estate*. She rubbed her eyes. Was this for real? When she finally looked up from the letter, she met Dawn's questioning gaze. "I think someone I don't even know left me a house. Well, half a house." She eyed the document again. "Unless this is a more elaborate version of the Nigerian prince scheme."

Dawn cocked her head. "Nigerian prince scheme?"

"Yeah, you know. One of those emails that say you're the closest living relative of a Nigerian prince and will inherit thirty million dollars if only you pay a small transfer fee."

Dawn chuckled. "Maybe try googling the lawyer."

Why hadn't she thought of that? Hannah's head was still spinning. She pulled out her phone and typed the law firm's name into the browser. A professional-looking website came up, and the about page said they specialized in estate planning, trusts, and probate law. "Looks legit."

So that was a dead end. But maybe... She typed in *Julian P. Lambert*, then scrolled past links to LinkedIn and the *Portland Business Journal* until she got to an obituary.

*Julian P. Lambert, age 76, founder of ZLT AgriMarketing, passed away on...*

The picture on the left finally loaded, and Hannah stopped reading.

*Oh my God! That's Jules!* Even with her poor memory for faces, she recognized him immediately. His thick, silver hair was unmistakable. The first time she'd met him, she had assumed it was a wig and only found out otherwise when she'd given him a head massage. She had paused, startled, and that had been the first time his serious face had creased into a grin.

And now he was dead. A heavy feeling settled in the pit of her stomach, and her hand with the phone dropped to the couch. She blinked against the sting in her eyes.

Dawn slid closer and put her own hand on top for a moment. "I'm so sorry. So you knew him after all?"

"Yeah, um..." Hannah dug her teeth into her bottom lip. The code of conduct for professional cuddlers included a confidentiality clause, so she couldn't tell Dawn how she knew Jules.

"Ah. He was a client. Say no more." Dawn gave her fingers a soft squeeze, then let go and got up. "I'll go now so you can process all of this." With a nod, she indicated the letter and the trust document that had fluttered to the floor.

Hannah picked them up and clamped her fingers around the pages as if that would make it tangible. "Thanks. I admit it threw me for a loop."

She had known that Jules was sick, of course, since they'd had to schedule their sessions at times that didn't interfere with his dialysis appointments. He had often looked tired, and every now and then, he had even fallen asleep during a session. But he had always brushed it off, acting as if it were nothing. The spark of determination in his eyes had made her forget he wasn't perfectly healthy—and she knew that was how he preferred it. Even though he hadn't scheduled a weekly session in a couple of months, as he usually did, she had assumed he had gotten busy with one of the many projects he was still involved in, despite being retired.

“I had no idea he...” She bit her lip again. “Or that he’d planned to leave me anything. I mean, just like that”—she snapped her fingers—“I own half a house. Does it really work like that? Shouldn’t there be a reading of the will or something?”

Dawn shook her head. “We didn’t have a reading of the will when my dad or my brother died either. That doesn’t happen in real life, only in movies. I guess those dramatic revelations and surprised gasps in mahogany-trimmed lawyers’ offices make for good entertainment.”

“Yeah, I guess.” Hannah’s feet moved as if on autopilot as she accompanied Dawn to the door and gave her a stack of business cards to hand out to her patients. “Thanks so much for coming. Call me once you’ve had a chance to talk to your patients—or if you have any questions.”

Once the door closed behind Dawn, Hannah leaned against it and lifted the documents she still held.

Would Jules’s daughters get similar letters? Had he told them he planned to give his professional cuddler half of the house?

If he hadn’t, surprised gasps might not be just a Hollywood thing after all.



## Chapter 2

WINTER STORMED PAST THE RECEPTION desk, brushed past two of her half sister's employees, and flung open Brooke's office door without bothering to knock. "Did you know about this?"

Brooke looked up, calmly lifted her manicured fingers from the keyboard, and gave a regal wave. "Close the door."

Winter slammed it shut. The rattle of the overpriced artwork on the walls gave her a certain satisfaction.

Her sister, however, seemed entirely unrattled, her makeup as flawless as ever and not a hair out of place in her stern bun. That glossy chestnut hair never failed to annoy Winter because there wasn't a single strand of gray in it, unlike her own silver mop, even though Brooke, at forty-one, was five months older than she.

Brooke leveled her with a cool stare. "Know about what?"

"Oh, don't play innocent with me. Of course you knew." With several long strides, Winter crossed the spacious corner office and thrust the document in Brooke's face. "The old fox placed his entire estate into a trust."

Brooke didn't even glance at it. "So? That'll speed things up for us by avoiding probate and all the never-ending court proceedings."

"It'll speed things up for *you*! You'll get the house in Lake Oswego and half of everything else, no matter what, while my inheritance comes with strings attached." Of course it did. She should have known. Nothing was ever unconditional with her father. Everything came with a price—at least for her. Brooke, his legitimate golden child, had always gotten whatever she wanted without even having to ask.

Winter's fingers cramped as she fought the urge to tear this damn document into shreds. When the letter had first arrived, she had come so close to saying to hell with it all, crumpling the pages into a ball, and tossing them away, just as Julian had tossed away her mother. Winter had worked hard to make her own firm successful and didn't need any of the things listed in the trust document. Not his money, not his stock, not his life insurance policies. She didn't give a damn about any of it.

The property on SW Park Avenue, however... She'd wanted that ever since she'd first heard it had been put on the market. Its location, in the heart of downtown Portland, put it within easy reach of business owners who were interested in her consulting services, and she'd been charmed by the large bay windows. They allowed more natural light to come in, which would be nice, especially during the gloomy Portland winters. She had planned to keep two of the small units for herself, one as a living space and one as an office to meet clients, while renting out the other apartments, which would have helped pay off the mortgage and provided her with a steady stream of passive income.

But thanks to her snake of a sister, Julian had found out about her plans and had snatched the building out from under her nose. "Just teaching you a valuable lesson," he had said, his tone all business. "Real estate is as fast-paced as marketing. If you want to make it as a marketing consultant, you can't afford to snooze, and it's better you learn it from me than from someone else."

Now he was dangling the building in front of Winter in one last attempt to control her, even from the grave.

Brooke shrugged. "It's what Dad wanted, and you're getting half of everything else without lifting a finger. You haven't done anything to deserve a dime of his money, so why are you complaining?"

"Deserve?" Winter drew out the word. "Oh, and you think you do just because your mother had a wedding ring on her finger when she gave birth and mine didn't? I'm his daughter too, and Julian's money is as much rightfully mine as it is yours!" That was the only reason she wasn't disclaiming her inheritance: to prove to everyone that she deserved it and was every bit as worthy as his legitimate daughter. Even if she ended up giving most of it to her mother or to charity, she wouldn't let Brooke have it all.

Brooke scoffed. “How convenient! Suddenly, you remember that you’re his daughter? You didn’t act like it when he got sick. You weren’t there to watch as his heart gave out and—” She cut herself off with a slashing wave of her hand, then pressed her palms to her expensive desk, her back ramrod straight. “So excuse me if I’m not in the mood to listen to your little temper tantrum. I’ve got work to do.” She pulled her keyboard closer and returned her gaze to the screen, dismissing Winter.

*Oh no, you don’t!* If Brooke thought she could follow the proud Lambert tradition of ignoring her existence, she had another think coming! Winter lowered herself into the visitor’s chair in front of Brooke’s huge desk and stretched out her long legs as if making herself comfortable. She wouldn’t leave this office until she was good and ready. One Lambert forcing her to do his bidding was enough. She narrowed her eyes and studied Brooke’s composed features. “If you think you deserve to get it all because you played nurse to Julian, why the hell are you happily going along with his farce? Don’t tell me you’re fine with half of the Park Avenue property going to a complete stranger.”

“Stranger?” Brooke repeated. “So you don’t know who she is either?”

Winter laughed, the sound bare of any humor. “Me? Why would I know? I have no clue who she is.”

“Me neither.” Brooke leaned back in her designer leather chair with an air of poise and superiority. “The only thing I know is that she won’t get the property.”

“Oh, yes, she will.”

“Says who?”

“Two degrees from fancy schools and you can’t even read?” Winter raised the trust document and smirked at her over the top of the page before reading aloud: “The right, title, and interest in and to the real estate located at 1405 SW Park Avenue in Portland, Oregon, shall be given to Hannah Elizabeth Martin and Winter Louise Sullivan in equal parts.”

“A degree from a state school no one’s ever heard of apparently didn’t help your reading skills either.” Brooke lifted a stack of paperwork, opened a leather folder, and pulled out her own copy of the trust document. “...in equal parts, provided that they live there, rent-free, for a period of ninety-two consecutive days. During this period, neither can spend the night under a different roof. In the event that either beneficiary does not agree to

or breaks the terms of this provision, they shall not receive any distribution, and their share of the trust estate shall go to the grantor's eldest daughter, Brooke Geraldine Lambert." She lowered the papers and gave Winter a smug look.

Winter coolly stared back. "So that's why you're so calm about it. You think I'll refuse to go along with Julian's blackmail, you then get my share, buy out this Hannah person—and voilà, you have it all."

Brooke lazily twirled a silver pen between her fingers. "Sounds like an infallible plan to me."

If there had ever been a moment when Winter had been tempted to throw the trust document in Brooke's face and tell her to keep it all, that thought vanished as fast as Julian had from her mother's life. The leather-and-steel contraption beneath Winter creaked as she leaned forward sharply. "Not as infallible as you think, sis"—she snidely drew out the word—"because I fully intend to comply with the terms of the trust."

*Shit.* She hadn't meant to say that and go along with Julian's blackmail. But now there was no way back.

If her declaration had surprised Brooke, she didn't show it. Her poker face was as flawless as her makeup. "Doesn't matter. Tell me, sis." She gave the word the same mocking sound. "How long did you cohabit with your last girlfriend? Oh, wait, that's right. You don't do relationships because you barely tolerate people—and vice versa."

Winter snorted. "Hello, pot calling the kettle black. You're a headhunter, yet you can't even find an assistant you can stand working with."

"Executive search consultant," Brooke muttered. "And I could find someone; I just don't want to. It would only slow me down. Most people are idiots."

A moment of silence settled between them as, after forty-one years of butting heads, they finally found something they could agree on.

"Mystery Woman"—Brooke tapped the section of the trust document that listed the beneficiaries—"probably won't be an exception."

"So what?" Winter said. "Just because we have to live under the same roof for three months doesn't mean we have to become BFFs. It's a big building after all. We'll give each other polite nods whenever we step into the elevator at the same time, and that's it."

The corners of Brooke's lips tilted up into a smirk. "Oh yeah. It's a big building. Thirty-three units—all of them rented out to tenants, and since the rent is pretty affordable for Portland, none of them will move out anytime soon. You'll have to share Dad's apartment on the top floor with Mystery Woman."

Share an apartment? A lump lodged in Winter's throat, but she refused to swallow it down, not wanting to give Brooke any indication of her unease. She hadn't lived with anyone since moving out of her mother's house at eighteen. The thought of sharing her space made tension creep up her back.

Had Julian known and come up with the terms of the trust in the hope that they would make her sweat? Probably. He had always had a talent for sniffing out the competition's weak spots, and he'd been the same in his private life.

Brooke's grin broadened. "Not so confident anymore, are you? Knowing you, you won't last ninety-two hours, much less ninety-two days living with someone. All I have to do is sit back and wait until one of you flees the scene of your misery. Maybe I'll even get lucky and both of you will leave."

Winter gritted her teeth. So that was why Brooke was as calm as a Tibetan monk. She assumed getting her hands on at least half the building was a sure thing! No way! She wouldn't give her that satisfaction. "Keep dreaming. I'll talk to you in ninety days, when I collect my inheritance." She rose and stalked to the door.

"Ninety-two," Brooke called after her. "But my money is on seven."

"Enjoy your delusions." Winter marched through the door, head held high. She could do this. Three months was nothing. Just because she had to share the apartment with a stranger didn't mean she had to hang out with her. They could negotiate a schedule for when each of them got to use the kitchen and didn't have to see each other except in passing. She would work the entire time anyway, and with any luck, Anna or Hannah—whatever her name was—would be a workaholic loner with a two-mile personal space too.

\* \* \*

Winter's first job out of college had been as a marketing account associate, working for a boutique marketing agency that specialized in law

firms. During those two years, she had learned three things: most lawyer bios read about as interestingly as a lawbook; she wasn't cut out for being an employee, and it was a good idea to have an attorney on speed dial for every occasion.

Calling her lawyer had probably been the first thing Brooke had done after receiving the letter, and that was part of why she was so annoyingly calm.

As Winter strode through the sleek, modern lobby of Brooke's office building, she pulled out her phone and scrolled through her contacts. She stepped out onto Market Street with the ringing phone pressed to her ear.

"Gardner & Jablonski. This is Patrick Murphy speaking," the law firm's receptionist said. "How may I help you?"

"My name is Winter Sullivan. Is Ms. Gardner in?"

"Yes, she is. One second. I'll put you through."

Lively piano music reverberated through the phone. Winter arched her brows. The piece was too upbeat for a firm dealing with wills and testaments. Not on-brand. Good thing she had called. She really needed to give Abby some free marketing advice in exchange for free legal advice—for years that had been the foundation of their friendship, if you could call it that.

"Hello, Winter," Abby's voice came through the phone. "How have you been? It's been a while since I heard from you."

Winter wasn't great at keeping in touch. Okay, she was awful at it. "I'm fine. How are you? And how's...um..." She stopped at a street corner as if that would give her brain a chance to catch up and remember. *Damn*. Brooke would have known the name of Abby's fiancée...probably wife by now. Rumor had it that Brooke kept the names of spouses and kids of business associates in her files.

Well, she wasn't Brooke. She would rather impress her clients with an improved conversion rate than with social niceties. Besides, it wasn't as if she and Abby were close friends. They had stayed in touch because they were both workaholics and understood each other but called mostly whenever they needed some professional advice.

"Claire," Abby finally supplied. "As far as I know, she's doing well. We split up."

“Oh. Sorry to hear that.” It really must have been a while since they had talked.

“It’s fine,” Abby said. “What can I do for you?”

“Julian...my father, died and—”

“I’m so sorry.”

Now it was Winter’s turn to say, “It’s fine.” That might not be the socially acceptable way to answer, but her father had been dead to her for a long time. “Anyway, he put his assets in trust and tied part of the inheritance to a ridiculous condition. If I refuse to live for three months with a perfect stranger he chose, the property he knew I wanted will transfer to my half sister. Is there a way to fight this?”

“Hmm.”

Not a sound Winter liked to hear from a lawyer. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I can recommend a trust lawyer who’s licensed to practice in Oregon, but I wouldn’t hold your breath. A living trust is a lot harder to challenge in court than a will. Your father’s condition might be unusual, but it doesn’t sound contrary to public policy. I doubt any court would overturn it—unless you can prove he lacked the mental capacity to make the trust agreement.”

Winter sighed. Proving that was impossible. Even in his mid-seventies, Julian’s mind had been as sharp as a scalpel. Deep down, she had already known she wouldn’t be able to get out of it that easily. Julian had probably hired the best estate lawyer on the West Coast to make sure the document was airtight.

*Great.* She was stuck with this Hannah person. For all she knew, she could be a serial killer.

She huffed at herself. *Dramatic much?*

Okay, maybe not a serial killer, but she might very well be a con artist who had tricked Julian into making her a beneficiary.

“All right. Looks like I’ll have to bite the bullet. Thanks, Abby. Let me know when you’ve got a marketing question and want me to return the favor. Oh, speaking of—you really should change your on-hold music to something less chipper.”

They said goodbye and ended the call.

Winter crossed the street to get to her car. Once she reached it, she climbed behind the wheel but didn't start the engine.

*Let's find out who Ms. Hannah Martin is.*

Winter was fairly sure she had never heard that name in her life. She tapped away at the phone screen with her thumbs.

*Hannah Martin Portland* got her so many hits that the ninety-two days would be over by the time she'd checked them all. The first page of the search results showed an event planner, a massage therapist, and a Pilates lady, and Winter had no way of knowing which one was the right Hannah Martin.

Maybe the event planner? Julian didn't seem the type to go for a massage or attend a Pilates class.

But then again, how would she know? His cleaning staff had probably known him better than she did.

Grumbling, she dropped her phone onto the passenger seat. She'd call the trustee first thing tomorrow and set up a meeting with him and Ms. Martin. The sooner they started their ninety-two-day sentence, the sooner this whole farce would be over.



## Chapter 3

ON SATURDAY MORNING, HANNAH SPEED-WALKED through the Cultural District, going as fast as she could without falling into a jog. She didn't want to arrive all sweaty for her meeting with the lawyer and her co-beneficiary.

Gosh, only she could manage to leave the house fifteen minutes early and still arrive late. She had gotten off the bus at the wrong stop and lost valuable time at every street corner, checking signs to make sure she was heading in the right direction.

Having Valentina on the phone the entire time hadn't helped. Normally, Hannah loved listening to the almost musical flow when her friend spoke. Every now and then, her very faint Brazilian accent came through, making Hannah smile. But right now, it was more of a distraction.

"What about the fern next to the couch?" Valentina asked. "Do I water that once a week too, or should I come over more often?"

"Uh, I'll give you a list of instructions later. They probably don't expect me to move in right away. I have to hang up now. I need my phone to make sure I don't end up in Goose Hollow."

Valentina's warm laughter made the phone vibrate. "Don't tell me you got lost again!"

"No! I'm not lost."

"Not lost?" Valentina giggled. "Like that time when you ended up in the kitchen of that Vietnamese restaurant because you took a left instead of a right after using the restroom?"

"I wasn't lost—just checking to see if they were maintaining food hygiene," Hannah answered but knew the laughter in her voice gave her away. She had long since learned to have a sense of humor about the

disadvantages that came with the unusual way her brain worked—and to embrace the pros. “But honestly, I’m not lost now. I think I’ve been there before. I’m just double-checking.”

At first, Hannah had assumed Jules had gifted her a house. But when she had read the trust document again, the address had seemed familiar, so she had looked it up on Google Maps—and almost fallen off the couch.

Jules had left her half of the building that housed what he’d called his “cuddle pad”!

In the beginning, he had preferred to have their sessions at her apartment, as if wanting to keep them separate from the rest of his life. But the last few times, he had asked her to come to him. He hadn’t given a reason, but now she suspected that his already-precarious health had taken a turn for the worse and he no longer had the strength to trek all the way across town. Why hadn’t he told her?

They had cuddled once a week for nearly two years, and yet he hadn’t trusted her enough to admit how sick he really was. He hadn’t even mentioned that he didn’t just rent the apartment on the top floor; he owned the entire building!

Hurt sliced through her, but she shook it off. As a professional cuddler, she occupied a weird spot in her clients’ lives, not quite a therapist, but also not a friend. While she was a confidante for many of her clients, others—like Jules—preferred to cuddle mostly in silence and share only tiny bits of information about their lives. That didn’t mean Jules hadn’t valued their sessions. He obviously had, or he wouldn’t have left her half a building.

“You *think* you’ve been there before?” Valentina repeated, bringing Hannah back to the conversation. “*Vixi*, Hannah, you’ve been in that neighborhood a hundred times!”

“I have?” Hannah glanced around. She only remembered two or three visits to Jules’s cuddle pad. None of the nondescript low-rise buildings on either side looked familiar, and the Starbucks she had just passed could have been anywhere in Portland.

“Okay, maybe not a hundred times, but you’ve been there,” Valentina said. “If you’re heading down Clay, you must have passed the dentist’s office where Luna works, and that doughnut shop where we got those yummy apple cider doughnuts is right where you’re going. Hey, and didn’t one of your clients used to live on that street too?”

Valentina knew because she was a fellow professional cuddler and Hannah's safety buddy—the person she texted the address to whenever she went to appointments at a client's home.

"Yeah, but I got off the bus at the right stop those times, so I took a different route."

"Just keep going until you get to the South Park Blocks, then turn north, and you're there."

Hannah shaded her eyes with her free hand and spied the tall oak trees of the park up ahead. "North means I take a right?"

Valentina laughed again. "Yes! I swear, I've never met anyone who was so bad at navigating! Is everyone with aphantasia like that?"

"No idea. Maybe some aphantasic people's brains found a way to make up for not having a mental map. Mine sure hasn't." Hannah checked the street sign at the next corner. "Phew! I found it. Thanks. I'll bring you some apple cider doughnuts as a thank-you for keeping an eye on my apartment."

"If you find the shop," Valentina said, the teasing grin evident in her voice.

"Ha ha. Talk to you later, okay?"

"*Tchau*," Valentina replied.

They ended the call, and Hannah turned right onto SW Park Street. She looked around, trying to remember the coffee shop on her left as a landmark so she would know how to get back to the bus stop later.

In the park to her right, a group of people sat on blankets, knitting. They didn't seem to mind that the sunny day the weather report had predicted had given way to gloomy May Gray.

*Ooh, nice!* Maybe once the weather turned warmer, she could take a blanket to the park to meet a client every now and then.

As she walked along the quiet, tree-lined one-way street, the buildings around her started to look familiar, even though she didn't have mental images to compare them to.

The charming red brick building to her left was unmistakable. On the upper stories, two bay windows on each level projected outward, flanking a wrought-iron fire escape. Decorative stone scrolls adorned the arch above the wooden double door, and a brass plaque announced that the property was on the National Register of Historic Places.

Hannah paused in the middle of the sidewalk, tilted her head back, and peered up the four stories. She still couldn't believe that she owned half of this—or that Jules wouldn't be there to greet her with an almost-shy hug when she entered the apartment.

“Ms. Martin?”

A deep voice startled Hannah out of her thoughts. When she lowered her gaze back to street level, two strangers—a man and a woman—walked toward her.

“Yes. Mr. Woodruff?” It wasn't hard to guess that he was the lawyer Jules had tasked with managing the trust. In a dark suit, a silk tie, and a black overcoat, he looked like an attorney.

He nodded, switched the file folder he carried to his left hand, and offered her his right. “Glad you could make it. Did you find it all right?”

“Um, yes, thanks.” Hannah shook his hand, then turned her attention to the woman next to him.

The stranger gave her a nod as crisp as her outfit. For a moment, Hannah thought her to be Mr. Woodruff's colleague because she was dressed in a similar style, all cool, professional colors—dark gray dress pants and a white cashmere turtleneck that hugged her long, lean body. But the black leather jacket reaching down to her slim hips didn't fit an attorney's wardrobe, and neither did the pair of sunglasses that hid her eyes despite the overcast sky. Even through the dark lenses, Hannah felt the woman's gaze cut into her.

After several seconds, she slid the sunglasses up, into her short, stylishly tousled hair that accentuated her high cheekbones and strong jawline. Piercing ice-blue eyes regarded her without blinking.

Hannah froze with her hand half-extended. Those eyes left no doubt about who the woman was. She had Jules's eyes and, come to think of it, his hair too. It was thick and silver-gray, making her age hard to guess. Other than a diagonal line above the bridge of her nose, as if she'd spent her life squinting at the world, her face was smooth. Not even a hint of laugh lines bracketed her mouth or crinkled the corners of her intense eyes. If Hannah had to guess, she'd say Jules's daughter was probably about ten years older than she was, maybe around forty.

“Winter Sullivan,” she said, her voice low and slightly raspy.

She didn't have Jules's last name. Well, she could be married.

Hannah gave herself a mental kick and raised her hand all the way, offering it to Winter. “Hi. I’m Hannah Martin.”

“Ms. Martin.” Another crisp nod. After a moment’s hesitation, Winter wrapped long fingers around Hannah’s and gave her hand a firm, businesslike shake. Then she let go and slid her hand into her jacket pocket as if wanting to make it impossible for Hannah to hold on for even a second longer than necessary.

“Oh, please, call me Hannah. After all, we’ll be neighbors for the next few months.” Hannah suppressed the nervous giggle that rose up her chest. Jesus, this woman was intense. She sobered. “I’m so sorry about your father.”

Winter’s expression didn’t change. No sign of grief flickered across her fair face as she tilted her head in silent acknowledgment.

*How weird.* If Jules had been Hannah’s father, she would probably still be holed up at home, crying. But, of course, everyone dealt with grief in their own way, so she really shouldn’t judge.

Mr. Woodruff cleared his throat, interrupting the awkward silence. “More than neighbors, actually.”

Hannah had nearly forgotten he was still there. Now she turned toward him and gave him a questioning look.

He lifted the folder in his hand. “Mr. Lambert left a letter of wishes to let me know how he wanted the trust to be administered. He intended for the two of you to share his apartment on the top floor, if that’s okay. It comes with an office, and I believe the den could easily be converted into a workspace for you, Hannah.”

Had Jules told him what she did for a living? More importantly, did Winter know?

“Wait,” Winter said. “You want us to work from here? I thought I’d work at my place, then come over in the evenings and sleep here.”

“Um, should we go in and talk upstairs?” Mr. Woodruff asked.

Winter didn’t move an inch. “Here’s fine.” She pierced him with an impatient glare and waved at him to explain himself.

“Your father made it very clear in his letter of wishes that he meant for this to be your primary residence, not just a place to sleep for a few hours.” He looked back and forth between them. “Is that going to be a problem?”

“No,” Hannah said immediately. “No problem at all, provided Winter doesn’t mind my having clients over and my clients are comfortable coming

to a home I'm sharing with someone." She didn't think any of her clients would mind, and for her, having a cuddling area that was a room of its own, not only a sectioned-off part of her bedroom, would be a wonderful luxury.

The lawyer looked at Winter.

"Just peachy," Winter said through pinched lips. "Shall we?" Without waiting for a reply, she led the way toward the double doors, her stride confident and purposeful, as if she owned the building.

Well, she did...or at least would own half of it soon. Hannah still hadn't gotten used to the thought that she would own the other half.

Was that why Winter was acting so coolly? Had she expected to inherit the entire building by herself?

Well, there wasn't much Hannah could do about it, other than giving up her inheritance, and that was something she definitely wouldn't do. An apartment of her own was a dream come true, and the extra income from the rent the tenants paid meant she could focus on her cuddling business without having to supplement her income by working as a massage therapist.

She and Winter would have to find a way to make the best of it.

Who knew? Often, those clients who came across as standoffish at first later turned out to be the biggest cuddle bugs. Maybe Winter would be the same.

Ahead of her, Winter pushed through the double doors like a battlefield surgeon ready to take off someone's limb.

Okay, maybe not.

\* \* \*

*No problem at all*, Winter mentally mimicked Hannah's cheerful tone as she marched up wide marble steps that led to a second set of double doors inside the building. Hannah Martin was as irritatingly chipper as Abby's on-hold music. No doubt she was the type who wanted to chat about the weather, the Blazers, or some other inane topic before Winter even had her second cup of coffee in the mornings.

*Ugh.*

Winter crossed the small, wood-paneled entrance hall beyond the double doors, not glancing back to see if Hannah and the lawyer were keeping up.

The elevator that would take them to the fourth floor was smaller than Winter remembered—so small that, for a moment, she considered taking the stairs.

But Hannah had already stepped in after her, apparently not minding at all. Most people instinctively gave Winter a wide berth, yet when Mr. Woodruff crowded in after them, Hannah shuffled closer until her arm brushed Winter's. She didn't even seem to notice as she chattered away with Mr. Woodruff—something about the park across the street.

Winter didn't listen long enough to find out the details. She moved her arm away by using that hand to press the button for the top floor. Her lungs only seemed to fully inflate again when the door opened and they stepped out.

While she had seen the floor plan and one of the smaller units when she had been in negotiations to buy the building, Winter had never set foot on the top floor or in Julian's apartment.

Mr. Woodruff took the lead and unlocked a door.

Winter hung back, entered after them, and took her time looking around.

While the other units were small, mainly studios, Julian's took up most of one side of the top floor.

The T-shaped hall opened up into an open-plan kitchen and a small dining area to the left. The gleaming stainless-steel appliances seemed brand-new, as if they had never been used.

Across from the kitchen, two doors led to the second bedroom and the office. Winter barely glanced at the bedroom—she would only spend time there when she was asleep, so she didn't care what it looked like—but took in the office more carefully. It was as well-maintained and spotless as the kitchen and already held everything Winter would need—a wooden desk, an office chair, a visitor's chair, and a floor lamp—but no frills. No personality.

That was a good description of the entire apartment. It had the air of a show house, not a true home. Had Julian ever lived here, or had he bought the building only to annoy her and then never used it?

Hannah paused next to her. Instead of looking around the room, she studied Winter with an attentive gaze that made her squirm and wonder what Hannah read in her expression.

“What?” Winter tried not to sound too gruff but knew she hadn’t quite succeeded.

Hannah gestured toward the window, which showed a view of the church across the street. “If you’d rather use the den as your office because it has a nicer view, I’d be happy to make this my workspace instead. You’d just have to help me to bring over the couch because I need that for my work.”

What the hell did she do for a living? Winter couldn’t think of any profession that would require a couch...unless Hannah was a psychotherapist. “I don’t care,” Winter said, meaning both the view and Hannah’s job. “I stare at my computer screen for most of the day, not out the window.”

Mr. Woodruff stepped between them like a teacher separating two squabbling students. He continued the tour by showing them the bigger bedroom at one end of the hall, then the living room at the other end.

Two bay windows and the high ceiling made the living room appear even more spacious. A white sliding door with inlaid milk glass panels led to the den, which was smaller and dominated by a large couch. Like the living room, it offered a beautiful view of the park across the street.

It was definitely nicer than staring at a church. For a moment, Winter thought about reconsidering Hannah’s offer. She reached out a hand to open the window, then froze. How the hell had Hannah known what view the den offered or that there’d be a sofa before she had even entered the room? She whirled around and pierced Hannah with a probing gaze. “How did you know about the view and the couch?”

Hannah stared back with wide eyes. “What?”

“You’ve been in the apartment before, haven’t you?” Winter ground out through a stiff jaw. “With Julian.”

Hannah studied the hardwood floor. “Um, I can’t really talk about it.”

It wasn’t as if Winter wanted to hear any details anyway. Even without a confession from Hannah, she now knew exactly why the apartment looked like a showpiece. Julian hadn’t lived here. He had merely used this place for the occasional roll in the hay with his mistress!

*What the fuck?* Her opinion of Julian had never been the best, but this was low, even for him. Why would he force her to live in his little love nest with his latest lover? Had he wanted to humiliate her one last time? Or was



making his fling and his illegitimate daughter co-beneficiaries his sick idea of a joke?

Whatever this was, Winter didn't find it funny in the least. Nausea twisted her gut. *Dammit, Julian!* Couldn't he at least have chosen a lover closer to his own age? Hannah was young enough to be his daughter—hell, probably even his granddaughter!

Winter stormed past Hannah. Then another thought hit her, and she slid to a stop in the doorway and whirled around. *Shit!* Maybe she *was* Julian's daughter! For some reason, that thought bothered her even more than assuming Hannah was his mistress. But maybe that had been Julian's sick rationale: have his two illegitimate daughters inherit the building together.

It would make sense. After all, he hadn't left any of his mistresses and lovers a dime. Winter's mother had waited around for Julian her whole life, and yet she wasn't even a footnote in his will. Clearly, he didn't think he owed her anything beyond child support, but he had always seemed to feel responsible for Winter, no matter how often she told him she wanted nothing to do with him or his money.

A touch to her arm made Winter flinch.

Hannah stood in front of her and looked up at her with a worried expression. "Winter? Are you all right?"

If she was indeed the old fox's daughter, she hadn't inherited his cold, cutthroat nature. Her honey-brown eyes held nothing but warmth, and most of the time, her wide mouth tipped up at the corners, as if she was always ready to smile. Unlike Winter, she didn't have his height or his prematurely gray hair either. At about five foot four, she wasn't exactly short but still five inches shorter than Winter. Dark-brown hair framed her round, rosy-cheeked face and tumbled loosely onto her shoulders.

Clearly, she hadn't grown up with Julian's strict expectations. No daughter of his had ever been allowed to be anything but the best and look anything but her best. Hannah, however, had obviously dressed for comfort, not to impress anyone. Her blue jeans, soft-looking lavender sweater, and unzipped rain jacket probably cost less than what Julian had spent on a tie. A worn canvas messenger bag was slung across her chest, resting against a well-rounded hip. Its slightly frayed strap ran across generous breasts. Even now with Hannah standing so uncomfortably close, Winter couldn't make

out the scent of perfume or expensive lotions or detect any hint of makeup on her face.

No matter how hard Winter stared, she couldn't see any family resemblance. But then again, she and Brooke didn't look a lot alike either.

"Winter?" Hannah asked again, her fingers still lingering on Winter's wrist.

Winter stuffed her hands into the pockets of her leather jacket, interrupting the contact. "Take the den."

"Thank you. You could take the bigger bedroom to make up for it."

"Whatever. I don't care either way." Winter strode away under the pretense of checking out the bathroom. All she wanted was to get this over with and retreat so she could process the revelation that she would have to share an apartment with a woman who was either her father's mistress or her half sister.

Hannah followed. "Wow! Look at that!" She squeezed past Winter, once again demonstrating a lack of any concept of personal space, and knelt to admire the claw-foot tub.

Maybe she wasn't Julian's offspring after all. He never would have exclaimed over a bathtub, not even if it were made of gold and contained three naked beauties bathing in donkey milk.

"I know it's unusual for such a big apartment, but this is the only bathroom," Mr. Woodruff said. "I'm afraid you'll have to share it."

*Great.* Winter turned toward the lawyer. "So, when does this"—she held herself back from saying *farce*—"arrangement officially start?"

"The day both of you move in," Mr. Woodruff said.

"How about tomorrow?"

Hannah started coughing as if she had swallowed and sucked in a breath at the same time. "T-tomorrow?" she gasped out.

Winter shrugged. "No time like the present. If we start tomorrow, the ninety-two days will be up on August 14."

"Did you just do that in your head?"

"I could, but actually, I checked my calendar this morning. The fourteenth is my birthday, so if we could"—Winter circled her index finger—"wrap this up by then, that would be great." When she had discovered it, she had wondered for a second if that was the reason Julian had chosen that weird number of days. But that was impossible. He had set

up the trust a few weeks before his death and couldn't have known when they'd move in.

A knowing smile dimpled Hannah's round cheeks. "Ah."

"What?"

"You're a Leo," Hannah said in a that-explains-it-all tone.

"Oh, Christ on a bicycle," Winter muttered. "Please tell me you're not one of those people who believe in all that woo-woo stuff." If Hannah tried reading her the daily horoscope, she would be out of there.

"No, not really. My best friend is, though. I guess it rubbed off on me."

Winter suppressed a sigh. "So, tomorrow?"

Finally, Hannah nodded. "All right. I guess I'll see you tomorrow, then." With a grin, she added, "Roomie."

Winter dragged in a long breath. *Ninety-two days*. Those would be the longest two thousand two hundred and eight hours of her life.

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# JUST A TOUCH AWAY

BY JAE

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