

SLOW BURN

A NOVEL

JULIE GARWOOD



BALLANTINE BOOKS

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NEW YORK

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Chapter One

The crusty old man was going to cause an uproar, and he was only sorry he wouldn't be around to watch it.

He was about to pull the rug out from under his useless relatives, and oh, were they going to take a tumble. But it was high time someone in this miserable family righted a terrible wrong, high time indeed.

While he waited for the equipment to be set up, he cleared the clutter from his desk. His gnarled fingers stroked the smooth wood with as much tenderness and care as he had once given his mistress when he touched them. The desk was old and scarred and as worn out as he was. He had made his fortune in this very room. With his phone glued to his ear, he had worked one lucrative deal after another. How many companies had he purchased in the past thirty years? How many more had he destroyed?

He stopped himself from daydreaming about his many victories. Now wasn't the time. He crossed the room to the bar and poured himself a glass of water from the crystal decanter one of his business associates had given him years ago. After he took a sip, he carried the glass to the desk and placed it on a coaster near the corner. He looked around the paneled library and decided it was too dark for the cameras, so he rushed to turn on all the table lights.

"Are you ready?" he asked, impatience brimming in his tone. Pulling the chair out, he sat down, smoothed his hair, and adjusted his suit jacket so the collar wouldn't stand up. He tugged on his tie as if that would loosen the tightness in his throat. "I'm going to prepare my thoughts now," he said, his voice raspy from years of barking orders and smoking his cherished Cuban cigars.

He wanted a cigar now. There weren't any in the house, though. He'd given up the habit ten years ago, but every once in a while when he was nervous he would get a sudden longing for one.

At the moment he was not only nervous but also a little fearful, which was an odd, almost unfamiliar, feeling for him. He was desperate to do the right thing before he died, which would be soon now, very soon. He owed at least that much to the MacKenna name.

The old-fashioned video camera with a VHS tape was positioned on a tripod facing the old man. The digital camera was being held up directly behind the video camera, and the eye was also focused on him.

He looked beyond the cameras. "I know you think digital is enough, and you're probably right, but I still like the old way with the videotape. I don't trust those discs, and so the videotape will be my backup. You nod," he instructed, "when everything's turned on, and I'll begin."

He picked up his glass, took a drink, and put it down. The pills those aggravating doctors forced on him made his mouth dry.

A few seconds later, all was ready, and he began.

“My name is Compton Thomas MacKenna. This is not my last will and testament because I’ve already taken care of all that. I changed my will some time ago. The original is in my safe-deposit box; a copy is in my file at the law firm I employ, and there is also another copy, which I assure you will rear its ugly head if for any reason the original and the attorney’s copy are misplaced or destroyed.

“I didn’t tell any of you about the new will or about the changes I made because I didn’t want to spend my last months being harassed, but now that the doctors have assured me the end is approaching and there is nothing more they can do, I want . . . no, I need,” he corrected, “to explain why I have done what I’ve done . . . though I’m not sure any of you will understand or care.

“I’m going to start my explanation with a brief history of the MacKenna family. My parents were born, raised, and buried in the Highlands of Scotland. My father owned quite a bit of land . . . quite a bit,” he repeated. He paused to clear his throat and take another drink of water before continuing. “When he died, the land came to my older brother, Robert Duncan the second, and to me equally. Robert and I traveled to the United States to complete our education, and both of us decided to stay. Years later Robert sold me his share of the land. With his inheritance, that made him a very wealthy man, and it made me the sole heir to the property called Glen MacKenna.

“I never married. I had neither the time nor the inclination. Robert married a woman I didn’t approve of, but unlike my brother, I didn’t threaten or carry on because he chose someone I didn’t like. Her name was Caroline . . . a social climber. She obviously married Robert for his money. She certainly never loved him. She did do her duty though and gave him two sons, Robert Duncan the third and Conal Thomas.

“And now to the heart of this history lesson. When my nephew Conal chose to marry a woman without social standing, his father disowned him. Robert had chosen someone else—a woman from an influential family—and he was outraged that his wishes were being ignored. Conal’s wife, Leah, was no better than a street beggar, but Conal didn’t seem to care about the money he would lose.” He let out a huff of disgust and said, “All Robert had left was his firstborn, a real yes-man who did whatever he was told to do.

“Over the years I lost track of Conal,” he continued. “Too busy,” he added as an excuse. “All I knew was that he’d moved to Silver Springs just outside of Charleston. But then I got word that he’d been killed in a car accident. I knew my brother wouldn’t go to the funeral . . . but I went. Not so much from a sense of obligation, I admit. I guess I was curious to see how Conal made out. I didn’t tell Leah or anyone I was there. Kept my distance. The church was packed with mourners. I even went to the cemetery and saw Leah with her three little girls, the youngest no more than a baby.” He stopped and thought though envisioning the scene. Not wanting to betray any hint of emotion that might cross his face, he looked away from the camera for a second. He straightened in his chair and resumed. “I saw what I went there to see. The MacKenna line would continue through Conal’s children . . . though

was a pity there weren't any boys.

“As for my brother's other son . . . Robert the third . . . he indulged him . . . taught him to be useless. He didn't allow him to have ambition, and in return my brother lived long enough to watch his firstborn drink himself into an early grave.

“The sin of excess has been passed down to the next generation. I have watched Robert's grandson squander their inheritance and, even worse, defile the MacKenna name. Bryce, the oldest, is following in his father's footsteps. He married a good woman, Vanessa, but she couldn't save him from his vices. Like his father, he's a drunk. He has sold all of his stocks and cashed in his bonds and has gone through every dollar. He spent a good deal on alcohol and women, and only God knows what he did with the rest.

“And then there's Roger. He's been the most elusive—disappearing for weeks at a time—but didn't take my sources long to track him down and find out what he's been up to. It appears Roger has turned to gambling for his amusement. According to the reports, last year alone he lost over four hundred thousand. Four hundred thousand.” The old man shook his head and continued as though the words left a foul taste. “What's worse, he's been dealing with mobsters like Johnny Jackman. Just having the MacKenna name associated with a thug like Jackman makes my stomach turn.

“Ewan, the youngest, can't or won't control his temper. If it were not for his high-priced and very clever attorneys, he would be in prison now. Two years ago he nearly beat a man to death.

“I am disgusted with all of them. They are useless men who have contributed nothing to this world.” The old man pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed at his brow.

“When those worthless doctors told me I would be here for only a few more months, I decided to take stock.” He turned and opened the side drawer and withdrew a thick black folder. He opened it at the center of the desk and stacked his hands on top of it. “I've had an investigator do some checking for me. I wanted to know how Conal's children turned out. I must admit I had low expectations. I assumed, after Conal's death, Leah and her girls would have been living hand to mouth. I also assumed none of them would have gone beyond high school . . . if that. I was wrong on both counts. There was enough of a settlement from the insurance company after Conal's accident that Leah could stay in their house with the children. She took a secretarial position at a girls' private school. The pay was meager—I don't suppose Leah was capable of much more—but there was a trade-off. All three of her daughters attended the private lower school and upper school, their tuition waived.” He nodded in approval and said, “Conal evidently had taught her the value of a proper education.”

He glanced over the report in the folder. “It seems that all three of them are hard workers. Not a slacker among them,” he added with emphasis. “The oldest, Kiera, received a full scholarship to a good university and graduated with honors. She received another scholarship to medical school and is doing exceptionally well. The middle girl, Kate, is the entrepreneur in the family. She, too, received a full scholarship to one of the finest universities in the east and also graduated with honors. She started a business while she was still in school, and today her company is growing and on its way to being very successful.” He looked back at the camera. “It appears she is most like me.”

“Isabel, the youngest, is certainly intelligent as well, but her true talent is her voice. I understand she is quite gifted.” He tapped the report with his index finger. “Isabel plans to study music and history at the university, and it is her desire to one day go to Scotland to meet her distant relatives.” He nodded. “This news pleases me considerably.”

“And now to the changes in my will.” The corners of his mouth lifted slightly in an almost imperceptible, devious smile. It faded as he continued. “Bryce and Roger and Ewan will each receive one hundred thousand dollars in cash immediately. It is my hope that the money will be spent on rehabilitation, but I doubt that will happen. Vanessa will also receive one hundred thousand, and she will get this house. She deserves at least that much for having put up with Bryce these past years. She has brought respect to the MacKenna name through her work with various charities and in the community, so I don’t see any sense in punishing her for her choice of husbands.”

“Now to the other MacKennas. I’ve signed over all my treasury bonds to Kiera. The maturity dates are outlined in the will. Isabel, a history buff like me, will receive Glen MacKenna. There are stipulations that go along with it, of course, and she will be apprised of these in due time. This is all they are to receive from me, but I believe I have been more than generous.”

His breathing became labored and he stopped to take another drink of water, emptying the glass before he finished speaking.

“Finally, to the bulk of my estate, my assets calculated to be worth eighty million dollars. This is the accumulation of my life’s work and it will be passed on to my blood relations, but I’ll be damned if I’ll just hand it over to my depraved nephews, and so it will go to Kate MacKenna. She is the most driven of the whole lot and, like me, knows the value of money. If she chooses this legacy, it’s all hers.”

“I trust that she will not squander it.”

Chapter Two

Kate Mackenna's Wonderbra saved her life.

Five minutes after she'd put the thing on, she wanted to take it off. She never should have let her sister Kiera talk her into wearing it. Yes, it did make her look voluptuous and sexy, but was that the message she wanted to send tonight? She was a businesswoman, for Pete's sake, not a porn star. Besides, without the push-'em-up-and-out bra she was already sufficiently endowed.

And why was Kiera so hell-bent on "sexing her up"—as she so eloquently put it? Was Kate's social life that much of a dud? Apparently her sisters thought so.

Of the three sisters Kiera was the oldest and the bossiest. She had vowed she'd get Kate to wear the little, black, way-too-snug cocktail dress or die trying. Isabel, the youngest, had sided with Kiera, but then she always did, and Kate had finally given in and put on the silk dress just to get them to stop nagging her. When the two of them ganged up on her, they were a force to be reckoned with—a loud, unrelenting force.

Kate stood in front of the mirror in the foyer tugging on the bra in an attempt to get it to stop digging into her ribs, but her efforts were useless. She checked the time and decided if she hurried she could change, but when she turned to go back up to her room, Kiera walked down the stairs.

"You look great," Kiera said after giving her sister the once-over.

"You look tired." Kate was stating the obvious. There were dark circles under Kiera's eyes. She'd just gotten out of the shower, and her blond hair was dripping on her shoulders. Kate didn't think she'd even bothered to towel it dry. Her sister wasn't wearing an ounce of makeup, but she still looked beautiful. She was a natural beauty, like their mother had been.

"I'm a medical student. I'm supposed to look sleep-deprived. It's a requirement. I'd get tossed out if I looked rested."

Despite their pestering, Kate was happy to be with her two sisters again, even if it was for only a couple of weeks. They had had little time together after their mother died. Kate had returned to Boston to finish her graduate degree, and Kiera had gone back to medical school at Duke while Isabel remained at home with their aunt Nora.

Kate was now home permanently, but Kiera, after two weeks off, would be returning to Duke again, and Isabel would be heading to her first year of college. The changes were inevitable, Kate presumed. Life should move forward.

"While you're home you ought to take a day and go to the beach . . . you know, relax. Take Isabel

with you,” Kate urged.

Kiera laughed. “Nice try. You’re not going to unload her on me, even if it’s just for a day. I’d spend the entire time fighting off the boys chasing after her. No, thank you. It’s bad enough right here with the phone calls. There’s some guy named Reece in particular. He seems to think he’s Isabel’s boyfriend. Isabel said she worked at a couple of concerts with him, and they went out a few times, but it was nothing serious. She stopped seeing him when he wanted to be more than friends. Now he’s calling here nonstop wanting to talk to her, and because Isabel refuses to take his calls, he’s becoming more and more belligerent. I love Isabel dearly, but sometimes I think she can make life just a little too complicated. So, thanks for the suggestion about the beach, but no thanks.”

Kate tugged on her bra again.

“Oh, *that’s* lovely,” Kiera said.

“This contraption is killing me. I can’t breathe.”

“You look gorgeous, and isn’t that more important than breathing?” she teased. “Suck it up. It’s for a good cause.”

“What’s the cause?”

“You. You’re my cause these days. Isabel’s, too. We’re determined to lighten you up. You’re way too serious for your own good. I personally think you suffer from middle-child syndrome. You know you’re filled with insecurities and phobias, and you have this need to constantly prove yourself.”

Kate decided to ignore her. She put her small clutch bag down on the table and went to the closet.

“You’re textbook material,” Kiera continued.

“That’s nice.”

“You’re not listening to me, are you?”

Kate was saved from responding when the phone rang. While Kiera hurried into the den to answer it, she opened the closet door and began to search for her raincoat. The television was blaring away from the kitchen, and she could hear the obscenely cheerful weatherman gleefully remind his audience that Charleston was still in the throes of a heat wave unlike anything the city had seen in thirty years. If the temperature remained in the high nineties for just two more days, a new record would be set. The possibility made the weatherman sound giddy with excitement.

The humidity was the real killer, though. The air was heavy, stagnant, and as thick as glue. The steam curling up from the sidewalks and streets mingled with the pollution hanging like a hazy specter over the airless city. One strong gust of wind would help clear the sky, but neither wind nor rain was predicted anytime soon. Unless one was acclimated, taking a deep breath required concentration. The muggy air drained the young and the old, and left everyone lethargic. Swatting a mosquito away required more energy than most people were willing to exert.

Yet as horribly hot as it was, the party Kate had promised to attend was still being held outside of the grounds of a privately owned art gallery. The event had been planned weeks ago, and the white tent had been erected before the weather turned so oppressive. Only one wing of the newly constructed gallery was completed, and Kate knew it wasn't large enough to accommodate the expected crowd.

There was no getting out of it. The owner, Carl Bertolli, was a friend of Kate's. She knew it would hurt his feelings if she didn't show up. Because of the traffic, the drive from Silver Springs, where she lived, to the other side of Charleston would take over an hour, but she didn't plan on staying long. She would help with any last-minute details and then, when the party was in full swing, she'd bolt. Carl would be too busy to notice her departure.

A controversial artist from Houston was showing her work, and there had already been protests and threatening phone calls. Carl couldn't have been happier. He believed that any publicity, good or bad, was good for his gallery's business. The artist, a woman who was calling herself Cinnamon, had quite a following—though, for the life of her, Kate couldn't understand why. As an artist Cinnamon was mediocre at best. She was, however, excellent at drawing attention to herself. She was constantly in the news and would do anything to get noticed. Currently she was against anything organized. When she wasn't throwing paint on her canvases, she was halfheartedly trying to overthrow the government. Cinnamon believed in free love, free expression, and a free ride through life. Her paintings weren't free, however. They were outrageously expensive.

Kiera came back into the hall saying, "That was Reece calling again. He's beginning to give me the creeps." She stopped when she saw Kate. "We're not supposed to get rain tonight. How come you're all buttoned up in your raincoat? It's like a hundred and twenty outside."

"One can't be too cautious. I wouldn't want the dress to get wet."

Kiera laughed. "I know what you're doing. You don't want Aunt Nora to see you in that dress. Admit it, Katie. You're afraid of her."

"I'm not afraid of her. I'm just trying to avoid a long lecture."

"The dress isn't indecent."

"She'll think it is," Kate said as she slipped the coat over her shoulders.

"It's going to be odd not having her here to boss us around. I'm going to miss her."

"Me too," Kate whispered.

Nora was moving back to St. Louis. She had come to Silver Springs when her sister had taken in the boys and she had stayed on to keep the household running until Isabel graduated from high school. Now that Kate was back and Isabel was going away to college, Nora was ready to go home. She missed being close to her daughter and her grandchildren.

Nora had been a godsend and had taken good care of all of them, especially when they needed her most. However, she was set in her ways, and in the sisters' opinions, she was obsessed with sex. Kiera

called her a born-again virgin. After their mother had died, she had appointed herself the girls' moral guardian. According to Nora, every man was out for "you know what," and it was her job to see that they didn't get it from her girls.

Kate peeked around the corner. Fortunately, Nora wasn't in the kitchen, so Kate turned the television off, removed her raincoat and draped it over a chair. She grabbed her keys and hurried for the garage. If luck stayed on her side, she'd be out of the house before Nora returned. She really wasn't afraid of her aunt, but when Nora got wound up, her lectures could go on and on and on. Some lasted as long as an hour.

Kiera followed Kate through the kitchen. "You be careful tonight. There are a lot of crazies out there who don't care for Cinnamon's views on government or religion. Doesn't she preach anarchy?"

"This month I think she does. I don't keep track of what she says and what she does, and I'm not worried about tonight. Security will be tight."

"Then Carl must be worried."

"No, it's all for show. I don't think Cinnamon believes any of the nonsense she spouts. She's just a publicity hound, that's all."

"The groups she's offended don't know it's all for show, and some of those groups are real radicals."

"Stop worrying. I'll be fine." Kate opened the door and stepped into the garage. The heat took her breath away.

"Why do you have to leave so early? The invitation said eight to midnight."

"Carl's assistant called and left a message for me to be there by six."

She got into the car, which felt like an oven, and pushed the remote control to open the garage door.

Kiera called out, "Are there going to be Kate MacKenna gift baskets?"

"Of course. Carl insisted. I think I've become one of his projects. He told me he wants to be able to say he knew me when," she called back. "Now shut the door. You're letting all the air-conditioning out."

"You're already becoming a household name. Pretty sweet, isn't it?"

Kiera evidently didn't require an answer, for she'd shut the door after making the comment.

Life was pretty sweet right now. Kate had plenty of time to think as she inched along the highway through the heavy traffic. Though she wasn't a household name yet, she was definitely headed in the right direction. It was funny how a little hobby could end up becoming a satisfying career.

While she had been busy trying to figure out what she wanted to be, her company was born. She had

been a senior in high school and scrounging for ways to make money so she could buy her family and friends birthday gifts. She had also been taking a chemistry class. She'd gone into the teacher's office and there was a lighted candle on the desk. Kate had always been sensitive to various scents, and the musky odor from the candle was offensive to her. The horrible smell had given her an idea to make her own candles. But she wouldn't do the same old same old. She would do something unique. How hard could it be?

She started out using the kitchen as her lab. By the end of the winter break, she'd made her first batch of scented candles. They were a disaster. She'd mixed several spices and herbs and made the kitchen smell like a sewer.

Her mother banished her to the basement. She didn't give up her experiments, though. Every spare minute she had that summer she worked on her project. She scoured libraries and labs, and by the end of her freshman year at college, she had come up with the most wonderful basil-and-grapefruit scented candles.

Kate's intention was to give them away, but her college roommate and best friend, Jordan Buchanan, saw great potential. Jordan took ten candles, priced them, and sold them all in one evening. She talked Kate into using her full name on all of her products. Then she helped her design a logo and some unusual boxes.

The clean and fresh scents along with the octagonal glass containers Kate found made the candles irresistible and an instant hit. Orders started pouring in. Kate, with two part-time employees, tried to make and stock as much as she could during summer break, but her enterprise outgrew the basement and so she moved to a rental space across town. It was located in a horrible area and for that reason was dirt cheap.

By the time she graduated from college, orders were coming in from all parts of the country. Kate realized her weakness was in management and decided to return to school in Boston to complete her master's. To keep the company running while she was away, she made her mother a partner so that she could sign checks and make deposits. Because Kate poured her profits back into the company, money was tight. She lived with Jordan in her apartment in Boston and often spent her weekends with Jordan's large family out on Nathan's Bay.

It was a struggle, but Kate managed to make the business grow in her absence. Then, when her mother became so ill, Kate's ambition was put on hold so she could return home to be with her. A long, sad year had passed since her mother's death, but in that year Kate had completed her graduate degree and formulated plans for expansion.

Now that she was back in Silver Springs permanently, she was ready to take her company to the next level. She had branched into body lotions and three signature perfumes named Leah, Kiera, and Isabel after her mother and her sisters. The space she rented was becoming too cramped, so she was negotiating a new lease in a warehouse that was much larger and also closer to home. She was also thinking about hiring more employees. Anton's, a chain of upscale department stores, was eager to carry her products, and soon she was going to sign an exclusive and extremely lucrative contract.

And any and all money worries would evaporate.

She smiled thinking about that. The first thing she was going to buy when she had a little extra money was a car with a proper air conditioner. She kept adjusting the vents, but that didn't help. The air coming out was lukewarm.

She felt wilted by the time she reached Carl's outrageously pretentious estate. He'd inherited Liongate from his father and was building his gallery on the property. Two massive lion faces adorned the electronic iron gates.

A security guard checked her name off his list and let her through. Carl's two-story house was at the top of a winding drive, but the gallery that would showcase Cinnamon's work was halfway up the hill on the south side. A massive white tent sat adjacent to the white stone structure.

Another security guard showed her where to park. Carl was obviously expecting quite a crowd if the number of security men and waiters rushing back and forth from the annex to the white tent were any indication.

Kate cut across the well-manicured lawn, her heels sinking into the irrigated sod. She'd almost reached the stone path when her cell phone rang.

"Hello, Kate darling. Where are you?" Carl's melodious voice wafted through the receiver.

"I'm right here on your lawn, Carl."

"Ah, that's wonderful."

"Where are you?" she asked.

"I'm in my closet trying to choose between the white linen suit and the pinstripe blazer with the cream-colored pants. Either way, I know I'm going to absolutely melt, but I have to look dashing for all the critics who are going to be here tonight, don't I?"

"I'm sure you'll look very handsome."

"I just wanted to let you know that I won't be down for a while. I have to hurry and dress and then go pick up Cinnamon at her hotel. The limo's waiting for me. I have a favor to ask. Would you check on the tent setup for me? I won't have time to get there before guests arrive, and I want to be sure everything's perfect. With your impeccable taste, I know you'll see that it's glorious."

"I'd be happy to," Kate answered, smiling at her friend's flair for the dramatic.

"You're a sweetheart. I owe you," Carl said as he hung up.

Kate found the entrance and went inside the tent. There were air conditioners operating full blast around the perimeter, but they weren't doing much good with all the waiters coming and going. Huge buffet tables stood in a line at one end. They were topped with colorful flower arrangements in crystal

bowls and gleaming silver servers. Small tables with white linens and white folding chairs were scattered around the rest of the space. Everything seemed to be going smoothly.

She spotted her gift baskets on a table at the back. The white tablecloth reached the ground, and her logo hung suspended in front. She hurried over to straighten it and to place the baskets in a semicircle. When she was finished, she stepped back to admire how lovely it looked.

She circled the table and reached for the chair but changed her mind. The Wonderbra was driving her nuts. The undergarment felt like a suffocating vise around her rib cage. She was in agony and was trying not to rip the thing off as she hurried into the art gallery to find a powder room so she could remove it and toss it in the trash.

Unfortunately, the ladies' room was blocked off and so was the men's room. There were servants cleaning both. Kate would have ignored the closed signs and gone in, but there were security guards stationed by the doors, and she was sure they wouldn't let her through.

Now what? Kate looked around for a vacant room with a door she could shut. There weren't any. She headed back to the tent feeling absolutely miserable, but her mood improved when she noticed a large basket of flowers had been placed on the ground just beneath her logo to showcase it. She must remember to thank Carl for being so thoughtful.

The heat was stifling. She picked up a program and began to fan her face. With less than two hours before the crowd would arrive, waiters were hurrying to set up more portable air conditioners. Kate stepped to the back of the tent to get out of their way.

As she lifted a flap of the canvas to get a breath of fresh air, she spotted a cluster of trees circled by a skirt of dense shrubs a few yards away. Bingo. She knew exactly what she was going to do. The bushes would give her privacy, and it would take just a few seconds to unhook the strapless bra and pull it off. She looked in all directions to make sure no one was watching or going to follow her and headed for the trees.

A minute later she had accomplished the feat.

"Finally," she sighed with relief. Now she could breathe.

It was her last thought before the explosion.

Chapter Three

The police found her curled up on her side at the base of a hundred-year-old walnut tree. They found her bra dangling from an uprooted magnolia fifteen feet away. No one could quite figure out how the force of the explosion had extracted the lacy black lingerie but left her dress intact. Aside from being covered in leaves and dirt, the dress was still in one piece.

The blast had taken a huge chunk out of the side of the hill and left a hole the size of a small crater where the tent had been. The resulting fire scorched everything in its path as it poured like lava down the hill. The magnificent and regal walnut tree was split in half straight down the middle. One hefty branch snapped and landed in an arch above Kate, covering her completely. The branch acted as a barrier against the shards of glass, metal, canvas, and wood hurling through the air like bullets from an automatic weapon.

Houses shuddered as much as half a mile away, or so some of the residents swore. Others thought the trembling they felt was an earthquake and ran to stand in doorways for protection.

It was a miracle no one was killed or seriously injured. Had any of the staff or guests been inside the tent at the time of the explosion, the paramedics would have been hard-pressed to identify them.

Kate certainly should have been killed, and if it weren't for that ill-fitting bra, she surely would have been standing in the center of the blast. It was yet another miracle that all of her body parts were where they belonged. One of the metal tent poles had rocketed like a guided missile and sliced straight through the tree trunk resting just above Kate. The tip stopped one inch away from her heart.

Nate Hallinger, a detective newly assigned to the Charleston division, was the first to see her. He was making his way up the hill, trying to stay clear of the crime scene team walking the grid, when he heard a cell phone ringing close by. The musical ring reminded him of the Harry Potter movie he had taken his nephews to see. The ringing stopped by the time he reached the uprooted walnut tree. He thought the phone was on the ground somewhere, and when he bent down on one knee to push a branch out of his way, he spotted a pair of shapely legs.

He tried to get closer to the woman to see if she was dead or alive. Part of the trunk began to teeter and if it shifted at all she would be crushed. He backed away when he heard her groan.

Two paramedics were coming toward him. "Holy mother, George. Will you look at this?" one of them remarked.

"Look at what?" his partner said with a distinct Bronx accent. He was shimmying on his belly to get to the victim.

"The pole, man. Look at the pole. It stopped just short of her chest. Is she lucky to be alive

what?"

"Assuming she's all in one piece, then yes, I'll agree, Riley. She is lucky."

George was fifteen years older than his partner. He was training Riley, and though he liked working with him, the younger man's nonstop chatter occasionally got on his nerves. Riley loved to gossip—which George didn't approve of—but sometimes he did pass along interesting information.

Riley carefully lifted one of the broken branches and scooted toward the woman. "Did you hear" he whispered. "The cops think that artist was the target, and the bomb went off too soon. I heard one of the firemen say it was overkill, but I'm not sure what that means, and I didn't dare ask 'cause they'd know I was eavesdropping."

The two men couldn't reach her, so they called for help. It took four strong firemen to lift the splintered trunk out of the way. The heavy branches were removed a minute later, and the paramedics moved in. They both marveled that there were no broken bones. They braced her as a precaution and gently transferred her onto a stretcher.

Kate was slow to come around. She struggled to open her eyes. Through the blurry haze, she could just make out three men looming over her.

She felt like she was in a hammock and the wind was pushing her every which way. She closed her eyes again and fought nausea as she was being carried down the hill. She smelled something burning in the air.

Nate walked by her side.

"Is she going to be okay?" he asked.

"Should be," Riley said.

"That's for the doctors to decide," George said.

"Can she talk?"

"Who are you?" George asked.

"Detective Nate Hallinger. Can she talk?" he repeated.

"She's got a bump the size of a baseball on the back of her head," Riley replied.

The other paramedic was nodding, but his attention, Nate noticed, was centered on his patient.

"She's probably got a concussion," he said.

"Uh-huh," Nate said. "But can she talk?" he asked, thinking that maybe the third time might be the charm with these guys. "Has she said anything?"

“No, she’s still out cold,” Riley said.

The fog in Kate’s head was beginning to clear, and she was almost sorry about that. She felt like someone had stuck a hatchet in the back of her skull—and she tried to reach up and find out if there really was something there.

“Yes, she can talk,” she whispered, her voice shaky. “She can walk, too.”

Nate flashed a smile. The woman was a smart-ass. He liked that. “Can you tell me your name?”

She didn’t dare nod. Any movement at all increased her headache. Aspirin, she thought. An aspirin would take care of it.

“Kate MacKenna,” she said. “What happened?”

“An explosion.”

She frowned. “I don’t remember an explosion. Was anyone hurt?”

“You were,” Riley said.

“I’m okay. Please put me down.”

The request was ignored. She asked once again if anyone was hurt, and George answered, “Just some scratches and bruises.”

“May I have an aspirin?”

“You’ve got a hell of a headache, don’t you?” George remarked. “We can’t give you anything yet. When we get you to the hospital—”

“I don’t need to go to the hospital.”

“Someone sure was looking out for you.” Riley offered the comment.

Confused, she squinted up at him. “I’m sorry?”

“You didn’t get blown up,” he said. “If you had been inside the tent, you’d be a goner.”

They reached the bottom of the hill and stopped to wait for an officer to open the back of the ambulance.

“I’m riding with her to the hospital,” Nate said.

“I guess that’s all right. Her vitals are good.”

Nate whistled to get a policeman’s attention, pointed to the ambulance, and climbed inside.

“I don’t need a ride to the hospital. I’m all right now,” she said. “My car’s here . . . somewhere.”

“You shouldn’t be driving anywhere,” George said.

“My driver’s license is in my car, and my purse and . . .” She realized how unimportant that information was and stopped talking.

“Think you could answer a couple of questions?” Nate asked.

She liked his voice. It was smooth . . . and not too loud. “Of course.”

“Tell me what happened?”

She sighed. “I don’t know what happened.” Why couldn’t she remember? What was wrong with her? Maybe when the headache went away it would all come back to her.

“Did you see anyone unusual . . . you know, someone who didn’t belong?”

She closed her eyes. “I don’t . . . I’m sorry. Maybe I’ll remember later.”

She knew she was frustrating him.

“And no one got hurt?” she repeated.

He assured her. “The caterers and the staff were inside the building preparing trays and trying to keep cool. The owner was in a limo on his way to pick up the artist.”

“Thank God,” she whispered.

“If it had happened later, there would have been a massacre,” George said.

The detective was sitting across from her, his arms on his knees, his hands clasped together, his gaze intent as he leaned forward and asked, “Try to think, Kate. You didn’t notice anything out of the ordinary?”

The urgency in his voice cut through her haze. “You don’t think this was an accident, do you?”

“We’re not ruling out any possibility.”

“Couldn’t it have been one of the air conditioners?” she asked. “There were wires everywhere. Maybe one was overloaded . . .” She stopped when he shook his head. “It isn’t possible that one of those blew up?” she asked.

“A hundred air conditioners couldn’t have done that kind of damage. The explosive took out half that hill.”

Riley bent over Kate and once again checked her blood pressure. He smiled as he loosened the cuffs.

“How’s she doing?” Nate asked.

“Her numbers are still good.”

“My head’s feeling better,” she said. It was a lie, but she wanted to go home.

“You still need to be checked out at the hospital,” George said.

Hallinger closed his notepad and took a long look at her. Not many victims, he thought, were as gorgeous as this. He realized he was staring and quickly looked away. “That old tree saved your life. If you hadn’t been standing behind it, you wouldn’t have survived. What were you doing all the way over there? You were quite a distance from the annex and the tent.”

She turned her head and winced. She really wanted an aspirin. “I went for a walk,” she said. It wasn’t a lie; she had gone for a walk. She just didn’t think she needed to explain why.

“In this heat? I would think you would have wanted to go inside the annex, or walk on up to the house, or maybe even stay inside the tent near one of those air conditioners.”

“You would think,” she agreed. “But I didn’t. I went for a walk. The heat doesn’t really bother me. Okay, that was a lie, but it was a little one and she could live with that.”

“Were you alone when you went for your walk?”

“Yes, I was.”

“Hmmm.” He looked skeptical.

“Detective, if someone had been with me, wouldn’t he or she have been knocked unconscious, too?”

“If he or she had stayed around.”

Before she could respond he asked, “How long were you out there?”

“Out where?”

“Behind the trees.”

“I don’t know. Not long.”

“Really.” The skepticism had moved to his voice.

“Is there a problem?” she asked.

“The crime scene unit found something about twenty feet away from you.”

“What’d they find?” she asked and only then realized where he was headed. Oh my, the bump on her head had made her dense.

“An article of clothing,” he said. “An undergarment, which was why I was wondering who was with you.”

She could feel her face burning. “No one was with me. You’re asking me about a black bra, right? And you’re wondering if it belonged to me?” Before he could answer she plunged ahead. “It did belong to me. The ladies’ room was blocked, and I needed a little privacy to take it off. I saw the tree and I headed there.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why did you want to take it off?”

He was being extremely intrusive, she thought, and she could have told him so, but she decided to be honest instead. “It was killing me.”

“I’m sorry?”

Everyone inside the ambulance was suddenly interested in the topic. Riley and George were waiting for her to explain.

“The wire . . .”

“Yes?”

Good Lord. “A woman would understand.”

“But a man wouldn’t?”

He wasn’t letting it go. She wondered if he was deliberately trying to embarrass her.

“You try wearing one of those things for an hour, and trust me, you’ll take it off, too.”

He laughed. “No, thanks. I guess I’ll just have to take your word for it.”

“Are you going to write that down in your notepad?”

He had a nice smile.

“Are you married?” he asked. “Is there a husband I should contact?”

“No, I’m not married. I live with my sisters.” She tried to sit up and only then realized she was strapped down. “I’ve got to call them. They’ll be worried.”

“When we get to the hospital, I’ll call them for you.” He sat back on the bench and glanced out the back window. “We’re almost there.”

“I don’t need to go to the hospital. My headache’s almost gone.”

“Uh-huh.”

From the way he drawled out the response she knew he didn’t believe her.

“You don’t live in Charleston proper,” he said.

“No,” she answered. She knew he could already have her address, phone number, and probably every other detail about her life. One phone call to an associate manning a computer would tell him everything he wanted to know.

“We live in Silver Springs, but it’s a quick drive to the city. Are you new to this area?”

“Yes,” he answered. “I just moved here from Savannah. It’s pretty laid-back here.” He smiled as he added, “. . . Usually. I’ll bet this is the most excitement you’ll have all year.”

Chapter Four

If only.

Kiera and Isabel rushed through the emergency room doors. Kiera looked relieved when she saw Kate and smiled. Isabel looked scared.

The ER physician checked Kate and sent her downstairs for a scan. The techs were backed up, and she had to wait two hours before they finished with her. Then she was brought upstairs and assigned to a room.

Kiera was pacing in the hallway. Isabel was sitting on the edge of the bed watching television. The footage of the aftermath of the explosion was all over the news.

The second Isabel spotted Kate she jumped up, anxiously waited until she was in bed, and threw herself into her sister's arms.

"You're okay, right? You gave us quite a scare, but you're okay, aren't you?"

"Yes, I'm fine."

Kiera grabbed the controls and adjusted the bed so that Kate could sit up.

"You're not seeing three of me, are you?" Isabel asked. She was fluffing the pillow behind Kate's head and causing her sister a good deal of pain.

"If she were seeing three of you, she'd be screaming now. One Isabel is enough." Kiera laughed.

"Not funny," Isabel said, but she, too, was smiling.

Kiera picked up Kate's chart from the metal slot at the foot of the hospital bed and began to read the doctor's notes.

"Should you be looking at that?" Isabel asked.

Kiera shrugged. "If they don't want you to read it, they shouldn't leave it. They're keeping you overnight for observation."

"I know," Kate said. "I want to go home."

"You should stay . . . as a precaution," she added. "Aunt Nora was still at her meeting, but we've left a message for her. No doubt she'll want to bring a cot in here so she can keep watch all night."

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