

# **Turn to Me**

**By Tiffany A. Snow**

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Turn to Me  
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## Chapter One

"Hey, pretty girl, give me your cash and I won't mess up your fancy dress."

I started, my pulse picking up as my brain processed the words. I was cold. Freezing actually, and my feet were killing me. December in Indianapolis was bad enough - add to it walking the streets alone at night wearing nothing but an evening gown and four inch heels and you had the ingredients for a truly wretched experience. Well, at least I'd thought that was the worst it could get. Apparently, I'd been wrong.

Turning, I watched as a man stepped out of the shadows. He was a hulking brute, big enough to easily outweigh me by a hundred pounds or more. The scattered light from a nearby streetlamp glinted off the knife he was holding and I swallowed heavily. I hated knives. Knives meant pain whereas guns meant death. Maybe I was in the minority, but death was the preferred of the two to my way of thinking. I wasn't a big fan of pain.

"I don't have any money," I said, trying to stay calm. I glanced around, keeping an eye on him as he advanced toward me. Unfortunately, no one was around. I backed away as he got closer, but knew I didn't stand a chance if I tried to run, not with these shoes.

"Then I'll take the pretty necklace," he sneered, leaping forward and grabbing my arm. I shrieked in surprise, but was silenced when he pressed the cold steel of the blade to my neck.

"Shut up, bitch," he snarled.

I was breathing hard, fear and adrenaline pumping through my veins. He towered over me, pushing against me until my back was against the cold brick wall. The rough stones abraded the exposed skin of my back.

"Give me the necklace." His breath was hot and fetid against my face.

"No," I said, helpless anger rising in me. I'd been given the necklace mere hours ago, Blane fastening it around my neck as I'd gotten dressed for this evening.

It suddenly seemed terribly ironic that a night that had started with such promise was ending in terror.

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The day had begun well enough. I'd had the day shift at The Drop, a local place where I tended bar. I know the current in vogue term was "mixologist," but neither myself nor the patrons had any illusions about what I did - which was pour drinks. On Saturdays I usually worked the night shift, but today I'd traded with Lucy so I could have tonight off to be with Blane.

Blane Kirk was my boyfriend, although the term was at once both too adolescent and too committed to actually describe him and our relationship. Blane was a high-profile lawyer in Indianapolis, with aspirations to public office. A former Navy SEAL, he was over six feet of male perfection complete with dirty blond hair, a square jaw and eyes a tantalizing mix of gray and green, drifting more one or the other depending on what he was wearing. Women had been an interchangeable accessory to Blane and I wasn't sure that wouldn't be the case with me. Blane and I had started dating about six weeks ago, right after Halloween. I know that doesn't sound like very long, but considering how often Blane usually changed girlfriends I was cautiously optimistic. Optimistic of what, well I wasn't sure of that either.

Considering who he was and who I am, it was difficult most days to believe that Blane would choose to be with me. As the daughter of a housewife and police officer from Rushville, Indiana, Kathleen Turner - yeah, that's me - wasn't a name people knew. I take that back. People knew the name, but I wasn't THAT Kathleen Turner. Turner was the family name and choosing a celebrity to be named after was the tradition. Just ask my dad, Ted Turner or my grandma, Tina Turner. Except neither one was with me any longer so I alone was left to carry on the Turner tradition or curse, depending on your point of view.

I'd moved to Indianapolis eight months ago and had taken a job working as a runner for Blane's law firm. It took both gigs to make ends meet and I hadn't given up the day job, even though I was sleeping with the boss. Incredibly tacky of me, but I needed the job. We kept it discreet because while Blane didn't care at all what people said, I did.

Blane had asked me to go with him to a victory dinner/fundraiser tonight for someone he knew that had been re-elected to Congress in the last election. I'd seen in the paper that plates were seven thousand dollars each. I'd swallowed hard and hoped the food was really good for that kind of price tag.

After my Saturday shift, I had dashed home, hopping into the shower to quickly wash my hair and shave my legs. I had time to blow my long, strawberry blond hair dry, pin it up and throw on some makeup before I heard his knock on my door.

I'd learned a hard lesson a few weeks ago about checking the peephole in my door and I remembered that tonight. I checked first before opening the door and my breath caught, as it nearly always did, when I saw Blane.

My doorway was filled with wide shoulders encased in a charcoal gray suit jacket that tapered to lean hips. A white shirt peeked from beneath his jacket and tie. Currently, a hand was braced high against the jamb of my door, opening his jacket enough for me to see the gun tucked into the holster against his side. Indiana was a conceal state and Blane had a permit to carry, which he always did. That habit had saved my life once.

"You're early," I said, smiling and opening the door wider to let him in. He unfolded his tall frame from where he'd been leaning and came inside, closing the door behind him and stepped into my personal space. The whole apartment seemed smaller with him in it, not that it was very big to begin with. He took in my appearance, still wrapped in a towel from my shower, and the gleam that came into his eyes made my heart beat faster.

"How early?" he asked, his voice a low rasp as he moved even closer, his hand coming up to trace the top edge of my towel. Words failed me when his lips and tongue touched the bare skin of my shoulder. I tipped my head to the side, my eyes fluttering shut. He sucked lightly at the juncture of my neck and shoulder and I inhaled deeply, the scent of his cologne enveloping and enticing me. When I felt him loosen the towel and it dropped to the floor, I found my voice.

"You'll mess up my hair," I managed breathlessly as his hand slipped between my thighs. I clutched at his shoulders for support, his fingers moving with practiced ease and causing my legs to tremble.

"There are ways to avoid that," he whispered in my ear, sending a delicious shiver through me. And indeed, there were, as he proceeded to show me.

Half an hour later, I was slipping on my dress and repairing the damage done to my lip gloss. True to his word, not a hair of mine was out of place, though my skin now had a telltale flush.

My dress was a deep, midnight blue and I thought it brought out my eyes, since they were nearly the same shade. It was a long, satin sheathe with a sweetheart neckline, the straps reaching over the outer curve of my shoulders. The cut emphasized my cleavage, something I'd

been blessed with plenty of. A long slit ran up the side, shifting and revealing my legs as I walked. I stepped into a pair of silver heels that helped make up for my sad lack of stature and surveyed myself with a critical eye in the mirror. The dress demanded a necklace, but jewelry – even the costume sort – was an unnecessary expense when I worked two jobs just to pay the bills. I'd found a pair of rhinestone earrings which now dangled from my ears and sparkled when I turned my head.

"You forgot something," Blane said, surprising me as he stepped into the mirror's reflection. I looked at the couple we made and was gratified at the sight. We looked good together, I thought.

My eyes widened as I watched his hands come up to place a necklace on me. As he did the catch, my jaw dropped at the sight of the large, oval sapphire pendant now nestled between my breasts. Surrounded in diamonds, it glittered brightly as it hung from a long double-chain.

"I'll let you put on these," he said, his arm reaching around in front of me.

I glanced down to see he was holding a velvet jewelry box, opened to display a set of matching diamond and sapphire earrings. I reached out cautious fingers to touch them, the movement causing them to sparkle in the light.

"Blane," I began, "I...I don't know what to say. It's too much." I was stunned. I had never been given something like this. Tears pricked my eyes and the earrings swam in my vision. I blinked them back. It would totally ruin the moment if my mascara ran.

"Say you'll wear them," he cajoled, his lips at my ear as his other arm slid around my waist to pull me back against his chest. "The stone reminded me of the color of your eyes. I want you to have them."

I put on the earrings as he watched me in the mirror and left the rhinestones on my bureau. A thought occurred to me and my eyes flew to his in the mirror. Was this my "going away" present? Blane always gave a gift to his girlfriends when he broke up with them, though usually they were chosen by his secretary, Clarice.

"You're beautiful," he complimented me, the warmth in his eyes easing my worry. The heat from his hands seeped through the thin satin and I berated myself for thinking he had other motives for the gift.

He glanced at his watch. "We'd better go."

I grabbed the silver clutch bag I'd gotten to go with the dress and headed for my apartment door.

"Wait," Blane said. "Where's your coat?"

I grimaced. I hated wearing coats and usually only did so when Mother Nature forced the issue by spreading snow on the ground.

"You have to wear a coat," Blane insisted, going to my tiny coat closet and pulling out the long, black trench coat he'd given me a few weeks ago. "It's freezing outside."

I reluctantly let him put it on me, though I didn't think it went with my dress at all, and locked my apartment door on the way out. I lived on the top floor of a two-story apartment building in an area of downtown Indy where you made sure you locked your car at night.

Blane took my hand as we went down the stairs and I was grateful for his solid presence next to me, unpracticed as I was in walking in heels this high. It's not like I went many places where I had cause to dress up - except church occasionally, but somehow I didn't think silver strappy sandals with a four-inch heel were Sunday morning Baptist attire.

He helped me into his black Jaguar which, let me say, was difficult to get into in the getup I was wearing. As he watched me carefully swing my legs into the car, Blane let out a chuckle.

"What?" I said, my voice testy.

"I was just wondering if you were going to emulate Britney again," he said, propping his arms against the door as he leaned toward me. My cheeks grew warm as I realized he was referring to my beloved pop princess, Britney Spears. I was a huge fan and could do a dead-on impression of her singing, which I'd had cause to do this past Halloween when all the girls at The Drop dressed up as pop divas for the holiday bash. In this instance, I didn't think Blane was referring to Britney's singing so much as her inadvertent flashing of some very private areas when climbing into and out of cars.

"You're assuming I'm not wearing anything under my dress," I said breezily, deciding to give as good as I got.

"Are you?" I noticed the gleam was back in his eyes as they dropped to where the cut of my dress had opened to expose the length of my thigh.

"If you're lucky, you might find out later," I teased. His lips curved in a wicked grin and he stepped back, shutting the car door.

A few minutes later, we arrived at the hotel. The fundraiser was taking place in one of the large ballrooms of the nicest and most expensive hotel in Indy. A valet took the keys and Blane helped me out of the low-slung car. I emerged as gracefully as I could without exposing anything I shouldn't. Offering me his arm, we went inside, where Blane checked our coats, pocketing the small ticket for retrieving them.

I was really nervous. This was the first public function I'd been to with Blane. He'd taken me to dinner and other casual dates, but this was the first time I was his "plus one" at something relating to his job. I knew Blane was ambitious; his career was on the fast track to public office, though he hadn't said which one. He came from a family of lawyers and politicians with a grandfather who had been a Senator and a great-grandfather who had been on the Massachusetts Supreme Court. Blane had a falling out with his father when he was only fourteen, then cemented the divide when he joined the Navy, but politics was still in his blood.

There would be a lot of people here tonight he'd want to connect with to increase his network of contacts, people who could help or hinder his future plans, whatever those might be. I didn't want to embarrass him in any way, though I felt far out of my element as I observed the ballroom and foyer full of people. They milled around in groups chatting, most with a cocktail or glass of wine in their hands. I swallowed hard, my palms clammy from nerves.

"Don't worry," Blane whispered to me, settling his hand on the small of my back. "You'll be fine. I promise, I'm the only one who'll bite you."

I smiled, my eyes catching his, and breathed easier. His attempt to tease me, make me smile, had bolstered my courage. I nodded, took a deep breath, and didn't resist when he led us to a group of people nearby.

"Kirk! There you are! We wondered when you'd be arriving." The greeting came from a man who looked to be about Blane's age and height, but was much slighter of build. He had dark hair and eyes and was holding a highball glass with a clear liquid inside. A woman stood next to him, as tall as he, wearing a black velvet gown that wrapped around her torso and legs before flaring at mid-calf. I wondered how she was able to walk in it. Her dark hair was piled in loose curls on top of her head, a few escaped coils trailing down her ears and neck. The darkness of her dress and hair accentuated the fairness of her skin. She held a glass of champagne in one manicured hand.

"George, good to see you," Blane replied, shaking the man's hand. "And I see your wife, Sarah, is looking as lovely as ever." Sarah smiled back at him, giving him a quick once-over.

Blane had his politician's smile firmly in place. I called it that because it was wide and friendly, but never really reached his eyes. "Congratulations on your win," Blane continued, returning his attention to George. "But that was never in doubt, was it?"

George laughed, clapping Blane on the shoulder. "I never lose, my friend. Something you should keep in mind when you decide to stop keeping secrets and tell me what office you want." George's gaze flicked to me and I pasted on a bright smile.

"I'd like to introduce Kathleen Turner," Blane said, his hand moving to rest lightly on the small of my back. "Kathleen, this is George Bradshaw. He is the campaign manager for the Senator. This is his wife, Sarah."

"Pleased to meet you," I said, politely grasping hands with first George, then Sarah. Sarah's fingers barely brushed mine before she dismissed me, turning back to Blane.

"Likewise," George said. I noticed he took in my appearance with a calculated gaze, his eyes lingering on the pendant Blane had given me. At least, I hoped it was the pendant though it could have just been my cleavage. "And what do you do, Kathleen?"

My smile grew forced. I hadn't thought about this part. I should have known someone was bound to ask that question. My face flushed as I realized I had only two answers to give, neither of which I wanted to say.

"She works at the firm," Blane smoothly interjected.

"A fellow lawyer," George said, assuming what my job was. "Always knew Blane would find a like-minded woman." He lifted his glass as if to toast me.

"Not...exactly," I stammered, not wanting to lie. Lies always came back to bite you in the ass.

We were interrupted by another man stepping into our small circle. He was an older man with silver hair who carried his age well though he had to be in his sixties. About Blane's height, he stood straight and tall in a dark suit and tie. He vaguely reminded me of Blane, exuding a palpable presence and energy that made him the center of attention. George and Sarah stepped back in deference as the man clapped Blane on the shoulder and grasped his hand firmly.

"Knew you wouldn't let me down, Blane," he said, smiling warmly. I watched as Blane responded in a much more natural way, grinning broadly and giving the man's hand a firm shake.

"I know better than to do that, sir," he replied with a twinkle in his eye. "Let me introduce you," Blane said, and just like that, my nerves were back. I could tell this was someone Blane genuinely liked. I just hoped he wouldn't ask me what I did for a living.

"This is Kathleen Turner," Blane said. "Kathleen, this is Senator Robert Keaston."

My eyes widened in surprise. I had known this evening was for a Senator, but hadn't realized it was this particular one. Even I, who followed politics not at all, knew the name, as often as it was in the news. Robert Keaston was a powerful Senator who had been elected and re-elected so many times I wondered that they even bothered with the formality any longer.

"Pleased to meet you," I managed to squeak out through lips frozen into a smile.

"Likewise, my dear," the Senator said, giving me a quick look over.

"Where's Vivian?" Blane asked, thankfully diverting the Senator's attention from me before he could ask any questions.

"Oh, she's over there with some other hens wanting to talk her ear off about some charity or another," answered Keaston with a wave of his hand. "You're sitting with me tonight, aren't you, Blane?"

"I don't think so, sir," Blane said regretfully. "I'm sure they have me seated elsewhere."

"Well, we'll fix that," Keaston replied, gesturing to a woman hovering nearby. She quickly came forward and he said something to her too low for me to overhear. With a nod, she left to do his bidding.

"That's not necessary, sir," Blane protested, but Keaston waved his hand dismissively.

"You may not be of the right party," Keaston said with a mock glare of disapproval, then he smiled, "but you're family."

Shock went through me and I couldn't stop a quick look at Blane. He glanced uncomfortably at me before returning his attention to Keaston.

Family? Blane was related to one of the most powerful men in the US Senate? That would have been helpful to know. If I'd felt out of place before, now I felt like a downright intruder.

"I have to do the rounds, Blane," the Senator said, "I'm sure you understand."

Blane nodded. "Of course."

"But I'll see you at dinner." Keaston looked my way and gave a short nod of dismissal. "My dear."

I automatically smiled and watched as Keaston ambled toward another knot of people, all of whom turned his way with fawning smiles. George and Sarah had drifted off as well, leaving Blane and me with a blessed moment alone in the midst of the crowd. I looked up at Blane.

"Family?" I asked, hoping that perhaps the Senator hadn't meant in the blood-relation sense.

"Great-Uncle," he answered shortly, dashing those hopes.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I asked, trying to keep the dismay from my voice.

"I didn't think it mattered," he replied quietly, taking my hand. "Does it?"

I didn't know what to say. I felt like the proverbial fish out of water and my mouth moved soundlessly, as if I were gasping for air. How was I to explain to Blane, who no doubt had never felt out of place in his life, how this news had impacted me? I was saved from replying as yet another couple came by to greet Blane.

I had underestimated the number of people who knew Blane and wanted to ingratiate themselves with him. I lost track of the names almost immediately after I was introduced, but I marveled at how Blane was never at a loss for a name or a smile. I watched with admiration as he wove his magic around those with whom he spoke, seeing in their eyes how he captivated them as he made each person feel special, sending them on their way with the certainty that they were important to him. It was amazing and I was proud of his skills, which seemed to come very naturally indeed. My smile grew less forced as it became clear that no one had any interest in me. They barely paid me any attention at all. I was glad to melt into the background at Blane's side.

Blane and I made our way around the room and I was feeling more relaxed since it seemed nothing was really expected of me except to smile and nod. Blane's hand was reassuring on the small of my back as we turned toward another couple. I stiffened immediately.

It was Kandi-with-an-i, the woman Blane had dated before me. She'd been none too happy about losing Blane and had expressed her contempt for me on Halloween, showing up at The Drop dressed in a fairy costume that I'm sure cost more than I had made that night. She was beautiful and had made no bones about the fact that she felt Blane was slumming it by being with me. Tall with long, straight blonde hair, tonight she wore a red dress that hugged her body. She was absolutely stunning and I hated her.

"Nice to see you again, Blane," she greeted him, ignoring me completely.

"Kandi," Blane replied evenly, "I didn't realize you'd be here this evening."

"I'm here with my father," she said with a smug smile, tipping her head towards a knot of people standing a short ways away. "You know what good friends he and the Senator are."

Blane gave a curt nod. "Of course," he said. "How are you?"

She moved closer to him, insinuating herself between us so Blane's hand was forced to release mine.

"I'm very good, as I'm sure you remember," I heard her say huskily. Her breasts brushed suggestively against his arm as she leaned into him.

My eyes narrowed. The tramp. I may not have grown up with her wealth and privilege, but at least I had manners, though I was having a hard time remembering them at the moment. I very much wanted to grab a hunk of her pretty blonde hair and yank. Hard.

"Call me," I heard her whisper in his ear before she walked away, her hand trailing lightly across his chest.

"Sorry about that," Blane said quietly, a grimace passing quickly over his face when he looked at me. I made my lips stretch into a tight smile.

"She's very pretty," I said diplomatically. I struggled not to sound jealous or bitchy. I didn't think I succeeded.

"Most people would say so," he replied. He slid his arm around my back and tugged my stiff body closer to him, overcoming my resistance with ease. "But she's not my type. Not anymore."

"Oh, really?" I said sarcastically, trying to ignore the effect of the heat from his body warmed me through the thin material of my dress. "What's your type?"

Blane bent and leaned close to me. "I prefer a woman with long hair the color of the sunset and eyes as clear blue as a twilight sky. She's got an Irish temper and likes her bourbon. Her guilty pleasure is a certain well-known pop princess and she has a passion for rocky road ice cream. Her skin is the color of peaches bathed in cream and is as smooth as silk."

His lips brushed against my ear as he spoke, sending a thrill of heat through me. I looked up at him and couldn't hold on to my irritation at Kandi. I melted into him, as he had no doubt known I would. The corners of his lips were tipped up ever so slightly, as if he were thinking about smiling. I was mesmerized by the stormy gray of his eyes, flecks of green sparkling from their depths.

"And if I were to tell her about the perfection of her breasts," he continued, the huskiness of his voice making me shiver, "that her body was made to fit mine, or how the noises she makes when I make love to her drive me crazy, she'd blush nearly to her toes."

My mouth dropped open at his audacity and my face flushed, as he'd predicted. Regardless, I couldn't help smiling and he let out a small huff of laughter, the tension Kandi had created dissipating.

"Let's find our seats," he said, his eyes twinkling. "I'm starving."

He took my hand and led me to a table near the front. It seemed Senator Keaston was as good as his word because our seats were with him and a woman I assumed was his wife. She looked to be only in her fifties, though I thought looks might be deceiving. To my dismay, I saw that Kandi and a man who was obviously her father were also seated at the table. George and Sarah were there, too. One other couple we'd met that evening rounded out the seats, the man a member of the Senator's staff, though I couldn't remember their names.

"Blane!" the older woman happily exclaimed. She went to rise from her chair but Blane quickly stepped to her side, forestalling her and pressing a chaste kiss to her cheek.

"Good evening, Vivian," Blane said warmly. "Don't get up."

"Robert said you were here tonight," she said as Blane held out my chair for me to sit down. "Thank you for coming to support him."

"I wouldn't have missed it," Blane replied, sliding into the seat on my left. He'd seated me beside Vivian. I wanted to grumble about Kandi's place at his left side, but that would be catty. I chose to be the better person. I wouldn't even throw food at her. Probably.

Blane introduced me to the very kind and gracious Vivian; I liked her immediately. I could tell that Blane was very fond of her as well. Tall and slight of build, she had a powerful presence about her.

Dinner was served and I kept quiet as I ate, listening to the small talk at the table and trying to make sure I didn't drip anything on my dress. Kandi chatted easily with the Senator and Vivian as well as the others. I tried not to feel like a kid at the grownups table.

I observed with growing dismay as Kandi drew Blane into conversation with George and Sarah, frequently laying her hand possessively on his arm. Blane couldn't very well be rude to her in front of everyone, but I was disgruntled to see how friendly he was with her as they joined in the laughter around the table.

I ate another tiny bite of some kind of fish they'd served, my appetite now gone, and pushed my food around on my plate in glum silence.

I think Vivian must have felt sorry for me being left out of the conversation because she turned to me and asked, "Kathleen, isn't it?"

I swallowed the lump of fish, quickly passing my napkin over my mouth as I nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

"Please, call me Vivian," she said with a smile. "And what do you do for a living, Kathleen?"

I shifted uneasily, but knew I couldn't lie to her. Thankfully, everyone else was still involved in their own conversations so no one was really paying attention to us. "I work for Blane as a runner," I said, "and I tend bar at night."

Vivian's eyes widened a fraction in surprise before she masked it. "I see," she said kindly. "And are you from Indianapolis?" Beyond her, I saw the Senator's eyes flick in our direction for a fraction of a second and I knew that while he was talking to his staff person next to him, he was also listening to us.

"No, ma'am," I answered, unable to shake my mother's lessons in manners enough to call Vivian by her given name – respect for my elders had been drilled into me. "I'm from Rushville, Indiana. My parents grew up there."

"And what do they do?"

"My dad was a policeman," I said. "My mother stayed home. They both passed some years ago."

"I'm so sorry," Vivian said sympathetically and to my surprise, her hand reached out to grasp mine. "Do you have other family? A brother or sister, perhaps?"

I shook my head regretfully. "I have an uncle and cousin, but we don't keep in touch." Truthfully, I couldn't even say where my dad's brother and son lived anymore. It had been years since I'd heard from them, since Mom's funeral, actually.

Vivian's grip on my hand tightened, her face creasing in a frown. "You're awfully young to be on your own," she remarked thoughtfully.

My smile was tight. I was unsure how to respond. I didn't want her pity, but neither did I want to appear rude. "I do all right," I said finally, slipping my hand from hers.

"So, Blane," the Senator said loudly, bringing everyone's attention to him, "are you going to tell us how the Waters trial is going? A lot of important people in Washington are watching to see how this turns out. You win this case, it'll be the biggest moment of your career. So far." He nodded knowingly. Everyone's eyes turned to Blane, waiting for his answer, their interest in this topic obvious.

I looked at Blane in confusion. What Waters trial? Biggest moment of his career? What was Keaston talking about?

Blane didn't usually say much about his work. I didn't know why – if he just didn't want to talk work after hours, or if he didn't think I was interested. While you would think I'd know everything going on at the firm since I worked there regardless of what Blane told me, I was frequently out of the office making runs. When I wasn't out of the office, I was still separated from Blane by four floors.

"It's going well," Blane replied, his face a mask of polite indifference.

Senator Keaston chuckled. "From what I hear, it's going better than that, son," he said. "You win this case, your name will be on everyone's short list."

Short list? Short list for what? My confusion increased. I tried to catch Blane's eye but he just shook his head, not looking at me.

"I don't know about that," he said. "The prosecution is pretty tough. We'll just have to see how it turns out. It'll be in the jury's hands."

"You'll beat James," Kandi said confidently. "He's no match for you in front of a jury and everyone knows it."

"James?" I interrupted incredulously. "James Gage?" This time Blane did turn to look at me, his expression unreadable.

"Yes, dear." Kandi was the one to answer my question. Her voice dripped condescension. "You do know name of the District Attorney, don't you?"

My face heated at her disdain but I refused to look at her, my gaze still locked with Blane's. I couldn't believe he hadn't told me.

James Gage was the son of the former senior partner at Blane's firm of Gage, Kirk and Trent, now just Kirk and Trent. His father, William Gage, had been indicted for fraud and accessory to murder. William had been behind the recent scandal that involved a local computer company, TecSol, rigging online election voting. He'd also been responsible for the death of my friend Sheila and her boyfriend Mark, who had worked for TecSol. James had been involved as well but had gotten off scot-free, even winning the election for Indianapolis District Attorney.

James and I had gone on one date - a date he felt gave him license to be jealous of Blane's attention to me. Remember I said I'd learned the hard way about checking the peephole in my door before opening it? That was because of James, who had hit me and tried to choke me when he found out Blane and I were together. Only the quick actions of CJ, my neighbor at the time and someone I'd thought a friend, had saved me from even graver injury.

James had always been jealous of Blane, waging a competition to which Blane had been oblivious. I was alarmed at the fact that they were going up against each other in what was apparently a very important trial, and hurt that Blane had said nothing about this to me. James was dangerous and volatile, not to be trusted. Would he do something stupid if he lost a big case to Blane?

My dismay must have shown on my face, because Blane's jaw clenched tightly before he looked away. I realized everyone was watching us now and I focused on my plate to keep from

meeting their eyes. I was embarrassed – everyone had known about something quite vital in Blane's life except me, his girlfriend.

"We missed you and Kade at Thanksgiving," Vivian said quietly to Blane, thankfully changing the topic of conversation and taking the attention away from me. It was the kind of comment mothers were adept at making. It demanded an explanation, even if she hadn't asked for one.

"We celebrated here," Blane replied.

I was surprised Vivian knew about Kade. Kade was Blane's illegitimate half-brother. Their father had been unfaithful to Blane's mother though he'd refused to claim Kade as his when Kade's mother had died.

Kade went by Kade Dennon and, as far as I knew, very few people knew of the relation. Kade was a former FBI agent, specializing in cyber crimes. I hadn't known any of that when I'd first met him, though, and had known only that he was an assassin for hire. Kade had quit the FBI a few years ago and gone freelance, something Blane abided but didn't necessarily condone. Kade was as dark as Blane was light, with black hair and piercing blue eyes, though he had the same charisma and aura of danger as that of his older brother.

Blane wasn't quite being truthful with Vivian – we had celebrated here in Indy, but Kade had not joined us for the festivities. He'd disappeared several weeks ago, right after the election. Blane said Kade stayed in touch with him, but I hadn't asked where he was and Blane hadn't offered the information.

Kade was an enigma to me – we'd begun by hating each other, but he'd saved my life when I'd been moments away from being raped and killed. I'd never breathed a word about it to Blane and to my knowledge, Kade hadn't either. The shame and humiliation of the incident still sometimes haunted my nightmares and the last thing I wanted was to see pity in Blane's eyes when he looked at me.

Kade had also been paid twenty thousand dollars to kill me, then had turned around and given that money to me. It seemed Kade and I had called an uneasy truce, though I'd wondered if my being around was what had kept him from Blane at Thanksgiving. Kade was utterly loyal and devoted to Blane and I felt a pang of remorse that his dislike of me might have been the reason he'd stayed away from his brother for the holiday.

Blane deftly turned the conversation to other topics and I kept my mouth shut, regretting my earlier outburst that displayed my woeful lack of knowledge about Blane's life. Thankfully, dinner was over soon and people began drifting to the dance floor, the strains of a slow jazz number coming from the five-person band. The smoky sound of the saxophone drifted through the room as I contemplated what Senator Keaston had said.

"Dance with me," Blane said quietly, resting his arm on the back of my chair and leaning over me. He caught a loose tendril of my hair and gently wrapped it around his finger. Our eyes met. I nodded and he rose, helping me from my chair and taking my elbow to lead me to the dance floor. I felt Kandi's glare burning a hole in my back as we walked away.

Blane took me in his arms and I felt my body stiffen, holding myself slightly apart from him; I was angry after all. I stared eye-level at his shirt, crisp and white as it peeked out from beneath his jacket and said nothing, still reeling from the realization of what he'd kept from me.

After a few minutes of dancing in tense silence, I finally spoke. "Why didn't you tell me?" I asked, unable to hold the question in any longer.

He sighed a little. "I know how you feel about James," he answered quietly, "and this doesn't involve you. He's my problem now."

My temper flared and I glared up at him. "So my role in this relationship is to look pretty, keep quiet and warm your bed, but not really be a part of your life?"

His hands dug into my hips. "I never said that," he replied evenly, his eyes narrowing. That usually signified a warning that his anger was close to the surface, but I ignored it.

"It's what you don't say that speaks volumes, Blane," I bit out, my heart hurting at the truth of it. "What did Keaston mean by short list? What short list will you be on if you win this case?"

I didn't think he was going to answer me, his jaw locked tight, but finally he spoke.

"Governor," he said curtly. "He was talking about the short list for Governor."

My jaw dropped open in shock and my feet stumbled. Only Blane's tight grip kept me from falling.

"Of Indiana?" I squeaked, then wanted to kick myself for the stupid question. Blane gave a curt nod, watching me.

"Excuse me," I said, stepping out of his grip. I had to get away for a few minutes, regain my control and equilibrium. I didn't want to break down into tears in the middle of the dance floor. He let me go, watching as I walked away.

I found a ladies' room and hid in a stall, taking deep breaths.

I had hoped Blane felt more for me. I wanted to be more than another transient woman in his life and his bed. I'd known Blane was a player, had seen him discard women without a backward glance. Why I thought I'd be different, I had no idea. My naiveté was my own undoing. I wanted to be a real part of his life, but the fact that he hadn't told me about the case, that he had thoughts of running for Governor, made my wants seem laughable. Sometimes my outlook on life was too hopeful for my own good.

I realized I couldn't hide in the bathroom all night and surveyed myself in the mirror, tucking a few strands of hair that had gotten loose back up into some pins. The light caught on my necklace and I touched it, remembering the look in Blane's eyes when he'd given it to me mere hours ago. A hint of doubt crept into my mind. Maybe I was wrong; maybe Blane had a good reason for not telling me about all this. It wasn't like I'd given him a chance to talk before rushing off.

I resolved to give him a chance to explain, to tell me why he'd kept this news from me, and that resolve lasted until I walked into the ballroom and saw him dancing with Kandi in his arms. Well.

Turning on my heel, I walked out and didn't stop walking until I hit the street. It was cold and I shivered, belatedly realizing I'd left my coat inside. I couldn't have retrieved it anyway; Blane still had the ticket.

It was late and the streets were nearly empty, the sidewalk even more so. I had my purse with me but only had a few dollars, not enough for a cab. There was a bus stop a few blocks away so I trudged onward. I'd catch the bus towards my apartment and walk the last few blocks from where it dropped off. It was nearly eleven and I knew it picked up every hour.

I walked morosely, watching the sidewalk so I didn't trip. I was regretting the shoes now, but it wasn't as if I'd known I'd be hiking in them by the end of the evening. I sniffed, telling myself it was the cold making my nose run. My toes were numb and I was freezing. I wrapped my arms around myself to try to stay warm. The wind went right through the satin fabric of my dress and before long I was shivering. I cursed the cold, my choice of attire tonight, the fact that I'd agreed to come with Blane in the first place, and Kandi-with-an-i on general principal. It was quite clear she had more of a history with Blane than I'd realized or that he'd bothered to tell me.

I turned down a side street and saw the bus stop a block away. Finally. I picked up the pace a little but was brought to a jarring halt by the voice echoing out of the darkness.

"Hey, pretty girl, give me your cash and I won't mess up your fancy dress."

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"Give me the necklace or you'll regret it," the mugger said, jerking me back to the imminently dangerous here and now.

"My husband's is on his way," I lied, grasping for straws.

He laughed cruelly. "You're a shitty liar," he scoffed. His hand closed around the pendant and yanked, the chain of the necklace biting painfully into my skin before it broke. He stepped back, admiring his prize.

"No!" I leapt forward and grabbed his fist, clenched tightly around the pendant. I had to get it back. Surprised, he turned sharply to avoid my lunge, the movement causing the knife to bite into the skin of my arm. I ignored the sharp burn. "Give that back!"

"Get off me," he growled, shoving me away. Furious, I came back at him again, grabbing the hand holding my necklace and sinking my teeth into it. He yelled in pain. Unable to get any leverage between us, his arm came down hard and he slammed a fist into my back. I was forced to release him, the painful blow knocking the wind from my lungs and leaving me unprepared for his punch to my stomach. I doubled over, the pain excruciating.

His hand closed around my neck and he pulled me upright before carelessly tossing me away. I hit the ground hard, my hands taking the brunt of it, but still smacked the side of my face on the ground. I couldn't move. My face ached and my thigh burned from where it had scraped the asphalt, and I struggled to breathe properly through the pain in my back and stomach.

"Fucking bitch," I heard him mutter angrily. His shoe scraped behind me and I made myself turn over, not wanting to have my back to him. I saw the kick coming too late to protect myself and I cried out when it connected. I curled into myself, trying to become as small a target as possible. He hauled back to kick me again.

A shape came hurtling out of the darkness, tackling the mugger to the ground. I watched them grapple. The knife glinted briefly in the light before it was kicked out of the thug's hand. The sound of grunts and flesh hitting bone filled the alley.

I struggled to sit up, sucking in a breath at the aches and pains, and saw my rescuer had gotten the upper hand as he straddled the attacker. His fists continued to pummel the man, though I thought for sure he was unconscious by now, as still as he was.

I stumbled to my feet, tottering forward carefully on my ill-used heels. He still wasn't stopping, his blows landing punishingly hard as I winced, afraid he was going to kill him. I moved as close as I dared.

"Stop," I implored, grabbing onto one of the man's arms with both my hands. "You're going to kill him!"

The man easily jerked his arm out of my grip, turning his head sharply to face me, and I froze in shock.

It was Blane. I didn't know where he'd come from or how he'd found me, but he had. His face was a mask of rage as he took in my appearance and I took a shaky step back, afraid of what he might do. I watched as the anger drained away from his face, leaving it unreadable. He spared one last glance for the unconscious mugger and I heard him snarl, "Fucking piece of shit," then he stood and was at my side in an instant.

"Are you all right?" he asked, turning me toward the light. He sucked in a breath and I knew I must look awful, blood trailing in a thin stream down my arm from the shallow cut the knife had made. I could feel my cheek swelling from where I'd hit the concrete. Blane's finger gently brushed my cheekbone, coming away with blood. Quickly removing his jacket, he placed it around my shoulders, pulling it tightly closed. Shock started to set in and I began to shake.

"Shh, Kat," he whispered, pulling me into his arms. "You're safe now. I've got you."

Tears spilled over my eyes as I leaned into him and basked in the comfort he offered, deeply breathing in cologne mixed with the musky scent of his sweat.

"Thank you," I mumbled against his shirt. In response, he pressed his lips lightly to my forehead.

"Let's get you someplace warm," he said, turning us toward the mouth of the alley.

"Wait!" I scrambled out of Blane's arms and ran back to the mugger. Prying open his fist, I grabbed my necklace. The man groaned but didn't open his eyes. I was glad Blane hadn't killed him, though I wondered briefly what would have happened if I hadn't stopped him.

As I returned back to Blane, he looked questioningly at me. I shrugged. "He took the necklace you gave me."

Blane didn't move. "You fought him over the necklace?" he asked, his tone chilling.

Grimacing, I muttered, "You gave it to me. I didn't want him to have it."

"Christ, Kat!" Blane exploded. "I would have bought you another one! It wasn't worth your life! He could have killed you!"

I bit my lip, knowing he was right but not wanting to admit it. I had acted irrationally, but hadn't been able to stop myself. I'd just been overcome with anger that he would dare to take something precious to me. It wasn't even that it was an expensive necklace, it was just that Blane had given it to me. I said none of this, just looked up at Blane and hoped he would drop it. Huffing with exasperation, he pulled me to him, wrapping me tightly in his arms and resting his chin on top of my head.

"Never a dull moment, Kat," he said with a sigh.

We emerged from the mouth of the alley to find two police cars pulling up, sirens blaring. A blinding light flashed at me and I realized there a few photographers there, too. A quick glance at Blane showed me that he looked like he'd obviously been in a fight. His hair was tousled and a bit of blood marred the corner of his mouth. His once white shirt was stained and torn, the cuffs open from where the buttons had come off. I saw his knuckles were raw, scraped and bloody from the fight. The veneer of gentility he'd worn earlier was gone. He looked altogether masculine and dangerous.

A cop stepped up to us, blocking the photographers. "Mr. Kirk, is that you?" he asked. At Blane's nod, he turned his attention to me. "You must be the victim. Someone heard you scream and called 911. You all right, miss?"

"I'm fine," I said, my voice a little too weak for my liking. The cop nodded and stepped past us toward the prone and now groaning mugger lying on the ground.

"Hey! That's Blane Kirk!" The words came from one of the photographers and seemed to ignite a frenzy of flashbulbs.

Turning me gently towards his chest, Blane hid my face from the cameras as we moved forward through the photographers and small crowd of onlookers that had gathered. Flashes continued to go off and I didn't know how Blane wasn't blinded by them. When we reached the street, he let out a piercing whistle and a passing taxi pulled to a stop.

He opened the door, eased me inside, and carefully shut it. Leaning into the open driver's window, he spoke to the cabbie.

"Take her home and help her inside." I saw him give the driver several bills before he turned to speak to me.

"I'll handle the cops and press," he said. "I'll come by when I'm through."

I nodded silently, grateful to be going home. The adrenaline was wearing off and my body was forcefully reminding me of the abuse I'd just endured.

With one last searching gaze, Blane backed away. The driver pulled into the street and I turned in my seat to look out the back window. Blane stood watching until I was out of sight. Flashbulbs brightly illuminated his torn white shirt and body every few seconds, the silence of the scene from the confines of the cab making it appear eerie as they bathed Blane with their cold glare.

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