

## Chapter 1

Saint Louis narcotics detective Jordan Delany sat quietly beside Tyler McGee, the only man who'd ever been able to bring her to a mind-bending orgasm with little more than a steamy look. And beginning today she had two whole weeks off to do nothing but sip margaritas and enjoy said man.

Less than two hours ago, she'd received a medal of commendation for a successful finish to her latest case. Another plus—her bank account had beefed up nicely while she'd been undercover.

As vacations went, she'd planned on this one being stellar.

But in true Jordan Delany form, two minutes before starting the vacation of a lifetime, a demon from her past strolled into her office and kicked her squarely in the teeth. Funny how one event in her childhood kept defining and re-defining her adult life.

An FBI bigwig had offered innocent congratulations for her commendation but then proceeded into a startling string of questions about a man named Jack Delany. Special Agent Bellows had remembered working with Special Agent Jack Delany. Jack had been Jordan's father's name, and her mind was still attempting to make sense of the strange coincidence.

Jordan's father had been a drug dealer, not a cop. Certainly not a Fed.

"Hey." Ty's voice reverberated through the cab of his truck and shook her back to the here and now. He reached for the radio and turned down the music. "Maybe we should just go home. Put vacation on hold. We can call Bahan, put our heads together, and figure out if the Jack Delany that Bellows mentioned could have possibly been your dad."

Still in shock, she shook her head. "It's just not possible, doesn't make sense. I was there the day the cops talked to my uncle. I heard them talking about missing drugs and missing

money. They said my dad made a horrible decision and it cost him his life. I *heard* it, Ty. I swear I did.”

He signaled, pulled the truck off the road and onto a gravel shoulder. He shifted into park and tugged her into his arms, then rubbed his hands up and down her back. “I believe you,” he whispered against her ear. “But you were only ten. You could have easily misunderstood.” He shifted back and cupped her face. “It’s a pretty big coincidence, don’t you think? Bellows working undercover with an FBI agent that had the same name as your dad? Bellows remembering Jack Delany’s family being murdered on a holiday weekend, just like your family? Come on, Jordan. I’m a huge skeptic, but even I can’t ignore that kind of information.”

Her throat tightened and burned. Stinging tears ran down her cheeks. “I’ve spent the better part of my life hating my dad because I thought he was a drug dealer. Jesus, *God*,” she sobbed. “Please don’t tell me I’m that stupid. What kind of dumbass cop makes a mistake like that about her own father?”

Ty tightened his grip and forced her gaze to his. “The kind that walked through hell as a child and was strong enough to come out on the other side. There’s a lot more to this than we know right now. You are not going to beat yourself up about this, not before we learn what really happened.”

She pulled Ty closer and buried her face in the crook of his neck. Most of her life had been spent avoiding any real connection with other people. But she couldn’t deny that being in his arms, having him understand like no one else ever would, might have been the only thing holding her together.

Finally, she nodded. “Okay, okay. You’re right. I’ll have to get answers one way or another.” She rested a hand on his chest. “But I don’t have to do it in the next two weeks. Bahan is my best FBI contact; he’ll know how to dig deeper into their system than I ever could. I’ll call

him, see what he can come up with.” She took a shaky breath. “Beyond that, the rest will have to wait.”

Ty looked into her eyes with just a bit too much knowledge of all her dark corners. “It’s not a big deal if we push back our vacation and spend a few days—”

She pressed a finger to his lips. “It’s a very big deal to me. I’ve put my life on hold for twenty years second-guessing what I could have done differently to save my family. And you know what? No matter what I do, no matter what I figure out, it’s never going to bring them back.”

Ty nodded, but she had no trouble reading the expression on his face. They both knew that even if she didn’t reach out to Bahan right away, she’d be worrying the issue in her mind for the full fourteen days.

Ty worked as a deputy and senior investigator in the small town of Longdale, nearly two hours outside of Saint Louis. At first glance, he radiated the easygoing charm of a good ol’ boy from Small Town, Missouri. But in reality his skills and intuition were as lethal as those of any cop Jordan had ever worked with. He missed nothing, particularly when it came to her.

She brushed her lips against his and kissed him softly. “I want this time with you. I *need* this time with you, and I don’t want what happened today to affect one second of our vacation.”

Ty nodded. “Vacation it is, then.” He tucked her hair back behind her ear and leaned close. “Make no mistake, I will definitely be giving you everything you need while we’re gone.”

He whispered the words devilishly against her neck and then closed his teeth gently on her earlobe, a move he knew robbed her of the capacity for rational thought. They’d only been in a relationship for a few months, but in those months she’d felt more alive than in the previous twenty years put together.

His tongue, seriously gifted in so many ways, worked in tandem with his breath to reduce her to nothing more than a sex junkie.

To hell with it. Her rough exhale escaped with a soft moan, and she slid her hands into the dark brown waves of his hair. The style—just a tad too long and unruly—pushed acceptable limits for a uniformed cop, but she loved the way her fingers could get lost in it during a scorching round of sex. They'd never had sex in his truck. Now felt like a perfect time to risk a public indecency violation.

Sucking his bottom lip between her teeth, she dove head first into a kiss designed with the sole purpose of rocking his world. *This* was exactly what she needed. Mindless, uncontrolled lust. Shocked when he suddenly pulled away, she arched a brow at him.

“Okay, then. Just close your eyes and sit back and relax for a while.” He reached behind the seat and pulled out a silky scarf. “I want the rest of the trip to be a surprise.”

For the first time since they'd left her precinct, she had the presence of mind to look out the windows of the truck and orient herself. They were well outside the city on a curvy two-lane highway and heading away from the airport.

“Where exactly are you taking me?” She glanced at the scrap of material in his hands. “I'm not terribly encouraged if you need to blindfold me to get me there.”

She let irritation battle back the heated memory of the last time he'd tied the silky scarf around her eyes. “You have a serious blindfold fetish, you know that, right?”

Her words fell upon deaf ears. The last sight she had before he knotted the soft material behind her head was his mischievous gray eyes and the predatory grin that meant trouble. Heat flared inside her as she remembered what he'd done to her the last time he'd used the blindfold.

He slipped her sunglasses back on over the scarf and tapped her nose with a finger.

“There, that's better. We wouldn't want anyone to think you're being kidnapped, now would we? Although that'd be a fantasy well worth exploring.”

She felt the truck shift into gear and begin to move.

“With your sight gone, your other senses are heightened, keeping you wondering what’s coming next,” he teased. “I think I proved that the other night.”

She sucked in a sharp breath at the memory. Oh boy, had he!

He chuckled—actually had the nerve to chuckle—at her reaction.

Even with her eyes covered, she knew the cocky grin that would be spread all over his face. Not to be outdone, she stretched her arm across the seat and settled her hand between his legs, rubbing and massaging him lightly. It took approximately two seconds before he responded.

She grinned when she heard his deep exhale. Satisfied that she’d gotten a hint of payback, she said, “Well, I don’t think we have nearly enough room to repeat that maneuver in your truck, but I’m willing to give it a try.”

“Keep it up, woman, and I’ll probably kill us both. Sex is not the reason you’re blindfolded.”

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The blindfold was purely for Ty’s own self-preservation. If Jordan could see, it’d take her no time at all to draw her weapon and aim it at his head when he pulled in front of the broken-down old ranch house in lieu of a tropical beach. He took a deep breath to slow his thundering heart rate.

Today Ty planned to convince Jordan to move in with him.

Her hints about wanting a beach and some water to play in hadn’t exactly been subtle. And a beach would have been awfully easy to deliver. But he’d come up with the bright idea to take her to the middle of nowhere and show her a house with no heat and weedy overgrown pastures. He peeked over at her.

*What the fuck was I thinking? She’s going to rip my head off!*

Jordan exhaled a giant impatient sigh and crossed her arms. “We’re not heading to the airport, are we?”

“Not exactly.” He swallowed hard. Shit, her instincts were sharp enough to split hairs. What made him think a blindfold would fool her?

“The train station?” she asked.

“Nope.” He sighed, debating whether to keep driving toward the lackluster property or turn around. A couple of weeks ago, the plan had seemed like a romantic gesture, a step toward commitment without scaring her off with a marriage proposal. Now his strategy felt foolish.

She sighed again. Heavily. “Hopping on a bus?”

“Un-uh.”

“What the hell, cowboy? I happen to know there are no tropical beaches in Missouri.”

Nerves had eaten away most of his composure. “Could you maybe just be quiet for, like, five more minutes?”

He turned on the gravel road that led to the gated entrance of the old Henderson estate, a onetime horse ranch. His heart was thundering so hard he could feel the wall of his chest vibrate. The woman he loved had been handed double doses of intelligence, bravery, and compassion, but she’d missed the patience line altogether.

He put the truck in park. “I’m hopping out for just a second.”

She reached up to pull the scarf from her eyes. Ty stopped her.

“Listen, I promise to have you at a beach by tomorrow night if that’s what you want. I have one surprise that I need you to see first. If you trust me, please keep your eyes covered for another minute or two.”

He brushed a kiss against her lips, and thankfully she nodded.

Ty hopped out of the truck and opened the old, rusted gate, then got back in with Jordan. He took his time passing through the narrow opening between the posts, then pulled to a stop in front of the house and killed the engine. He tugged Jordan out of the cab and turned her so that she faced the house head on.

“Take it all in before you react,” he said. “Use a little imagination—see what it could be, not what it is. And promise me you’ll let me explain what I want to do before you decide if you like it or not.” He squeezed her hands. “It needs some TLC, but—”

“God *damn* it, McGee. You’re scaring the crap out of me.” She pulled the sunglasses and scarf away from her face and blinked to adjust her sight in the late afternoon light. Her gaze traveled all over the huge old house. Top to bottom. Left to right. She sucked in a sharp breath, and her mouth fell open.

The place had been empty for years and was in need of a pretty serious overhaul, but the land surrounding it was amazing. He could so clearly visualize how it had looked when he was a kid. But Jordan didn’t have those memories, so he tried to see it as it was today and through her eyes.

Its weathered wood had flaked bare, leaving only the smallest traces of white paint. Green shutters hung from most of the windows. Some were crooked. An enormous covered porch wrapped around the front and sides. That was what Jordan was focused on. He wasn’t about to tell her that the porch was mostly rotten and couldn’t be saved.

“Oh, Ty.” She gasped. “It’s beautiful.” Then she turned a stunned gaze on him. “But why are we here?”

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Jordan wanted to fall back on old habits and make a smart remark. But honest to God, the puzzle that was Tyler McGee once again left her dumbfounded. It was the last day of February and the temperature hovered around the freezing point. Precipitation that couldn’t decide if it wanted to be rain or snow began to spit around them. For a second, she mourned the warm Caribbean temperatures she’d been dreaming about. Then she glanced between Ty and the house, and a surge of nervous heat waved through her.

The confusion didn't linger long before she began to process the facts objectively, just as if she'd been dropped into the middle of a case with no explanation. This was exactly the type of place she pictured Ty living in. He liked the city pace and the city challenges when it came to police work, but he was a country boy at heart. Given the fact it had only taken them about an hour to get here from her precinct, she suspected this was his solution to fuel both needs.

She studied Ty. He looked nervous as hell, and his breathing had quickened. The frosty puffs of breath hanging in the cold air gave him away.

*Struggling for words, aren't you, pal?*

And he damned well better come up with the right ones quick because the knot that had churned in her gut earlier had returned with a vengeance. "I don't understand. Why are we here?"

He shifted from foot to foot. Stepped away from her and then stepped toward her again.

"I hate going to bed without you. I hate waking up without you." He rubbed the back of his neck. "I love you, Jordan, and I want a place that's not yours or mine, but ours."

As explanations went, that was a pretty concise one. Her heart twisted and rolled. She sucked in a lungful of icy air, but it didn't come close to easing the shock that had seized her at Ty's words. Being with Ty, loving him, making love *to* him had breathed life into many of the dead corners of her heart. But moving in together? Full-time? That would open up not just a can but a whole barrel of worms she had no intention of dealing with this soon in their relationship.

"It's a house." Her stunned tone shattered the silence between them.

"Yes. And it was beautiful once. It can be beautiful again."

She looked around. Did a full three-sixty before turning back to the front porch. Even if she did want to move in with him—which the jury was still out on that decision—why on earth would they need all this land? "This is a big-ass house." She motioned to the other visible

building. “And that looks like a big-ass barn. I’m guessing all this sits on property roughly the size of a small country.”

“No, it’s not that big.” He chuckled. “By the way, that’s a horse stable, not a barn.”

Unable to decide if the idea appealed to her or made her physically ill, she narrowed her eyes. “Looking for a simple apartment we could rent together never crossed your mind?”

“So you’re not opposed to us living together? Officially, I mean?” His lips curled into a hesitant smile.

Damn, he was always so quick to take advantage.

“I didn’t say that. I . . . we were supposed to be on vacation. This is out of the blue, Ty. I don’t know what I’m supposed to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything yet.” Ty picked up her hands, kissed her knuckles. “I’m not expecting a yes. I was just hoping there wouldn’t be an immediate no.”

They’d practically been living together anyway. The few nights they’d spent apart had been long and sleepless. She’d become unnervingly dependent on being in Ty’s arms on a regular basis. The reality was she hadn’t had a consuming case since Titus. They hadn’t been together while the dreams were upending every part of her life. And as comfortable as she was with Ty, the thought of letting go of a sanctuary that was solely her own was terrifying.

“I’m not saying we should live together, but even if we did decide to do that, fixing up this house would be a huge task to take on. I don’t think—”

“It doesn’t have to be this place; anywhere you want to live is okay with me. I thought we’d want a place centered between my work in Longdale and your Saint Louis precinct. This property is almost dead center, but if you’d rather look for an apartment—”

“I didn’t say that.” Had she? She *had* mentioned an apartment. Christ, she was so off balance she didn’t know what she’d suggested.

What she did know was that she'd disappointed him. She could see the resignation in his eyes, in the grim line of his mouth. All too often her connection with Ty hovered in a spiritual plane she didn't care to investigate too closely. His emotions could take her breath away more effectively than her own. Right now, his enthusiasm was fading like flames under a bucket of water. Her chest ached because of it. *She* ached at being the cause of it.

She studied the house again and couldn't help wondering how it had fallen into such a state of disrepair. It needed work. Very serious work. But the diamond in the rough was unmistakably there.

Ty moved behind her and rested his hands on her shoulders. "You're right—I have no idea what I was thinking. I guess I just keep going back to when I was a kid. The Hendersons would open this place up on Halloween and have hayrides and a haunted house. Sounds stupid now—it was just a horse ranch—but to a kid it seemed like the Hendersons had created paradise."

He squeezed her shoulders again. "It's cold out here. Let's get you back in the truck."

Man, she wondered if he sat around and practiced those little speeches. Emotion sizzled through her throat and chest. Regret twisted her insides as she thought about getting back into the truck and leaving without seeing the interior. "I'm not saying it isn't pretty here."

The wind kicked up a notch. A loose shutter knocked against the house and tree limbs whistled in the cold gusts of air. A rusted weathervane topped with a racehorse and an arrow squeaked and groaned as it spun.

Huh. No man's land had its own sound.

Another blast of wind, stronger yet, whipped around them. The weathervane spun wildly, like an angry top, then came to a noisy, screeching halt pointing directly at her and Ty. She sucked in a breath. What the hell?

She wiggled out of his hold and turned to him. "Did you hear that?"

“Hear what?”

“Are you kidding me? Did you *see* that?” she asked.

Ty shook his head. “See what?”

“That arrow. It . . . it spun and then . . .”

He chuckled. “It’s called a weathervane, baby. That’s what they do. Every old farm has one.”

“I know what it’s called, cowboy. I’m not an idiot. But it . . .” *What? Talked to me? Waved its little weathervane arms and legs to get my attention? Sure, Jordan, go ahead and say that out loud. It won’t sound crazy at all.*

Ty arched a brow at her. “Is something wrong?”

“No.” The evidence was circumstantial at best. The wind blew and a weathervane spun—nothing more could be said without her sounding crazy. Learning when to keep her mouth shut was an art Jordan had honed long ago. But that weathervane had pointed at them like an angry finger. She was intrigued in spite of herself. “Can we go inside?”

Ty’s eyes opened wide. “Really? You want to go inside?”

“Well, number one, I’m freezing out here. And two, yeah, I’d like to see the inside just for fun. We’re here, so . . .” She shrugged and took his hand. “Lead the way. But unless you have a beach tucked away here on your personal Ponderosa, you owe me big.”

They stepped up on the old porch. Ty pulled out a key and easily maneuvered the locks. Apparently, this wasn’t his first time going inside.

“There are great options for maintenance-free siding that looks just as good as the old wood planks. I don’t think the porch can be saved, but we can re-create it,” he said, rattling off the house’s condition. “The roof is in pretty good shape considering the age and lack of care.”

He swung the door open, and Jordan stepped across the threshold. Ty was already moving, so she followed him. The rooms were large and impressive, with tall ceilings and big

windows. Ty was right, the place was definitely in need of TLC. But beyond the surface dirt, the old home had something magical.

Still, she kept quiet. Partly because she was stunned at the pure beauty of the place, but mostly because Ty hadn't taken a breath since they'd entered.

He tugged her through another doorway and said, "The kitchen, well, it needs a lot of work. But since you barely know the difference between a coffee maker and a dishwasher, that didn't seem an important concern."

She slugged his shoulder, but he was right again; she hated to cook. To her it wouldn't matter if the whole kitchen was missing. She scrutinized the space. A thick layer of dust and grime coated most of the house. But in the kitchen, someone had taken the time to run a rag over the countertops and sweep the floor. She wondered just how many times Ty had been to the old place—sprucing it up so he could sell her on it.

The cabinet door next to the stove sat askew, so she opened it. It was faint, but the smell of spices lingered in the wood. A memory of her mom reaching for spices in a handy cabinet just like this one rattled her. She let the door fall shut and took a deep, steadying breath. Normally flashbacks of her mom came with a sharp burst of pain. This time, surprisingly, the memories didn't sting quite as harshly.

Ty touched her arm. "What is it, baby?"

She shook her head. "Nothing."

"Something was going through that head of yours."

"Maybe." She smiled at him. "Maybe I was wondering how long you've been planning all this. Long enough to do some cleaning, I see." She drew in a spot of dust he'd missed.

Glancing down at the simple curve, he finished it off by turning it into a big heart. If that wasn't a perfect metaphor of how he'd changed her life, she didn't know what would be. Such a stupid, simple gesture. But it intensified all the emotions she'd been feeling since she'd stepped

out of the truck. She risked a glance at him. His grin reminded her of the expression on a little boy in a toy store who'd been given carte blanche to buy anything he wanted—happy, excited, thrilled.

In that moment, there was no denying how much he'd come to mean to her. She'd nosedived from a comfortably solo life into a full-blown relationship. Tyler McGee was deadly handsome. Dark, sexy hair, full lips, steely gray eyes —each of his features more striking than any one woman deserved.

But their connection went much deeper.

It was the way he cared for her that stifled her ability to breathe. The concern in his eyes that could burn her up with nothing more than a glance. And yes, this time it was his excitement about a stupid house that had stolen every ounce of oxygen from her lungs. She took a deep breath just to steady herself.

When he stepped closer and ran a knuckle down her cheek, she knew he'd been lost in the same carnal link that had wrapped around her throat.

“Stay here for a few minutes.” His voice was husky. He winked. “I have a couple things to prepare, and then I'll show you the most important room in the house.”

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