

## Chapter One

Trey's head snapped back. "Ow!"

Gabriella ignored him and pressed her hand harder against the nape of his neck, her eyebrows knit in concentration. She had him sitting backwards in a kitchen chair, shirtless and annoyed, while she poked and prodded the muscles across the top of his shoulders.

I stayed on the sofa with my *Garden and Gun* magazine, not saying a word. Through the terrace doors, a spring sunset flickered behind Atlanta's Midtown skyline, gilding the black and white apartment with golden light. This was not how I'd envisioned my Saturday night—up on the 35th floor instead of down in the vibrant scrum of Buckhead. But I guessed from Gabriella's cocktail dress and sky-scraping Louboutins, she'd had other plans too.

She was barefoot now, her lips pursed prettily. She was Trey's bodywork therapist, alternative medical adviser, and former lover. The first two were fine by me. The last one sucker punched me every time I saw her place a deceptively delicate-looking hand on his bare skin.

I licked my finger and turned another page. "Is it bad?"

Gabriella blew one red ringlet from her forehead. "I am still evaluating."

She moved her hand across the plane of his upper back to his left arm, then pushed her fingers into the muscle of his shoulder. Trey closed his eyes and curled his hands into fists. If he'd been a cursing man, obscenities would have been spilling from his lips.

He grimaced up at her. "Well?"

She slipped back into her shoes. "Not dislocated, and not torn. But you have severely strained the acromioclavicular."

"Does it require a doctor?"

"No. But you will need to treat it with care for a while." She left him in the chair and opened the leather carry case on the counter with a snap. "How did this happen?"

Trey shot a look my way. I buried my face in my magazine.

Gabriella caught the look. "I see. You will need to take more care, especially with your more...energetic activities. You're predisposed to subluxations, and every injury—"

"Increases the risk of further injury, I know."

"Then behave as if you do." She smacked two bottles on the counter. "Turmeric and boswellia capsules. Liniment and tape. Ice tonight, then moist heat."

"I know how to deal with this."

"I was explaining for Tai, since she is to be stuck with you this evening, not I, *par la grâce de Dieu*." She turned to face me. "He can't drive for twenty-four hours and must leave the holster at home for a week. Is he fully stocked on painkillers?"

"Everything from aspirin to oxycodone."

"Good. That shoulder will hurt *comme de le merde* in an hour." A rueful smile twitched at the corner of her mouth. "Of course, fifteen milligrams of oxy, and he will be utterly useless to you for the rest of the evening."

"Yeah. I figured as much."

She closed her case and slipped the strap over her shoulder. "But congratulations on the occasion nonetheless. A year together is a year together, yes?"

Across the room, Trey reached for his tee shirt, black hair mussed, blue eyes

prickly with pain and simmering anger, although I couldn't tell if his wrath was directed at me in particular or the world in general. He and I were supposed to be celebrating that year together. Had started celebrating, in fact, before our unfortunate tangle and tumble. Now he was a tornado of irritation.

Gabriella nodded toward the hallway, my cue to follow her. I did, shutting the door behind me as I walked her to the elevator. She carried herself like the ballet dancer she'd once been.

"I understand your enthusiasm, *ma chère*, but you must be more gentle with him. The hypermobility—"

"The what?"

"Hypermobility. Double-jointedness, yes? Surely you have noticed?"

My brain sifted through several very specific memories. "That explains some things."

"*Probablement*. But it also predisposes him to injuries like this, especially if he is overtraining, which from the state of his deltoids, I am guessing he is. Has the PTSD returned?"

When she said it, the acronym sounded exotic, flowing with French trills and gliding vowels. *Peety-Essdie*.

I shrugged. "It's hard to tell."

"Have you consulted your brother? He has a specialty in this, yes?"

I felt the knot tie up again. Yes, my brother Eric was a cognitive behavior psychologist, and he did indeed specialize in post-traumatic stress rehabilitation. And yes, he knew the situation exceedingly well having once served as Trey's occupational

therapist. But I was reluctant to approach him. Asking my brother's advice about Trey invited him to offer advice about me, and that never went well.

"Eric recommended some books on clinical exercise physiology, which is why Trey has upped his training regimen into the Iron Man zone."

"Is this regimen working?"

"Yes. No. Maybe." I shook my head. "I can't put my finger on it. He seems...I don't know. Like he's trying too hard."

"Have the nightmares returned?"

"No."

"Is he sleeping properly?"

"Yes."

"And sexually—"

"Working just fine, thank you."

She examined me almost as keenly as Trey did. They'd been together for over five years when I came along, three of those years before Trey's car accident, two of them after. And yet she seemed to hold not one hint of resentment against me. Quite the opposite, in fact, something I found terribly suspicious. But according to Trey, she'd saved his life. Since he wasn't a man to exaggerate, I tolerated the phone calls, the herbal remedies, and the vegan soup she brought over regularly. I remained skeptical, though. And watchful.

She tilted her head. "You are upset he is not spending as much time with you, yes?"

"I didn't say that."

"No, you did not, true enough." She crossed her arms and tapped one crimson-tipped fingernail against her shoulder. "Let me guess. His schedule is becoming tighter and more regimented. More work, more training, less time to be your significant other."

I started to argue, but realized she was right. Our now-defunct dinner was to have been our first date-date in over a month.

Her expression was one of commiseration. "You must be patient. Recovery from a traumatic brain injury is a complicated process."

"I know that, but—"

"You and your *folie du jour* have made his life interesting, yes. And that is good. But interesting can be problematic at times."

I wasn't sure I'd heard her correctly. "My what?"

"Your hazards and exploits. Trey cannot help wanting to protect you, and this sometimes involves him beyond his capabilities. You must not let your life choices interfere with his well-being."

"What exactly are you trying to tell me?"

She smiled with infuriating patience. "When I was a little girl, I visited my grandmother in Provence every spring. One day I found a butterfly struggling to free itself from its cocoon. I wanted to help it, but *mémère* told me, "Non. It is the struggle that makes it strong enough to fly."

I stared at her. "That's your contribution to the situation, a butterfly story?"

Her lips compressed in a straight line. "Then here is the story without the pretty butterfly. This isn't about you. Your wants, your needs, the way you wish things were or were not. What matters is Trey. And right now, he is stable and functioning. I am

determined to make sure that does not change."

She got in the elevator and punched the first floor button. I grabbed the door before it could close.

"Are you threatening me? Because that sounded like a threat."

Her eyes flashed. "We do not need to threaten each other because we both want the same thing."

"That thing being Trey?"

"That is not what I mean!"

"I think it's exactly what you mean."

"I meant...ugh! Now is not the time for this discussion. I am late for dinner with Jean Luc." She straightened her back, smoothed the anger from her perfect face. "If you would kindly step back, please."

I hesitated only one second, then pulled back my hand and let the doors close.