

The morning of Trey's birthday dawned brilliant and blue, glossed by a spell of soft cool weather, unusual for mid-September. We'd made no plans — Trey wasn't a cake and candles kind of man, after all — but Garrity had insisted we do *something*. So he'd dragged his decrepit charcoal grill over to Trey's, along with several slabs of porterhouse in a beat-up cooler. He'd brought beer too, a couple of six packs of dark good stuff, as thick and robust as pumpnickel. Then he'd immediately taken over the apartment, setting up on the terrace, sending me out for potatoes to bake, ordering Trey to make a salad of some kind.

"I know you have vegetables," he said. "And olive oil and vinegar. You always have that healthy crap lying around."

Which Trey did. So I called Rico, and we drove to the Publix on Peachtree Battle and bought potatoes and boiled peanuts and playing cards. And that was how, as the sun set behind Midtown on the first day of the thirty-fifth year of Trey's life, we ended up gathered around his dark mahogany dinner table, well-fed and content, with no place to go and nothing to do on a Saturday night except play cards and finish the beers.

Except for Trey, who insisted on finishing the dishes.

I watched him at the sink, sleeves rolled up, hands deep in suds. He paid close attention to every glass, every plate, occasionally holding the faceted crystal to the light, turning it this way and that. Running his thumb along the rim, listening to the squeak of wet skin on porcelain.

"Are you sure you don't need any help?" I called.

He shook his head. "I'm almost done."

Garrity chewed on his unlit cigar — smoking was strictly verboten in Trey's vicinity, but Garrity liked props, and a hand-rolled Dominican made a nice one. He was ahead, had taken the lead right out the gate and kept it, even if a table of three made for less-than-thrilling play. I kept waiting for Rico to pull his dark horse routine, but he was sanguine and low key. Rico got cutthroat about a lot of things — poetry being at the top of the list — but amateur poker was not one.

I was less mellow. "Jeez, Garrity, play or fold. You've been staring at your cards like they're in code or something."

He pulled the cigar from his mouth. "Why're you in such a hurry?"

"Because I hate dawdling."

"This isn't dawdling, it's contemplation."

"I swear, if you don't—"

"Raise," he said, and thumped a quarter forward.

Rico shook his head. "I'm out."

I turned the glare on him. "What's with you? The slightest bit of action from this guy and you crumble."

"Play the cards you're dealt, baby girl, and I'll play mine."

Garrity tapped the table. "Meet it or beat it, Tai."

I threw another quarter forward, biting my tongue. I was pretty sure Garrity had had me beat since the seven of hearts showed up at the turn. He had three of a kind sure as sunrise, topping my pair of nines, but if the final card came up a nine . . .

Garrity flipped over the card — the freaking ace of spades. I blinked at it, tried to keep some semblance of a poker face. But Garrity was too sharp for that, despite the beers. He grinned wolfishly.

“What ya gonna do?” he said.

I threw down my cards and cursed, and Garrity made kissy noises at the pile of coins as he pulled it to him. Damn. There went the last of that nice bonus I’d earned for delivering a client’s new dress grays to a strip club on Cheshire Bridge Road. He’d thought I wouldn’t show — obviously a guy who didn’t know me too well — and handed me a wad of singles rubber-banded into a hard roll. And now I’d handed most of that to Garrity.

“You had sevens, didn’t you?” I said.

He shook his head and put his cards facedown into the muck. “You get out before the showdown, you don’t get to see.”

I gathered the cards into a stack again. Garrity put his soggy cigar on the table with a quick glance at the kitchen to make sure Trey didn’t see.

He didn’t. He was busy drying now, using a soft white cotton towel to polish the last bit of water from the glasses before putting them away. Watching him clean made me happy in the same way that watching him draw diagrams or run on the treadmill. He was so purely himself when he was absorbed in a task, utterly unselfconscious and totally focused.

Garrity kicked the chair opposite him. “Why are you washing dishes on your birthday? Sit down and play.”

Rico turned and looked up at Trey. It was the first spark of interest I’d seen in him all night. “I didn’t know you played.”

“I don’t.” Trey folded the dish towel into precise quarters and placed it on the counter. “I did, however, several years ago.” He did a quick calculation. “Ten and a half approximately.”

This was news to me. The only time I ever saw Trey messing with cards was for memory work, and then it was usually a tarot deck — 78 cards versus 52, for the greater mental challenge. I tried to picture Trey seated around a smoke-wreathed table, a cigar like Garrity’s stuck in his mouth. My imagination failed me.

“Were you any good?”

Trey nodded. “I was good.”

Garrity laughed. “You were good at losing.”

Trey considered, nodded again. “Yes, I was good at that too.”

And Garrity laughed some more. “Back when we both worked patrol, some of the Red Dog guys used to have poker night once a week. One of the regulars got sick, so I invited Trey. First night he shows up, he shucked us down. Everybody was like, damn, who invited him? And then the beginner’s luck ran out, and we cleaned him out on a regular basis. After that, he was everybody’s favorite guest.”

Trey shook his head. “You never cleaned me out. I always broke even.”

And Garrity laughed some more. And Rico gathered the cards for shuffling and dealing, his turn now to choose the game.

But I was thinking, and thinking hard. Nobody else seemed to have heard what Trey had said, or if they had, they weren’t really paying attention or they would have noticed the contradiction. I didn’t think it was a contradiction though. I thought Trey had just said something very interesting.

I started stacking my pennies. “Trey? What did you mean when you said you were good at poker, and good at losing at poker too?”

“Oh. I meant that I was good at poker, but that Garrity’s friends got annoyed when I won. He told me to stop, or I wouldn’t be invited back. So I did.”

Garrity turned slowly in his chair. “You did what?”

“I stopped winning.”

Garrity was staring at him. “Are you telling me you lost on purpose just so you could keep coming?”

Trey nodded.

I laughed. This was exactly what I’d been expecting to hear. But Garrity was flummoxed.

“You threw the games? You? That’s like cheating in reverse.”

Trey looked insulted. “I did not cheat. I just didn’t press my advantage when I had it, and didn’t deflect my losses when I didn’t.”

“Just so you could stay in the game?”

“So that we both could. It seemed important to you, and your friends didn’t seem to notice. They seemed more concerned with the various alcoholic products.”

Garrity didn’t say anything. He looked startled, almost wounded. His relationship with Trey was tense and stilted and uncomfortable at times. I knew it had once been something else, something profound and reciprocal and deep, as deep as only cops who’d once been partners could understand. Trey had never had the words to articulate it, however. What it had been, what he’d lost. Garrity covered everything in a smothery fraternal blanket of gruff concern. But I knew he missed the easy camaraderie he’d once shared with the man in the kitchen. He made a point of not bringing it up. And now here was Trey, trotting out the old times like a faded photo album nobody knew he’d been keeping.

Rico smacked the deck on the table, shuffling with all the style and precision of a Vegas pro, efficient and snappy and thorough. He was in the game suddenly, on point and interested. “So how good were you?” he asked.

Trey considered. “Very good. A simple understanding of odds and ratios combined with an analysis of each player’s behavioral predictabilities will succeed fairly regularly, if practiced consistently.”

“Care to demonstrate?”

Trey looked my way, head cocked. I patted the chair next to me.

“Sit down, boyfriend. Time to put your money where your mouth is.”

An hour later, we’d all put a bunch of our own money where his mouth was.

Garrity was getting frustrated. “You were this good and you faked being that mediocre?”

Trey shook his head. “I wasn’t this good then.”

“Of course not. Your frontal lobes weren’t freaking lie detectors then.”

Trey finished stacking his winnings into neatly ordered towers, a little fortress of good fortune. “A viable theory.”

Now there was no bluffing him. We may as well have been playing with transparent cards and tiny neon billboards on our foreheads that displayed our every flare of hope or disappointment.

“We could try Go Fish?” I suggested.

“Screw Go Fish,” Garrity snapped, rising from the table. “We’re playing poker. We

just need to handicap him, that's all."

Trey shot him a baffled look. "What do you mean by handicap?" He turned to me, his expression slightly panicked. "What did he mean by handicap?"

I shrugged. Garrity stomped his way into the kitchen, muttering to himself. I heard the sound of cabinets being opened, bottles shifting. When he reappeared in the doorway, he held four glasses in one hand and my new bottle of Svedka in the other.

"It's simple chemistry," he said, taking his seat. "Nothing short-circuits the frontal lobes like eighty proof. Look it up."

He dropped the vodka to the table and put a glass in front of everyone. Including Trey. Who slid the glass right back.

"I don't drink," he said.

"Not anymore maybe." Garrity pushed it back. "But you did."

Trey pushed the glass away again. "Did. Past tense. And I didn't drink vodka."

Garrity sent the glass Trey's way yet again. "Except for that one time."

Trey's eyes narrowed. "We had an agreement."

"Had. Past tense. Back when I was married and had something to lose." Garrity stretched back in his chair, hands behind his head, elbows spread. "But I'm all single now. Capable of telling all kinds of stories, no matter how self-incriminating."

I leaned forward. "Stories like what?"

Garrity grinned. "Things you would not believe. Bachelor party debauchery. Hedonistic stuff."

We all looked at Trey. He was glaring daggers at Garrity. And then I saw the flash, the cool blue gleam, and his expression shifted into that preternatural calm that often preceded a Krav Maga takedown. He tilted his head to the side, and I thought I saw a twitch at the corner of his mouth. And then I saw his index finger start tap-tap-tapping on the tabletop.

I held my breath. I'd seen this evening going a lot of ways, but not this way. Oh no, not this one.

Trey reached for the deck. Garrity smacked a hand on top of it, then tipped a finger of vodka into each glass. "First, we even up everybody's frontal lobes."

Trey pulled his hand back. He considered. Pondered. Then he picked up the glass of vodka and held it to the light, watching the overheads catch and refract in the swirling clear liquid. He looked at Garrity, looked at me. Then he threw the whole thing back in one shot, slammed the glass on the table, and coughed and hacked for thirty seconds straight.

I patted his back. "You okay?"

He nodded, still coughing. "Get some ice, please. And some Pellegrino." Then he reached for the deck again. "Dealer's choice?"

Garrity spread his hands. "Your call, my friend."

"Seven card stud. Straight, fixed limit. Half dollar to ante." He looked around the table. "Is everyone in?"

I shoved two quarters into the center and grabbed a glass of vodka. "Oh, hell yes."

One hour later, three things had become abundantly clear. One, as handicaps went, vodka did the trick. Even with only three shots in him, Trey's lie detector was seriously incapacitated; I could have told him I was the King of Prussia and the lie would

have lain smooth and innocent on my face. Two, Trey could not hold his liquor. Combine a body fat of eight percent with the metabolism of a hummingbird, and you've got somebody with the alcohol tolerance of a toddler.

But the third thing? Neither of the first two things mattered one whit. Even with his eyes not focusing properly and his speech slurry around the sibilants, he still had the analytical skill to mop the floor with us. All three of us. And — and this was the real surprise — he was enjoying it. Immensely.

Now, with a fresh deal on the table, Garrity had the ace of spades in front of him and a swagger in his eyes. I wondered what he had in the hole — he'd barely peeked at his first and second card — but he had the manner of a man loaded for bear.

Rico kept his eyes on his cards. He was a burly blur in my vodka-saturated vision, and didn't look the least bit affected by Garrity's bluster. He noted the five of hearts he had showing and tossed in his money without a word.

Trey had the ten of clubs. Like Garrity, he'd barely glanced at the downcards, but he'd examined the rest of our hands with a predatory analysis, all of it data for the engine between his ears.

"Call," he said, putting in his bet. And then he looked at me.

I smiled. I had the dark-eyed queen of spades in front of me. Trey wouldn't have minded having her in hand. He would have been especially keen for the jack I had too, if he'd known the debonair creature was in there, which he didn't, since despite his other super-powers, he didn't have x-ray vision.

"Raise," I said.

Garrity shook his head at me. "I know what you're up to."

I smiled in what I hoped was an enigmatic manner. I didn't mind losing if I could make him sputter in the process, but he was the only one getting cranked. Rico played like a Zen master, purely above the action on the table, interested more in the dynamics of the players around it. And Trey? He played like a damn calculator — unruffled and unruffleable, but keen on the numbers and what we did with them. If I could have peeled his skull open with a can opener, it would have been alive and seething with equations in there.

The action had returned to Garrity, however. "Whatever," he said, and threw in the matching coins. Rico and Trey followed suit.

Trey picked up the deck. One smooth deal, and he'd added the ace of diamonds to me, a second ace to Garrity, a seven to Rico, and the ten of diamonds for himself.

I assessed the table. Trey now had a pair of tens in front of him, but Garrity was rocking a pair of black aces. Rico's seven made chopped salad of his hand — I could tell from the twist at the corner of his mouth — and I knew he'd fold when the bidding came round to him.

Trey sat back in his chair. The more inebriated he got, the more deliberate his movements. He was practically in slow motion now, but I knew his brain was still clipping along. The restless tapping of the index finger told me so.

When the bet came to Rico, he shook his head and shoved his cards forward, flipping over his downcards in the process — he'd had the king of diamonds in the hole, plus the nine of clubs.

Garrity made an exasperated noise. "Damn, Rico, watch your discards!"

"My bad," Rico said, turning the cards facedown again. He tipped some of Trey's

fizzy water into his vodka, then grabbed a handful of ice and chucked that in with a tinkle. I knew he'd shown his cards on purpose, like flicking a spark into a barrel of gunpowder.

Garrity knew it too. He glared at Rico and jabbed a finger in Trey's direction. "You know why he picked this game? He picked it because seven card stud is math geek heaven. And every card you let him see is one more nail in everybody else's coffin."

Trey didn't look up for Garrity's diatribe; instead he blinked lazily and surveyed the table. He reminded me of a half-asleep wolf — a little dazed, a little drowsy, a whole lot dangerous.

When the bet came back to me, I smiled prettily and pushed my coins forward. "Raise."

Garrity swore, then flung his coins in the pot. "Sweet Jesus, you are trying my last nerve, you hear me?"

"You know what they say — if you don't like the heat, get out the kitchen."

And so it went. Garrity carping at me, me carping back, the two of us raucous as crows, enjoying every second of it. Rico watched the action like a Buddha at the end of the table. And Trey? He was as cool and focused as a gunslinger.

He dealt the final upcards and settled back to scour the table with a good long look, his brow furrowed in concentration. It was a fascinating piece of real estate, that was for sure. Rico gave a long low whistle.

"Damn," he said, drawing the word into two syllables.

"Damn indeed," I agreed.

The queen of diamonds joined Garrity's line-up, nestling alongside the eight of clubs and the aces. The table was a smorgasbord of high cards and almost-straight, but Garrity's black pair still outranked every hand on the table, with Trey's pair of tens kissing a jack and seven, putting him second.

He slid a glance in my direction. I let him look. I possessed a hand as red as a ruby diadem — the eight and ten of hearts showing with the matching nine and jack in the hole, plus the ace of diamonds like a crown jewel. The queen of spades, sloe-eyed and treacherous, added a spot of ink to an otherwise scarlet spread.

I smiled at him. "Like what you see?"

Trey cocked his head. "Do you mean the cards?"

I felt my heart do a little step-ball-change. Was he flirting? Trey didn't flirt. But something glittered in his eyes this night — glittered like the lights of Midtown, like a distant comet coming closer, like the flash of light along the edge of a blade.

I smiled bigger. "You tell me."

He smiled back, and I almost dropped my vodka. Trey's smiles were as sudden and devastating as lightning. This one kinked the edge of his mouth, deepening the otherwise invisible dimple in his cheek, curving like a scimitar. An irresistible double-edged scimitar.

"The odds are against you," he pronounced.

"So? I like betting against the odds."

"That's not logical."

"I'm not a fan of logic, at least not at the poker table."

Garrity made a noise. "You ain't kidding."

I swiveled a glance in his direction. "Put up or shut up, mister man. The bet's to you."

He kicked in his coins without a word. Trey met it. So did I. Trey picked up the deck and dealt the final downcards.

I peeked at mine. Took another look just to be sure. Then I placed the card flat on the table, poured another shot of vodka and settled back without a word.

Garrity put his cigar back in his mouth. "You're saying a whole lot of nothing."
"Really?"

"Really. You've been playing like a tornado all night, touching down here, ripping through there. Blowing shit around. Now you're all quiet, but I ain't falling for it." He laughed around the soggy cigar. "You've got a pocketful of trash over there, and you're playing it like it was pure gold."

I scowled at him. "What do you know, Dan Garrity?"

"I know you've been running your fingers through your hair, sucking on your bottom lip. You even unbuttoned your shirt, all part of your strategy to distract and conquer." Garrity threw me a fastball look, inside and low. "But it ain't working."

Trey made a soft noise in the back of his throat, almost like a laugh. "Of course it's working. But that doesn't matter." He leaned forward, slowly, eyes still on the table. "Because no matter what seductive . . . something something, starts with 's,' what's the word?"

"Subterfuge?" I supplied.

He turned his gaze on me. "Yes. Subterfuge. No matter what subterfuge you try, it doesn't change what I'm holding." He let his eyes run down to my mouth, linger there. "It's better if you fold. That would be the smart move at this point. The sensible thing to do. Girlfriend."

I didn't drop my eyes. I kept them on him, on the blue gleam, on the dimple. Suddenly I couldn't have cared less what Garrity was holding. Another possibility, positively scintillating, held me in thrall.

I cupped my money in both hands and shoved it to the middle of the table.

"All in," I said.

Garrity gave me an exasperated look. "It's not your turn! And it's a fixed limit pot, dummy, you can't—"

Trey waved a hand at him. "It's okay. Let her."

We both stared at him. He was breaking the rules. This was unprecedented, like a snowstorm in July, a miracle on par with loaves and fishes. And then he pushed his stack of winnings into the middle, his Mount Everest of coins, and sat back.

"All in as well," he said.

I narrowed my eyes at him. "What are you up to?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean this isn't like you. Garrity's most likely got you beat. Unless you're rocking some kind of freaking once-in-a-lifetime miracle hand, boyfriend."

Trey didn't reply. He switched his gaze to Garrity. "Are you in?"

Garrity didn't hesitate. He shoved his stack of coins to the middle where they joined the rest of our wagers. It was only a pile of spare change, but it glittered like a dragon's keep against the dark wood.

"All in," he said, then flipped his cards over.

Two black pair, aces and eights, just like I'd suspected. Garrity grinned around the cigar.

“Dead Man’s hand,” he said.

Trey cocked his head, then sat back in his seat. He could not disguise his satisfaction. He practically dripped with it. He flipped over his downcards . . . and it really was a miracle, two of them in fact. The remaining jacks, arm in arm like duplicitous frat boys, joining their partner beside the ten pair.

“Jacks over tens,” he said. “Full house.”

Garrity cursed and dropped his forehead to the table. He banged it a couple of times, muttering further obscenities under his breath. Then he sat back abruptly.

“Fine. Whatever. Let’s move to the girlie-girl sitting there grinning like a briar-eating mule.” He narrowed his eyes, pointed his cigar at me. “Spread ‘em, Tai.”

I smiled at him, smiled at Trey. Trey paid close attention to my every move. His frontal lobes may have been alcohol-damped, but the rest of him was on point. He was poised for the reckoning.

I folded my hands demurely on the table. “Garrity’s right. I have an unfortunate tell. When the cards aren’t being sweet to me, I tend to behave a little . . . wantonly.”

I moved my cards to the center of the table one by one. The eight and ten of hearts, which everyone had already seen, plus the nine to nestle between them. Then — with exquisite aching slowness — I uncovered the jack of hearts, my first downcard, the secret knave who’d been with me from the first.

I tapped the last card, still hidden, then leaned forward until my face was inches from Trey’s, so close I could have kissed him if I’d wanted, and I did want, but I kept it in check. He saw it, though — the crushing, the craving, the barely contained voraciousness. I saw his pupils dilate, saw the flush along his cheekbones.

“So yes, you saw the tell,” I said. “Only you misunderstood. Because the truth is, I am about to kick your ass all over this table, boyfriend. And the thought has me so hot I can barely stay in my seat.”

I turned over the queen of hearts next to the jack. They made a lovely pair, red as blood and twinned on the table, practically pawing each other.

“Straight flush,” I said.

Rico whistled. Garrity murmured a hushed and reverent curse. But Trey didn’t even look down. He didn’t drop his eyes from mine, not even for one second.

“Everybody out,” he said.

Garrity yanked the cigar from his mouth. “What?”

“Now.” Trey shot him and Rico a look. “Really. Right now. Out.”

“But—”

“I mean it. Out. Both of you.” And then he got up — a little unsteadily but with unwavering purpose — and went to the front door and held it open. “It’s been a very good birthday. Thank for you coming, and for cooking, and for . . . all this. But you have to leave now.”

I grinned at Garrity. “You heard the man. Out.”

“But—”

“The concierge will call you a cab. Here.” I shoved the entire mound of coins at him. “This ought to get you both home no problem.

I let Trey get the door locked behind them, but just barely. And then I took him to the floor. It was wild — shirt-snatching, shoe-flinging, button-popping wild — right there

behind the couch, on the freshly swept hardwood.

Afterward, Trey lay on his back, staring at the ceiling. "I've never seen it from this angle."

I lay beside him. "Me either. But it's fascinating."

And it was. I wouldn't have thought so before that moment since it was nothing more than stark white acoustical tiles. But the throbbing of my pulse warmed and jazzed my vision. It was practically psychedelic up there.

"That was the most amazing four minutes of my life," I said.

Trey rolled his head to the side and looked at me. "Are you serious?"

"I'm so damn serious. I know you can't tell, so you're gonna have to trust me." I grinned at him. "That was awesome."

He looked skeptical. He started to sit up, then thought better of it. "Where are my pants?"

"By the coffee table."

"Those are your pants."

"Oh. In that case, I have no clue."

He made no further move to get dressed. The floor was uncomfortable, but I didn't care. One of us had tripped the other — I wasn't sure which — and I'd banged my knee going down in the tangle. I registered the tender area intellectually, but my body was abuzz with too many endorphins for pain to actually set in.

Trey's eyes crinkled at the corners. "Are you telling the truth?"

"About that being amazing? Absolutely. Was it not amazing for you?"

"No, it's not that . . . I mean, yes, but . . ." He shook his head. "My tongue isn't working properly."

"Give it a minute."

He studied my face, trying to get a reading on me, but he wasn't finding any catch. He blinked and blinked again, but he'd lost the ability to focus. Which meant that everything about me was a colorful indecipherable blur.

He thought hard. "That was . . . quick."

"Uh huh."

"And I wasn't . . . I mean, I didn't . . ." He licked his lips. "Are you really telling the truth?"

I propped up on one elbow and examined my boyfriend. He was naked, and inebriated, and kinda dazed in that post-coital way, two minutes from dropping into sleep.

I picked up his hand and placed it palm-flat on my heart. "Feel that?"

"Yes."

"That's not faked. Neither was the rest of it."

"But—"

"No buts. I know you like things a little more . . . skillfully executed. But sometimes it's about exactly what that was about."

"And what was that about?"

"Need. Drive. Lust. All that juicy jungle stuff." I sat up and kissed him on the forehead. "I'm glad you have skills. Very very glad. But all I ask — all that really matters — is that when you're with me, you're with me." I grinned at him. "And you were with me, boyfriend. You were with me every damn second."

He nodded, slowly, drowsily. "Yes. That's true. I understand that part."

I held out my hand, and he took it. I pulled him to sitting. "Let's go to bed. As in, let's go to sleep. You need to drink a glass of water and take two ibuprofen first. It's not going to prevent the sledgehammer hangover you have coming, but it will help."

He squinted up at me. "Okay."

I stood. He did too, a lot shakier than I was. He headed for the bedroom, and I watched him every step of the way. He was a work of art, that man, as if from the hand of Michelangelo. But sweeter than marble. Alive and ever-evolving, ever-surprising. A freaking once-in-a-lifetime miracle deal in his own right.

I snagged his shirt from under the sofa and pulled it over my head, remembering with a warm buzz the sight of him walking to the bedroom. I closed my eyes and shook it off. Sleep, I scolded myself. The man needed sleep.

At least a few hours' worth anyway.