THINGS
WE
CANNOT
KEEP
A NOVEL
Amanda Cox

THINGS WE CANNOT KEEP

Amanda Cox

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.

Joshua 1:9 NIV

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ONE

People always used the phrase "can't see the forest for the trees" like it was a bad thing, but Tess Holcomb had learned to survive by letting the big picture fade into a meaningless blur.

After a last look over the antique stopwatch's now gleaming gears and springs, Tess removed the watchmaker's loupe from her eye, anticipation fluttering in her chest. There was nothing left but the moment of truth.

She carefully placed the mechanism back into its casing and turned it over, testing the start button. The second hand swept along, smooth and unhindered, history resurrected. Tess sat back in her chair, a satisfied smile stretching across her face. As the seconds ticked by, she could almost hear the distant thunder of hoofbeats and the roar of a crowd.

What a life this instrument must have lived.

This same stopwatch had once timed the famous Triple Crown–winning horse Citation back in the 1940s, when a teenage boy left his job as a grocery clerk to become a lowly groom at a nearby farm, determined to work his way up the ranks and someday train a Derby contender of his own. He'd been obsessed with stories of the horse's speed and had snuck to the track with his grandfather's stopwatch early one morning

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to watch the training exercise before the Kentucky Derby. And the rest was history.

At least that was how the story went.

Tess reset the hands to zero and then buffed the surface with a soft cloth, making sure no traces of her fingerprints remained. She nestled the stopwatch in a velvet-cushioned box and set it on her outgoing shelf for tomorrow's pickup. The cleaned and restored instrument was to be the man's ninety-fifth-birthday present. She'd give anything to be a fly on the wall during the celebration of his life, surrounded by his children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and the generations of champion horses he raised on his prominent Kentucky farm. What a gift it was, being chosen to play a tiny role in this family's special day.

Timeless Restoration allowed Tess to borrow other people's sweet memories and hold them close. And when it was time, she gently placed them back in the hands of their rightful owners.

A knock sounded on the frame of her open door. "Hey."

Tess turned at the sound of Diane's voice.

"Sorry to interrupt, boss, but a new client is in for a consultation. Your favorite part."

"You know it." Tess rose from her chair and began tidying her tools, lining them up like little soldiers in formation. "Is this the lady all the way from Delaware?"

Diane nodded. "It's wild how far people are starting to travel to get to us. That's gotta be at least a twenty-hour drive."

"Uh-huh." Tess did a head count of her gleaming tools and then scanned her workspace for the smallest of her precision screwdrivers. Spying it beneath the velveteen lining her tray, she slipped the tool into alignment with the rest and readjusted the spacing between each. *Perfect.* The tension she hadn't realized she'd been carrying in her shoulders released.

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"Tess? You *are* coming, right?" Diane's teasing tone nudged Tess back to reality.

She turned to her friend, a sheepish grin on her face. "They wander off if I don't put them in order before I leave."

Diane smirked. "So you've said."

Tess and Diane made their way through the barn-turned-workshop, where the Timeless Restoration team restored priceless heirlooms in their given fields of expertise.

"You think this client's genuine?" Tess asked. She had no patience for the fame seekers. Thankfully she'd had to chase off only a few.

Diane shrugged. "One way to find out."

A few months ago, while restoring an antique jewelry box, the team had discovered contact information that ended a birthmother's two-decade search for her daughter. Their office manager, Becky, had seized the opportunity to garner free publicity by spilling the info to her friend at *The Fairhope Courier*. To Tess's horror, the article in the Alabama newspaper had snowballed until it was covered on all the major networks.

Great for business.

Not so great for a person in hiding.

Diane chatted amiably beside her as they headed to the lobby, updating her on the progress she and her daughter, Adreonna, had made cleaning an oil portrait that had been passed down through the generations since the beginning of the Civil War.

As they entered the consultation salon, a woman stood from one of the wingback chairs and walked to the polished farmhouse table where something bigger than a bread box was shrouded beneath a sheet.

Timeless's upholstery expert, Shannon, had designed the shabby chic receiving area. Though it was a little refined for an old barn, Tess had to admit the furnishings and decor lent the space a cozy yet professional vibe.

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"Hello, I'm Tess," she said, addressing the woman, "and this is my associate Diane. She tells me you've got a project you'd like us to take a look at."

The woman reached across the table and shook each of their hands. "I'm Karen." She fidgeted with the hem of her shirtsleeve and nodded at the shrouded object. "I hope you can help."

"May I?" Tess grasped the edge of the worn sheet covering the proposed project, unable to tame the smile stretching her face.

"Please." Karen took a step back.

Only a moment like this could tempt Tess away from the comfort she found working with gears, pinions, and springs.

Together, Tess and Diane lifted the sheet away, revealing a Victorian dollhouse that had certainly seen better days. Though old toys, particularly those without mechanical components, weren't her area of expertise, Tess recognized quality when she saw it. She glanced at Diane.

"Lovely," Diane said as she studied the structure, taking it in from all angles.

This house had chipped paint, missing shingles, and broken railings. The interior was yellowed with age, and the wallpaper peeled in several places. But Diane, like every expert who worked at Timeless, had the ability to see beyond all the spots and wrinkles that came with life-worn heirlooms.

Tess braced her hands on the table. "Karen, what can you tell us about this piece?"

As she began to speak, a fine sheen glossed the woman's eyes. "My grandpa was a young father during the Great Depression. He did everything he could to find work, even traveling to neighboring cities. Though life was doing its best to beat the joy and wonder out of him, he didn't want his child to face disappointment come Christmas morning." Karen swiped her cheeks.

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"He barely had enough money for his train ticket home, much less a present. On his walk to the train station, he passed this grand mansion bedecked in holly and evergreen, with a candle glowing in every window. While he stopped and stared, he caught sight of someone tossing a dollhouse onto a rubbish heap. After they'd gone back inside, my grandfather picked it up. It was a replica of that same beautiful home, but with a broken porch railing, a few scuffs, and no furniture. He traveled with that discarded house on his lap the whole way home." Karen's soft smile stretched into a full grin. "It became a centerpiece in my grandparents' living room, and every time I visited, he and I would play with this old house, inventing all sorts of stories about the tiny people who lived there."

Tess inspected a broken shingle, recreating the tender scenes in her mind. When she looked up, Karen suddenly seemed decades younger. It took little effort to imagine the little girl Karen had been.

The woman wrapped her arms around her middle as if giving herself a hug. "It reminds me of the simple joy and hopefulness my grandfather brought to every room he walked into, no matter how bad the day was. Not many people can make a child feel as important as he made me feel." Her smile faltered. "He passed away shortly after my own daughter was born, and this dollhouse helped my mother and I share the story of the man he was."

Tess allowed herself to be swept up in the affection in Karen's voice, and the story settled over her like a weighted blanket.

As the woman continued with the history of the dollhouse, Tess peered inside and traced a fingertip over a red crayon mark and a purple stain. In her mind's eye, she could see a set of weathered hands alongside a child's pudgy fingers posing the dolls and rearranging furniture. Tess's insides bubbled with imagined laughter in a beautiful, light-filled room. For just a

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moment she pretended the deeper accompanying laugh was someone taking delight in *her*.

Then Tess set the borrowed memory aside, once again giving her full attention to her client. "And what made you decide to bring your dollhouse to us?"

Karen peered through one of the windows. "As you can see, it's had a long and well-loved life. It's the victim of generations of clumsy childhood play. After my daughter grew up, I put it in the attic for safekeeping. But some sort of vermin chewed one of the balcony railings. A squirrel, I suspect." She laughed lightly. "One of the rooms was stuffed with acorns." She placed her hand on the peak of the roof. "But now my daughter is pregnant with her first, and when my grandchild comes to visit, I need this old house to be sturdy enough to make memories for generations to come."

Tess gave her an encouraging smile. "And how do you envision the dollhouse after our work is complete?"

Karen's gaze wandered over the structure. "I imagine the old layers of paint sanded away and repainted crisp white, with black shutters. The dingy and peeling wallpaper restored however you see fit. The chewed balcony railing and wooden shingles replaced, and the overall structure fortified if there are any weak spots." She touched the mismatched porch railing. "But please don't replace the original repair my grandfather made. It's clumsy, I know. But to me, it's the most beautiful part."

"I agree," Tess said, and then she looked to Diane. "What do you think?"

Diane nodded. "We can definitely restore the paint. Adreonna and I may even be able to do some hand-stamped wallpaper that would match the design of the original."

"Bert for repairs to the woodwork?" Tess asked. Bert was amazing with carpentry, no matter how large or minute the project.

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"Definitely."

Tess offered Karen a warm smile. One she hoped conveyed all the care and attention the team would invest in her project. "I'm honored you've entrusted your grandfather's legacy to us."

After they finalized the details and paperwork, Tess carried the dollhouse back to Diane's and Adreonna's workstation, her heart light. After she set it down, she said, "Let me know if you need any help with anything. I know everyone's plate is extra full right now."

Adreonna propped her hands on her hips. "You better leave the artwork to the artists. But there's a bucket of paintbrushes that could use a deep clean," she teased.

"You got it." Tess gave her a small salute and made for the canister of brushes Adreonna indicated.

Diane shooed Tess away. "Get on with you. She was only joking. You've as much or more to do than the rest of us."

Tess laughed and held up her hands in surrender and then headed in the direction of her office. Over her shoulder, she said, "Just remember I offered when you're stuck in the washroom later." The last thing she wanted was her staff feeling overworked and underappreciated.

She strolled through the quietly bustling repair shop, surrounded by the sound of gentle work. Order. Rhythm. Beautiful memories all around her. There was never a temptation to cling to things that didn't belong to her, because there were always more precious stories coming through her doors.

"Tess?" Becky said, interrupting her reverie, an unusual tinge of confusion in the young woman's tone.

Tess turned around. "What's up?"

Becky closed the distance between them in a couple of strides, a box in her hands. "A package was shipped here by mistake, I think. And there's no return address."

"Oh?" Tess took the small package from the younger woman

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and then almost dropped it. Her heart thudded in her chest as she read the name on the address line again and again.

Becky frowned. "I wonder who Teresa Baker is? No one by that name has ever worked here, have they?"

"I'll get this sorted," Tess managed to choke out before she hurried to her office.

Deep down she'd known the life she'd fled eighteen years ago would catch up with her one day.

She stuck the box on the highest shelf.

Just because her past found her didn't mean she had to face it.

Not yet.

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TWO

Tess waved goodbye as the school bus pulled out of the Timeless parking lot. Field trips were another of Becky's grand ideas for increasing revenue at the shop. But Tess was actually on board with this one.

Every field trip Tess hosted was her own little war against society's draw to the new, shiny, and disposable. The spark of wonder and enthusiasm on the kids' faces as they watched true craftspeople transform antiques gave her hope she'd inspired at least a few of them.

A little girl in the very back of the bus waved at Tess, her nose nearly pressed to the glass. Tess grinned and waved with added energy, remembering the way young Megan had toured the workshop. Wide-eyed and full of questions. So much like the child Tess had once been.

She waited as the bus full of energetic fourth graders disappeared down the graveled driveway in a cloud of gray dust, and then she went back inside.

Bypassing her office, she stopped by Bert's workbench where the dollhouse waited, sanded down and looking bare, yet fresh and full of promise.

"Hiya, Miss Tess."

"Hey, Bert. How's it coming along?"

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The wiry older gentleman grinned. "Swimmingly. I've already replaced the balcony railing, and I just finished up the wooden shingles I made to replace the broken and missing ones." He held out his hand to show her six intricately carved pieces, each no bigger than her thumbnail. "After that's done, it's back to Diane and Adreonna for the paintwork and wallpapering. Shannon and I are going to work together to make a few historically accurate furniture pieces as an extra surprise for the family."

Tess took a big satisfying breath, fully expanding her lungs. She could always count on her team to go the extra mile to show clients how much they cared.

Though several timepieces waited in her office, ready to be cleaned, polished, and refitted with new parts, she settled on a stool and chatted with Bert as he fixed the new shingles into place.

In the week since the mystery package had arrived, she found herself avoiding her office and lingering on the workshop floor. But if she didn't get back to her normal routine, she'd never be able to catch up.

"Y'alright, Tess? You went quiet on me."

"Forgive me." She laughed lightly as she stood from her perch. "As usual, my head's full of what needs to be done next." What she didn't mention was that lately the mystery box had consumed *that* space. "I can't thank you enough for the work you've done on Karen's dollhouse. She'll never be able to pick out the replacement shingles from the original."

The man's cheeks pinked at her praise. "Well now, I don't know if I'd go that far."

Tess raised an eyebrow at him and grinned. The man's work was sheer perfection, and he knew it. She headed back to her office to see to a wristwatch that, though it had little monetary value, had been passed through the family to the firstborn boy on their eighteenth birthday for six generations.

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Before she began work on the piece, her gaze found the Gulf Shores, Alabama, magnet that lived on her filing cabinet. When she was eleven, she'd swiped it from the olive-green fridge in Granny's kitchen the day before the dear woman's funeral. She'd held on to it like a promise ever since.

Tess sighed, turned on her lamp, and donned her watchmaker's loupe. But no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't get the forest of her life to blur as she attempted to focus on the work in front of her. Her grandmother's house, with its sloping floors and sagging porch, clung to the mountainside with the same grit Granny possessed, and it remained fixed in her mind.

Granny hadn't had much to her name, but she always had her stories. Tess's favorite was about the trip she'd taken to Gulf Shores as a child. Granny had vowed to take her someday too, and Tess had loved her for it, even knowing her grandmother had been too poor and careworn to take anyone anywhere.

When circumstances forced Tess off the mountain that had raised her, she'd made a beeline for the coast depicted on that tiny, faded magnet.

But as fate or God or whoever deserved the credit would have it, Tess never made it to Gulf Shores.

She pushed back from her desk now, groaning. The past was just too close to the surface today.

She exited the workshop and took the long, wooded path to the cabin where her best friend and business partner lived.

She knocked on the front door, and the home health aide let her in.

"Hello, Margery," Tess said. "Is Amos up for visitors?"

The woman smiled. "I'd say so. He just finished up lunch, and you'd think the food was full of vinegar for as snarky as he's feeling."

Tess laughed as she walked down the hallway. She was more than a little proud that the business venture she and Amos

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started ten years ago not only paid the bills but also made sure he had the care he needed in the home he loved.

"Amos?" she called out right before she stepped into the living room, knowing the exact scene she'd witness upon entering—Amos hooked up to oxygen while he watched television in his favorite recliner.

He clicked the TV off, banishing the melodramatic image from the screen as she entered. She bit the insides of her cheeks to keep from letting him know she'd caught him watching his soaps.

"Well, I'll be. I didn't expect you 'til Saturday," he rasped. "You got some tricky clock that needs an old timer's expertise?"

She shook her head with a wry smile. "Not today." Today she just brought a weary soul that needed a little time with the man who'd so gently retooled her life.

Amos's face fell a fraction, and she wished she'd thought to grab one of the watches on her shelf and come up with a question or two to ask him. His health had forced him to become homebound a few years ago, and as hard as she'd tried to tempt him back to the workshop now that he was out of the woods, he insisted it was for the best if he stayed put.

One of the few points in life they didn't agree on.

"I just needed to clear my head and thought I'd come aggravate you a minute."

"Happy birthday." He wriggled his silver caterpillar eyebrows. "Have a sweet." He held out the jumbo bucket of soft peppermints like they'd bring world peace.

She plucked a candy from his stash and popped it into her mouth, buying herself a couple of seconds. "It's not my birthday." That had been last week. Not that anyone knew.

"Maybe not. But seeing as you won't tell me your birthday, I always count the day we met. Eighteen years now, isn't it?"

"I guess," she said as if his assertion was of no consequence. But it was disconcerting, realizing she'd lived exactly half her

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life in Fairhope. It was almost enough time to make the first part of her life seem like a secondhand story.

"Why'd you do it?" She picked up the folded newspaper occupying the neighboring recliner and sat.

"Why'd I pick up a ragamuffin girl wandering down the road who refused to tell me a thing about who she was or where she came from?" He scoffed. "I've given you the same exact answer every single time you've asked."

She grinned at the elderly man. "I've got a rotten memory. Tell me again."

He shook his head and pursed his lips in mock annoyance. "'Cause God told me to. No other reason than that. Plain and simple, Tess Holcomb."

She wasn't sure what she thought about the idea of a God up in heaven caring about the likes of her. But believing in Amos? That was easy as taking her next breath.

That day, when she'd confessed she'd run out of money and had nowhere to go, Amos took her to his sister Candy's souvenir shop that had a vacant apartment over top. In the span of a few hours Tess gained a roof over her head and a job. It'd been so simple to sidle into a new identity.

"How's that great-niece of mine working out?" Amos's question jolted her back to the present.

"Becky always has fresh ideas." Tess inwardly cringed and then spat out a question that had been simmering under the surface since he recommended hiring the girl. "You think we should take her on as a partner?" It was well within his rights to make the decision. He was the majority holder in Timeless Restoration and the sole owner on all official documentation. And though Becky was impulsive, she knew marketing.

He let out a bark of a laugh. "Have you lost your senses? The girl is smart as a whip, but she's young yet. Who knows if she'll stick around after she's earned that MBA she's chasing."

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He gave her a sly grin. "She's still launching half-cooked ideas without asking?"

"Yep. It's hard to be mad though," she said. "Every single one of them has brought in more revenue. But I'm pretty sure she's the cause of the gray hair I found on my head last week." She smirked. "And you know me. I prefer to think on a thing for a month of Sundays before I act. Your niece on the other hand . . ."

"There's a balance to be found somewhere in there." Amos crossed his arms over his chest. "I know you prefer people to feel like they work with you instead of for you, but it's okay to stand your ground when it counts. Timeless is your baby. Your dream."

Our dream, you mean. Rather than correct him, she nodded. "I hear you."

They spent another half hour talking shop. When she headed back to work, she wasn't certain she'd be able to concentrate any better than she had earlier. But at least she felt a little more like the person she'd become since landing in Fairhope.

Tess reentered Timeless through the barn's back door and headed for her office. Before she reached it, an unfamiliar masculine laugh echoed through the space, pulling her up short.

The workshop floor was usually a place of easy camaraderie that flowed with a gentle rhythm—quiet conversations and the sound of tools. Each artist's project required the utmost concentration. Field trips and apprentice visits were meticulously scheduled to avoid unplanned disruptions.

This noise did not belong.

She passed her office in the back with catlike tread, heading for the open area partitioned with toolboxes and tables where the other craftspeople worked. Mingling with the unfamiliar male voice was Adreonna's and Becky's laughter and gleeful responses. Tess paused when she turned the corner.

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A man with an athletic build stood with his back to her, hands shoved in his jean pockets, hip casually leaned against a workbench. Whoever it was behaved far too at ease for an uninvited guest.

Amos had said she needed to be firm with her boundaries. She stood tall and stepped forward, clearing her throat.

"Can I help y—" The question died on her lips as the man turned his mega-watt smile on her. It felt as if her heart flopped straight out of her chest and withered on the concrete floor.

His smile morphed into something wistful and apologetic. "Hey, Tink."

She tried to catch her breath, but all the oxygen had fled the room. Unlike the mystery box, she could not pretend away this specter from her past.

He took a step forward, and she took one back.

A dance she'd perfected eighteen years ago when Elliot Sullivan ruined her life.

Or saved it.

She'd never been quite sure.

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THREE

I found you." Elliot's voice, leached of all his typical charisma, had the reverence of a whispered prayer.

She would not, could not let this pretense shift her off balance. Tess fixed her attention on Becky. "Did we have a visitor on the schedule that you neglected to inform me of?"

The younger woman flinched at the uncharacteristic sharpness in Tess's tone. "No . . . I . . . I . . . He said he was an old friend of yours."

She raised her brows. "And you just took his word for it?"

"I . . ." Becky seemed to shrink before her while Adreonna listened in stunned silence.

Tess would've felt bad, but Elliot was standing right there. *Elliot.* And she knew exactly how her childhood "friend" had found her—Becky and that stupid media coverage. Tess took a deep breath, attempting to quiet the anger and panic fighting for rank.

She refocused on Elliot. "I'm sorry, sir, but we don't receive unscheduled guests on the workshop floor. Allow me to escort you out."

His eyebrows had shot up at her use of "sir" and seemed to have gotten stuck there. "Tink . . ." he said.

She cringed at the old nickname that was laced with emo-

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tions she couldn't trust. But at least he hadn't used her real name. She had to get him out of there before he did.

"Please." She spat out the word like a command and motioned toward the front of the workshop.

He shifted his feet but didn't move from where he stood. "Coffee."

"I'm sorry?" She crossed her arms over her chest.

"Before you kick me out, just tell me I can take you to coffee." He pressed his palms together as if offering supplication. "One cup of coffee and a conversation, and I'm gone forever if you want me to be."

Could she trust those words? "I don't like coffee."

"Since when?" The corners of his mouth twitched, the almost grin challenging her lie.

She stared him down.

"Dinner, then?" He took another step toward her, but this time she stood her ground.

"I don't have time for this, Elliot. Please go." Time had nothing to do with it.

Instead of turning toward the exit, he closed in on her. "You have no reason to give me the time of day. And I know that. But, please. One conversation. Give me one chance to explain. To say I'm sorry."

The more he pleaded, the more his volume rose. One by one all the Timeless employees had ceased their work and collected around Adreonna's workbench like a gaggle of geese.

Tess gripped his upper arm. He flexed his bicep beneath her hand either from the shock of her touch or to show off.

She assumed the latter.

Tess rolled her eyes and pulled him toward her office, away from the onlookers. Any explanation or apology he had to offer was too little and came far too late, but she had to get him away from there before any more of her past flooded the delicate world she'd built.

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She shut her door behind them and rounded on him full of anger but with no idea what to say. He took in her office, seemingly wonderstruck, and she followed the direction of his inspection. The shelves of repair texts, her framed horology certifications, tidy rows of tiny tools on a rolling tray. Old clocks she'd collected.

"Wow. Looks like you found the perfect job. You've always been obsessed with tinkering with things." Hence the nickname.

She propped her hands on her hips. "This isn't a *job*. I'm an owner." An off-the-books twenty-five percent owner, earned via sweat equity, but Elliot didn't need to know that. "Built it from the ground up." *Just like I built myself*. She had to get him out of here and out of her life. Because what she'd built was suddenly feeling quite fragile.

"Remember the first watch you ever repaired?" He gave her a crooked smile.

She raised her brows. "Uh-huh." It was the first but not the last time she'd bailed out "the poor little rich boy" who lived in the mansion on the hilltop.

Elliot picked up the half-full mug she'd left on her desk. "You might like coffee if you put something in it." He winked. Eleven-year-old Tess had started drinking black coffee the day Granny died, and he knew it.

"Elliot, I've worked really hard to start over here. Can't you just leave and forget you found me? You owe me that much."

He dropped his gaze to the floor. "I know, Tink. And I've tried to forget you . . . and that night. But I can't."

She clenched her fists at her sides. "Tess."

His brow furrowed.

"I'm Tess now. Tess Holcomb. Not Tink. Not Teresa."

His gaze locked on hers. "You're married, then?" He let out a small breath.

She tried and failed to decipher the emotions passing over

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his face. "Nope. A new name for a new life. Teresa Baker disappeared eighteen years ago, and I need her to stay that way."

Her attention involuntarily drifted to the brown-paper-wrapped package she'd taken down from the shelf earlier that morning. Elliot's gaze followed, and he stepped closer to the box.

His lips parted as he read the name. "Someone, somewhere still knows Teresa Baker lives on."

She groaned as he ran a finger over the written words and then picked at a raised edge of the tape. "Elliot, don't."

He turned to her. "Why haven't you opened it?" There was a haunted yet hungry look in his expression. "You should see what it is. Who it's from."

She glared. "You sent this."

He shook his head. "Not me."

"I'm not playing your games," she said through gritted teeth. She'd had enough of them to last a lifetime.

He flinched. "I didn't come to torment you. I promise on my life. I want . . ." He scrubbed a hand over his face. "I want to make things right."

The nerve. What'd he have planned? To throw another wad of cash at her? Like father, like son.

Despite the anger and fear roiling in her gut, she slipped on a cool facade and placed a hand on his shoulder. "I don't want to say hurtful things that won't do either of us any good. I want you to go. For once in our lives, put me first instead of yourself."

He sighed and nodded once. "Okay."

"Okay?" She studied him, expecting a tell indicating he lied, but found none.

"Yeah, I'll go. But, Tin—Tess, the past is over. For both of us." Then his open, earnest demeanor was replaced with a teasing glint. "The statute of limitations is up for most things, anyway."

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"Enough," Tess ground out and opened her office door. Finding humor in the destruction of what little reputation she'd had in Wilder told her all she needed to know. The reckless boy she'd known and the man before her now were one and the same.

Thankfully he yielded and allowed her to escort him to the rear exit.

Before he crossed the threshold, she said, "Turn out your pockets."

Elliot's mouth dropped open. "Are you serious right now?"

"As a heart attack."

Annoyance mixed with something else—regret, maybe—flooded his face as he turned his pockets inside out. "Nothing but lint, *Tink*."

After he exited, he turned back, a hopeful plea in his eyes. "I'd give anything to share just one conversation over coffee or lunch. Breakfast. Dinner. Anything. If you ever change your mind, call me." He turned and was gone, somehow leaving her feeling like the bad guy in this whole situation.

She hurried back inside her office, shut the door, and then collapsed against it. Elliot Sullivan in her workshop? This couldn't be happening. She forced air into her lungs. At least he was gone, and she'd even survived the encounter without letting him sway her. That had to be a first.

Thankfully she didn't have to consider his request to call. She didn't have his number. She took another steadying breath. There was nothing to worry about. Nothing had shifted. She was still in control of her own destiny.

Later, as she was tidying in the front room before locking up for the night, Becky accosted her.

"So . . . who's the *guy*?" Apparently Becky had made a speedy recovery from Tess's dress down. "He's cute. And so funny."

"And too old for you," Tess muttered as she dusted the side tables in the receiving room, tension crawling up her spine.

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Elliot had looked better than a man who'd wrecked her life had any right to.

The lanky teenage body she remembered had filled out well. There was even something inviting about the faint lines at the corners of his eyes and the one between his brows. Tess scrubbed the already clean table harder, as if she could wipe away her errant thoughts.

Becky gave a dreamy sigh and then joined Tess in her task. "He's your age?"

Tess nodded.

"So thirty-six-ish . . . and I'm twenty-seven. Nine years isn't *so* bad."

Tess froze. "Becky, this isn't a joke. Our clients trust us with irreplaceable heirlooms. We can't let just anyone back there. Especially after the national attention we've had. The public is aware of the value of the types of items we often handle."

Becky's shoulders inched higher. "He said you were childhood friends."

Tess brushed her fingertips against her lips. *Friends?* He'd had an easier time classifying them than she would have. Tess shook her head and returned to her cleaning. "When we were growing up, he was a rich kid who pickpocketed and committed other petty crimes for the thrill of it. And you let him in the heart of the shop, no questions asked. We have to do better in the future."

Becky ducked her head. "I'm sorry. He just seemed so nice. And I was so excited to meet one of your friends. A real friend, not a work friend."

Tess paused and twisted the dustrag in her hands, torn between compassion for the girl and the need to make it clear that this couldn't happen again. "I know you meant well." But people put their precious memories in her hands and she would not allow her clients to be roped into whatever new games Elliot Sullivan played.

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After everyone else had gone home, Tess headed to the front door and flipped the lock. She then walked back through the building, shutting off the lights as she went. In the corridor by her office, she climbed the stairs to her loft apartment, but when she pulled her keys from her cardigan pocket, there was a slender slip of paper folded over the ring.

Puzzled, she smoothed it against her thigh as she read the words hastily scrawled across it. *If you change your mind, I'll drop everything to be there.* She flipped it over and stared at the ten digits he'd written. Despite the self-assured way he'd asked her to coffee, Elliot still knew her well enough to have anticipated her reaction. Not a comforting thought.

Tess shook her head. How he managed this sleight of hand without being detected, she'd never understand.

She started to crumple it but then stopped herself. This piece of paper secreted into her pocket was the reminder she needed that Elliot couldn't be trusted. And that meant he was just as dangerous to her now as he was then.

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