

The Stained Glass Window

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Section 3: Description

Coming back from a trip to Montreal, Lily Brannan is shocked to find her boyfriend Berto waiting for her, along with her contractor Tom, who desperately needs to talk with her about things. Will Lily profess her love for Berto and live happily ever after? Or will she focus instead on Tom's news?

Lily is shocked to find out the secret about her house and her boyfriend. Will her life ever be the same again?

Chapter 1

I was horrified. No, that word didn't even begin to cover my mortification. Berto had just proposed to me, and my response was to vomit all over my own office.

I wasn't sick. I knew that for sure. I definitely wasn't pregnant. You had to have sex more than once every six months to get pregnant, and I hadn't, and I'd had my period repeatedly since the last time, so I wasn't going to be a mother any time soon.

Then what the hell had just made me puke like that? Oh, my God! I'd just thrown up in front of Tom and Berto, and Berto was still standing there with champagne and a goddamn engagement ring.

I swallowed, hard, because the nausea was still there. With my hand loosely covering my mouth, I whispered, "Berto, I am so sorry. Please, Berto, please know that I didn't mean to do that, but I need to clean up now, so could you please either go home for now, or at least go outside and take a walk for a few minutes so I can clean up in here, and clean myself up?"

His eyes glittered as I looked at him. Was that anger I saw in them? His tone was cool. "Of course, Lily. You must have eaten something that upset your system. I will go home, and darling, I will come back up tonight for our dinner like we planned."

"That would be wonderful." I tried to smile, then realized that he couldn't see my mouth as it was still covered by my hand. "Thank you for understanding."

He came over to kiss my forehead. "Darling, we will keep our celebration for tonight."

Berto left without even glancing at Tom, who still stood in the doorway. I looked at Tom, and for the first time since I'd known him, his eyes looked cold and dead. No sparkle, no warmth, no humor. With a shake of his head, he turned away. "I'll go get cleaning supplies from the kitchen."

"Tom! No. I'm the one who got sick, you aren't going to help me clean it up."

"Lily, enough. I'll help you; God knows, I've cleaned up things like this before. When that's done, we need to talk about the project."

"Okay."

He was back in minutes with paper towels, a fresh garbage bag, gloves, and carpet cleaner. Working in silence, we cleaned up the mess. When we were done, I whispered. "Thank you."

Tom was silent. Finally, I looked up at him, and saw pure sadness in his eyes. "Lily, I don't understand why someone as amazing as you would let a man like him treat you like that, but clearly you've made your decision."

"What do you mean by that?" I snapped.

“You just got sick, and instead of staying to help you, or at least staying until he was sure you were okay, he leaves, making sure he gets his celebration tonight.” He shook his head. “You’ve made your decision. I’ll abide by that. But, once we figure out what’s going on here, then other than supervising the project, I’m stepping away.”

“You can’t!”

His voice cut through the air like a knife. “I can, and I am. You hired my company to get the job done. We will do that. That doesn’t mean that I’ll be here doing it. If that’s a problem for you, then today, I’ll give you an updated bill for where we are, and you can find another contractor.”

“Why are you doing this?”

The anger was back. “Look, Lily. If you want a man who will treat you like shit, one who doesn’t care about you, one who wants you to conform to his wishes, that’s your business. I don’t have to stand by and watch it happen.”

“Tom, please, please don’t do this. You are the only person other than Berto that I really know around here. Please...” How could I explain to him I would miss him more than I could say?

He shook his head. “I am your hired hand, Lily. Not your friend. Your contractor. Keep that in mind.” He gestured up the stairs. “And I really need you to come see what is going on here. I’ve tried for two days to keep it out of the public eye, but eventually, one of my guys is going to get sloppy and spill it to someone. Then it will be a fucking three-ring circus around here.”

Chapter 2

We started walking up the stairs, with me trailing Tom. At the door of my bedroom, he paused. “This is going to be a lot for you to take in, Lily.”

I walked into my future bedroom and stopped in shock. The interior wall nearest the hallway was now open, showing the framing. Between the studs were at least 15 paintings in ornate frames. I looked at Tom, my eyes almost bugging out of my head, and asked, “What the hell is this?”

Tom rolled his eyes. “This is what I’ve been trying to reach you about for the last two days. When we started to work on the trim around the door, we realized that the trim on one side of the door was a half inch wider than on the other side. It was done so well that it was unnoticeable—you’d have to know it was there. Once we took the trim off, we could see there was something in the wall.”

“They look real,” I said as I stepped closer to the first painting. It was a beautiful landscape that looked to be of Tuscany.

“I think they are real,” said Tom. “I think someone hid them here so no one would find them.” He stepped forward and picked up one of the paintings from between the framing. “Look at this, Lily! I think this painting is an actual Matisse.”

“Holy shit,” I exclaimed as I looked at the familiar signature in the corner of the painting. Tom put it back. “Lily, we think there are a lot more of them. We didn’t go any further than this room. but looking at the room next door, we think there is a hiding space in that wall too.”

“Are you serious?” I almost shouted the words at Tom.

“I am dead serious. Lily, someone hid all of these paintings.”

“I don’t know what we do about this.”

“I think we need to contact the police.”

“Why?”

“I wonder if they weren’t stolen.”

This was all a bit too much for me. So far today, I’ve driven back from Montreal, found my boyfriend in my house, he proposed, and I vomited all over my oriental rug. And, yeah, now I seemed to have a secret stash of potentially rare and valuable paintings. I sat down on the window seat and put my head in my hands. “Tom, what the hell do I do? Why are these paintings here?”

“I don’t know. I have no idea who would’ve done this. In my lifetime, no one has ever lived in this house, at least not full-time. So, I don’t know who would’ve done this or why, and I don’t know if you were the person who was supposed to find them. I mean you’ve already told me that

you didn't know why this house was left to you. What if this was the reason? What if the person wanted you to find these at some point?"

"I guess that's possible." I whispered. "Right now, nothing makes sense."

Tom sat down beside me. "We need to call the state police. We need to get their input on this."

I nodded. "Do you know anyone that we could call?"

"The best idea is for us to just call the local state police barracks rather than 911. This isn't an emergency, but we do need someone to get out here. I'll go make the call."

"Thanks, Tom. I really appreciate it."

Chapter 3

An hour later, Tom and I were standing again in my future bedroom. But now we were accompanied by two Vermont state troopers. They were as dumbfounded by the find in my walls as we were.

Sergeant Nichols finally spoke. “Ms. Brannan, we have no idea what to do with this. I don’t think the Vermont state police have ever had to deal with a case like this before. My recommendation is that we call the Burlington office of the FBI and ask them for support.”

I nodded. “I think that’s a great idea.”

His partner, Lieutenant Jane Beck, looked at me and quietly asked, “Ms. Brannan, do you live here alone?”

“Yes, I do.”

Her brow furrowed as she searched for the right words. “Not to say you can’t take care of yourself, but I would recommend that you have someone stay here until we at least get the FBI’s recommendations.”

“Why?”

“You may have a fortune in paintings here, and knowing that a few other people know about this, I would be concerned that someone might want to rob you.”

I hadn’t even thought of that. My shoulders slumped. “I will try to find someone to come stay here.”

A sound very close to a growl came out of Tom’s mouth. “Jesus, Lily, I’ll stay here until the FBI figures this out. I know the house, I know the property, I’m the best person for it.”

“Do you mean it?” I asked.

He rolled his eyes in frustration. “I wouldn’t have said it if I didn’t.”

Lieutenant Beck smiled. “Great!”

Less than thirty minutes later, the police left, having taken many pictures, and having contacted the FBI.

The silence was heavy. Finally, I said, “You don’t need to stay, Tom. I’ll be fine, okay? And I know how angry you are right now.”

Tom didn’t look at me. “I said I’d stay, and I will. I’ve already messaged my mom about keeping Jake tonight, and she’ll bring up some clothes for me in just a bit.”

Well, that was warm...

“Okay. Well, I really appreciate it.”

“I know.”

“What do we do now?”

Finally, he turned so I could see his face. “I’ll keep working, and I expect you’ll unpack and take care of everything you need to after your trip. I’d also suggest that you call your lawyer for any suggestions about this.”

“Good idea.”

He paused. “Lily, here’s the thing. I know that you are getting together with Berto tonight. I would prefer to not be around for that. If you have him coming here, I’ll leave for a bit. If you’re going there, I’ll stay here.”

Shit! Berto! In the craziness of seeing those paintings, I’d completely forgotten about Berto. Jesus Christ, the man proposed to me this morning, and I hadn’t thought about him in hours. I swallowed. “Frankly, with everything going on here today, I’m going to call Berto and cancel for tonight.”

Tom snorted. “He proposed, and you didn’t give him an answer, he might take offense if you cancel tonight.”

Did I care? It suddenly hit me that I didn’t really care if Berto was upset. Okay, that was a problem. Now I was going to have to deal with that too. “I’ll deal with that. Anyway, I’ll be here.”

“Okay.”

“After I unpack and call my lawyer, I’ll make us some dinner.”

“You don’t need to, I’ll be fine.”

“For God’s sake, Tom, don’t be a stubborn ass. I know you’re mad at me, and I get it, but we are going to be here together tonight, and we both need to eat.”

For the first time since I’d arrived back from Montreal, Tom smiled. “Point taken.”

Chapter 4

It was late afternoon, the sun setting to the west, and I was trying to edit one chapter before starting dinner. I heard a car coming up the driveway. Looking out the windows by my desk, I saw the state police cruiser come into view.

Sergeant Nichols and Lieutenant Beck came to the door. I opened the screen door. "Hi."

It was the sergeant who spoke. "Hi, Ms. Brannan. We wanted to stop up and check on you both, and to give you an update on the FBI."

"Please come in." In my office, they sat on the couch, I sat back down at my desk, and Tom took the armchair. "Please, go ahead."

He nodded. "Thank you. So, we shared the photos with the FBI, and explained the situation. They do want to take a look at it before any of us do any more about this, but they can't have an art person here until tomorrow morning."

"And what do they think is going on?"

Lieutenant Beck's gaze was serious. "Ms. Brannan, what do you know about the person who left you the house?"

I leaned back in my chair. "My great-aunt Helen left me the house, but I had never heard of it before the reading of the will. I knew of everything else that was in that document, with the exception of this house. Our shared lawyer didn't know anything more than I did. And there is no way Helen would have hidden the paintings. If they are genuine, if she had known about them, she would have bragged about them."

Nichols cracked a smile. "You liked her a lot, I gather."

"She was a vicious old bitch. When my mom died, she was my guardian, and she made it clear that she hated me and the responsibility."

Now he laughed. "Okay, well, then. So, if we assume she didn't put them in the wall, then we need to figure out who gave her the house to give it to you, and why that person or someone else hid them."

"True. But first, don't we need to figure out if they are real, not either copies or forgeries?"

"We do. That's why we called in the FBI. There are art professors at the college we could ask, but we don't want to announce this to the community. So, we wait for the feds to get here."

"Oh." I rubbed my forehead. "What time do we expect them tomorrow?"

"They said they would get to our barracks by 9, then we will come directly here."

“Great.” I handed Lieutenant Beck a post-it note. “That is the name and number of my lawyer, the one who was in charge of Helen’s will and is the executor of her estate. He will be here about noon tomorrow to help with this process, but if you need to ask him anything between now and then, that is his personal cell phone, and he will take your calls.”

They both stood up. “Thank you. We will be up in the morning, and if anything, and we do mean anything, seems out of the ordinary tonight, please call 911 immediately.”

“Of course.”

Chapter 5

I made dinner while Tom doublechecked the locks on the doors and windows. When he came back into the kitchen, he paused in the doorway. “Okay, not my business, but what happened with your plans with Berto for tonight?”

I stirred the Alfredo sauce automatically. “I told him something had come up here and said I would see him tomorrow.”

“And that was it? He didn’t ask you for your answer?” His voice was a mix of irritation and disbelief.

“No, he said he understood, and we could talk then. I said I’d call him mid-day tomorrow and set a time to meet him in town.”

Pulling out forks and knives, he set two places at the counter. “Wow, I’m not sure if I’m impressed or shocked.”

“What do you mean?”

He stopped what he was doing to look at me seriously. “I’ve only proposed once, but I sure as shit couldn’t have asked her to marry me, then waited more than a day to get an answer because of things coming up with a *house*.”

I hadn’t thought of it that way. To me, I had appreciated how calm and supportive Berto had sounded on the phone. I knew in my heart what my answer was, and I suspected so did Berto, but still, he’d been pleasant as could be. Was that weird? I shrugged. “He didn’t know what was happening here, but between me getting sick, and me telling him that something had come up with the project, he was good about it.”

“Are you going to say yes?”

Fuck. Did I really want to have this conversation with Tom? Didn’t I owe it to Berto to talk to him first? I stretched up on my tiptoes to take down two pasta dishes. While my back was to him, I answered. “No.”

“Why not?”

That pissed me off. “What do you want from me? You asked a question, I answered you.”

“And I asked you why.”

“Because...” Why was I saying no? I cared about him. He was attractive, and we shared a lot of interests. And the fact was, I didn’t love him, and I didn’t think I ever would. “Because I don’t love him. I thought maybe I could over time, but when he proposed this morning, it didn’t feel right.”

I could hear the humor in his voice. “Was it the violent vomiting that made you realize that?”

Okay, that was funny. I turned around and grinned. “That was the first sign, yes. Then, when you and I were talking about you staying tonight, it hit me that I hadn’t thought of him at all while I was thinking about the paintings. If I was going to fall in love with him, I would have at least wanted him to be there.”

“True.”

I dished out our dinner. “Come on, let’s eat.”

Tom had opened a bottle of wine while I took the plates to the counter. He handed me a glass. “Cheers.”

I raised my own. “Cheers. Thanks for staying.”

“No problem.”

He took a bite. “This is great, thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

We ate in silence for a few minutes. Finally, I put down my fork. “Aren’t you going to ask me if I’m going to keep seeing him?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Look, I asked you if you were marrying him. I heard your answer, and while it seems like the relationship is dying, I would be a complete ass if I was pushing you about this right now.”

“True. Thanks.”

Dinner done, we cleaned up the kitchen. I gestured toward my office. “Want to watch TV for a bit?”

“Sounds good.”

“Go on in and pick something. I’ll set the coffee maker for tomorrow, then be right in.”

“Will do.” As Tom walked toward my office, I took a moment to admire his absolutely perfect backside. Damn, the man was gorgeous. Was there still a chance for us?

I poured cold water into the coffee maker, then carefully measured the grounds into the basket. I hated waking up and having to make coffee then, always had. It was such a little thing, but it made such a difference in my day.

Just then, I heard Tom’s voice. He sounded calm, but his comment caught my attention.

“Lilibelle, ready to come watch television?”

Lilibelle? Lilibelle? I felt a wave of fear race through me. I'd never told Tom that my given name was Lilibelle. It wasn't listed anywhere anymore. How the hell did he know that? I swallowed a mouthful of bile. Something was wrong, really wrong. I cleared my throat and willed myself to sound normal. "Be right there, Tom."

I reached into the cupboard below the sink and felt for the small steel basket I'd concealed in the back. There it was, right where it should be.

Don't judge me. I'm a woman who has lived alone in cities for years now. Yes, I have a gun. I am licensed to own it, and with my small handgun, I actually am a hell of a shot. Here in Vermont? Well, I'd brought it along, and after the kitchen was complete, I'd hidden it where only I would know about it. Something was really wrong in the next room, and I wasn't going in there unprepared.

Chapter 6

I stuck the handgun into the waistband of my leggings. As long as I didn't turn around, no one could see it.

I shouted. "Tom, do you want anything from the kitchen?"

His voice was calm. "No, thanks. Just the pleasure of your company."

I walked toward the door of my office, and when I could finally see into the room, my heart jumped into my throat.

Berto was standing in the middle of the room, his back to me. He was facing Tom, who was seated in the armchair again. What the hell was going on?

Staying in the doorway, I called out, "Berto, my love, what are you doing here?"

Berto turned to look over his shoulder at me, and I felt shock flow through me. Gone was the urbane, refined man I'd come to think I knew. He was disheveled, dressed in black pants and a black hoodie, his hair wild, and I could even see a twig caught in it. He sneered, "Get the fuck in here."

What the holy hell? That wasn't the soft, accented English he'd always used. He sounded like someone from South Philly. I tried to pretend I was still relaxed. "What are you talking about, Berto? I told you, I'd have a meal with you tomorrow so we could talk, just the two of us."

He turned a bit more, and suddenly, I could see the large handgun in his hand, pointed directly at Tom.

Okay, bad ass timing. I realized my almost-fiancé was pointing a gun at my contractor, and it hit me like a tidal wave that I was head over fucking heels in love with Tom. Not just hot for him, like hopefully happily ever after in love with him. Like forever, like have babies together.

This was just the perfect time to realize this, right? I have a gun stuck down my pants, Berto or whoever he was was standing there pointing a gun at Tom, and I still didn't know what this was all about. Could it be he was jealous? Cautiously, I whispered. "Berto, is this because I cancelled on you tonight? I was really sorry. Please don't be mad."

Now he turned fully, the gun pointed directly at me. He growled, "Are you kidding me? I hate you, you spoiled rotten fucking bitch."

My eyes widened. Okay, yes, he had a gun, but that was no reason to be an asshole to me.

"Excuse me? And what's with the lack of accent?"

"Jesus, Lily, stop the questions. My real name, my given name, is Robert Terrenzini, and I'm from Philadelphia. I did study Italian, I am a professor, but Berto was a creation of mine. I have a fucking alter ego. I've been in this shithole town for years."

"What?"

“Get over here, now. I want to be able to see both of you at the same time.”

There were several ways this could be handled, none of them great. First of all, I could do what he said, but I had a sneaking suspicion that if I did that, we were likely to end up dead. The second was to pull my gun out and shoot the son of a bitch. That held some appeal right now. The third was to stand my ground for a bit longer and make him look back and forth between us. That would buy me some time to figure out an option that would make it less likely that my newfound love interest would end up looking like a piece of Swiss cheese.

I was going with option three. I calmly asked. “Okay, Berto, Robert, whoever you are, what is this about? You proposed to me this morning, and now you’re here with a gun. You’ve already told me you hate me, so what was your game?”

He was so incensed, he seemed to forget he’d ordered me into the room. “I’ve spent my entire life in your fucking shadow, Lilibelle. My entire fucking life. I was the oldest heir, but no, you were the fucking princess.”

What the hell was he talking about? Was I somehow related to this piece of shit? “I’m lost. Explain.”

He yelled so loudly I could actually feel my eardrums reverberate. “I’m your brother, you bitch! I’m your older brother!”

Wow. That was unexpected. Nothing in the last months had prepared me for that revelation. Lately, I’d fainted and thrown up when hit with surprises. Now this? Nope, I wasn’t the least bit nauseous or dizzy.

I was fucking pissed.

Chapter 7

To be fair, it wasn't exactly what I'd planned when I'd chosen option three. My plan had been to buy some time while I tried to figure out what to do. But his nasty tone when he said he was my brother? Well, not my finest moment in terms of appropriate responses.

Tom exclaimed, "Brother?"

His voice distracted Berto, who turned his head to snap, "Shut up!"

That was all the time I needed. Years of practicing at the range kicked in, and I yanked out my gun and nailed the shithead in the calf. Yes, I was aiming at his calf. I was mad, but not to the point of murder.

My shot rang out, and he screamed in pain, dropping his gun and collapsing to the floor, clutching his leg. Tom jumped up and grabbed the gun, getting it out of Berto's reach.

Right on cue, red and blue lights lit up the yard. The state police had just arrived.

I should have just stepped back then, putting my hands up, waiting for the police. After all, Berto wasn't going anywhere. He was writhing on the ground, yelling in pain, swearing at me.

I dropped the gun, put my hands in the air, and as the police swarmed into the room, I took one final chance, and took two running steps and then kicked like I did as a soccer goalie at Miss Porter's, hopefully permanently embedding my brother's balls somewhere up near his sinus cavities.

The unholy noise that came out of Berto told me instantly that my kick had found the target. He forgot all about his leg, rolling into a tight, sobbing ball on the floor. Then, to my great amusement, he proceeded to vomit all over himself. Yup, I had nailed him just like I wanted to.

He deserved it. You don't tell someone you're their brother and call them a bitch all in the same breath. Asshole.

The police swarmed into the room, grabbing my gun in the process. The EMT wrapped Berto's leg, trying to avoid the copious amounts of vomit all over him. Then, the second EMT announced that he would need to go to the hospital to get the bullet removed. The police had already cuffed him, and as he lay on the stretcher, Sergeant Nichols took out his notepad. "The EMTs tell me you aren't in mortal danger. So, want to tell us your side of the story now, or later at the jail?"

Berto sneered, which was slightly impressive considering the circumstance. "I want a lawyer."

"I thought you might." Nichols nodded. "Take him away. Make sure he's shackled at the hospital too."

The ambulance had driven away when Sergeant Nichols motioned to the couch. "Have a seat," he ordered.

I'm not good at taking orders, never have been, but considering that I'd just shot and further assaulted a man in full view of the police, and somehow, I wasn't cuffed, so I immediately did what they said, assuming they were about to question me.

Tom sat next to me, and without really thinking about it, I reached out to take his hand. I needed to feel his skin, to know he was still with me. Yes, I now knew how I felt about him, but even beyond that, I was so thankful he hadn't been hurt because of me. I tried to focus on the police officers. "How did you know to come up here?"

The lieutenant spoke. "Well..."

Nichols rubbed his forehead. "Well, screw it. Just tell her."

Beck tried to hide a smile. "So, the sergeant's mother called him, having heard on the scanner that we were up here. She told him a rumor she'd heard, and it put us into overdrive this afternoon."

I was fascinated. "What rumor?"

Nichols looked straight in my eyes. "That a former Nazi owned this house."

Revulsion filled me, and without meaning to, I dug my nails into Tom's hand. "What are you talking about?"

Nichols took off his hat, holding it on his lap. "Lily, my mom said that decades ago, an Italian who had supposedly collaborated with the Nazis lived here. No one had lived here full time since, but that was the rumor."

I swallowed. Shit, that was not what I expected... "And what was the name of the Nazi collaborator?"

He grimaced. "I think you know the answer to that."

"Terrenzini."

"Yup."

I slumped back against the couch, suddenly exhausted and so very sad. "So, I may have just found out who my paternal lineage is, and they were Nazi collaborators, and that to make it even better, my brother, who knew he was my brother, proposed to me this morning so he could..." I sat up straight. "The paintings!"

Beck nodded. "Yes. That's what we think, at least."

"You mean...?"

"We think they are real, and that Terrenzini stole them from Jewish families, smuggled them here, and hid them. We don't know that for certain, but we have asked for a search warrant for his house to see what we can find."

I felt lost. Lost and sad. My entire life, I'd wondered about my father, and if I had any family out there, and it seemed like I might have gotten my answer today, and it was a piss poor one.

"Okay."

The two officers stood up. Sergeant Nichols looked at me with something akin to pity. "I'm sorry, Ms. Brannan. This has to be a lot to take in like this. I'd still like Mr. Givens to stay here tonight, just in case someone else causes problems. The FBI will be here first thing tomorrow, and between now and then, maybe we'll learn more about the whole thing."

I nodded. "Sounds good." My manners kicked in. "Thank you for your time."

"Of course, see you in the morning."

I stood at the window, watching their cruiser head down the hill. Without turning, I asked. "How did he get into the house?"

Tom walked over so he was standing behind me, but not touching me. "My stupidity. He came to the door and called out. I opened the door without looking out first because I recognized his voice. If I'd seen how he was dressed, I would have known something was up, but he was inside, gun in hand, before I knew what was going on. Sorry."

I turned to him in disbelief. "Sorry? What the hell are you talking about? You gave me the heads up that something was wrong. That was amazing."

He cracked a tiny smile. "Lilibelle?"

"Yeah. How'd you know?"

"He called you that, sneering about you. I figured since you didn't even have it on your checks or on your books, it would alert you to something being wrong."

"It did." I closed my eyes for a second as grief hit me. "But only my mom ever called me that. It's on my birth certificate, but that's the only time I see it anymore. If Berto knew it, it means he had some real knowledge of me. You called me that, and I knew you were trying to tell me something. Thank you."

"I hoped you would figure it out." He opened his arms silently. Without thinking it through, I fell into his arms, feeling them wrap around me in a wall of safety and comfort.

Then the tears came...

Chapter 8

As soon as I felt his arms around me, it was as if all of the adrenaline and anger left my body, leaving behind just searing sadness and grief.

My mom, my amazing mom had somehow gotten mixed up with the group of misfits. And it seemed like I was the descendent of a Nazi collaborator.

No, stop that shit. There are no collaborators. If you were helping the Nazis, you were a Nazi.

My relatives were Nazis. That's not something I'd ever gotten to say before. And I finally found out that I might have a brother, and he'd tried to kill me today. Great. The family Christmas gatherings were going to be a blast, I could just tell.

Did I have a fortune in stolen paintings in my house? What the fuck was that all about?

Finally, the tears slowed. I sniffed. "Thanks."

Tom hugged me. "For what?"

"For not running screaming from the crazy Nazi lady."

"You're not a crazy Nazi lady." With those words, he snorted, then took my hand. "Come with me."

He led me to the kitchen. "Sit," he ordered, gesturing to one of the stools.

I sat.

Opening cabinets, he finally found what he was looking for, and pulled out a bottle of whiskey.

"Where do you keep shot glasses?"

"To the left of the fridge."

He got out two shot glasses, and filled them, putting one in front of me. "Drink that."

I did. After I finished shuddering, I looked across at him. He took a sip of his, which made me smile. "Thanks."

"You're welcome. It looked like you might need it."

"And you don't?"

That made him laugh. "Okay, well, yes, it's been a hell of a day. But I think I still got the easier side of this."

I rubbed my forehead. "Aren't you going to say that you told me so?"

He looked genuinely confused. "About what?"

"About Berto being an asshole?"

With that question, he slugged back the rest of the shot, grimaced, and put the glass down. “Look, I didn’t like him, that’s true, but there was no way anyone could have known how bad this seems to be. Give yourself a break, okay?”

“Thanks.”

He held up the bottle. “Want more?”

“One more, please.” He poured, and handed it to me, and I took a small sip. “Wow.”

“Which part?” He started to chuckle. “The part when the psychopath showed up with a gun? The part where you pulled a gun out and shot him?” He paused, “Damn fine shot by the way.”

“I was aiming for his calf.”

He nodded. “Lily, I was there, remember? I watched you pull the gun out, sight it, and fire. No hands shaking, nothing. I know where you were aiming, and that’s where you hit him.”

That made me proud. “Thank you.”

“Someday I’ll ask you about where you learned to shoot that well. But then there was the *pièce de résistance* when you kicked him.” He was clearly trying not to laugh, because his voice sounded slightly strangled.

The look on his face suddenly made all of this seem so much less important. I grinned, proud of myself. “He deserved it.”

“He did, but what the hell was it in that moment that motivated you to do it?”

“You don’t tell someone you are their sister and call her a bitch in the same sentence.” I took a swig. “Especially after you proposed to her this morning. Fuckhead.”

The mention of the proposal made Tom’s face grow serious again. “I’m sorry about that. This has to be really hard. I know you thought you might have a future with him.”

He was being so kind and supportive, and I suddenly wanted to smack him for it. “Tom! Stop being noble, for Christ’s sake!”

That pissed him off. He snapped. “I’m trying to be supportive!”

“I know and knock it the hell off.”

He threw up his hands in frustration. “I don’t get you! You seemed to want me to be okay with being just your fucking lackey while you fucked around with him, so I was trying to do just that, and now you’re pissed at me for it. What the hell do you want from me?”

Should I tell him what I now knew? That I was head over heels in love with him, probably had been for a while, and that I’d almost died with fear when I’d realized he was in danger because of me? Did I share that now, or hold onto it for a while?

Chapter 9

I was just about to tell him the truth. The whole truth. Yes, it would be awkward, but it was bubbling up inside me. I needed to tell him.

Then his cell phone rang. With a sigh, he picked it up. “Hi, Mom.”

I could hear her voice through the phone. She was freaking out, that’s for sure. Tom’s voice was calm. “Yes, Mom, there was an incident up here. We’re fine. Berto showed up, turns out he’s not who we thought he was for all this time, and anyway, he showed up, the police got involved, and we are sitting here talking about it right now.”

I couldn’t hear what she said next, but he looked at me and a smile crossed his face. “Jesus, the gossips are working overtime tonight. Yes, she did shoot him. He’ll be fine. He’s in custody over at the hospital, and I’m glad you aren’t on call tonight because that could have been awkward.”

Whatever she said back made him laugh. “I’ll tell her. How’s Jake?” There was a pause. “Good, tell him I’ll see him tomorrow and I love him.” He took a quick look at his watch. “Shit, don’t wake him. Love you, too.”

He hung up. “Mom says congratulations on shooting him. She’s heard enough from the grapevine that she’s ready to kill him herself.”

That made me laugh. “Tell her I appreciate the vote of confidence.”

By now, my urge to tell him everything had waned. The emotion was still there, I just didn’t want to start a huge conversation right now about it. Maybe tomorrow... I yawned so widely; my jaw made an audible cracking sound.

He stood up and held out his hand. “Come on, princess. Time for you to get some sleep.”

I took his hand, loving the way my hand was swallowed up by his much larger one. It brought an immediate sense of peace and safety. “Okay.”

I was still using my office as my makeshift bedroom. After all, my future bedroom was about to be investigated by the frigging FBI. We walked hand-in-hand into the office, and I paused. “You can take the couch.”

He chuckled. “No, Lily, you can sleep in your own bed tonight. And, before you offer to let me share it with you because you don’t want me sleeping in the chair, the answer would be no.”

Did he mean that? Shit...

My face must have shown my internal turmoil. He reached out to stroke back a curl off my cheek. “My feelings for you and about you haven’t changed over the last few days. But, since you get proposed to this morning, in this very same room, I think it best that you take some time

to figure out where you're at, and"--his eyes were dark and sexy, and I could feel my insides start to melt--"If I get into that bed with you tonight, I will not be able to keep to the being noble as you referred to it earlier."

Well, that was better! He wasn't saying he didn't like me or didn't want me. He was just giving me some time to get my head on straight. That was a sweet thing to do.

I wriggled just a bit. It was sweet and kind. And it wasn't going to help my raging hormones or the ache building in me. Berto had seemed attractive to me, but not like this, not this white hot, swirling mass of emotion and desire.

Shit, I had it bad... Trying to focus on something other than how much I wanted him in my bed, I nodded. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." He pulled out the couch, flipping it open with ease. Then, he turned down the covers. "Get some sleep."

I pulled my sweater up over my head, leaving just my camisole and leggings on. I could sleep in them. Then, I slid under the covers, looking up at him.

Carefully, Tom sat on the edge of the bed, reaching out to smooth the covers over me. His touch was gentle, and it made me smile. Then he leaned over me, gazing at me intently. "Could you please get whatever remains of Berto out of your head and heart sooner rather than later?"

Then he kissed me, and I knew he felt as strongly as I did. I'd never felt emotion and heat as strongly before, with any man.

When he pulled back, I reached up to stroke his cheek. "I will, I promise."

"Good."

Chapter 10

Several hours later, I woke, suddenly aware that I wasn't alone in the room. The momentary panic subsided as I realized that Tom was stretched out in my armchair, his bare feet resting on the ottoman, the afghan barely covering him. I rolled on my side, so I could stare at him in the muted light of the moon, streaming in through the cracks in the curtains. Let's face it, I wanted to memorize every inch of him.

I slowly savored watching him. He was so fucking beautiful. And he'd figured out a way to protect me today, and had stayed tonight, even after all the shit I'd put him through in the process. He was a keeper, that was for sure...

"You know, I can see you checking me out." His tone was amused.

I was mortified. If he could have seen the color of my skin right then, my cheeks would have glowed red. "I was not!"

"You were too, and I did the same to you earlier in the night." He moved in the chair, finding a more comfortable spot. "And you need to stop because it is getting harder and harder for me to stay over here."

"You don't need to."

He shook his head. "I do, and you know it."

Sigh. Just when I'd finally figured out who I wanted, he developed rules. Sometimes life was not fair. I grunted. "Fine. Good night again."

"Good night."

I awoke to the smell of coffee and chocolate. Sitting up, I realized Tom was no longer in the chair. I struggled out of bed, grabbing for clean clothes before I headed to the bathroom for a much-needed shower. As I passed the door to the kitchen, I yelled. "Morning, be right back."

"No rush. I'll be here."

I showered quickly, but then fussed in front of the mirror. For the first time, I wanted to look really good for him. For weeks, months even, he'd seen me in my writing uniform, often after a late night. Usually, I looked well, like hell. No, not like hell. I'm not bad looking even then, but certainly I didn't look like I really cared how I looked. Today, I wanted to look like I cared.

A touch of eyeliner, a brush of mascara, and I pulled my hair back a bit. I stood back from the mirror. I looked good.

Obviously, he'd heard me open the bathroom door because when I got to the kitchen, Tom was pouring me a cup of coffee. I stopped in shock. I wasn't the only one who had dressed to impress that morning.

Jeans, yes, but not the faded and paint-stained ones. A button down, soft blue shirt showed off his physique, and damn, he was fine. Rather than his normal work boots, he had on loafers. I suddenly knew exactly what I wanted for breakfast, and it sure as hell wasn't a pastry.

Yup, I was sunk. He looked good enough to eat. Or marry. Or both...

I swallowed. "Hi." Jesus! My voice sounded like a wistful fourteen-year-old. I cleared my throat. "Good morning, the coffee smells great."

He grinned, clearly aware of how he was affecting me. "Good. I remembered you said you had brought pastries from Montreal, so they are warming." He gestured toward a stool. "Have a seat."

"Thanks." I sat and took a sip of coffee. Should I say it? Shit... "You look really good today."

He stopped in his tracks, half-way to the toaster oven with two plates in his hand. He put them down, turned, and walked around the counter toward me. When he reached me, he turned my stool around like it was nothing at all and put one arm on either side of me to brace himself and leaned down.

His breath was warm. I saw a wolfish smile cross his face, and I could feel myself fight the urge to giggle. "You look good enough to eat. If you're trying to get my attention, Lily, you don't need to work at it, I can promise you that."

I reached up and linked my hands behind his neck and pulled him down toward me. Then I kissed him.

For a split second, I could feel him hesitate, then he growled and leaned into me, kissing me back. It was perfect. Sexy, hot, and unexpected. It hit me. I didn't think I could ever tire of kissing this man.

I pulled back, knowing that I was about to beg him to take me to bed if I didn't put the brakes on right then. "Pastries? I swear I heard the word pastry."

He licked his lower lip, and I almost came undone. Shit, the look of pride in his eyes showed me that he knew exactly what he was doing to me. "I did. Just a moment."

We ate breakfast in relative silence, only having a brief conversation of social niceties. When we were done, I bounced up off that stool like a piece of toast from the toaster. "I'll clean up."

“Okay.” He took a look at his watch. “I’ll call home for a quick check-in, then people should be arriving.”

“Sounds good.”

Chapter 11

Three hours later, I was in shock. Alternating between anger, hurt, grief, and bewilderment, I could feel anxiety growing by the second...

I had just come out of the bathroom after brushing my teeth when I heard the first car arrive. Hurrying to the door, I almost fell over when I realized that James was getting out of his car, which I expected. What I hadn't expected was that David and Megan were with him too. Holy fuck! That was going to make things even more awkward with Tom.

But, then again, I had to admit that for just a moment, seeing the three of them made me feel safe and loved. They were three people who had been in my corner for a hell of a lot of years. It was good they were there.

Just then, a warm hand settled on my waist. Tom's voice was low. "I'm assuming that's your lawyer, and since I've seen his picture, he's with your ex and his wife. Correct?"

His voice was calm. Maybe this was going to go better than I'd thought. "Yes."

He chuckled, then dropped his voice to almost a whisper. "Remember what I said."

"What's that?" I thought I knew what he meant, but I wasn't completely sure.

"I don't share."

I raced from the door to the car, hugging all three of them joyfully. "James! You didn't tell me that you were bringing David and Megan."

He shrugged. "I thought it was time to bring in the troops. Besides, Megan can help make sure I'm not forgetting something with the FBI."

With a spurt of nerves, I motioned to Tom. "James, David, Megan, this is my friend Tom." I took his hand. "Tom, this is James, David and Megan."

He was absolutely charming, shaking hands with each one, commenting something I'd mentioned about them. Just like I had, I could see them immediately liking him.

Then the troopers and FBI arrived. I assumed we would go straight up to the bedroom, but instead, they wanted to talk to us all.

The head FBI guy was named Agent Harrington. Dressed in a dark suit and tie, he looked the part. He cleared his throat, "Ms. Brannan, we have some information we'd like to share with you."

What the hell did that mean? “Okay.”

He opened the black leather portfolio in front of him and handed me a set of photocopied pages. “Overnight, the VSP served a search warrant on Mr. Terrenzini’s house. They found this letter, which was addressed to you.”

I sat back on the couch, looking at the spidery handwriting on the pages in front of me. It was dated almost seven years earlier.

My dearest Lilibelle,

There is nothing that grieves me more in my life than that I only had that one opportunity to meet you in person. The day your mother brought you to meet me was the happiest day of my life.

My son, Paulo, was your father. He had an affair with your mother. At the time, your mother was only seventeen, and Paulo was forty. He also was married with children.

I don’t know if he loved your mother or not, but I do know that to my great dismay, when she told him she was pregnant, he cut her off completely. It was several years after your birth that he finally told me about you, and I was able to contact your mother to offer my support.

Your mother was a woman of rare grace and strength. She wanted nothing from me, having made a life for the two of you. She graciously accepted my letters and did send me information about you. When she died, I would have given anything to raise you myself, but that was not in the cards as my family was not listed in any way on your birth records.

I had always planned to leave this house to you. When you came here that one time, we had just removed the stained glass window from the front hall, and you were entranced by that window. I kept it hidden so it would stay safe for what I hoped would be your return to claim your birthright.

That window is not the only secret in this house. For decades, I have kept an ugly and horrible secret, one that I want to share with you, in hopes that you will pray for my soul and eventually forgive me.

During the Second World War, I was still living in Italy. I was a banker and art appraiser then, living well. When the Third Reich started circling our country, I had a decision to make. I took the coward’s choice and helped those in that evil empire. I helped let them know of the art collections held by clients, and they then seized those works from any members of the Resistance or Jews.

I could see what was happening. I did nothing to stop it. I am so ashamed of that. But then, in an effort to protect myself and my own, I did something I can never forgive myself for. I stole artworks myself, keeping them hidden until I could get them out of the country and bring them here.

When I bought this house, it was for two reasons. One was for the beauty and solitude it provided. The other was that I knew I could hide the works here and keep them safe for the future.

In this house, I have hidden the stained glass window and twenty-three paintings. Each of the paintings is listed on the following pages, along with the provenance, and where I acquired it.

This house is yours. It was the only legacy I could give you. The paintings are yours to do with what you will. I know you will do what is right.

Every letter your mother sent enclosed a picture of you. Those pictures were the greatest gifts I received. I loved you from the second I knew of your existence, and I wish we could have known each other well in person.

I will always be with you, my beloved granddaughter. I am so proud of you, and I love you more than I can tell you.

With all my love,

Angelo Terrenzini, your Nonno

My eyes were huge as I looked up after leafing through the enclosed papers. “He stole the paintings!”

Agent Harrington nodded. “Yes. And we also found more information in Robert’s house. He had known something was up at the house, having known what his grandfather had done and where he’d lived, and that he tried for years to find the paintings with no luck. Then, when his father—” he paused “--your father, died, he found this letter. That was a couple years ago, so he’d gone into overdrive. When you arrived, he wanted to find the paintings before you did.”

“Jesus.”

“Yes. So, we know that you have twenty-three paintings here. We know you’ve found fifteen of them, so we need to find the rest.”

James interrupted. “And what happens then?”

The other agent, an Agent Thomas answered. “Then we take custody of them, have an expert prove they are real, and that the provenance is correct, and determine what happens then.”

I knew what I wanted to do. “If there are still family members alive, I want to return the paintings to them.”

Thomas nodded. “If that is possible, we will help you figure out the logistics.”

It took hours, but we finally found the last set of paintings, hidden in a wall off the dining room. They were all gathered in the dining room for the forensic team to take photos. I stood there,

gazing at them. They were gorgeous, and yet the ugly history associated with them made me queasy. I didn't know how to feel. I had a grandfather, and he'd loved me. He'd done horrible things, and yet he'd hoped I would make it right. I'd had a father, who didn't want anything to do with me. I had a brother, who had tried to trick me into letting him into the house. Jesus, no wonder I was exhausted and confused.

Tom's hands were gentle on my shoulders. "Come with me."

"Why? I should stay here."

"Come on"

I followed him silently, as he walked outside to the big rock behind the barn and sat down. I sat too. He took my hand. "You okay?"

That was it. Those two words were my undoing, and I started to sob.

Without a word, Tom pulled me into to his arms, and let me cry.

Chapter 12

I sat in the kitchen, a pizza box sitting in the middle of the counter, empty wine bottles all around. James, David, Megan and I had just eaten a lot of pizza and had more than a reasonable amount of wine with it.

Tom had gone home, not wanting to be away from Jake for two dinners. I missed him already.

After I'd cried, he wiped my tears, and told me it would all work out. Then, he put a finger under my chin. "And, when this is all over, will you please go out with me?"

That was the best thing I'd heard all day. "Please."

I cleared the debris from dinner. James handed me the empty bottles, which I dropped into the recycling bin. He looked concerned. "So, you understand what is happening, right?"

I nodded. "Yes, the FBI took control of the paintings. If they can prove they are legitimate, and then find the original families, they will be returned. If not, then we will have to decide what to do in terms of next steps."

"Right."

"And you'll be the contact person."

"Yes. And the security team is coming tomorrow to set up the alarm system. If the press wants to talk to you, refer them to me. Got it?"

"I do."

Coming back into the office, I grinned seeing David at my computer, scrolling through my recent work. He heard my footsteps. "Looks good, Lil. Too much dialogue in that last chapter, though."

It felt good to hear that. Life might someday return to normal. "Fuck you, asshole."

Megan was sitting in the armchair, a work file in front of her. She looked up, peering at me over her half-glasses. "So, what's the deal with Tom?"

I smiled. "He's amazing."

"So, then, bestie, get off your ass and make him yours."

Chapter 13

I'd locked up after Megan and David left for the evening. James wanted to keep an eye on me, so we made up a comfortable bed on the office floor. Half-teasing, he whined, "I don't see why we can't sleep in the same bed like we always do."

I grinned. "Because I want to make this work with Tom, and he wouldn't understand what we were doing."

"Oh." He chuckled. "Then could you please make sure you have a guest room the next time I visit?"

"Of course."

I lay in bed thinking about Megan's words. Was it time to make a move on Tom for real? What did I want from him? For him?

Sitting up, I knew exactly what I wanted. It was time to make it happen. "James!" I hissed.

He was clearly sound asleep but roused a bit. "What?"

"I'm going to take a run into town to see Tom. I'll be back soon."

He sat up. "Okay. Drive carefully." He paused. "Can I have your bed?"

I drove through the dark roads with butterflies growing by the second. What was I going to do if he turned me down?

Thankfully, I knew where he lived. I stopped a block away and called him.

He answered on the second ring. "Are you okay?"

"I am." I tried to find the right words. "I'm nearby, can I come over?"

"Of course."

Pulling into his driveway, I turned off the car. It was now or never...

Tom was sitting on the porch, rocking in the swing. He looked at me curiously. "Hey."

"Hey."

He patted the bench beside him. "Want to join me?"

"Please." I sat. "Thanks."

He waited in silence. I took a deep breath. "I need to tell you something."

"Okay."

"When I was in Montreal, I kept thinking about you. But then, I thought that Berto was the easiest, most logical path. I never deluded myself that I was in love with him, but I thought it was worth trying. But when he proposed, all I could think about was the look on your face. In that moment, you were the one I cared about."

"Oh."

"And then when you called out to me last night, calling me Lilibelle, I knew you were trying to tell me something. But when I saw you were in danger, it hit me like a ton of bricks. I was so scared he might hurt you, I wanted to kill him."

"What are you saying?"

I knew exactly what I wanted to say. "I'm saying that I am head over heels in love with you. I want you to be in my life for the rest of my life. I want to be Jake's mom. I want to have babies with you. I want to make a family and a life with you." I took his hand, hoping he wasn't about to break my heart. "Would you please marry me?"

Tom leaned back in the swing in silence. Then he reached out to stroke my cheek. "Are you proposing to me?"

"Never been proposed to before?"

"Never."

He hadn't answered me yet. "So?"

Tom stood up and before I knew what he was doing, he dropped to his knees. "Lily Brannan, there is nothing I want more in this world than to spend the rest of my life loving you. Yes, I will marry you."

I leaned forward. "I love you."

"I love you, too."

Epilogue

Two years later, I chuckled as I walked back into our hotel suite. Jake was almost six now and thought he ruled the world. Currently, he was jumping on the bed like a wildman. Baby Violet, who was just a year old, was lying on a blanket in the sunshine, her daddy next to her tickling her stomach.

“Mommy!” Jake screamed.

I kissed his forehead. “Hi, buddy.”

Tom reached up his hand to take mine. “How’d it go?”

“Great. The exhibit is ready for the opening.”

Five of the paintings no longer had rightful owners. Finally, I’d arranged for the entire group to be exhibited for one month to raise awareness of the Holocaust. Tomorrow night, the exhibit would open.

Tom got to his feet, coming over to kiss me slowly. “I’m so proud of you.”

“I couldn’t have done it without you.” I nibbled on his lower lip. “Later on, I’ll show you how grateful I am.”

“Can’t wait.”

Want to connect with author Kris Francoeur?

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Kris’ novel *Tomorrow and Yesterday* is available on Amazon and other online retailers, as is her memoir *Of Grief, Garlic, and Gratitude*.

Late 2021 or early 2022, Kris will release her newest novel, *Competing with the Dead Man* with Between the Lines Publishing. Three other novels, *That One Small Omission*, *More Than I Can Say*, and *That Missed Call* will also be re-released by Between the Lines Publishing in the winter of 21/22.