

# JUSTICE DELAYED

PATRICIA  
BRADLEY



*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Patricia Bradley, *Justice Delayed*  
Revell Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2017. Used by permission.

(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

© 2017 by Patricia Bradley

Published by Revell  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287  
www.revellbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file at the Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

ISBN 9780800727086 (paper)  
ISBN 9780800728588 (print on demand)

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

17 18 19 20 21 22 23      7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Patricia Bradley, *Justice Delayed*  
Revell Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2017. Used by permission.

(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

In memory of Mary Sue Seymour,  
who exemplified the fruit of the Spirit.  
“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace,  
forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,  
gentleness and self-control. Against such  
things there is no law.” (Galatians 5:22–23)

# PROLOGUE

## NEW YEAR'S EVE

Paris, France. She should be ecstatic to be here on the cusp of a new year. Stephanie Hollister pushed aside the hotel's heavy brocade curtains and looked out over the city. The setting sun provided a beautiful backdrop for the Eiffel Tower. She didn't have to ask how her ex-boyfriend afforded such a room.

Stephanie turned from the window, and her mouth dried as she stared at the diamonds on the crimson duvet. Briefly, she closed her eyes, but the image of the stones remained, and she opened her eyes again.

"Beautiful, aren't they? Not a one under three carats." JD's voice was as slick as snake oil.

Stephanie clenched her jaw. She had promised herself after the last shipment that there wouldn't be another. She drew her gaze away from the bed.

"I told you last time was it." She hated the fluttering in her voice. She hated, too, the way her heart pounded just from being this close to him. *Get a grip. He used you.*

"It'll be ten thousand cash, like before."

Ten thousand dollars could not buy peace of mind or wash away

the shame of breaking the law. “I only came here to tell you to leave me alone. If you don’t, I’ll . . . turn you in to the authorities.”

“That would not be a wise thing to do.” He ran his thumb down her cheek.

The suggestion in his eyes sent shivers through her body. *He only wants what you’ll do for him.* She scooped the diamonds into the velvet pouch beside them and slapped the bag into his hands. “Get Jillian to do it—what’s a few more diamonds for her to smuggle? And don’t ever ask me to smuggle diamonds for you again. I’m not doing it.”

He grabbed her wrist. “Don’t get any bright ideas about going to the authorities. I’d hate for anything to happen to that pretty little sister of yours.”

“You touch my sister and I’ll kill you.”

He laughed softly, the menace in his face vanishing as he released her arm. “You know I wouldn’t hurt her. So, when’s your flight leave?”

His personality changed like a chameleon. She wanted to step away and escape the seductive scent of his aftershave, but his gaze kept her feet from moving. “Two hours. You’re not on it?”

“No. I’m not going back until the weekend. So I have a couple of days to see the sights of Gay Paree.” He fingered the top button of her blouse, sliding it open. “Too bad you can’t hang around.”

“Yeah, too bad.” Stephanie jerked away from him and turned again toward the view of the Eiffel Tower. Not in a million years. She fastened her button, then gathered her purse and jacket. She would not come under his spell again.

“See you in the States.” His voice held a promise.

Not if she saw him first. She shut the door firmly behind her.



On board the 747, Stephanie’s fingers shook as she adjusted a passenger’s carry-on and closed the overhead bin. As hard as saying no had been, she’d done it. Then why didn’t she feel . . . free?

Because he'd crooked his little finger, and she'd gone running to him. Had she really believed JD wanted to see *her*? It was never about her, always about him. *He* didn't take the risk. No, he had his network of flight attendants to do the dirty work for him.

Stephanie shivered. That first, and only, time she'd been standing in line to go through customs, she realized if they caught her smuggling the diamonds into the States, she would face jail time. The thought scared her so much that she almost fainted. She'd seen JD for who he really was that day, and she didn't like what she'd become because of him.

But that hadn't been the only reason she refused to smuggle again. She hadn't known a lot about conflict diamonds because she chose not to, but one day while she was flipping through the TV channels, she stopped on a story about the diamond mines in Sierra Leone.

When she saw the emaciated children mining for the rough stones, the horror of what she'd done hit her. It was because of people like her who looked the other way that children were forced into slave labor, working twelve hours a day or more to pan for the stones. And it didn't end there. The documentary went on to show thirteen-year-old boys bent over a table for hours, squinting through an eyeglass as they cut and polished the gems. She couldn't be a part of that again.

"You want to give me a hand here?" Her co-attendant stood on tiptoes, pushing against a bulging duffel bag.

"Sure, Lacey." She frowned at the weight of the bag, wondering how the passenger got the bag up there in the first place.

"Thanks." Lacey Wilson dusted her hands. "Did you see JD?"

Stephanie jerked her head around. She'd told no one she was meeting him and shot her friend a warning frown, then ignored Lacey until they'd secured the cabin.

Once they were in the air and in the relative privacy of the galley, Lacey asked the question again.

“What are you talking about?” Stephanie said.

Lacey shrugged. “I saw the note with the Hôtel Plaza Athénée on it. I figured you were meeting him, since we don’t know anyone else who could afford to stay there. You’re smuggling again, aren’t you? Does Jillian know you went to see JD?”

“No.” The disapproval in Lacey’s voice about her seeing JD again sent a dart straight to Stephanie’s heart. How had she let herself get taken in by JD’s charm, knowing that her best friend Jillian was in love with him? Shame filled her again.

A call light flashed, and Stephanie said, “I’ll take care of that.”

“I don’t believe you.” Lacey grabbed her arm. “He’s not worth it, Steph. Don’t do it. He’ll discard you like yesterday’s news when he gets tired of you. Look how he treated Jillian.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Stephanie shook her hand off.

She turned, and several passengers in first class averted their gaze. Heat crawled up her neck. Hopefully, they’d only heard the tail end of the conversation. She lifted her chin and flipped a switch in her brain. Everything except her duties faded for the next ten hours as they winged toward Memphis International Airport.

Once they were off the plane, Stephanie hurried to the parking garage.

“Can I catch a ride?” Lacey asked.

She was tempted to say no, but that was silly. If Lacey wanted to get on her case, she could do it at her parents’ old house they shared with three other women. A house her parents would be returning to as soon as they found a buyer for her mom’s dream home. “Sure.”

Lacey got in the car, and Stephanie drove her small Miata toward I-240. In the passenger seat, Lacey sighed.

“When do we have to be out of the house?” she asked. “I know Jillian has found an apartment near Memphis State so she can

finish her degree in her off hours, but I just wondered how much time we had.”

“By the end of the month.” Maybe she should have taken the diamonds. Ten thousand dollars would go a long way to help her parents until her dad could get another job, and then maybe they wouldn’t have to move.

No. It was wrong, and besides, her dad wouldn’t take money from her without knowing where it came from. To escape her thoughts, Stephanie turned on the radio and cranked up the volume. Strains of “Where Have All the Cowboys Gone?” filled the car.

Lacey switched the music off and faced her. “When do you deliver the diamonds?”

Stephanie had hoped that Lacey would decide to drop that subject. “It’s not really any of your business, but I’m not.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Well, I can’t help that.” Stephanie was too tired to argue with her.

“Look, I know you want to help your parents, but you were out of this business. God knows I wish I were. JD would give you money if he cared about you.”

“I don’t want *anything* from him.” It would do no good to argue with Lacey about whether she was smuggling diamonds or not. When her friend got something into her head, there was no changing it. “And please, never mention anything about JD and me around Jillian. It would crush her to know what happened.”

“Don’t worry. I don’t want her hurt, either,” Lacey said. “But you should have thought about that before you got involved with him.”

“They weren’t seeing each other when I dated him, and I thought their relationship was over.” It had almost killed her when JD and Jillian got back together, but her pain wasn’t Jillian’s fault. Stephanie slowed to exit the interstate. No, she owned that mistake. And Lacey was right. She and Jillian not only worked together



but also lived in the same house. Stephanie should have known it would get sticky.

Her friend shook her head. “I’ve never seen what you two see in him. Jillian says it’s because he’s exciting and she’s never bored, but how about you?”

“No one else ever made me feel the way he did,” she said. That was hardly an explanation, but she didn’t know how else to explain her attraction to JD. It wasn’t so much his good looks, which he had plenty of, but the way he carried himself, the confidence he exuded. He was the kind of man mothers warned their daughters to stay clear of. Her friends didn’t understand why she seemed to be drawn to men with bad-boy attitudes.

*She* understood. These men, who could have anyone they wanted, chose her. And she believed she would be the one who would reform them.

Except it hadn’t worked. Especially not with JD. Stephanie doubted anyone could tame him. He’d caught her in a vulnerable moment and then used that mistake to continue a relationship in secret once he and Jillian reconnected.

She turned into the drive and pulled to the back of the house to her pottery studio. “Be careful you don’t make the same mistake with Adam Matthews.”

“Adam is not like JD.”

Stephanie snorted. “He’s a man, isn’t he?” She opened her car door.

Lacey put her hand on Stephanie’s arm. “Wait. I’m your friend, and I hate to see you get back in this mess. You stopped once, don’t get involved again. If I had your courage, I would stop too. So would Jillian.”

She sighed. “I don’t know how to be any clearer. I. Am. Not. Smuggling. Diamonds.”

Lacey’s eyes narrowed. “If that’s true, then you better watch your back. JD can be very vindictive.” She bit her bottom lip.

“And I don’t think you should talk to the cops. They might not believe you once they know you smuggled a package of diamonds through customs.”

“It’s the only reason I’ve kept quiet. My dad would be so disappointed in me if he ever found out. But I’m not doing it again.”

“Good.” Lacey opened the passenger door. “I’m going upstairs to take a nap.”

“And I have work to do in the pottery shop,” Stephanie said as she climbed out of the small car. Although as tired as she was, resting a bit tempted her, but she’d been commissioned to make a horse sculpture, and it waited.

At the shop door, Stephanie rummaged for the brass skeleton key in her purse, and it slipped from her hands. She tried to catch it but only succeeded in turning the purse upside down. With a huff, she knelt to gather the scattered items. Her fingers hovered over a soft velvet pouch.

Where had that come from? It wasn’t hers. Gingerly, she picked it up and peered inside at three dirty-looking pieces of glass. Stephanie closed her eyes and tamped down the nausea that rolled up from her stomach.

How had JD gotten the uncut diamonds in her purse? *The window*. When she’d gazed out the window at the Eiffel Tower. She ground her molars until pain shot to her ears. What if customs had gone through her purse?

She once more bent down and retrieved the key to the studio. Inside the darkened room, she sat at her worktable.

The police. Yes. That’s what she’d do. She’d go to them and explain everything, and she would take the journal where she’d documented every step of the smuggling process. But first she’d have to get it from her bedroom. She glanced toward the fireplace, where she’d hidden sheets torn from the middle of the journal. No, that was her ace in the hole. She rose to go get the journal, then sat back down.

JD had said he had friends in high places. He would deny everything and point out she was the one with the diamonds. What if they didn't believe her?

She buried her face in her hands. She needed time to think. *Wait.* JD wouldn't be home for a day or two. If she could just get some sleep, she could think more clearly. But she needed to hide the diamonds. She lifted her head, and the first thing she saw was the wrapped sculpture.

Stephanie dumped the three diamonds on her worktable and then unwrapped the half-finished horse sculpture. With deft hands, she pressed two of the diamonds between the wires supporting the belly and slid the third one between the withers, then smoothed clay over them. When she finished, she examined her work.

Perfect.

# 1

## 18 YEARS LATER

Andi Hollister flipped her wipers on high. It was a lousy night to be on I-240. The early April thunderstorms that swept across Arkansas earlier in the day were now taking dead aim on Memphis. A cloud had swallowed the setting sun, making it seem much later than six o'clock.

She took the airport exit and gripped the steering wheel as her Corolla hydroplaned, sending the car sliding toward the outside of the curve. A second later, the tires regained traction, and she blew out a breath. At least she'd lost all the traffic heading in to the FedEx Forum for the first game of the Final Four.

This was the first time in years that the University of Memphis Tigers had made it to the finals of March Madness. The town was crazy, traffic was crazy, and now the weather was crazy. Her cell phone played "Rainy Days and Mondays." Treece. If Andi didn't answer, Treece would call out the National Guard. She pressed the answer button on the steering wheel. "Hello, Ms. Rogers."

"Where are you?" The drumming rain practically drowned out Treece's voice.

"Almost to the airport." The two of them had worked together

since after college, when they both went to work for WLTZ as reporters, Andi reporting the weather and Treece the traffic.

Andi slowed as she approached the terminal, searching for the entry to the short-term parking garage. Lacey had said to wait for her at the Delta check-in area, that she would find her.

“I don’t feel good about this,” Treece said. “You don’t even know this woman or if she’s actually Lacey Wilson. It could be someone pretending to be your sister’s old roommate.”

Andi lowered her window, rain dripping off her car onto her arm as she punched the button for a parking ticket. She took the ticket the meter spit out. A dark SUV appeared in Andi’s mirror, almost on her bumper.

“Are you still there?” Treece asked.

“I’m trying to get into the short-term garage,” Andi said as the arm lifted and she pulled forward inside the garage. She followed the arrows to the fourth level, looking for a parking spot. “And I’m not in any danger—what could go wrong with a hundred TSA agents around?”

She spotted an empty space and wheeled into it.

“You have to ask that after the trouble you get into?”

“That was three months ago.” Treece was referring to when she ruptured a disc in her back while climbing a fence to video a pit bull chained outside in the cold weather with no shelter.

“I am not talking about three months ago, I’m talking about two weeks ago when I taped you interviewing that gang leader, and he lost his temper. If Reggie hadn’t insisted on coming with us—”

“Interviewing him seemed like a good idea at the time.” Until Treece’s cop boyfriend had to twist the gang leader’s arm behind his back after he blew his top and threatened her. The Memphis police lieutenant hadn’t liked Treece videoing Andi’s segments after that. “Even you thought it’d be a good story.”

“After that episode, my perspective is a little different. You have to be more careful.”

"I'm trying to change, but investigative reporting comes with risk. I hope you're not thinking about changing fields," Andi said.

"No, at least not yet."

"Good." Treece had been her friend since grade school, and while she was a good reporter, she was also the best videographer the station had. Andi tossed the parking stub on the dash before unhooking her seat belt. The SUV inched by her car, and she tried to see the driver. *Isn't it against the law for windows to be tinted that dark?*

"What's going on? You're not meeting this woman inside the garage, are you?"

"No. We're meeting at the Delta check-in, and don't be such a worrywart. I need to do this. She promised answers about my sister. How could I say no?" Andi had so many unanswered questions about Steph and her life just before she was killed, and it wasn't a topic anyone in her family talked about.

"I hope she tells you more than she did the last time you two met."

"Yeah, me too." Andi had met Lacey for lunch once before, thinking the woman might share information about Steph, but she'd talked around every question Andi asked.

"Call me as soon as your meeting is over," Treece said, "and don't let your overconfidence get you into trouble. Got it?"

"You're not old enough to be giving me orders."

"Somebody needs to," Treece said dryly.

"I'm going in now."

Andi climbed out of her car, gritting her teeth at the pain in her back. She reached into the car and grabbed a water bottle, then took out a small prescription bottle and shook a pill into her hand. After gulping the pill down, she scanned the cavernous building and shivered.

Underground tombs. That's what these garages were. Using her phone, she snapped a photo of her parking spot with the Level 4

and Row 7 signs in the background. A few rows over, a woman her age rolled her luggage smartly toward the elevator, and since Andi did not want to be locked in that elevator alone, she hurried after her. At least the woman looked athletic enough to help her climb out in case the elevator stalled between floors. Of course, she could take the stairs.

*Uh, no.* She'd seen too many suspense movies. And it had only been a month ago that she'd reported on a mugging in the stairwell at the airport. No telling who or what she'd encounter in the two flights of stairs down to the walkover. Wails from a child caught her attention, and she looked to her right, where a young mother balanced a baby in one arm while another child tugged at her skirt as she tried to unlock her car door.

She shifted her gaze back to the woman approaching the elevator. If Andi hurried, she could catch her. The thump of keys hitting concrete pulled her back to the mother, and their eyes connected. Fatigue was etched in the mother's face and the slump of her shoulders.

The elevator dinged open, and the woman with the suitcase called out, "Would you like me to hold the door?"

"Uh . . ." *Get on the elevator.* Her feet itched to go, and then she sighed. "No. Appreciate it, though."

Andi turned to the mother. "I'll get those keys and unlock the door for you."

"Thank you so much," the mother said, shifting the baby to the other arm and smoothing her toddler's hair.

"No problem." Andi smiled at the small girl, who wrapped her arms around her mother's leg. Andi scooped the keys up and minutes later had the family on their way home.

When the elevator ride to the walkover was uneventful, she laughed at her fear. She could face a gang leader but let an enclosed box get to her. She really did need to work on that.

Inside the terminal, the check-in queues were practically empty.

Evidently not many people were flying out of Memphis on a rainy Tuesday night. She found a seat where she could watch the doors and waited.

Thirty minutes later she checked her watch. Where was Lacey? She'd been adamant about meeting *tonight* and that her flight boarded at seven twenty. Andi called her for the second time and left a message, asking where she was.

Forty minutes later, she grabbed her bag and walked out of the airport and back to her car. Lacey was a no-show. It wasn't like Andi had never been stood up, but she hadn't expected it from Lacey. Not after the way she'd pressed her to come tonight.

The ringtone for Treece sounded again, and Andi answered. "I haven't called because she never showed."

"I bet you're hungry, then. There's pizza left. Then we can work on the outline for the cold case documentary."

"Be home in fifteen." The documentary on cold case murders and the one on runaways were their tickets to cinching anchor spots at the TV station or even to bigger markets, like Dallas or Atlanta. Then, maybe they'd attract the attention of one of the Big Three. They wouldn't turn down a cable news network, either.

She glanced in her side mirror as she exited the airport. Halos circled the car lights coming alongside her, and in the foggy mist she saw she was in the wrong lane and almost missed the exit for I-240. She glanced sharply over her shoulder, and when the lane was empty, she shot over. Her breath caught as a dark SUV with tinted windows swept past her under the lights. It looked like the one she'd seen earlier. Was it following her? Or was her vivid imagination kicking in again? No. If she hadn't abruptly changed lanes, she would have never known the car was behind her.

She kept an eye out for the SUV as she drove to Midtown and was prepared to drive past the older two-story home where she lived if she spotted the vehicle again. Andi checked her rearview mirror and saw that the street was empty. She turned into the



drive and pulled behind the 1940s house that had been turned into three apartments.

Mrs. Casey, the older woman who owned the house, occupied the first floor, and Andi and Treece lived in the two upstairs apartments. Instead of taking the outside stairs, Andi went through the back door on the main floor to pick up her mail that Mrs. Casey always placed on the hallway table.

Bill, bill, advertisement. She looked up as Treece peered over the bannister, a grin pasted on her face. “Don’t say ‘I told you so,’” Andi said.

Treece descended the steps, holding a pitcher in one hand. “I was thinking more along the lines that you must have been speeding to get here so quickly. You’re going to get caught one of these days.”

“Nah.” Andi shook her head and climbed the stairs. “But if I do, I’ll get Brad to fix it. Or Will.”

This time Treece laughed out loud, her dark eyes dancing. “You know that’s not happening. They might hover over you like mother hens, but neither of them has *ever* fixed one of your tickets.”

Andi gave her a sour look. They were mother hens, all right. Had been ever since she was diagnosed with a bad heart valve as a child. Her protectors, they called themselves. Guards, she’d called them, and their attitude hadn’t changed after her surgery, and had lasted even to this day. “What are you doing with the pitcher?”

“Mrs. Casey called from Nashville. She forgot to water her plants and asked if we would do it,” Treece said as she unlocked their landlord’s door. “If you’ll help me, it’ll be quicker.”

“Sure.” Andi followed her friend inside the apartment that was directly under Treece’s, where they found another pitcher and filled it with water. Fifteen minutes later the plants were watered, and she and Treece were climbing the stairs.

“I have the makings for a salad if you’d like it to go with your pizza,” Treece said.

“That sounds good,” Andi said as they topped the stairs and she

walked to her door. “I think I’m going to change into something more comfortable. Do I need to bring over anything for the salad?”

“I don’t think so.” Her friend tilted her head. “Why do you think Lacey didn’t show?”

She hesitated with her hand on the door. Maybe she’d eat first, then come home and take a hot shower and go to bed. “I don’t know, but it sure wasn’t any fun driving to the airport.”

“Did you ever figure out who the person was that she mentioned on the phone?”

Lacey had rambled about someone. Andi tried to recall the name. “Do you remember who I said it was?”

Treece shook her head. “No. Only that you said she mentioned a name.”

“It was someone with initials . . .” She shrugged and trailed Treece into her apartment. Whenever they got together, whether it was for work or for social reasons, they always gravitated to Treece’s apartment. Maybe it was because she cooked, or because her apartment was more inviting.

She glanced around Treece’s living room. Their apartment layouts mirrored each other, but that’s where the similarity ended. Other than a couple of paintings, Andi’s walls were bare, and she certainly didn’t have knickknacks sitting around waiting to be dusted. The only pottery she owned was a sculpture her sister had been working on when she was murdered.

Treece, on the other hand, was a decorating maven. Bright paint covered the walls and bold fabric hung on the windows. African pottery, along with pieces from local artists, graced tables and bookcases. Andi really did need to make an effort to spruce things up over on her side.

She set her bag on the counter. “Where’s that pizza? I’m starving.”

Treece pointed to the top of the stove. “Microwave or oven?”

“Not the microwave,” Andi said, turning on the oven.

“While we wait for it to reheat, tell me more about this friend

of your sister. You wouldn't discuss her this morning, but I think you need to. Was she there the night Stephanie . . . ?”

Andi's stomach curdled. She'd managed all day to push that night out of her mind. She'd been barely thirteen, and two days after the funeral, she'd had surgery to replace a heart valve.

Steph had been eight years older than Andi, and Andi idolized her big sister. Finding out who Steph was as an adult had been the reason for agreeing to meet Lacey at the airport. Not to discuss Stephanie's death—the man who killed her sat on death row.

Andi turned around and slid the pizza into the oven. “I don't remember. And I still don't want to talk about it. Let it go. Okay?”

When she turned back around, her heart sank. Treece had that reporter gleam in her eyes that said she was not dropping the subject. Andi broke off a stalk of celery for her salad. Why did people always think they knew what was best for her? She sliced the celery in the wooden bowl with a rounded Ulu blade. She did not want to discuss Stephanie's death.

“That celery isn't your enemy,” Treece said. “What I can't understand is why you won't discuss your sister. You never back away from anything, except Stephanie's death.”

“There's nothing to discuss. My sister's ex-boyfriend shot and killed her. My mom and I found Jimmy Shelton sitting by her body with the gun. He confessed, and Sunday night it will finally be over. What else is there to talk about?”

“For one thing, from what I read about the case on the internet, he recanted the confession. Said it was coerced.”

Andi stared at her friend. She'd been researching Jimmy's trial?

Before she could say anything, Treece continued. “And another thing, he's Will Kincade's cousin. How do you handle it with him?”

Will was her brother's best friend, and lately her heart had been reacting strangely when she was around him. She placed a carrot in the wooden bowl and attacked it with the blade. “We don't talk about it.”

“Here, let me make your salad before you turn everything into mush.” Treece took the knife away from her. “How do you feel when you think about your sister’s death?”

Andi pinched her mouth together as her friend raked the carrot into a bowl of lettuce and dropped a handful of grape tomatoes on top. “Horrible, Dr. Phil. That’s how I feel. And angry that Jimmy is alive and Stephanie isn’t. Anything else?”

“You haven’t forgiven him.”

Andi narrowed her eyes, ignoring the dart of guilt pricking her conscience. “Forgive him? How do you expect me to forgive him for taking Stephanie’s life? I was ten when she left home for college, thirteen when she died, and I never got the chance to really know her. Satisfied?”

Treece palmed her hands up. “Sorry, didn’t mean to rile you. So how’s it going with Will? And don’t tell me you’re not attracted to him.”

“Give me a break. I haven’t had time for a boyfriend. Besides, I know better than to fall for him—he only sees me like a sister. No way would it ever work out. And how about you?”

“We’re not talking about me.”

Andi wasn’t going to let it go that easily, not if it would shift the conversation to Treece’s boyfriend problems. “Have you called Reggie? Or answered any of his texts?” She raised her eyebrows, waiting. “See, I’m not the only one who doesn’t like to get up close and personal.”

Before Treece could say anything, Andi grabbed her apartment key. “And now I’m going to go across the hall and get my bottle of raspberry vinaigrette.”

Andi fled the apartment, leaving Treece with her mouth gaping. Sometimes she pushed their friendship too far. *She worries.* Andi pushed the thought away. Living next door to Treece at times was like living at home with her parents.

Andi unlocked her door and frowned. She didn’t remember

leaving the living room light on. Had to do better than that if she was going to cut her electric bill.

She was halfway to the refrigerator when the unmistakable click of the door shutting stopped her. The apartment plunged into darkness. Andi froze, her heart pummeling her chest. She turned to run, but rough hands yanked her back in a chokehold. Cold steel pressed against her temple.

“Yell, and your friend dies along with you.”

The raspy whisper raked her senses. Andi’s mind whirled, seeking an escape. As if he read her thoughts, he tightened his grip around her neck, cutting off her air.

“Where are they?”

Black dots swam in her vision. She tried to answer him. “What—”

His arm relaxed slightly, but the gun barrel pressed harder against her head. “I won’t hesitate to kill you,” he said. “Now where are they?”

“What? I don’t know . . .” Her lungs cried for air.

“The diamonds. You have them. They belong to me.”

“I . . . can’t . . . breathe . . .”