The Connellys of County Down

a novel

TRACEY LANGE

Also by Tracey Lange

We Are the Brennans

The Connellys of County Down

Tracey Lange

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To all the O'Hares of County Down

Especially Louis O'Hare

R.I.P. Dad

Fairy tales do not give the child his first idea of bogey. What fairy tales give the child is his first clear idea of the possible defeat of bogey. The baby has known the dragon intimately ever since he had an imagination. What the fairy tale provides for him is a St. George to kill the dragon.

—G. K. Chesterton

Chapter One

When the unit intercom buzzed and the cell door rattled open on its old metal track that morning, Tara breathed a heavy sigh of relief and swore it was the last time she'd ever hear that racket in her life. For 525 consecutive mornings that noise had signaled the start to a day that looked just like the one before, another day when she was told exactly what to do and exactly when to do it.

She'd been restless most of the night, wired with anxiety. Until she walked out the door of that place, something could still go wrong. That wasn't likely. She had yet to see one woman's release date changed this late in the game. But that's how it was when she let herself want something so damn much. The closer she got to getting it, the more she doubted it.

Jeannie had snored like a trucker as usual, but Tara hadn't bothered nudging the upper bunk with her foot to get her cellmate to turn over and quiet down. It wouldn't have helped. When the alarm went off at 6:30 a.m., Tara was sitting on her bunk, back against the cinder block wall, knees pulled up to her chest. While she waited she listened, peeled apart the sounds that fused together to create the early-morning white noise of prison life: the ring of a telephone and the guards' distant conversation, echoes of a cough here and a clearing of a throat there, bodies turning over in their bunks—seeking, for the last few moments of rest, a comfortable position on a metal frame covered by a two-inch mat.

Less than an hour to go. They'd told her to be ready to leave her cell by seven thirty, before morning roll call. The discharge process would be fairly quick, then her sister, Geraldine, would be waiting outside in the parking lot. Tara had hoped her brother would pick her up; Geraldine had a way of shredding Tara's nerves in short order. On their last phone call

three days ago Tara subtly asked about it—*I know how busy you are, Ger. Maybe Eddie could make the trip.* But Geraldine shot that down, saying Eddie shouldn't lose a day's wages and rock the boat at work by asking for time off, never mind so he could pick his sister up *from prison*, she had added, whispering the last two words, no doubt in case anyone around her overheard.

Jeannie started moving around above her, but Tara didn't get up right away. There was nothing for her to do at the moment. The running around had been done yesterday: returning library books, tendering all prison-issued clothing and linens except for what she was wearing, stopping by medical to get cleared. She wasn't prescribed any pills to take with her. Unlike the majority of the women at the Taconic Correctional Facility she'd managed to sidestep any dependence on drugs—prescribed meds or contraband narcotics. Though she'd started smoking cigarettes again, a habit she'd quit almost ten years ago.

Her packing was done, and she'd said most of her goodbyes the night before. It was more emotional than she thought it would be, saying goodbye to some of the girls. Prison made for unexpected friendships. There were women from all walks of life serving time at Taconic. Medium security was a catchall for everything between white collar and the most serious felonies. If someone committed fraud or laundered money, they generally went to minimum security, aka prison camp. If the crime was serious, the sentence long, and the person had priors, they usually did their time in maximum. Tara had hoped for minimum; transporting stolen opioids was not a violent crime. But because it was across state lines and she had a previous assault charge on her record, the Bureau of Prisons points system dictated she do her time in medium.

It worked out okay. She'd always known how to take care of herself. It came from growing up in a home with little parental supervision, in one of the poorer neighborhoods of Port Chester, one of the poorer towns in Westchester County. But Eddie always had her back when they were kids, when her tendency to buck the rules would land her in the hot seat. He would either help her get out of trouble or suffer alongside her. In Taconic, she was utterly alone.

Her show-no-fear strategy had gotten her into a little trouble initially.

When she didn't follow all the guards' rules she was restricted to her cell until she figured it out. When she didn't follow all the inmates' rules she paid a physical toll, though that was just the one time. For the most part she stayed on the fringe and observed until she learned how it all worked. In the end, prison was a lot like high school. There was a hierarchy, with the most significant offenders at the top. They had committed major crimes and would be there the longest, though most of those women weren't very scary. A lot of domestic abuse victims who'd finally struck back or addicts who had committed enough drug crimes to earn a long mandatory sentence. Everyone else resided within a tentative clique of some kind, sometimes determined by race or language or religion, sometimes by education or employment background. Repeat offenders tended to hang together, as did the lowest and most hated on the totem pole: the child abusers.

Like in her years at Port Chester High School, Tara was able to avoid making any real enemies at Taconic. She kept friendships pretty loose, other than Jeannie, but got along with most of the women there. Most of the guards too, except for a few menacing assholes—including a couple of female guards—and she made damn sure never to get caught alone with them. That was one thing she wouldn't miss. Being so vigilant all the time was exhausting.

Jeannie's bare lower legs appeared over the side of the top bunk as she finally sat up. "When you leave," she said around a yawn, "I'm taking that bunk. Tired of climbing up and down."

Tara stood and stretched, headed over to the sink to brush her teeth. She glanced at the sheet of polished metal that was supposed to pass for a mirror. All she saw was a distorted pale face framed by blurry copper waves. "You should switch the mattresses," she told Jeannie. "Mine's thin as paper."

Jeannie nodded, her black corkscrew curls bouncing on both sides of her round face. She half slid, half hopped down from her bunk, kissed her fingertips, and pressed them to the eight-by-ten school portrait of her eight-year-old daughter, Chloe, which hung on the wall opposite their bunks. Then she started changing into the forest-green top and pants every inmate at Taconic wore. She had four months to go on a ten-month

stint for repeatedly writing bad checks. Her dickhead boyfriend put her up to it and walked away scot-free when she got busted. Funny how many of them had a similar story, doing time for some man.

While Jeannie dressed, Tara turned to the small desk they'd shared since becoming cellmates six months ago. She opened the midsize cardboard box that held the belongings she was taking: her many sketch pads and pencils, some drawings and family photos that had been taped above her bunk, a large stack of homemade cards from her ten-year-old nephew, Conor. The letter from her father was in there, though she wasn't sure why. She'd read it once and never responded.

She pulled out the handful of cigarettes she had slid in the box the night before and studied them. She should just leave them behind, quit cold turkey as she exited this place. Jeannie didn't smoke, but she could trade them for something. Someone was always hunting for cigarettes. Tara folded her hand around the Marlboros that had been smuggled in by a guard or somebody's family member or friend during a visit. She never knew who or where the cigs originated from, just traded for them when she got the chance, usually food, sometimes one of her sketches. If Geraldine saw them, Tara would never hear the end of it. But just the thought of her sister made her want to light one up, so she slid them back in the box.

Next Tara pulled out a folder, laid it on the desk, and touched her fingertips to it. "This is for Chloe," she said, glancing at the school portrait. "It's the last four installments. You can give them all to her next weekend or dole them out over the next month." Jeannie's mother was taking care of Chloe while Jeannie served her time, and every weekend, without fail, they made the four-hour round-trip from Albany to visit her.

Tara hadn't had a visitor in over four months. Her family lived thirty miles away.

Jeannie shook her head and pressed a fist to a hip. "I can't believe you did all this, T."

"I wanted to finish the story." It was more like a comic book. Chloe had cerebral palsy and walked with two canes. Not long after Jeannie moved into her cell, Tara caught her crying one night because she had nothing to send her daughter for her birthday. A couple days later Tara offered her a comic strip that depicted Chloe using her special power—canes that became ultramagnets at her command—to save a dog from an

evil dogcatcher. Chloe loved it so much Tara expanded it to a series over the past few months, giving the heroine a nemesis, Dr. Doom, who was trying to take over Chloe's hometown.

"Does she finally get rid of that Dr. Doom?" Jeannie asked.

"She turns her canes up to their highest magnetic strength and uses them to crush him." Tara smacked her palms together. "She lets him live, but he's harmless after that."

Jeannie laughed. "She's gonna love that." Her head tilted. "You know, these comics have meant so much to her."

Tara shrugged a shoulder. "I'm just glad she liked them."

"I bet Conor loved his too."

"He said in his letters he hung them all up in his room."

Jeannie's brows pinched together in concern. "You sure you gonna be okay, going back to live with that brother and sister of yours?" She was twenty-six, four years younger than Tara, but Jeannie had a natural mother hen thing going on. And she made no bones about how little she thought of Eddie and Geraldine. *What kind of brother and sister don't visit more when they live right down the road? That ain't right.*

Tara had given up making excuses for them. "I'll be fine," she said.

"Connelly." The raspy voice belonged to Linda Morelli, a short, compact guard with a gray flattop. "You ready to check out of this place?" she asked, crossing her arms.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well, let's go." Morelli tossed her head down the cellblock. "I have the privilege of escorting you through processing."

"I guess this is it," Jeannie said. "Damn. Who's gonna listen to all my stories about Chloe and nag me to exercise? God knows who I'm gonna get up in here next."

Tara folded down the flaps on her box. "Hope it's someone who can sleep through your snoring."

But Jeannie didn't smile. "I mean it, T. I don't know how I would have survived without you in the beginning."

"You would have been fine."

Jeannie, quite a bit taller and wider than Tara, enveloped her in a hug. "You stay in touch, and be good now. No more running drugs for that asshole."

"You too," Tara said. "No more writing bad checks for that other asshole."

Morelli cleared her throat. "If this is gonna take a while, I can come back later."

Tara stepped away from Jeannie and smiled at her. "We'll talk soon," she said. Then she picked up her box and followed Morelli.

Relief rushed through her whole body as she stepped out of that cell for the last time.

But then a wave of panic sideswiped her so suddenly she stopped walking for a moment to catch her breath, pretending to get a better grip on the box in her hands.

It was impossible to put into words how much she wanted to leave Taconic behind. The crushing claustrophobia she had to beat down every time they locked the cell doors, the mind-numbing sameness of every day, the tragic stories of the women around her—many of whom missed their kids so much they cried through the night, or were so hungry for intimacy they turned to each other, or were in so much emotional pain their only release was to make it physical by cutting themselves with dull blades pried from cheap commissary razors.

But when she looked ahead, down that cellblock toward the exit, the overwhelming openness of it all hit her and she still felt a sense of powerlessness that came with having little control over her own life. She had no money and would be living off her sister and brother. Employment would be tough to find with a record. There was no way she'd be allowed to teach art to kids anymore, which never paid well but she'd loved the work. She would be on parole for two years, at the continued mercy of the corrections system. And she had no idea what Roland Shea might be expecting at this point. It better be nothing. He'd already cost her the last year and a half of her life.

Morelli turned back. "You all right, Connelly?"

Tara drew a deep breath and pushed her shoulders down. "I'm fine," she said, picking up her pace.

Yeah, there were some serious obstacles coming her way. But she would figure it out, with or without anyone's help. She was used to doing that.

Morelli led her out of the block and across the scrubby courtyard, to the far building that housed Receiving and Departures. It had been her first stop upon arriving at Taconic, when eighteen months had felt like a life sentence. They made their way through a series of locked doors and gates before stopping at a small inventory room. Morelli handed her a bag of clothes and pointed her in the direction of the bathroom, where she changed. She had asked her sister to pick out a few items from her closet, but for some reason Geraldine sent clothes she'd bought from a second-hand store: an amorphous T-shirt and jeans that were so big Tara had to fold over the waistband so they stayed up.

She leaned forward, arms braced against the sink beneath her, and took a close look in the mirror. God, she was so washed-out. The plain white shirt didn't help, but it was more the pasty skin combined with light eyes. The freckles glared more than ever. Her reddish-blondish hair was long now, past her shoulders, and frayed on the ends because she hadn't had a cut in months. Other inmates did the haircutting, and some of them were pretty good. But it was customary to offer a solid tip—food or postage stamps—and Tara had been frugal. She was lucky enough to get money deposited into her inmate account every month like clockwork. Her brother and sister had done that for her, and though it was probably guilt money for not visiting more, she was grateful. Having the ability to buy the things she needed from the commissary helped her make it through.

She gathered the prison uniform into the plastic bag and headed back out to the inventory counter. Morelli took the bag from her and gave her another one, which contained the clothes she'd arrived in. She would have worn them home, but it was against the rules. A fresh set of clothes was required for release because the prison didn't wash the old ones, and there was no telling what shape they'd be in after sitting on a dusty shelf for years, or whether they would still fit. They were the only personal effects Tara had brought with her. She'd known the day she was starting her sentence. It was all prearranged thanks to a plea deal. Eddie had driven her to Taconic on a frigid gray November morning over two

Thanksgivings ago. They didn't talk on the ride, not a word. There was too much to say. But when they got there, Eddie gave her a long, fierce hug, whispering into her ear—*Stay strong, Tare.* And he cried as he drove away, his big shoulders shaking behind the wheel of his old pickup.

"You don't have a jacket?" Morelli asked. "It's chilly out there today."

"I have a hoodie from when I got here." She pointed to the plastic bag of clothes.

Morelli sighed. "Okay."

Tara pulled out her soft black zip hoodie and slipped it on over the T-shirt. It felt good to wear something of her own again, a connection to who she was before this place.

"Next," Morelli said, "you sign this." She slid a piece of paper and a pen across the counter.

Tara scanned the document, a contract whereby she vowed not to commit any crimes, not to consort with criminals, to abide by the terms of her parole . . . A deterrent, as if she needed one. She signed the contract.

"This is a copy of all your release paperwork," Morelli said, handing over a manila folder. "Your parole officer's info is in there. Don't forget to make contact within twenty-four hours or you'll be in violation. Grab your box and come this way." She turned and headed farther down the hall.

They made a left around a corner, and Tara could see it. The exit door at the far end of the corridor. There was a large window in the upper half of the door, and sunlight poured through the crisscross wiring embedded in the thick glass. She was just about there, and Geraldine would be waiting on the other side. *In the same old white minivan,* she'd told Tara. Her sister had no good reason for driving a minivan, no husband or kids or cargo to lug around. She just had a pathological need to prove to everyone how practical she was. But in that moment Tara didn't care. She was getting the hell out of here.

They arrived at a Plexiglas window and Morelli moved behind it, used one of her many keys to open a lockbox and remove an envelope. "Wow," she said, "you have over a hundred dollars saved up in your inmate account." She slid the envelope and a clipboard across the counter to Tara. "Your driver's license and a prepaid Visa card are in there. Just sign that receipt."

Tara signed again, removed her license and the Visa card from the envelope, slipped them into the front pocket of her jeans. She had plans for that money and wanted to make sure she didn't lose it.

Morelli pointed down the corridor to the bulky desk sitting maybe ten feet from the exit. "Now we head over there and you officially sign out. Then, you blow this joint." She angled her head and squinted at Tara. "You know, Connelly, I've been here almost twenty years, walked I-don't-know-how-many women through this building on their release date. And I *always* know if I'm gonna see them again."

Tara stared at her and held her breath, wanting to hear her next words but dreading them just as much. As if Linda Morelli had her own special power, and Tara was doomed to whatever verdict she predicted: she would make it or she wouldn't, yes or no.

"But I can't figure you out," Morelli said. "You're a smart girl, smart enough to keep your head down and get along in here. Yet you were dumb enough to get mixed up with a drug dealer and his business." She shook her head. "I just don't know."

So, a sentence of maybe.

Tara met the older woman's gaze head-on. "Sorry to break your record, Morelli, but you can bet your ass you'll never see me again."

Morelli flashed her a wide grin and said, "Hope not." Then she turned, waving for Tara to follow. They moved to the desk by the exterior door, where Tara was supposed to sign one last form. Morelli was in the middle of explaining it—a liability release stating she was no longer an occupant of a New York State correctional facility—when the desk phone rang.

Morelli held up a finger and answered, listened, said, "Yeah," and, "Understood," a few times.

Tara waited and looked out the exit door again. For the first time in 525 days she was about to step out into the unblemished fresh air, where the breeze would touch her skin without trailing through chain-link fence and barbed wire first. She'd leave the window open in Geraldine's van on the drive, let the wind rush through her fingers and her hair. Eddie and Conor would be home later, and her chest lifted at the thought of wrapping her arms around both of them. Goodwill surged through her, and she didn't care that they hadn't visited more. She just wanted to go home.

Morelli hung up the phone. "Appears we have a little holdup."

Tara pulled her eyes from the door. "Sorry?"

"That was a call from the warden's office," Morelli said, nodding toward the phone. "Someone wants to talk to you before you leave."

"Who?"

Morelli shrugged. "Above my pay grade. Should only take a few minutes, but I got an intake arriving soon, so I'm going to have you wait in there." She pointed to a door behind her, a door with no window in it.

Tara felt a sharp constriction in her chest. "What are you talking about? Let me sign that last form and I'm done, I'm outta here."

Morelli gave her a pointed look. "We have to do things right, Connelly." She started waving Tara toward her. "Let's go. It's policy, I can't have more than one inmate in this area at a time."

Tara froze. Was Morelli kidding? In five steps Tara could be out the door and there'd be no concern about too many inmates in this area. Was she technically even an inmate anymore? Who wanted to talk to her and why did she need to wait in some room? Something was wrong. Maybe another inmate had lied about her, implicated her in some infraction in exchange for favors or a reduced sentence. It happened all the time. She backed up a step toward the exit.

"Stop," Morelli said, raising her voice. "Don't be stupid, Connelly. I'm sure it won't take long—"

"*What* won't take long?"

"I don't know, they just told me to hold you for a minute. All I'm asking is that you wait in there."

No, she was asking Tara to move away from the exit and farther back into the building, to step into another locked room while someone else decided her fate. Fuck that, she'd done her time. She turned around and headed for the exterior door. Four steps to go. Three . . . two . . .

But Morelli was too fast. Her hands wrapped around Tara's forearms and yanked them behind her.

Tara was stopped cold, her five and a half feet and 120 pounds no match. Besides, fighting was pointless—what the hell was she thinking . . . Her head started to spin with the infractions she was racking up: insubordination, resisting, erratic behavior.

"Please wait," she said, hating the pleading wobble in her voice. "Wait. It's okay, I'll go."

But it was too late. She recognized the feel of cold metal and the sound of clicking gears as the cuffs encircled her wrists and squeezed tight.

Chapter Two

Brian had carefully planned his visit to the Taconic Correctional Facility that Monday morning. He was there to see Tara Connelly. She wasn't expecting him, and timing would be key. Better to talk to her after she changed into civilian clothes, avoid the power imbalance that came with a police detective sitting across from someone wearing a prison jumpsuit. But he wanted to catch her before she left the building so he could say what he needed to say without her family around. The optimal moment would be at the tail end of her discharge process. She would be excited about leaving, looking forward to going home. Hopefully she'd be open to hearing his apology. Maybe she'd even be willing to accept it.

But he couldn't control that part, her reaction. He just needed to see her, make sure she was okay, and say sorry, for his own sake. Then he could move on, become unstuck from this guilt quicksand that had been pulling at him for eighteen months.

He'd checked in with the warden's office earlier, and they promised to call him when Tara was nearing the final sign-out. In the meantime he waited in his car in the parking lot, checking emails on his phone. Most of them were messages about new cases waiting for his attention, but there was also an update about Roland Shea. Apparently he'd been at his home as of thirty minutes ago. Brian had asked an officer working the early shift to verify Roland's whereabouts, even though it was doubtful he'd pick Tara up that morning. He hadn't visited her once the last eighteen months; Brian had checked. But he felt better knowing exactly where that dirtbag was, confirming he would not be part of her homecoming. That was the last thing she needed.

While he was scrolling, a new text appeared. It was from Hank: *Still at the dentist?*

Brian checked his watch before responding: *Yeah. Be in by 9.*

He'd worked with Hank the last six years, and known him much longer, since Hank was also his uncle. They were tight, but there was no need for him to know what Brian was up to that morning. His uncle would never understand this whole thing. In his eyes it would be inappropriate and unprofessional, and Brian couldn't really argue with that.

A couple minutes later he got the call. Tara was almost finished and he needed to get in there if he wanted the chance to talk to her.

He hopped out of the car, bent down to check his reflection in the window, and ran fingers through his dark hair. He'd grown out the crew cut a couple years ago to a medium wavy length. Susan, his ex-wife, asked him to do that the whole last year they were married, but he refused. Probably because he knew by then it wouldn't have helped. When she was offered her dream Realtor job at Sotheby's in Manhattan and he said he wouldn't move, she used it as justification for cheating on him with—and eventually leaving him for—Slick Rick the Finance Prick: *You're just so stuck, Brian . . . the only thing you're passionate about is your job . . . nothing ever changes.* And his personal favorite, *It's like being married to an old man.* Apparently he'd missed the line in the wedding vows about promising to "grow and change as a human being" until death did them part.

Continuing to use the window as a mirror, he stood up to his full six feet and straightened his tie. At least he didn't look like an old man. No sign of gray at his temples yet, and he'd only had to loosen his belt one notch since he graduated from the academy. In his opinion he looked right about his age of thirty-three. He had a sport coat in the trunk he could throw on, but that felt too formal. Maybe he should lose the tie and just go with the blue button-down, open the collar . . .

Maybe he should stop worrying about shit that didn't matter. This wasn't a date. He was a cop and she was a criminal. He just wanted the chance to get something off his chest. After that, Tara Connelly would become a distant memory.

He hurried across the parking lot, rehearsing the brief lines he'd decided on. He would offer them up right before she walked out the door. The whole thing would take less than thirty seconds.

When he entered the building Tara wasn't in the discharge area. A female guard with short gray hair sat behind the desk, talking on the phone. Her name tag said L. MORELLI. She nodded at him and held up a finger while she finished her call.

After she hung up he flashed his badge. "Detective Nolan," he said. "I'm looking for Tara Connelly."

"She's in there." Morelli flicked a thumb over her shoulder toward a closed door, which likely led to some sort of holding room. "I was told someone wanted to talk to her. Is that you?"

Brian nodded.

"I hope it's not more bad news for her." She stood and gestured toward the phone on the desk. "That was the main office. Her sister can't pick her up this morning. She's gonna have to figure out a ride."

While she unclipped her key ring from a belt loop and sorted through keys, Brian tried to prepare himself. It had been a long time, and she might look quite different now. There was no denying it. A year and a half ago Tara Connelly had been very attractive, with her strawberry blond hair, pale blue eyes, the smattering of light freckles across her face. And, at least in Brian's experience, she'd been strong-willed and stubborn, tough in the way people were when at a young age they had learned to be disappointed by life. She stuck to her guns once she made a decision, even a bad one. *A woman who knows her own mind*, his mother would have said with an approving smile.

But Brian saw it often, the changes people underwent while serving time. Sometimes they gained substantial weight from being sedentary. Which was preferable to those who came out skin and bones because they developed a serious drug habit on the inside. Some people aged disproportionately fast because of the lack of sun and sleep or an overabundance of anxiety. Other inmates changed their personalities, exiting much angrier than when they entered or more fearful. Sometimes they just went quiet and flat, like some inner light had been extinguished. He hoped she still had her spunk after being in this place.

Morelli found the right key and swung open the door. She led him inside a small room with a metal table and two chairs, one of which was occupied. Tara raised her face.

Damn. She looked the same.

Her gaze zeroed in on him. "What the hell are *you* doing here?"

When she shot out of her chair he realized her hands were behind her back. She appeared ready to lunge across the table at him. It seemed he needn't have worried about her lively spirit being crushed.

"Jesus Christ," she said. "Did you screw with my release, Nolan?"

"What? No." He held his hands up in innocence and turned to Morelli. "Why is she cuffed?"

"She started resisting, and I needed her to calm down while we waited for you."

"I didn't mean for you to . . ." He dropped his head and rested his hands on his hips. "Take them off."

"All right, but you're responsible." Morelli pushed off the wall, walked behind Tara, and removed the cuffs.

This was not a good start. Right before Tara was about to walk outside, Morelli had apparently locked her in this room with no explanation. And it was Brian's fault. "Look," he said to her, "there's been some confusion. You are free to go."

Tara rubbed her wrists while her eyes flicked between Morelli and him, like she didn't trust it.

"Although I guess your sister can't pick you up," he said. He looked to Morelli for confirmation and she nodded.

Tara's shoulders slumped, and she exhaled in resignation. "Figures."

Brian didn't know what to do. She'd just suffered a bad scare and learned she didn't have a ride home. It seemed self-serving to insert a quick apology at this moment so he could check it off the list and be on his way.

She crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes at him. "Did you come all the way here to tell me that?"

"No, I just found out myself." But that led to the question of exactly what he was doing there, and he wasn't getting into it in front of a guard. An idea sprang to mind, and he acted on it, even though he suspected it was a bad one. "I was actually here on another matter," he said. "But I thought I'd offer you a ride home."

Her eyes widened in disbelief. Or maybe dread. She looked at Morelli. "What are my other options?"

"We can get you a bus ticket, but it'll take a while," Morelli said. "Or we could call you a taxi. But that'll cost you most of that commissary money you saved up."

Tara's arms dropped to her sides in defeat.

Brian cleared his throat. "I'm headed back to Port Chester anyway, so it's no problem . . ."

She shook her head but eventually said, "Fine," through clenched teeth. Then she grabbed her box from the table and walked past him, out into the hall.

"Damn." Morelli cocked a brow. "What did you do to her?"

He pressed his lips together for a moment. "I helped put her in here."

It didn't take Brian long to doubt the wisdom of offering the ride. Tara made a lot of angry noise while moving through the final stage of her release: slamming her box on the desk, tossing the pen down when she was done signing the last form, rushing out the exterior door. Now she was stalking across the parking lot at a rapid clip. If his legs weren't longer than hers, he would have had to jog to keep pace. It was shaping up to be a fun drive.

"It's the black SUV parked near the end," he said, pointing to an unmarked Ford Explorer in the first row. He didn't mention that she'd been in that car before, but the way her steps slowed while she stared at it said she remembered.

As they got closer he asked if she wanted him to put her box in the trunk.

"No." She held it tight against her chest and stopped by the passenger door. "I assume I can sit in front this time, where I'm not trapped inside."

He gave her a serene smile and unlocked the car. "Of course."

After climbing in she forced the box down into the space by her feet.

Brian started to reach for his Ray-Bans in the center console but figured he'd look even more cop than he already did, so he left them off and settled for flipping down the visor. They belted up and he pulled

out, moving across the long parking lot toward the exit. They had to wait in line behind several cars to check out with the guard, and as Brian made slow progress toward the gate with one hand on the wheel, he noticed Tara's eyes trained on the section of tall chain-link fence that rolled back and forth, letting one vehicle at a time pass through. She shifted in her seat often, legs twitching, full of anxious energy. He turned to her. "We're almost there."

A moment later they pulled up to the gatehouse, presented their IDs to the guard, and the gate rolled open. Brian gunned the gas as soon as he could, and after he turned onto the main road she stilled. But her gaze was glued to the side mirror, watching Taconic slowly fade away behind them. She stared until he turned south on the Saw Mill River Parkway half a mile later. Only then did she seem to take a breath and lift her head to look out the window, at the trees and road signs and world rushing by.

He'd never picked someone up from prison before, but he imagined the relief she must be feeling in that moment, some level of emotion about the idea that she was free, so he just let her take it in for a while. Besides, there was no rush to reach for awkward conversation. He had thirty minutes left to recite his practiced apology—*Miss Connelly, I want to acknowledge that our investigation back then did not go as planned. Although you refused to cooperate, the end result was regrettable.* He checked on her occasionally though, and caught her sniffing and swiping fingers across her cheeks a couple times.

Where the hell was her family this morning? He knew from her file that her mom died when she was young, and her father vanished a few years later. But she had an older brother and sister who should have been there.

The quiet started to weigh on him after about ten minutes. So did the delicate floral scent that had to be coming from her hair, which seemed surprising considering she'd just been released from prison. She hadn't so much as turned her face toward him yet.

"Well," he said, "you look good."

Her head finally swiveled his way, but her forehead was wrinkled in question or doubt.

"I mean, you know," he said, glancing over at her. "You look healthy."

"Really?" she asked in a flat voice. "Must be all the prison food and cigarettes."

There was no good response to that, so he just stared ahead while she lifted partway out of her seat to dig a Visa card from her jeans pocket.

"You can drop me at the toy store in town," she said. "I'll walk from there."

The toy store. That's what the leftover commissary money was about. She lived with her nephew and probably had saved up to buy him something. "That's fine," he said. "I'll wait and take you all the way. I assume we're going to your old house . . ."

"You remember where it is, right?" She thrust the Visa card in her hoodie pocket and zipped it up. "The place you arrested me one morning in front of my brother and my nephew while we were eating breakfast."

He kept his voice level. "I remember." Perhaps this was his penance, this drive with her. Having to sit next to someone who was so angry with him it pulsed off her in waves. But he wasn't going to be cowed into silence. "So you'll be living with your brother and sister again?"

She let out a complicated sigh that ended in "Yes."

Maybe a sore subject. Brian never understood people complaining about their siblings. While growing up he often wished for a brother or sister, particularly after his parents died when he was fifteen. All these years later he still longed for someone who'd known them the way he had, someone who shared those memories and could help keep his parents alive in his mind. Hank was the closest thing Brian had to that, but they generally avoided the subject of Brian's parents. The discussion would inevitably work its way around to the night they were killed in an apparent robbery gone wrong, and that was just too painful for both of them.

Another ten minutes went by and he was still reaching for something to say, maybe news to report about Port Chester. But not much had changed while she was gone. As they approached the south end of town they were greeted by the abandoned hospital campus, which had sat lifeless since 2005 and served as a testament to a town stuck midtransformation. Port Chester was a gateway to New England and had served as a transportation hub going all the way back to the 1600s, when it was considered a major seaport, given its location on the Byram River and Long Island Sound. It had the oldest school district in Westchester County, and

its economy had been through several evolutions, from boatbuilding and farming to foundries and manufacturing.

But it had been hurting since factories started closing doors in the 1980s. Some revitalization in the early 2000s had attracted a younger crowd, happy to ride the Metro-North two hours round-trip to get to their jobs in the city every day if it meant getting more bang for their buck. Though it hadn't done much for the longtime residents. Brian saw it on the job every day—increasing auto thefts, robberies, domestic violence calls—largely the result of a shortage of jobs and affordable housing. Something like 75 percent of the kids in the school district qualified for the free lunch program. And in recent years, like many hurting towns, it had become fertile ground for a thriving drug trade. But Tara already knew all about that.

So they stayed quiet while he pulled off the highway and headed north on Boston Post Road. Port Chester was more working class and diverse than any neighboring towns, which was evident in the bustling half-mile strip of ethnic restaurants, markets, and specialty stores that lined the main drag. It ran parallel to the Byram River two blocks to the east, which served as the state line between New York and Connecticut for a couple of miles.

The toy store was located just off Main Street, and the OPEN sign in the window was lit up in bright colors.

"You really don't have to wait," she said. "I can walk."

"No, it's fine. I want to grab a coffee anyway." He nodded toward the Dunkin' across the street.

She chewed her bottom lip while she debated, but then she climbed out, leaving her box on the floor of the car. It was all bent out of shape crammed down there, and the flaps were halfway open. When he glanced inside it, he spotted notebooks and a few loose cigarettes tucked against the side. Maybe, like a lot of inmates, she'd traded most of her commissary money for cigarettes the whole time she was in there.

Brian shot Hank another text—*Running late. Closer to 9:30*—and figured he better get some coffee. It wasn't until he was placing his order that he realized he should have asked if she wanted something. A memory flashed across his mind then: sitting across from her in an interview room at the station with Hank at his side, the first time they questioned

her. They kept her there for two hours that night, and she went through four cups of coffee. During a lull in the questioning, when he and Hank were keeping it friendly, playing good cop–good cop for the time being, Brian made some remark about how much coffee she drank. Her response still made him smile—*I'd prefer tequila, but I'm guessing that's not an option.*

Black with two sugars. That's how she'd taken those coffees. As well as the others he'd watched her drink during follow-up interviews, which got less friendly each time. She hadn't had a decent cup of coffee in eighteen months. He bought her a large and added extra sugar.

On his way back to the car he spotted her through the toy store window, studying the LEGO sets like her life depended on picking the right one. He'd met her nephew once, the unfortunate morning she mentioned earlier. The kid had to be maybe ten or eleven now . . .

He went inside and walked down the aisle toward her. "A guy I work with has a kid about your nephew's age. I went to his birthday barbecue last weekend and this one"—he carefully pointed with an index finger so as not to spill the coffee in that hand—"was a huge hit."

Her eyes flicked to the complicated spaceship set, but she made no move to pick it up. Maybe eighty-five bucks was more than she had.

He held up one of the coffees. "I picked this up for you." When she didn't reach for it, he placed it on the shelf next to the LEGOs. "Just thought you might want one. I'll be outside." He turned and left the aisle, but stopped around the corner. When he peeked a few moments later, she was sipping the coffee and examining the spaceship LEGOs up close.

Once she got back in the car with her shopping bag he knew he only had a few minutes. He headed north on Main, under the elevated train tracks, where downtown gave way to a residential area. Tara and her family lived in an older part of town, where a lot of the Colonial-style houses had been converted to multifamily dwellings. Most were in need of significant maintenance or updating, and grass grew between gaping cracks in the pavement, much of which had buckled over time from bulging tree roots. Gentrification would eventually move in this direction, but for now there

were lots of holdouts. People in this neighborhood could get a good price for their house, but not enough to afford another place in Port Chester. Or anywhere else in Westchester for that matter.

They only had half a mile to go. Brian took a breath and was about to start his little speech—*Miss Connelly, I want to acknowledge . . .* —but she bent down to her box, started moving things around to make room for her purchase. He waited so he wasn't apologizing to the back of her head. Then he was making the left onto Gillette Street, and two blocks later they came to the end of the cul-de-sac, where the Connellys lived.

She sat back up but he still didn't say anything because she was staring up at the house, scrutinizing it, and it felt like he'd be interrupting something.

The house looked about as he remembered it: a run-down two-story with a partial daylight basement. The whole thing rambled up the steep hillside behind it. It was a faded yellow with chipped white trim and a lot of worn latticework under the porch, which ran the width of the house. A wilting white shed sat in the side yard, under the thick branches of a maple tree.

There was no car in the driveway and no movement inside. No one was home to greet her.

When she reached down for her box Brian realized he was out of time. It was now or never. *Miss Connelly . . .* Shit. That was too stiff.

Her hand wrapped around the door handle and pulled.

"Tara."

She turned to him with slightly raised brows, probably surprised to hear him say her first name, and in such a soft tone. Her icy blue eyes searched his and his rehearsed lines went out the window.

He swallowed. "I never wanted you in there. I'm sorry it all went down the way it did."

She blinked and pulled her head back a bit. He didn't drop his eyes while she studied him because she was clearly trying to read his intentions. Though it felt a little dangerous, staring straight back at her. Especially when her gaze softened just a touch for the first time that morning. Maybe she was thinking about the last time they saw each other, the day of her third interview at the police station.

But when she spoke the edge was back. "Have a nice life, Nolan." She

climbed out of the car with her box and hip-checked the passenger door shut. Then she walked up the path and the porch steps, never looking back.

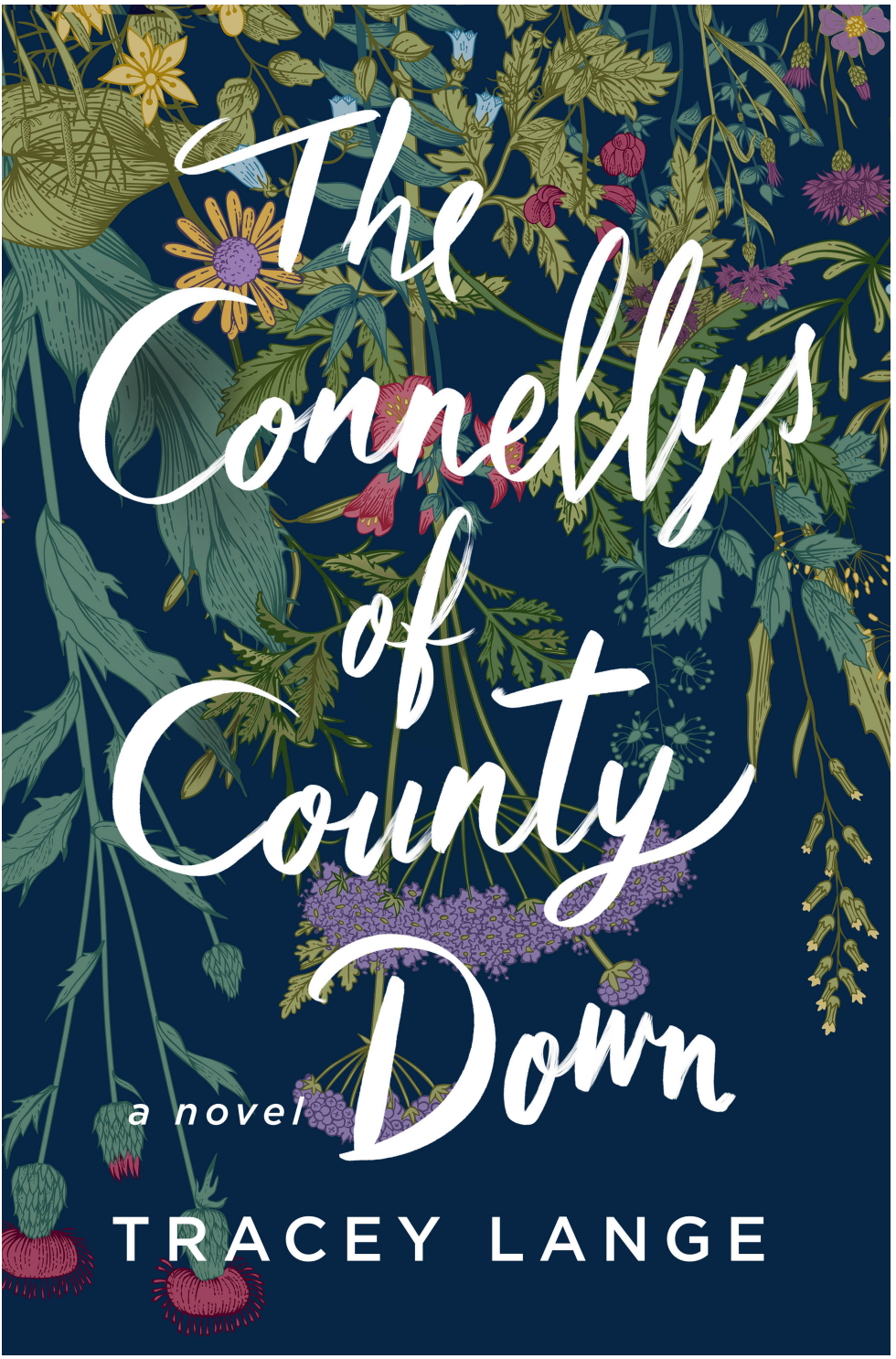
"You too," Brian said to the empty car.

He waited while she searched under the cushion of a worn wicker chair and came up with a key, let herself into the house. Then he drove off, headed back toward town, toward the station and the full day ahead of him. Hank would be waiting, chomping at the bit. They had a meeting that afternoon with the Westchester County prosecutor's office to talk about their ongoing investigation into a drug trafficking ring that was operating out of Port Chester. A ring that was headed up by one Roland Shea.

Brian glanced at the yellow house in his rearview once more. A weight had lifted from his chest when he offered that apology, a more heartfelt one than he'd originally intended. He'd been thinking about her for so long, she'd taken up residence in his brain. But he'd done all he could for her now, and it would be a relief to let her go.

It was unlikely he'd see Tara Connelly in the future. He lived twenty minutes away, over in White Plains, and really only worked in Port Chester. Like a lot of cops, he preferred to keep his professional life and his personal life—what little he had—as separate as possible. His path would probably cross Tara's only if she returned to criminal behaviors.

So with a little regret—maybe more than a little—he hoped to never see her again.



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