# TRUST

“You want to *what*?”

David pops off a laugh, one that I recognize as pleased-with-himself rather than a spontaneous expression of pleasure. He is enjoying my surprise. That, I also understand, is the plan.

He smiles. I want to see his eyes but they are masked behind sunglasses that, just yesterday, I bought at a swim shop on the Boardwalk. The lenses are tinted bright yellow and offer the highest possible UV protection. According to the sticker, they are also unbreakable. This I doubt, but I didn’t buy them for safety. I thought they’d make him look young and hip, and they do, offsetting the gray creeping along his temples. I find the new color attractive but when he thinks I am not looking, David stares at his hairline in the mirror and scowls.

I do not think of his hair—or his ego—now. The rims glint in the morning sun. Seeing my jaundiced reflection, I am tempted to rip the sunglasses from his face and fling them into the ocean.

“What’s the big deal?” he says. “All I want is to bury you in the sand.”

“I got that,” I say. “But, why? And please, can you lose the shades?”

He lets go of my hand and obeys. His smile remains, although it morphs into the I’m-indulging-your-silly-request one. I hate that one.

I know all of his smiles. Seventeen years of marriage, twenty-one years together; father of my child, love of my life. I know his wants, his desires, his flaws and moods and solid good points. I know that creasing his forehead shows aggravation and raising his eyebrows mean fake surprise. When his shock is genuine, he puckers his lips. He doesn’t realize this, and I’m not telling.

I wonder if my lips are puckered, because I am definitely surprised.

“Are you saying no?”

“I’m asking why. It *is* a bit of an odd request, even from you.”

He twirls the sunglasses and stares at them, instead of me.

“To see if you trust me.” Now he glances up and I wish I’d never wished to see his eyes. They are plain and brown and small, unremarkable, and yet, holding mine, they send out a challenge that hits like a cold fist to my stomach.

He leans forward, moving like someone about to kiss someone else, but that isn’t what he does.

“She said we should do a trust exercise,” he says, very softly, as if it is a secret, or as if I have somehow forgotten. “You’re the one who wanted to do this.”

As if, somehow, I have forgotten that, too. All is clear now. *She* is the marriage counselor I wanted us to see. This is payback, or punishment. It doesn’t really matter which. It’s not like either is a very desirable choice.

“I know, but…bury me in the sand? I don’t think that’s what Lynette had in mind.”

“It’s what I want.” Still softly, but now stubborn. “Will you do it?”

I turn towards the ocean. Of course I will do it. He knows it and I know it and, after a mere three sessions, Lynette would know it, too. She’s the one who first said the word “doormat.” David didn’t frown in surprise hearing it. Nor did I. But knowing you have a flaw does not necessarily mean you know how to repair it.

I inhale deeply. A very light film of spray covers me. It is mid-May, but yesterday was blazing hot, and swimmers braved the still-chilly waters. David was among them. I sat under an umbrella and stared at him while he stared at other women.

Yes. Doormat.

“Well?’

We are close to the water. The waves break gently. One comes close enough to touch our feet. David steps back, away from it, but I let the water hit me. When it does, an electric chill shoots up through me, but I hardly notice.

Today will be just as warm, but it is Monday, so there will not be a crowd, probably just couples like us, or college kids, or locals skipping school to hang out, beachside.

And my husband wants to bury me among them, to prove that I trust him.

Another couple walks by, our age, also holding hands. The man nods, the woman tosses off a smile. *Lucky us*, it seems to say, *on the beach on a Monday instead of at our jobs. Enjoying a walk in the sand with an attentive man alongside.*

David runs a thumb across the inside of my wrist. It feels intimate, too much so out here in public, with other people. My face heats. I yank away.

“If that’s what you want,” I say. “Where? When?”

He turns in a slow circle, his arms extending out. “Out here.”

I glance around. We are past the lifeguard zone, but I won’t need a rescue.

“Fine,” I say.

His mouth drops, but I don’t pause to enjoy the shock. He wants to play games, I’ll play along. I spin away from the water and stalk up the beach. I stop midway between the fence marking the beach’s edge and where the tide stops.

I twirl in a slow circle. David waits, ten, fifteen, twenty feet away, and watches.

My move.

“Here?” I say, and to emphasize how much I mean it, I flop down. “Come on, big boy.” I kick off my sandals and lift my bottom to wiggle out of my cover-ups. “Start digging.”

I’m bluffing, I think, but he comes to my side and drops to his knees. He scoops up a handful of sand and tosses it over my foot. It breaks apart, but it is warm, unlike the chill creeping up my backside. He slides his palm and mounds more over my ankle.

“We should have a shovel,” he says. I think the exact same thing, at the exact same time. He shoves enough sand to cover my feet. He crawls back and pushes more to get my calves under. He starts to pant a little at the exertion. I laugh.

“What’s so funny?” he asks, clearly annoyed.

“Lynette,” I say. “I’m thinking of what Lynette would say right now. Do you honestly think this is what she meant by a trust exercise?”

His jaw clamps.

“I’m trying, all right?” he says. “Are you going to try, or are you going to hang on to that one thing the rest of our lives?”

*That one thing?*

I don’t respond. He grunts as he cups his palms into an open V and digs into the sand. I don’t help.

“I can’t lie flat,” I say. “I’ll need a mound under my head.”

He nods. He is working hard now. His face is red. Sweat gathers at his gray temples.

Good. Good. Let him sweat. Let him have a heart attack.

I lay back slowly, one vertebra at a time, like in Pilates. I press down the small of my back so there is no arch. He packs sand along my sides and under my shoulders. He climbs across my chest and does the same on the other side.

“Is that all right?”

“It’s fine,” I say, and it is. I rest on my elbows.

He covers my thighs, smacking sand down below my knees and above. He doesn’t touch my skin. My legs disappear. I lean back. Next his hands are over my breasts, patting, but there is nothing erotic in the touch.

“That looks like fun!”

I raise my head. The other couple is back. The man calls to us, but the woman shakes her head before putting her hands over her eyes. The sun is at her back. Is she blocking out the glare, or blocking out the sight?

“I’m fine,” I say, to her, but her hand falls to her side and she does not answer.

“Almost done,” David grunts.

He stands, grunting again and walks past my head. I am confused. My shoulders are bare, my arms free. Has he quit? Is this it?

I hear a sound, and I understand. He needs more sand.

“Raise your head,” he says. After a half minute, he tells me to lower it. I rest back onto the mound he’s built up behind me. It is very comfortable.

I lay my arms along my sides. He hesitates, I don’t know why, before pouring sand over them. He gently covers my shoulders. He crawls around my body, patting my knees, packing down my toes. Finally, he stands.

“Do you feel all right?”

His concern is genuine. I don’t have to see his eyes to know that. He is not cruel. That was never the problem. I would never stay twenty-one years with a mean person

I realize I haven’t asked a very important question. “How long do I stay here?”

And then comes that smile, the one that is rare, and should be so, because it is the one I hate the most.

“As long as you want,” he says. “It’s up to you.”

He spins around and goes off, walking briskly along the waves’ edge, growing smaller with every step, but not so small that I cannot see him turn sharply and walk up to the Boardwalk. When he does disappear, it’s not because he’s so far away but because I cannot twist my head anymore to watch him.

He, however, does not glance at me. Not once.

I sigh. The sand covering me feels damp and itchy, and I feel like a complete idiot, or a stubborn child, or a manipulated wife. Or all three.

“Great,” I say aloud. “What do I do now?”

My face grows hot in chagrin. Underneath, my back is cold against the tight packing, but it is not unbearable. I’ve suffered worse.

He’ll come back. He always does. I just have to wait it out.

So I do. I lie and wait. I close my eyes and listen to the waves, listen to the seagulls, listen to my heart beating, listening to my brain ponder where I am. My husband buried me up to my neck and abandoned me. I can dig myself out whenever I want to, but instead I lie here, by my own choice.

I almost laugh. I wonder if David knows his trust exercise is a metaphor for my life.

Lynette would just love that. I wonder what she’d want me to do with this time. Review my marriage, my life with David, explore the deep recesses of why, after all these years, we need to be indulging in a trust exercise.

The answer to that isn’t deep at all.

*That one thing.*

Something—a sand fly?—buzzes past my head, and I jerk. I feel sand fall off of my shoulder. I will myself to lie still. A stubborn voice I hardly recognize tells me I can do this, and after I do, it’ll be his turn, and I’ll…I’ll…

I’ll what? I bite my lip and consider what I might ask David to do in return. Skydive? Renew our vows? Tell *her* husband and let David take the consequences?

I close my eyes. After a while, I stop considering, because I am asleep.

“Annabelle? Annabelle, honey, wake up.”

Amazingly, my first thought is not to disturb the sand. David is kneeling at my side. The sunglasses are gone, but something else is there.

I blink once, twice. His eyes are very somber.

I know this one, too.

He’s sorry.

“It’s been an hour.” He starts shoveling off the sand. “Come on, get—“

“Stop,” I say, harshly. “Leave it alone.”

His hands stop. The sorry look is gone. David is back, but I don’t want him anymore.

“Okay,” he says, playing cool. “What, are you thinking of what I can do?”

I don’t answer. I lie in the sand, and I know. There’s nothing he can do.