

Monday, May 7, 2068, 2:30 p.m., Black Mountain, New Hampshire

"Here it is," Jeff said quietly as he pulled the SUV to a stop.

Dianne's eyes opened wide with wonder. "Oh, Jeff! What a beautiful place!" She turned to him, her eyes shining, but her countenance fell when she saw the look on his face. She reached out a hand to cup his cheek and draw his eyes toward her. "Oh, love. It's hard, isn't it?"

He swallowed heavily, his blue eyes meeting her brown ones frankly, and nodded slightly. "It is. Much harder than I anticipated."

"We don't have to stay," she offered. "We can go back to New York, spend the rest of the week at the penthouse."

He sat quietly for a moment, looking down, avoiding her gaze, then raised his eyes back to hers again and shook his head. "No. I bought this place for you and I'm not going to let... what happened... interfere with your enjoyment of it. Or mine. Let's go up and see the inside." He pressed his hand over hers for a moment, then turned his face to kiss her palm.

She smiled at him. "Let's go."

They walked up to the A-frame cottage together, arms around each other's waists. He held the door open for her then stepped inside after her.

"Oh my!" she said as she looked around. Turning to him, she asked, "Did you pick out the furnishings?"

"Yes. It didn't make sense to come up here to an empty house. Anything you don't like, we get rid of and replace," he said. "But I thought I knew your tastes well enough to do some of the decorating."

"Oh, I love it!"

The furniture in the great room, where they now stood, was made of a redwood tone, in the plain Mission style of the Southwest. Braided Native American rugs covered some of the knotty pine floors, and a log cabin quilt hung above the flagstone fireplace. The cushions were of dark brown leather, and had pillows done in Native American patterns on them. The dining area was also of the Mission style, with a wide table and padded wooden chairs done in Native American prints. The kitchen was sunny and bright, the walls covered with a fine lined plaid in light blue. Curtains were white and light blue, and the dishes were white with a rim of dark jewel colors.

Together they climbed the stairs to the master bedroom, where the plain Mission style held sway, but there was the old fashioned feel of quilts done in dark plaids. The bathroom was done in the dark jeweltones on bright white.

Dianne sighed in contentment. She turned to give Jeff a sweet, passionate kiss. "It's all lovely, dearest," she said, her voice breathless. "Jes' me an' you heah, foah a whole week."

He smiled at the drawl that had surfaced, and moved his hand slowly down the side of her neck as he returned the kiss, making it deeper and slower before saying, "I've longed for this... just the two of us."

A sudden banging on the door interrupted the building passion. They exchanged glances full of surprise and annoyance at whoever dared to bother them.

"Ah'll go downstayahs an' find out what they want," Dianne said levelly. Jeff shook his head. He had heard this tone of Dianne's before and seen the glint in her eye and knew it meant trouble.

"I'll come with you. For backup."

She studied him for a moment, knowing very well what he was saying without words: "I'm going to make sure you don't make a fool of yourself." There was a pregnant pause, and then she nodded curtly. "Let's go."

The knocking continued. Outside, Ned Cook stood, microphone in hand, Joe at his right on the deck, camera at the ready. Two or three other reporters, smelling a story, were standing on the ground, hoping to catch a snippet from the famous and reclusive Jefferson Tracy and his still-new wife.

Cook heard the lock on the door being unfastened and pointed to Joe, who started his camera rolling. "Hello, America. Ned Cook here, waiting to get an exclusive interview with reclusive multibillionaire, Jefferson Tracy and his lovely new wife, Dr. Dianne Tracy. They've come to a property somewhere in New Hampshire for an undisclosed reason. The property is not far from the site where Mr. Tracy nearly lost his life in a helijet crash three months ago. Now, the door is opening and I hope that the couple will come out and answer a few questions. Here's Dr. Tracy."

He thrust his microphone in Dianne's face as she stepped out onto the deck, closing the door emphatically behind her. "Dr. Tracy? Could I ask a few questions? Why are you and your husband here, so close to the place where, if not for the actions of International Rescue, he would have lost his life?"

Dianne stood firmly and impassively, her arms folded over her chest, and no one could miss the thunderous look on her face. But it was with a clear and seemingly calm voice that she said, "Mistah Cook. Ah don' know how you found out wheyah we were. But th' only words Ah'm gonna give you ahr th' same ones Ah gave you in New York. The same ones mah children gave you theah when you harassed them. An' th' same ones mah husband gave you when you tried to break into his hospital room." She took out one finger and pointed it at him, punctuating every word with a stab toward him as she stated succinctly, "Mahnd. Yoah. Own. Bizness."

She glared out at the other reporters and waved a hand in their direction. "Thet goes foah th' rest o' you. Mahnd yoah own business." She stopped, turned as if to go back inside, then swiveled back. "An' whayle yoah at it: GET OFF MAH PROPERTY befoah Ah call th' sheriff an' have y'all

removed." Then she spun on her heel, marched inside, and slammed the door in his face.

While she was confronting the media and keeping their attention, Jeff was quietly closing the vertical blinds that covered the lower windows of the A-frame. So when the startled Cook signaled Joe to try his luck, the windows were impenetrable.

"Yes, I'd like the sheriff's office please," he called on his satellite phone when he had finished with covering the windows. "Hello, this is Jefferson Tracy calling.... no, it really is Jefferson Tracy. Yes, THAT Jefferson Tracy. Listen, I don't have time for small talk here. My wife and I are at our cabin on Black Mountain... yes, it's the A-frame on Mountain Creek Road. We have a small group of reporters outside our house and we'd like your people to remove them... now." Jeff's face began to grow red with anger, and Dianne put a hand on his arm and gave him a warning look. "Yes, NOW." There was a pause. "Then let me talk to the sheriff himself. Oh, he is, is he? Where? Listen, I don't care if he's lunching with the governor! I want some action here! Never mind. You'll be hearing from Concord in just a few minutes." Jeff slammed down the phone and muttered imprecations under his breath.

"Looks like this is going to be a trying vacation for both of us, love," Dianne said, rubbing his shoulders.

"Not if I have anything to say about it," he replied with a growl. He picked up the phone. "I want the number of the governor's office in Concord, please."

From: Tikatu Sent: 9/12/2005

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