

THE FATAL FARANDOLE

Ana T. Drew

Chapter 1

Insistent face-licking wakes me up. I'm flat on my stomach, dazed, and wedged against something small and furry.

It's freezing in here... wherever *here* is.

Slowly, I half open my eyes to darkness and a weak green glow. A wall gleams white. A fan hums somewhere. My breath fogs in front of me. The air smells like death and Roquefort.

And Lady.

Opening my eyes wide, I take in Grandma's dog. She whines at my side, eyes locked on mine, tail thumping. The rest of her body is moving, too. Or, rather, quivering as tremor after tremor jerks through her.

My voice scrapes. "Hey, sweetie!"

She answers with a small sound. Not a bark—a plea. I wrap an arm tighter around her. She shakes so hard it rocks us both.

I lift my head. The floor is hard and slick under my cheek. Tiles. A metal wall chills my back. I try to sit up. Pain spikes behind my right ear. The world tilts and swings, then steadies.

Light. I need light.

I pat around for my purse but don't find it. My fingers stumble over the back pocket of my jeans. My keys are in there with the tiny LED key chain.

Click. A weak cone of light cuts the dark. I spy shelves of stainless steel, plastic crates, and cardboard boxes. Much of it is covered with a thin layer of frost.

I swallow and rub Lady's back. "Looks like we're inside a fridge, sweetie."

We don't have a walk-in refrigerator room in the pastry shop. So, whose cold room is this? And how the hell did Lady and I get here?

She whimpers again as if to remind me to prioritize.

"Don't you worry," I grit out through clattering teeth. "I'm going to get us out of here."

She presses her face into my sweatshirt. Her ears feel like ice. I look for the thermostat reading. The display blinks 4 degrees Celsius.

Dogs aren't exactly masters of temperature control. They pant themselves silly in the heat and they shiver in the cold unless they're built for blizzards, like sturdy huskies or big woolly Saint Bernards. Lady is neither. She's a pampered little King Charles spaniel. And right now, the poor thing is shaking like a leaf.

How long have we been here? Ten minutes? Twenty? An hour? More?

I don't have a clue.

My foggy brain starts doing useless math. Ten kilos of dog, 4 degrees Celsius, one discombobulated human... None of it ends well.

I lift my hand to check my watch. It's half past nine. Morning or evening? My frozen gray matter offers a blank slate, but then, a smear of memory... Rose has to attend some event or meeting over in Avignon, in her official capacity as Queen of Beldoc. So, I'm dog sitting Lady.

That's all I have.

I sit up slowly, rubbing the chill from my arms, then reach down and give Lady a brisk, warming scrub. She leans into it, grateful. With a heavy sigh, I haul myself upright and wobble toward the door, still dazed and unsteady. Lady's patter follows close behind. Her leash rustles, dragging behind her, and her nails tick on the floor like she's afraid I might vanish if she doesn't keep up.

I push the door with my shoulder. It doesn't budge. I pull the inside lever. It moves a millimeter and bites my fingers. Sealed. Either the safety release is broken, or the door is locked from the outside.

Not great.

"Don't panic," I say to Lady. "We have time."

She shivers more.

I'm glad I couldn't figure out exactly how much time we have, so I can tell myself we have enough to do something.

First, warmth.

I squat, unclasp Lady's leash from her harness and stick it in the pocket of my windbreaker. Then I pick her up. A quick cuddle, and I tuck her under my sweater, zipping the windbreaker over it. Her heartbeat drums against my chest.

“There,” I coo, patting the little head that sticks out. “This should help.”

She licks my chin. My nose stings. I blink hard.

Think, Julie!

One hand rubbing Lady’s back, I shine the tiny light around me with the other hand. The shelves hold boxes labeled Duck, Cream, and Cheese. Bags of flour are stacked on a lower rack. A small stool sits under the fruit and veg rack. Above, in the corner, a square grille.

A vent.

“That’s our exit, right there,” I say to Lady, making sure to suppress any doubt from my voice—for her sake, as well as for mine.

One hand under her bum, I stand up, holding on to the nearest rack. Its metal feels glued with ice. I tuck my sweater into my jeans, so Lady won’t slip out, then step closer to the vent. I test it with the beam. Four screws, as you’d expect. I pat my pockets, hoping to find something I can use, but aside from a roll of poo bags in one windbreaker pocket and a five-cent coin in another, they’re empty.

Would the coin work?

I lift the keychain light and squint at the screws. They’re flathead screws, not painted over. A small mercy. If I’m lucky, I just might save our frozen butts.

Stretching on tiptoe, one arm supporting Lady, I press the coin into the first slot. It catches, but barely. My fingers are too numb, and they skid right off. I wrap my sweater sleeve around the coin for grip and try again. The screw grudgingly turns half a notch.

“At this rate,” I mutter, “we’ll thaw out sometime in June.”

Step stool!

I grab it, set it under the vent, and test it with one foot. It wobbles as if to say, “bad idea,” but I climb on, anyway.

Lady nudges my zipper with her nose.

“No, miss! You stay with the radiator.” I bend to kiss the top of her head.

My lips sting. Her ears are ice-cold.

Back to the screws.

One...

Two...

My fingers are thick and uncooperative. I blow warm air on them, stop, blow again. Frosted breath curls over the grille. Lady slides, her grip on me loosening. I adjust her, leaning back a bit, and tuck my sweater tighter with frigid fingers. Then I flex them until they tingle and try the coin again.

It slips.

The stupid thing skates right off the screw, bounces against the vent, and clatters onto the tiles.

Billions of blue blistering barnacles!

God, I'm so tired and cold! The most tempting prospect right now is to sink to the floor, wedge Lady between my chest and knees, curl up around her, and close my eyes.

What else is there to do when the universe turns on you?

It's one of those days. The kind when nothing you try fixes anything. The kind that smells like smoke and loss. The kind you wouldn't wish on anyone, not even people you despise.

Lady's shivers intensify. I realize *I'm* shaking, too, now. It's a deep tremor that goes all the way to my bones.

"Hang in there," I whisper, trying for steady but sounding like a wreck. "There'll be warm blankets and roast chicken on the other side."

She answers with a thin, broken whine that slices straight through me.

And while my guard is low, the thought I've been dodging since I woke up elbows its way in.

What if she freezes before I can get her out?

What if neither of us makes it out?