



THE BUILDERS

TONYA CANNARIATO

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By Tonya Cannariato

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For Stacey, who requested this story,
and for Sharon and Jo, who will live forever in my personal quantum library.

Chapter 1

The end of the preconference negotiations drove Tara's need to escape to the bar, but that didn't mean she wanted to do anything other than nurse a toddy that would send her to sleep. She felt frazzled, though she had taken care to refresh her makeup before showing herself in public. The old lessons of keeping up appearances stayed with her despite all her years of therapy—not that she would ever consider herself anything more than an unlovable, pasty, pudgy freak. But she did what she could to fit in. The only other woman at the bar could have been an international model with her bronze skin and exotic tattoos. Next to her, Tara was practically anonymous. But anonymous was what she wanted tonight. And since it was another woman, she could pretend she was only seeking safety in platonic companionship rather than acknowledge the strange butterflies that woke up in her belly as she approached the beauty.

Still, as she settled herself in the adjacent bar stool, Tara saw the sheath of her neighbor's elegant dress slide to reveal a risqué slit and more tattoos crawling beyond sight up the woman's thigh. Tara had to remind herself not to stare and caught the bartender's attention.

"Milwaukee special toddy?" he asked.

Tara nodded. "Apparently I'm predictable these days."

"Work and weather dictates the drink sometimes. Plus, it's not like you're a regular yet, hey?" He winked and walked over to the station where he could heat the water, honey, lemon, ginger ale, and brandy into the steaming mix that would soothe her nerves.

The TV behind the bar showed the Governor of California proclaiming her latest plan to end childhood hunger. Tara sighed. *Leave it to Mother to find a way to insert herself into a sound bite that would find me all the way in Milwaukee.* Tara ducked furtively to see whether anyone noticed their resemblance. She waved at the bartender. Made the universal twisting motion to ask for a channel change. Apparently the other option was local sports talk with some Green Bay Packers coach, but that was better than adding to her stress with a virtual version of Mother looking down on her. Tara was, after all, merely an event planner.

Sometimes her job was fun. She liked making sure all the details were set—and had backups—for the conferences her company helped stage for a whole cadre of clients. It appealed to her OCD self. She was still working on managing her inclination toward hypervigilance. Milwaukee in mid-December was the antithesis of fun, though, and the stress didn't help either of her tics improve.

The sun was already long over the horizon, and she was grateful to be off the roads. The conference she was planning for her company's client was still six months away, but she felt like she'd been chasing up and down the entire length of the shore of Lake Michigan, looking for a hotel that could suit the company's needs. Traffic, while somewhat improved by the predictable grid of Midwestern roads, had been snarled by the addition of 2-3 inches of sleet and its attendant fender benders.

Tara caught her gaze wandering up her neighbor's arm, tracing the abstract whorls that embraced the fine-boned structure of the rigid appendage. *What is wrong with me? Can't I maintain basic manners? Mother would be so disappointed.* After all, Tara had chosen this spot to avoid anyone else bugging her. Why were her eyes trespassing this way? How was it possible to feel such a magnetic draw to a stranger? And a woman, at that?

The patterns were mesmerizing. Tara barely noted the delivery of her drink as she tried to decipher the inky cuff that wrapped the slim wrist next to hers. She wouldn't have imagined that such dark skin would allow such vibrant colors to show so clearly. Some of the links in the design almost seemed 3D, or as if they had some kind of luminescent component to give them depth and life.

Yet she couldn't identify any particular cultural tendency showing in the intricate curlicues. There were no words she could identify—in any language, let alone the ever-popular Chinese characters that may or may not have been an order for a Dragon and Phoenix special. She knew people with Celtic and tribal cuffs in that location, but this display defied either description. The designs seemed to have an organic connection to the images she could see peeking around the woman's collarbones, but they weren't quite vines and leaves, either.

Tara forced her attention back to the steam drifting languidly up from the glass mug in front of her. She would only be here two more days. She was nearly done arranging the harbor cruise option—just had to finish negotiations with the Summerfest staff to make sure the thousand-plus attendees expected for this conference would have access to at least some of the headliner tickets while they were rattling around town after the business of the day was done.

All she needed to do was wrap up here and escape home for her annual holiday retreat. This year might even have a special gift in store—Tara had finally paid off the last of the debt from harvesting her eggs and saved up enough to afford the donor fee. The timing was still in flux, but her long-cherished, secret dream of a child of her own seemed finally in reach.

She noticed the hand at the end of the arm now grasping its mate. The action made some of the tattoos appear to jump across the entwined fingers to make faces at Tara.

Tara blinked hard and shook her head slightly. Something was definitely wrong with her. Even the artist colony she sometimes visited, where the members were almost as vibrantly arrayed, had never distracted her this way. She shifted in her seat to turn more fully to her neighbor and could feel the heat creeping up behind her ears. "I'm sorry. I can't seem not to be rude tonight. I hope I'm not intruding too much, but your body art is quite mesmerizing. By the way, I'm Tara Shifflet."

The other woman kept her head ducked, but she too shifted her body so now Tara could see the vines of ink creeping up her neck from her colletage. "How do you do? I am Navenah. I do not find you to be rude. Your curiosity is mild compared to many, and since I am alone here, it is a welcome diversion."

Her lilting tones and vaguely British accent deepened Tara's curiosity. "You seem to be far from home. How long are you staying in Milwaukee?"

The other woman's lips compressed. "I am merely on a short-term assignment and do not expect to remain in this city much longer, though my work as a Seeker is my life's mission. Do you have any recommendations for other cities to visit on this continent?"

The question, along with its quaint and worldly phrasing, surprised Tara. She supposed she had been forgiven for interrupting Navenah's silent contemplation. In the wake of her nervousness, Tara found her normal enthusiasm for her work jumping to the fore, though she wasn't sure she could echo Navenah's assertion about having a life's mission—other than recovery and its attendant promise of a peaceful life. "What are you looking for? Culture? History? Music? Natural wonders? Finding the right

locale is key to enjoying your visit, and America has a wide range of attractions. I can't help you much with locations outside this country though, since I don't have much experience with Canada or other continents."

The other woman finally turned to look at Tara directly, her shoulders straightening. Navenah's new posture reinforced Tara's initial impression of a beauty from the modeling world. Her eyes were striking, dark blue pools of mystery, and her curly black hair was cropped in a short buzz cut, drawing attention to high cheekbones and a skull worth showing off with the daring haircut. She murmured, "Whatever aid you could provide would be more than welcome. My mission is frustratingly vague."

"Oh, great!" Tara responded enthusiastically. "You've come to the right woman. I travel all over this country, searching out venues for conferences both large and small. Obviously the most popular cities are the biggest and most well-known: New York, Chicago, LA, DC. But you can have a lot of fun in places like New Orleans, Phoenix, Seattle, and Miami. Even places like St. Louis and Charleston have their attractions. It just depends on what floats your boat. Still, I would need at least a few more details if I'm to help you effectively." Tara smiled her brightest, most professional smile in invitation before finally noticing a potbellied, nerdy-looking white man tapping ineffectually on Navenah's shoulder. Tara glared at the interloper. "Here now, we're having a private conversation. There's no need to be rude."

The other woman shook her head minutely and sighed. "My dear, thank you for your kindness. I was, however, expecting this intrusion."

Navenah bowed her head briefly in Tara's direction before standing at regal attention in front of the man, towering over him by almost a foot. He handed her a room card that she inspected before striding across the lounge, trailing him in her wake. Her movements were as elegant and attention grabbing as the rest of her, and by the time she disappeared around the corner to the elevators, all fifteen patrons had found excuses to stare after her.

The bartender cleared his throat. Tara snapped her head around in time to catch his smirk. "What do I owe you?"

He cleared his throat again and grimaced at Tara before nodding at the rest of the entranced customers. He fanned himself, trying to make an in-joke connection with Tara. "It happens that way every evening. If she didn't have her own suite booked here I'd swear she was a hooker based on the parade of yutzes who follow her upstairs. And I don't care if you're gay or not, she's enough to make everyone swing her direction. Unless you want to swing mine?" He winked.

Tara blushed. Typical man. "The bill, please?"

His gaze slid away and his local accent became more pronounced. "Right. It's happy hour, so your total tonight is four dollars."

Tara snapped out a five-dollar bill and escaped to her room. It was a good thing she wasn't going to be here much longer, considering the bartender appeared to be that kind of lecher.

Chapter 2

Tara had difficulty falling asleep. She tossed and turned repeatedly before dreaming about a decaying, alien world. Hands every color of the rainbow reached out to grab for her. Alien faces were grimacing as they produced sounds Tara couldn't decipher. *How am I supposed to help when I can't understand?*

Waking at first light to a dreary sky and a view of the Hoan Bridge with only a hint of Lake Michigan at the edge of the horizon, she struggled to remember the order of tasks she faced. Where was her planner? Her planner was only supposed to be a back-up system; she always memorized the next day's order of events. Where had she plugged in her phone? Something, somewhere had to get her brain back on track. The sense of failure the dream had imprinted on her hung over Tara as she stumbled out of bed and frantically searched for either of her tools of the trade to start her day in its more accustomed mode.

Events went downhill from there. By midday, she found herself at Mitchell International airport, trying to catch a flight back to the Atlanta office, having been called back to deal with a colleague's botched job. She wondered how was it she had made herself so invaluable as to warrant her boss approving the expensive change fees. Tapping a finger on her chin in ironic amusement, Tara reflected that Mother might even be proud of her if she ever knew about this indispensability. A moment later she was frowning again as she considered what she knew of Bob's assignment and how she might be able to help him replace the hotel contract that had fallen through. The real problem with being flexible for her boss meant her carefully curated calendar was out the window and she would need to triage half a dozen other issues after she passed through security.

Her iPhone screen blacked out at the same time the airport lights dimmed and flickered, then darkened entirely before the hum of generators picked up and emergency lights turned on. Though it was early afternoon, the sky was dark with heavy clouds. Despite the walls of windows, the gray atmosphere served to reawaken the gloomy foreboding of Tara's early morning dream.

The PA crackled to life. "Code Bravo. Stay right where you are. Do not move. I repeat. This is Code Bravo."

Tara's shoulders tightened. *This is the last thing I need.* Frowning, she poked at the power button and the home button on her iPhone. Maybe the phone was just out of charge? She stood and took a step toward another seat near a charging outlet before she heard a strident, "Miss? Miss!"

She looked over her shoulder and saw an airline employee waving frantically in her direction. Tara stood still.

"Didn't you hear the announcement? We're on full lock-down. You're to stay in your seat until further notice."

Tara's eyes widened. "In our seats? But I need to charge my phone and let the office know. Can't I just move over here?"

"Miss! Do I need to bring you to security's attention? We're on full lock-down. Everyone is to freeze where they are. We're not to move. This is serious. We will let you know when movement is allowed again."

The woman's statement struck Tara's sense of the ridiculous. "But what if people have to pee?"

That was evidently the wrong response.

"Miss. I'm afraid you'll have to come with me."

The airport lights went dark again. Combined with the threatening bank of dark clouds, what should have been midday brightness was now gloom and shadows. This time the emergency generators didn't kick in, and Tara could see the officious woman struggling with her priorities while strobing security lights made the atmosphere frantic. Tara felt like she was in an unwanted spotlight at a night club, with other passengers riveted by the drama playing out between the two of them and the piercing lights stabbing at anyone who thought to move closer to the conflict.

"Look. I don't mean any harm. I didn't understand we couldn't move. I'll just go back to my seat and be quiet so you can go figure out what's wrong."

There was a low rumble overhead, as if a bomber were about to strike, vibrating the safety glass. Tara backed away to her former seat. That decided the official, who turned and sprinted in the other direction down the hall while shouting into her walkie talkie that her terminal was successfully locked down. Why were they still under the threat?

The noise, the uncertain lighting, and the tension among all the other passengers started the first trickle of fear down Tara's back.

The terminal shuddered more, and the overhead noise intensified. Now there were light effects to go with the noise. They weren't exactly lightning flashes like Tara had seen elsewhere. They were more diffuse and contained an array of different colors.

As quickly as they had begun, the sounds stopped. As did the light show. The clouds cleared out to reveal a sun-shiny blue sky. Still the power didn't come back on in the terminal.

A minute of silence passed. The first whispers started up among the stranded travelers. Nobody was yet willing to break the literal command to freeze—the command that had almost gotten Tara in trouble—but the unspecified danger seemed to have passed. Since no one had bothered to keep them in the loop, people began shifting in their seats, looking over their shoulders, and craning their necks to look out at the uncharacteristic weather.

Suddenly a squadron of some kind of fighter jets blew past. The sonic boom they brought with them made a few people jump. That decided at least one passenger—a pale, young woman who rushed around the corner to the bathroom clapping her hands to her mouth, disregarding the official command.

Tara scoffed at the now-absent girl. *Losing your lunch over a sound and light show? A bit of an overreaction, however mysterious it might have been, or?*

The terminal loudspeaker again crackled to life. "This is not a drill. Please continue to remain frozen in place. The National Guard will secure the perimeter and recheck identification papers. Please do not leave your seats until you have been cleared by the Guardsmen. Repeat: This is not a drill."

Nothing like closing the barn door after the horses were already out. If the sound and light show were what had prompted this exercise, they were looking in the wrong place for the source of the disruption.

Tara's phone beeped and flashed and went dark again. "What in the world?"

She tapped the screen and shook the phone before pushing the home button one more time. The login screen popped up, but wouldn't accept her thumbprint to open the interface to her apps. She punched in her security code. The phone still had half a charge and acted as if nothing untoward had happened.

Except there was a text message indicator. Tapping through to the appropriate screen, she expected a simple misaddressed text. Perplexed, Tara stared at the unfamiliar message from an unknown number. It took her a minute to process that though the glyphs on her screen might have been misaddressed, they were also in a language she had no way of understanding—and wouldn't have expected her phone to be able to produce, since they didn't match any alphabet she was aware of. Tara puzzled over the strange symbols, suddenly realizing they were oddly reminiscent of the tattoos on Navenah that had so bemused her the night before.

How did they find me? Have I been targeted? Does Mother suspect something? As the eeriness settled on her shoulders like a heavy cloak, Tara felt a knot of fear forming in her stomach. Her stomach clenched and she swallowed bile—especially when she saw the jack-booted figures marching in formation down the long hallway from the security screening stop. She hastily backed out of the message window and closed the text app, hoping nobody would have cause to look through her phone.

Tara took a deep breath and closed her eyes. Practiced her yoga breathing: in through the nose, out through the mouth. End in a sigh. In through the nose, out through the mouth. End in a sigh.

A rough hand gripped her shoulder, and she yelped, startled, undoing what tiny bit of relaxation she had managed.

"ID and boarding pass, please."

She fumbled with her purse and wallet, berating herself for not having taken this step right after the announcement. She should have been able to anticipate this request. She was a seasoned traveler, used to having her documents ready and available for inspection. But then her stubborn streak kicked in and she had to question the officious woman about freezing—and now she was unprepared for a more standard request. *Why couldn't she just be an agreeable minion and do as the authorities asked? Of course, it would help if the nerve-tingling grip relaxed so I could actually respond effectively.* The pressure on her shoulder increased and the muscles in her arm protested, her fingers losing their grasp on her belongings. Her purse tumbled over and upended its contents on the floor. "Sorry. Could you please let go so I can get my stuff?"

"Which one is your wallet?"

She eyed the gruff speaker and fancied she could see fear lurking in his eyes too, reminding her that everyone was likely on edge. She reached out with her foot and fished her wallet forward. "This one."

The soldier didn't let go of her shoulder but bent down to pick up the pink leather billfold before flipping it open and thumbing through its contents. Her Georgia driver's license peeked through the window, but the man didn't seem as interested in that as the credit cards and business cards that occupied the various organizing slots. The pressure finally let up. "Senior Meeting Planner, huh? Ever had a meeting like this one?"

She chanced a small grin. "Never been told to freeze in place and not leave my seat at an airport before, if that's what you're asking."

"Yep. Me neither. You're trying to head home this afternoon?"

"As far as that goes. My boss called me back a day early to clean up another planner's mess, so in all likelihood I'll be hopping another plane tonight."

"Tough job. You should tell your boss not to count on your return today though."

"Really? Why? Isn't the power outage able to be repaired? Is there any way I could get to Chicago to catch a plane there?"

"Sorry, ma'am. This airport is under temporary quarantine now. Nobody's going anywhere until the higher-ups..." The man cleared his throat and looked over his shoulder before shrugging. "There will be an official announcement explaining the situation once we review everybody's papers. In the meantime, here's your pass to move about within this terminal until we clear the building."

Tara eyed the paper. It was a simple print-out saying that the bearer had been cleared. It wasn't anything like a normal boarding pass or airline printout. Nor were there watermarks nor microprint to prevent counterfeiting. As she watched, the soldier stamped it and scribbled what looked like his initials across the text and seal. *How was that going to prove anything? Somebody didn't think that through too carefully.*

She looked around as he moved away. The rest of the squadron seemed to be treating everyone else the same way, and she wondered what it was they were looking for. Everyone in the terminal had already been through the backscatter machine and had their bags x-rayed. It was lucky it was the middle of the day and the middle of the week, so there weren't many to recheck, but it seemed a hearty waste of everyone's time.

With no explanation for the sound and light show or the apparent need for a fighter squadron air response, Tara wasn't going to mention her mystery text to anyone either.

The hum of the back-up generators started up, and the lights and monitors in the terminal flickered to life again.

The TV nearest her resumed broadcasting as her phone began vibrating with incoming texts, voicemails, and emails. "Breaking News ahead: The Milwaukee General Mitchell International Airport is on lockdown after a close encounter of the second kind. More after the break."

Tara considered the channel logo while staring hard at the images that flashed by before the commercials began. It looked like there was artwork on the airport's tarmac—though how it had gotten there, and who might have been on hand to get a first-hand image in the immediate aftermath of the

fly-over were mysteries Tara wasn't sure she wanted to contemplate. CNN was credible enough, but if they were talking aliens on a mainstream channel, it was going to be hard for her to maintain a low profile and get home—though home, and her friends at the planetarium, would be her best chance at a more scientific explanation of this phenomenon. Plus, if she missed the window for her cycle, it would be another year before she would have the time off to get through all the necessary procedures.

She meandered over to the wall of windows nearest where she would have boarded, and joined a three-year-old in pressing her nose against the glass. In living color, the artwork was almost psychedelic, and more than the small postage stamp of a picture some lucky traffic helicopter cameraman had captured for the news. Tara absorbed the image at what felt like the cellular level, her head slowly sweeping from one edge of the expanse of blues, yellows, reds, greens, and oranges to the other, the child beside her echoing her movements and eventually leaning against her in what Tara felt was an instinctive need for contact comfort. She smiled at the little girl before pulling herself away from the scene that had kept them enrapt and turning to find the parent who could better take care of the child who was now shivering.