

Marina Adair
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR



Second
First Kiss

A NOVEL

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DEDICATION

*To Diana Orgain,
for reminding me that I can.*

Kat Rhodes's sister had disappeared off the planet. One minute she was there and the next she was gone. A never-ending theme in Kat's life, it seemed.

She refreshed her Find My Friends app, but Tessa's dot had mysteriously disappeared an hour ago, which meant she was not at the library prepping for her SATs and likely up to trouble. The kind of trouble Kat had once invented.

Boy trouble.

Those days were long behind her, or so she thought, until she became the keeper of a teenager. She wasn't Tessa's legal guardian, but she was working on it. Which was why she was at Sunrise Falls—the stomping grounds for underaged partiers in Sierra Vista—instead of at work. Embarrassingly enough, she was spying on her sister's extracurricular activities. Activities that likely included keg stands and hooking up.

“I'm so going to get fired,” she mumbled to herself.

This was the third time she'd left work in the middle of a shift to babysit. Karma was definitely paying her back for all the trouble she'd caused when she'd been Tessa's age. Unfortunately, Karma wasn't paying her a salary—a problem since Kat desperately needed money. Between college loans

and paying off the back property taxes on her dad's house, which she'd taken over three years ago when he'd gotten injured and lost his job as a lumberjack, she was so in the red. Her life was always in emergency mode, like the constant flashing of the exit sign during a plane crash.

Grab the parachute and escape while you can.

Only she couldn't escape. She and Tessa were working on building trust. Another theme in Kat's life.

Trust was harder for Kat than love. And she wanted to trust her sister, she really did, but recent history hadn't afforded Tessa that privilege. Three years ago, when Kat had walked away from her dream college to come home and help care for her sister, Tessa had been a sweet, rule-following, people pleaser who was more into boy bands than bad boys. Then she'd grown boobs, learned the power of a push-up bra, and attracted the interest of the baddest of bad boys, R. J. Locke, and things rapidly changed. All those people-pleasing tendencies had transferred from her family to her crush.

Checking to make sure there were no bears or coyotes in the near vicinity—Kat hated bears—she hopped out of Bette Davis, her late grandpa's 1967 yellow Ford Fairlane, which looked like a banana on wheels. She grabbed the bolt cutters from the back seat and approached the metal gate, which was blocking her entrance to the park's grounds. It had a chain wrapped around it, securing it shut. Screwed to the center of the imposing gate was a big, official-looking sign stating:

FEDERAL FOREST PARK RULES:

1.OPEN FROM DUSK TO DAWN

Um, that wouldn't work. It was nearly eight thirty and Kat was going into that parking lot.

2.NO ALCOHOL

According to the thumping bass in the distance that rule was broken by about a hundred underaged teens.

3.NO PETS

Kat looked at Tiny Dancer, her miniature pony who suffered from separation anxiety and thought he was a lawn mower. TD had shown up on her front porch one morning three summers ago in serious need of a mani-pedi and some TLC. Kat's bleeding heart had cost her a \$1,000 vet bill, three throw rugs, and her favorite leather recliner, that now had a TD-butt-sized dent in it.

"One neigh out of you and your name will be glue."

Neigh!

"Rebel," she mumbled.

Kat studied the rest of the rules and nearly rolled her eyes when she realized there were twelve. Including but not limited to: NO FIRES, HUNTING, CAMPING, LITTERING, OR UNAUTHORIZED GROUPS OVER TWENTY.

Geez, they might as well have listed: NO FUN.

12. NO UNAUTHORIZED MOTOR VEHICLES DURING OFF HOURS.

That wasn't going to work since she wasn't about to hike in a quarter of a mile over the river and through the woods in the pitch black. Even the moon was working against her—a thin slice about as bright as a single Christmas tree light. Then again, just like she knew how to handle herself—a necessity when you grow up the poor kid in town with parents who couldn't be bothered—she also knew the importance of self-reliance.

She gave one last look at the sign and its bolded ALL VIOLATORS WILL BE PROSECUTED TO THE FULL EXTENT OF THE LAW and shrugged off the warning. Sometimes bending a little rule, or twelve, was the right thing to do. And catching her sister in the act was the right thing to do. Too much was at stake for Tessa to be out partying on a school night.

"Buckle up," she told Tiny Dancer. "Things are about to get interesting."

Holding the bolt cutters, she was ready to slice through the metal when she realized someone else had already broken rule twelve, since the chain was, in fact, cut.

“I guess we’re only violating the entry part in this impromptu B&E.”

Neigh.

Kat unwound the chain, letting the heavy metal clank against the steel gate and pushed it open. Hopping in Bette, she drove over the storm grate and pulled around the bend, where she found a parking lot full of cars. Enough to account for Sierra Vista High’s entire football, basketball, and cheerleading teams.

She was going to kill Tessa.

With an exhausted breath, she drove off the pavement and onto the gravel shoulder, inching up as far as she could get to the base of the trail, blocking any and all exits. She wasn’t about to miss her sister’s escape.

Turning off the engine, she pulled out her phone.

Kat: How’s studying going? You understand $E=MC^2$ squared yet?

Tessa: ...

The dots disappeared while her sister was likely concocting yet another lie.

Tessa: No, but I’m learning how to conjugate “My sister’s annoying” in French.

Kat: You’ll have to teach me that one. I imagine it will come in handy. What time will you be home?

Tessa: Don’t worry DAD. I’ll be home by curfew.

Most kids would have said *Mom*, but since Tina Rhodes bailed when Tessa was only seven, the only parent her sister really knew was Abe Rhodes. A shame since he was a frequent flyer on the dead-beat dad plane.

Kat: Good. I got off early so we should get home around the same time.

Which was in twenty minutes. More than enough time to get home from the library. Booking it all the way from Sunrise Falls? Never going to happen. It would take her ten minutes

alone just to hike through the dense forest after dark—if she were sober.

Kat hoped to God her sister was sober.

Tessa: You don't have to do that. I have my key.

Kat: And I have a headache. See you in twenty.

Kat waited a whole three minutes for a response—not even a single blinking dot. She didn't like playing the heavy or pulling on the Hall Monitor hat, but if she was going to prove to the court that she could provide a safe and loving environment for Tessa, then she'd wear however many hats as it took.

Kat rolled down the window and let the fresh spring air wash over her. She smelled of curly fries and malt beer. She felt like she'd been run through a woodchipper. Moonlighting as a bartender was going to kill her. After pulling her nine-to-five at the county as an IT specialist—which was more of a glorified DMV clerk—she worked the closing shift at Bigfoot's Brews at least four nights a week. She wouldn't say she was living the dream, but it kept her on good terms with the electric company.

Man, would her peers at MIT laugh their asses off if they could see her now. Their resident hacker now working for the Man. At least working at the bar allowed for her to showcase her badassery, with her shredded jeans, Doc Martens, black nails, and blood-red lipstick. Not to mention an attitude and wicked right hook that kept the natives from getting too rowdy.

Bigfoot's Brews was a bar and grill located at the base of the largest family-owned ski lodge in the area and a hot gathering spot for tourists and locals alike. It was the stunning combo of rustic-luxe and cabin chic with vaulted wood ceilings, pounded copper tabletops, and floor-to-ceiling windows that showed off the mountain views—which in the early spring showcased the evergreen ridges with white-capped peaks dusted in residual snow from the long winter.

Kat felt like she'd had a long winter as well—one that had started three years and a few abandoned dreams ago when her dad lost his job as a lumberjack and had to reinvent himself as a cross-country truck driver. But family meant everything to Kat, so she'd do whatever it took to keep her small family together.

Abe wasn't an abusive father, he was just unavailable. Literally. As in gone for months on end while on long hauls. To make matters worse, he didn't excel in the parenting department. Never had. He was more interested in being the "cool" dad rather than being a "solid" dad his daughters could count on. When Kat was Tessa's age, she'd had no curfew, no boundaries, no guiding hand, and absolutely no rules. She'd run wild and made mistakes—big mistakes that almost cost her MIT.

Big mistakes that had big consequences. Painful consequences.

One year, she reminded herself.

That was all she had left and then she could reapply to MIT and finish her degree. *If* they'd let her back in. And, after the misunderstanding that had been blown out of proportion, that was a big *if*. Misunderstanding was an understatement. She'd been accused of cheating in a group project—which was horseshit. She'd done her part, fair and square, but didn't have time to double check her partner's work because she was pulling a triple shift that weekend. Even worse, her partner had been her boyfriend.

Had she not come home for family reasons, she was pretty sure she'd have been expelled.

But she was done with mistakes. For Tessa, Kat was going to turn in her Bad Girl rep for a PTA tiara. On the outside, working at a bar might look like an irresponsible job, but she made more money in four nights of tips than she did with forty hours a week at the county.

A rational person would quit the daily grind for a few more nights a week at the bar, but the bar didn't provide benefits—like health insurance. And if Kat was going to gain custody of

Tessa, she needed to at least appear as if she had this whole adulting thing down. Adulting wasn't really her MO, but she was trying.

Good thing she was a master of deception.

Kat had been pretending since she was a kid. Pretending to be happy, pretending her home life wasn't unstable, pretending people's judgments didn't hurt. Especially pretending that she had her shit together.

"Let's see how she talks her way out of this one," Kat said to Tiny Dancer.

Neigh.

Kat rested her head back on the seat and closed her eyes. She wasn't lying about the headache. It was the equivalent of the thumping bass in a Snoop Dogg song.

Boom. Boom. Boom, it went. Right behind her eyes.

As if sensing her discomfort, Tiny Dancer wiggled himself out from his seat belt and stuck his head between the front seats, giving her ear a little nibble.

"If you want a nibble, you'd better buy me dinner first."

"I get off at eleven."

Kat didn't bother opening her eyes. She'd recognize that voice anywhere.

Nolan Carmichael. Her neighbor, nemesis, and everyone's favorite federal officer. Everyone, that was, except Kat. He might be the sexiest man in Sierra Vista, but when it came to her, he was inflexible, closed off, and straitlaced. To the rest of the world, he was this easy to trust, larger than life, gregarious golden boy with a sunny smile. A big teddy bear hiding in grizzly clothing. She'd dated one of those guys before, but it turned out that beneath the playful exterior he really was a grizzly with claws and big paws.

Another thing she needed to remember: That when it came to rules, Nolan was so rigid he made the mountains look smooth. Guys like him never messed with chaos, and Kat's life was chaos personified.

Not that she wanted him to. Unlike the rest of the female population in their small mountain town, she had zero interest in Ranger Tight-ass.

Then why did you kiss him? her inner bad girl asked.

Because it was a dare and I never turn down a dare.

Her inner bad girl called bullshit. And it *was* a bullshit excuse, and she knew it. The dare had been a fun game of *Buckle Up*, where the dare-ee had to take off the belt of the next man who walked through the door—with her teeth. To her dismay, Nolan happened to walk through that door. Wanting to see him squirm, she'd challenged him, and just like her, Nolan couldn't pass up a challenge. Kat had whipped that belt off in under twenty seconds, then—in a moment of sheer insanity—planted one on him.

They'd been circling each other ever since. For months she had given herself permission to admire from afar, but she'd never allowed herself to act on it. Until that damn belt and one awkward kiss—well, she couldn't really call it a kiss. It was more of an impromptu brush of the lips with zero warning and zero time to rally. A ludicrous, lashing, lip-smashing kind of deal. Even though it had been the worst kiss in history, he'd still managed to create a spark brighter than fireworks on the Fourth of July. Which was why Kat had been avoiding him.

But she couldn't forget that spark. Maybe it was the way he'd cupped her cheek or the way he'd gazed down at her gently, but something had flickered between them and it wouldn't go away.

She didn't have the time or the bandwidth to do anything more than casual. In fact, ever since she'd come home from Boston, she'd sworn off relationships. She'd had exactly one and discovered that she wasn't really the “bring home to dad type”—or so her ex's mom had said. Being romantically challenged was something she'd accepted over the years—so she'd become a one-night-stand champion. And she was okay with that title. It worked for her.

Most of the time.

But that title had become a hindrance in her attempt to gain custody of her sister. She needed to show that, unlike her parents, she had sticking power. Even before their divorce, her parents had missed birthdays, Christmas, even showing up for Tessa's parent-teacher conferences. Tessa was falling through the cracks, and Kat was determined to catch her—but Abe refused to sign over custody. He thought it made him look like a bad father.

And since the loss of their grandpa, that meant Tessa only had Kat as a role model. The irony wasn't lost on her—or the rest of the town.

Things got really bad when Abe got injured on the job and fell behind on, well, everything. It took him two years of physical therapy to heal, but he had to find another career. To this day, Kat never understood how, out of all the possible career choices, a father could pick a job that put thousands of miles between him and his family. Maybe if he'd had a partner who stayed at home it wouldn't have been so traumatic.

Then again, he did. Kat. He'd asked Kat to walk away from the future possibilities Boston represented. That help eventually became a full-time job, until Kat found that her dream of finishing college was no longer an option.

Still standing at her window, Nolan cleared his throat, as if expecting a real answer to his ridiculous offer.

“You'll have to get off on your own. I don't accept nibbles from men who kiss like corpses,” she said to Nolan, referring to that kiss three months ago.

“Is that your way of asking for a second round? Because I promise you, one kiss and you'll be begging me to use my tongue—and not just on your mouth.”

A tiny trill of anticipation flickered in her belly. A demoralizing feeling.

She finally turned her head to acknowledge Nolan's presence and her tongue turned to dust. Instead of his department-issued uniform, he was in faded jeans that were soft in all the right places, a red and black flannel that was

waging war with his biceps, and a black ball cap turned backward. He looked like Thor and Paul Bunyan had a love child.

He was bending over slightly, his hands resting on the roof of her car, his face so close she could make out every dark hair of his scruff.

“What are you even doing here?” she asked, working hard to keep her gaze from landing on his lips. Either he could read minds, or she had a very bad poker face, because he smiled this annoying, *You’re totally thinking about round two* smile.

“I should ask you the same.”

She closed her eyes again and rested her head on the seat back, feigning boredom. “I plead the Fifth.”

“That only works in a court of law.”

“Well, you always walk around flashing your big badge and pistol like you’re the judge, jury, and executioner, so forgive me if I got confused,” she said, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

“You’ve been checking out my big badge and pistol, Kitten?”

“Don’t let it go to your head, Ranger Tight-ass. You prance around like a peacock with cuffs. It’s impossible to miss.”

She felt him move closer, now resting his forearms on the sill of her window. Then he shot her one of those long, intense looks her brain hadn’t yet deciphered, but her panties reacted nonetheless. “First my pistol, and now my cuffs. You asking what I’m doing when my shift ends?”

She straightened and leveled him with a look. “While you’re clearly finding this amusing, I’ve got a job to do, so if you’ll kindly fuck off.”

“I have a job to do too. Like writing you up for trespassing after dark.”

She shrugged as if unconcerned, when inside she was nervous. She couldn’t afford another ticket. She could barely

afford her streaming channels. “I’d just throw it back in your face.”

He smiled. “Then I’d have to write you up for littering.”

Tiny Dancer took that moment to let his presence be known with a loud neigh. Nolan lifted a brow. He and Tiny Dancer went way back. All the way back to the day that Tiny Dancer decided to sharpen his teeth on Nolan’s truck bumper, then drop doodie on Nolan’s boot.

“Before you bring up the fact that he isn’t leashed, know he hasn’t stepped foot out of this car.”

“Have you?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“It is when you’re sitting in a secluded area in the middle of the night, alone.” He said it as if he were genuinely concerned for her safety.

“Are you worried about me, Ranger?” she said, purposefully downgrading him from a federal agent to a character from Yogi Bear.

“Yes,” he said, and there was a quality to his voice that caused a warm bubble to start in her belly and slowly rise into her chest. When was the last time someone had been worried about her? She couldn’t remember.

“There’s a reason we don’t allow people out here at night; it’s dangerous,” he continued.

And the moment had passed. Nolan was the kind of man who thought all of life’s problems could be solved with a smile and a wink. When that didn’t work, he pulled out his badge and gun.

“Sorry, Mr. Fun Police, you aren’t even in uniform, so I don’t have to listen to you drone on about rules and bylaws.”

“I’m always in uniform.” A truer statement had never been said. He was dangerous no matter what he wore. He was also sexy as hell. “And when I found the gate open, I thought I’d investigate.”

She lifted her hands in innocence. “It was already open when I got here.”

He looked at the bolt cutters on the passenger seat and lifted a brow.

“Hand to God, someone got here before me.” She did a sweeping pass with her hand to highlight the dozens of cars in the parking lot. “It could have been any of them.”

“Yet you ignored the no trespassing sign anyway and drove off road.”

“I was just checking to make sure people weren’t up to shady business. You should be thanking me, not harassing me.”

At that precise moment a belt of loud laughter ricocheted off the mountains surrounding them and filtered through the pines. He straightened and turned toward the trail leading to, what Kat knew, was a raging party.

Just great. Here she was trying to catch Tessa in the act, and a lawman was there to pay witness. Tessa better be sober or there would be words. Lots and lots of words.

She opened the door and stepped outside. A little shiver chased the hairs on the back of her neck—which had nothing to do with how well he filled out a pair of jeans. Even though spring had come, winter was still holding on, bringing low temperatures and cutting winds.

She leaned back against the car. “Seriously, what are you even doing here?”

“I can’t talk about an ongoing investigation,” he said, and she gave a dramatic eye roll for his benefit. “So why don’t you head on out before I call the tow truck?”

“No can do, Ranger,” she said, knowing full well that he was an officer for the US Forest Service, who was usually armed to the teeth and took down bad guys who did bad things on federal land. “I’m in the middle of a stakeout and I can’t turn back now.”

“Boyfriend?” he asked.

“Curious about my dating status?” she asked and immediately regretted it.

“My interest in you is becoming a problem.”

“That sounds like a you problem.”

He let his gaze purposefully fall to her lips, then met her eyes and this time when she shivered, it had nothing to do with the chill in the night.

“Kitten, by the way you’ve been tracking me every time I enter the bar, it’s starting to sound like an us problem.”

How had he noticed? She’d done her best to play it stealth mode, hiding behind her bartender facade, but he’d somehow noticed. Of course he’d noticed. His job was literally to suss out people’s secrets. And she had a big one. Even though she couldn’t stand the guy, she couldn’t stop staring when he wasn’t looking. It was becoming a problem.

Damn the man.

“I’m here for my sister.”

His eyes softened with understanding and something too close to empathy for her liking. It wasn’t a secret that Tessa was staging a rebellion against the world. And while Kat couldn’t blame her, she wasn’t about to help her sister light the fuse.

Abe drove big rigs to help pay the bills and took on as many hauls as he could get to chip in, but Kat wondered what would hurt Tessa more, losing the family home or losing the last few precious years with her dad before she headed off to college and, according to her sister, never stepping foot back in Sierra Vista.

“If she’s at the party, I will get her home safely,” Nolan said. “I promise. But you staying here isn’t an option.”

There was a strange urgency to his voice that she didn’t understand. “And I promised to kick my sister’s ass if she snuck out again, so my promise eclipses yours.” She held her head high. “I’m not leaving here without Tessa.”

Nolan studied her for a long moment, and she wasn't sure what he was thinking but she didn't like it. "Well, I hope she gets here before the tow truck."

She pushed off the car and walked right into his space, craning her neck so she could meet his gaze—which was dialed to amused.

"Seriously? I'm parked in a sea of cars and you're harassing *me*?" She poked him in the chest and her finger bounced back. The man was built like a Viking—imposing, indestructible, and so sexy one might call him irresistible.

"They're next." Nolan turned to look behind him as a chant of "*chug, chug, chug*" filled the night sky and Kat let out a defeated breath. "Is your sister at the party?"

Kat's shoulders drooped with exhaustion. "She's supposed to be at the library, but her Find My Friends dot mysteriously vanished. Which means she's up to no good."

"How did you know to come here?"

"This is exactly where I'd be if I were up to trouble."

He chuckled. "If?"

She crossed her arms defiantly. "I've actually grown up." *Some*. And not by choice.

He looked her up and down, pausing in specific places—places that began to tingle. Treacherous tingles. He was as strait-laced as they came, and he carried a badge. Badges made her palms itch. But he filled out the ass of his uniform like nobody's business, not that she'd tell him that, because for as much as she found him attractive, she wasn't looking for the kind of long-term relationship that guys like Nolan deserved. Her life was too chaotic, and her past was too questionable for that.

Plus, his morality barometer was set to judge and jury. And she hated judgy people almost as much as she hated badges.

"Trust me, I know," he said quietly, and those tingles went from treacherous to straight-up traitors. "Every time you take

out the garbage in those itty-bitty pajama bottoms, I'm reminded of just how much you've grown up."

She gasped and looked him in the eye.

Sure, three months ago they'd shared a drunken kiss. To clarify, she'd been drunk, he'd been as uptight as ever. It had been a dare—and she never turned down a dare. The kiss had been awful—like swallow-a-gallon-of-bleach awful. After, they'd both parted ways, but there had been a crackle lingering between them that refused to dissipate.

Before that, he'd never shown much interest in her. Even in high school she'd had a massive crush on him, but he'd kept her firmly in the friend zone. More like the "I'm the golden boy and you're the bad girl" zone. And it had become their thing. Then the kiss happened and suddenly there was this vibe. He'd tease her, she'd flip him the bird, then they'd go back to ignoring each other.

"We hate each other."

"Hate is a strong word."

"Loathe. Dislike. Detest. Irritate. Annoy. Abhor." His smile hitched higher with every word. "I give Tiny Dancer a treat when he poops in your yard. I steal your tomatoes in the summer. I reported you to the Community Board last month because your sequoia dropped pine needles on my property. I blow my leaves onto your lawn in the fall and shovel snow on your side of the easement in the winter."

"That's an awful lot of effort for someone you loathe, dislike, detest, irritate, and annoy."

"Don't forget abhor."

"I'm surprised you haven't started pulling my pigtails," he said, lowering his voice to intimate levels.

"We're at war. I'm not wooing you," she said, but he didn't look convinced. "Is there tension between us? Sure. We're both attractive people so there might be a tiny bit of chemistry." That was the understatement of the year. When they were together the air crackled. Then he'd open his mouth and say something that brought out his letter-of-the-law nature

and she'd be reminded that he saw the world in black and white and she'd learned to survive in the gray. "But we aren't going *there*."

"I know," he stated with so much certainty she wanted to knee him in the nuts. She was the one to shut things down, but for some reason hearing him agree made her stomach pinch.

"Then why are you watching me take out the trash?" she asked.

He stepped closer and lowered his voice. "Hard not to when you do it every time I leave for a shift. Like clockwork," he said. "Almost as if you want me to watch." He reached out and ran the pad of his thumb down her jawline. "Do you want me to watch, Kitten?"

Did she? She never used to wear her silky pj's until Nolan moved next door. But that was just a coincidence, right? It had to be.

"What a total guy thing to say. I know this will probably blow your mind, but it's not all about you, Nolan. Did you ever think that maybe I wear them for me? Or maybe I had an overnight guest, and I wore them for him."

Nolan's nostrils flared and his mouth went into a tight, unhappy line. Perhaps *he's* the one who wanted to pull *her* pigtails.

"Maybe." He casually lifted one massive shoulder and let it fall. "Maybe not."

She threw her hands in the air. "Oh my god. Next are you going to mansplain the nonverbal signals around wearing pajamas in the morning?"

"I could. How about tomorrow morning over coffee?"

Kat would rather drink from a gas station toilet than share her morning coffee with Nolan. She opened her mouth to tell him exactly that, but nothing came out. She cleared her throat and tried again, but only a strangled breath escaped, turning to mist in the chilled air. The air might have been chilly, but her body was reacting as if she were a nuclear plant in the middle of a meltdown.

He stuffed his hands into his pockets and rocked back on his heels. “Cat got your tongue, Kat?”

“Clever. Did you come up with that all on your own?”

“I have others I can share with you while I make you my famous frittata.”

She couldn’t tell if he was being serious or just yanking her chain. The bigger mystery was, did she want him to be serious?

Kat loved men. The breadth of their shoulders, the smell of testosterone, their rough and capable hands. Nolan had all of those in spades, but they drove each other crazy—and not in a good way. He was a groom in bachelor’s clothing and her grumpy neighbor. Not to mention her friend’s soon to be brother-in-law. So when her joke of a kiss a few months back sparked something deeper, she’d turned tail. And he knew it.

“What happened to *I know*?”

Before he could answer, a shrill ring cut through the night, but neither of them moved. It was as if she were stuck in some kind of hormone-charged standoff with her sexy and insufferable neighbor. Without breaking eye contact, she pulled her phone out and answered.

“Hello?” she said without looking at the screen.

“Kat?” A guilt-filled voice came through the phone.

It was Tessa. Who would rather die than actually talk on the phone. Who was supposed to be home in ten minutes and hadn’t appeared from the woods. Who Kat was supposed to be focusing on instead of sparring with her sexy and insufferable neighbor.

“If you’re calling to extend your curfew, the answer is a big, fat hells-to-the-no.”

She could hear Tessa take in a big gulp of air. “I know you’re going to be mad at me. So mad. But you promised that if I ever needed you that you’d pick me up, no questions asked. Are you going to keep your promise?”

Kat's smile vanished and as if sensing that something was off, Nolan's posture went from competitive to protective. "Always," she said.

"Can you come get me? I'm at Sunrise Falls."

"I'm already here. At the base of the trail."

There was a long pause where she was certain Tessa was doing some quick math that equated to *caught red-handed*.

"Okay, I'll be there in a few—"

A loud *pop* blasted simultaneously through the phone and the blackness of night. A sound so violent it felt as if the ground beneath Kat's feet vibrated. So terrifying her heart stopped mid-beat.

"Was that a gunshot?" she asked, but Nolan was already on the move. Weapon drawn, protect and serve in full effect, he disappeared into the night.

A National Park Service special agent who worked for the investigative service branch, Nolan Carmichael could navigate this forest blindfolded. Good tool to have in his belt, since once he slid under the dense canopy of sequoias and sugar pines, not even a sliver of moonlight could penetrate. But sneaking through the mountains blindfolded and sneaking around when someone had a loaded weapon were two different things.

“This is off-duty Forest Service officer Nolan Carmichael,” he whispered into his phone, rattling off his badge number. “Shots fired at Sunrise Falls. I repeat. Shots fired. Plainclothes agent on scene. Send backup.”

Without waiting for a response, he pocketed his phone and made his way north, toward the bottom of the falls, where the shot came from. The same area he knew high schoolers gathered to build bonfires and party.

Anger and frustration laced through his body, but he shut it down, instead converting the energy to a laser focus. This wasn't the first time they'd been called to this location as of late. Three weeks ago a group of partying teens got their hands on some bad ecstasy and two ended up in the hospital. Both kids made it, but they never found the dealer.

Which was why he was out there on his night off. Nolan got a tip that his prime suspect, R. J. Locke, was hosting a party at Sunrise Falls. The tip also included that R. J. had been bragging about getting his hands on a gun.

Sure, every town had its drug problems, but for the most part, Sierra Vista kids were using more marijuana than molly. But lately the landscape of these parties was getting out of hand, which made Nolan even more determined to solve this case and get the dealer out of the picture before someone got seriously hurt—like his former partner, who, during a raid on a lab, ended up taking a bullet to the shoulder. It shredded his rotator cuff on his shooting arm and put him out of commission.

Nolan had tried to make things right, even giving him a job at the lodge helping to oversee security. It was the least Nolan could do to make up for leaving his partner high and dry.

Sierra Vista was, for the most part, a small town with small-town problems. Located at the base of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, and bordering both the California and Nevada state lines, the town attracted people from around the globe who wanted to enjoy the breathtaking views of Lake Tahoe and the year-round activities. With so much of the town surrounded by federal forest land, any crimes committed outside city limits fell under the jurisdiction of the US Forest Services.

And even though this case was shared with a special task force, made up of the US Forest Service and the local sheriff's department, Nolan treated this case as if it were his alone to solve. He understood the value of teamwork, but his partner had been shot on Nolan's watch and that made this case personal. Which was why he was out there on his night off, because he got a tip that his prime suspect, R. J. Locke, was at the party and packing.

While his brothers teased him that he was a glorified park ranger, working in the Investigative Service Branch, in reality Nolan dealt with everything from poachers to illegal drug growers. But the kind of drugs that were making their way into his hometown was a whole other kind of trouble.

Heart rate slow and steady, hearing fully attuned, Nolan waited a moment for his eyes to acclimate to the dark, then carefully started his way up the hill. He hadn't moved more than three steps when the crunching of leaves sounded behind him. Weapon drawn, he spun around and aimed at the shadow between the trees.

“Put your hands up where I can see them.”

The person didn't raise their hands, instead dug them defiantly into their hips. “Seriously? It's just me.”

He didn't have to ask who “me” was. The raspy and throaty, and definitely pissy, voice that drove him crazy was enough to identify the trespasser. Not to mention the horse-shaped shadow standing next to her, nibbling at the ferns.

He closed his eyes and holstered his gun. Irritation and something else that felt a hell of a lot like fear bubbled up in his chest, which was ridiculous because Nolan didn't do fear. “What part of ‘don't move an inch’ didn't you understand?”

“I didn't move an inch. I moved several yards. And before you go all Barney Fife on me, let me remind you that, one,” she ticked up a finger, “I'm not one of your lackeys, so I don't have to listen to you.”

“My badge says different.”

“Which brings me to two, you're not even on duty. Three,” she held up her middle finger, “I can take care of myself. And four, my sister is out there.” A hint of vulnerability cracked through her tough-girl tone and something in his gut tightened.

He took a few steps forward, closing the distance until he could smell a hint of jasmine and french fries. He never took her for a flower kind of woman, then again, lately, there was a lot about Kat that surprised him. It gave him a similar feeling when he was close enough to see the light dusting of freckles over her nose—like he was seeing a hint of sweet behind the salty side. “I can't do my job while worrying about your safety.”

“I don't need you worrying about me.” She said it as if his concern for her would puncture that steel armor she hid

behind.

“I can’t seem to help it,” he said quietly and was taken aback at how true those words rang.

When Kat wasn’t busting his balls, she had her quills out. And while she had them aimed at most of the penis-owning population—she’d singled him out as mortal enemy number one. For some sick reason, that turned him on.

He’d had a little thing for Kat ever since she’d kneed Brian Skelton in the nuts in high school for not picking her first in a game of football. Kat had been a freshman; Brian, the varsity team captain. Kat hadn’t given two shits that he’d been a head taller and fifty pounds heavier. All she cared about was that he’d overlooked her because she was a girl. She didn’t throw or tackle like any girl he’d known. And she sure as hell didn’t look like a girl anymore.

Sure, she still wore army boots, lots of shredded black clothing, and her hair in an edgy style that made her look like a badass Cinderella, but that body of hers packed enough womanly curves to make a man want.

And he wanted.

Badly.

What had started out as a little high school crush had turned into an obsession last year when he’d caught a peek of her in those pajamas. Never in a million years did he think it was reciprocated—until she’d kissed him. She was too busy busting his balls for any kind of connection to happen. In fact, it was like she thrived on making him sweat.

Back in school she’d been as wild as a bobcat and had the claws to prove it. But he saw a gentler side beneath that pulled him in. He’d considered asking her out so many times he’d lost count, but he knew he wanted to be a federal agent and his career goals didn’t allow for a partner with a record. She’d already tested the waters with hacking into a corporate database for shits and giggles; he couldn’t risk his dream on a wild card.

She was still a wild card and he was now a federal agent. And her claws were still as sharp. But there was that soft underbelly that he'd seen on occasion that called to him.

"Well, try harder," she said, walking past him and shoulder-checking him hard in the process. He reached out and grabbed her elbow and a spark ignited that damn near lit up the night sky.

She whipped around and cut to his gaze, shock in her own. Those emerald eyes of hers flickered with unwelcome heat.

'Bout time you joined the party, babe.

"I get it. Your sister is out there and you're worried. But I *will* bring her back to you safely. However, I can't do that if you're traipsing around the woods. With a horse." She seemed to consider this and when he saw her teetering on the edge of compliance, he added, "I promise."

"I'm not really good with promises," she said quietly.

"Good thing I am." He put his hand on her lower back, ushering her through the woods. "Now go sit in your car. Lock the doors. And wait for me."

He saw the moment she gave in. Her gaze moved from the woods to him and then behind her toward the parking lot. "You'll get Tessa?"

"I'll get Tessa."

She opened her mouth to say something when suddenly a pounding of feet raced directly toward them. A stampede of feet reminiscent of a herd of rhinos.

Putting himself between the danger and Kat, he hollered, "Armed officer. Slowly come out with your hands in the air."

Only the feet didn't slow, they picked up speed and before he knew what was happening, a mass of teenagers burst through the trees.

"Stop!" he called out. "Stay where you are. Running will only make things worse." When that didn't work, he added, "You're surrounded."

Kat snorted. “Like they’re going to fall for that crap.”

He started to argue, but she was right; not a single person stopped. A few kids hesitated briefly, eyes wide and skeptical, before realizing he was alone and breaking off in different directions.

“Shit!”

There must have been twenty kids, going every which way. He opened his mouth to shout again when a loud, ear-piercing whistle broke through the night.

“One more step and I will call each and every one of your parents personally,” Kat yelled, her voice like an air horn. “Then I will call your coaches at the school, followed by your grandparents, and any other people who should be apprised that you’re out getting drunk at the falls. And I don’t have to see your faces to know who you are. I wrote down each and every license plate number in the lot!”

She lunged left, just as a kid in a sweatshirt raced past. She grabbed him by the hoodie and yanked him back. The kid landed on his ass. “Hey, Jason Talbot. How’s that study group working out for you?” Before Jason could answer, Kat yelled, “Thomas, Will S, Will D, Monica, Ashley, and Daniel, your ass is already grass so take a seat next to my car or you’ll be in even deeper shit. And Tessa Rhodes, don’t you even think about hightailing it home!” She paused and took a breath. “Get up,” she said to Jason, then tugged him by the scruff of his sweatshirt.

If Nolan weren’t so focused on finding a particular face in the crowd, he might have found her tactic funny. But this wasn’t a laughing matter. By the time Nolan and Kat rounded up three more kids and made it to the parking lot, another ten minutes had gone by. Certain that the partiers had disappeared into the night, he was shocked to see the majority of them sitting on the ground next to Kat’s car, more scared of her than law enforcement. He shouldn’t be surprised. Pissed-off Kat was terrifying—and exhilarating.



“No one got hurt,” Tessa said, her voice quivering with emotion.

The once-dark parking lot was now flooded with red and blue flashing lights. There were at least a dozen law enforcement officers on the scene. From US Forest Service SUVs to the local sheriff department cruisers. Some of the officers were questioning kids while others had disappeared into the hills, likely combing the woods for stragglers.

“Good thing for you guys that’s the truth. Now, who fired the gun?” Nolan asked, and Kat’s warning system went on high alert. There were a dozen kids there, and yet he’d singled out Tessa.

Kat put a protective arm around Tessa’s shoulders, which were trembling. Partly it was due to the headband she’d repurposed for a skirt, but mostly her sister was terrified. Kat didn’t blame her. Tessa might have been acting out lately, but she’d never been in trouble with the cops before. Good thing Kat had had plenty of experience with causing trouble growing up.

She may not have been that same wild, hot-headed kid desperate to prove she was tough enough to take on the world, but she still had those impulsive urges and the need to go a little crazy on life every once in a while. A need she kept firmly in check. She had to. Everything was riding on Kat’s ability to appear responsible.

“She already told you she doesn’t know,” Kat said.

He ignored her. “Who fired the gun, Tessa?”

“Asked and answered,” Kat said, then looked at Tessa. “You don’t have to answer him again.”

Nolan’s expression was impenetrable. Gone was the man who’d made her a promise and in his place was a hall monitor with a gun. “She does if she doesn’t want to go sleep it off in the drunk tank.”

“Come on. She’s had, what, a beer or two?”

Nolan lifted a judgy brow and Kat looked down at Tessa, whose eyes were off-her-ass-drunk glazed over. She was swaying slightly and her sweatshirt was inside out.

Shit.

“So she partook in a little too much. It’s nothing that you and your brothers didn’t do every Friday night after the game.”

“There was never a gun in play. Someone could have been shot. This is a completely different situation.” He turned to Tessa. “Last chance.”

“Or what?” Tessa croaked.

“Seriously? You’re threatening her?” Kat said, stepping toe to toe with Nolan. “She’s seventeen and scared.”

“She should be scared. This is a serious situation.”

“You know, you want these kids to trust you, but you aren’t going to get it by being a tight-ass. I am willing to drive each kid home and explain to their parents what they were doing. But arresting them? Giving them a record only hurts their chances to get scholarships. It could even affect their college applications. Most of all it will affect the way they interact with law enforcement in the future. Most of these kids are first-time offenders.”

Except for the last, all of the above had been true for Kat. Scholarships, college, the way she interacted with the fuzz were all adversely affected by one stupid, single mistake.

“And at least one of them has a gun. What part of ‘someone could have gotten shot’ are you missing?”

“The part where you think my sister’s involved. She’s an honors student with her sights set on UCLA. It isn’t her. So you want to find that gun, search everyone. Then arrest the one asshole in the group. Don’t punish them all for some idiot’s choice.”

“They chose to party with that idiot.” Nolan looked down at Tessa’s coat. And that’s when Kat realized why her sister was being singled out. It was R. J. Locke’s letterman jacket. “You come here with R. J.?”

“No. She did not, because she promised me she wouldn’t see him anymore,” Kat said, glaring at her sister. Tessa’s answer was to toe at the ground.

Great. Just great.

“Did he have the gun?”

“It was R. J.,” a sheriff’s deputy said, approaching Nolan. “One of the kids said that he was bragging about having some cop’s gun earlier today.”

“Did anyone actually see him with the gun?”

“Not that anyone is admitting.”

Nolan rubbed his head as if he had a teen-induced migraine coming on. If he weren’t being such a jerk, she’d feel bad for him.

“There we go,” Kat said with heat. “Mystery solved. It was R. J., who is not here. Can we all go now?”

“The only place these kids are going is downtown for questioning. Then their parents can pick them up.” Nolan put his hand on Tessa’s shoulder. “You can ride with me.”

Panic flooded Kat’s body, making her a little lightheaded. Out of all the nights for Tessa to get arrested, she couldn’t have picked a worse night. If Kat didn’t fix this mess, she was pretty sure the social worker was going come to the conclusion that Tessa would be better somewhere else. And maybe she would, but Kat was willing to do anything it took to make the last few years of Tessa’s childhood perfect. The poor kid deserved it.

Kat reached out and grabbed Nolan's arm. "Please, you can't do this." Then she did something she never allowed herself to do—she let someone see her fear. "You promised you'd bring her back to me."

Nolan's expression went soft with understanding and a flicker of hope pounded against her ribs. "She's a witness."

"Who's already said that she doesn't know anything. My sister is coming with me."

"You aren't her legal guardian," he pointed out.

"Technically no. But—"

"Then technically I can't release her to you." He started toward his SUV and Kat ran to keep pace with him.

"You know I'm in the process of gaining custody and it's almost handled. The system is just slow."

"I understand and I feel for you. I really do. But the law is the law."

Something that would be a non-issue for any other kid there. But everyone in town knew that Kat was trying for guardianship and her dad was fighting it tooth and nail. Only her closest friends knew just how close she was to losing her sister and she wanted to keep it that way. But if she had any chance of winning Nolan to her side, she had to be honest and pray he didn't use it against her.

"My dad's not home. He hasn't been for six weeks. If you bring her in, they'll know and then you'll have to call CPS and it can ruin my chances," she said and felt emotion clog her throat. "You don't have to do this."

"Milly told me a little about what's going on," he said, referring to her sister-from-another-mister and his soon to be sister-in-law—whom Kat would never, in a million years, have imagined spilling her secrets to anyone—let alone an officer of the law.

Embarrassment flamed in her cheeks, and desperation shook her body hard. This was where other people would ask for and receive help. Life had never really worked that way for

Kat, which was why she never asked for assistance. But she was willing to take a chance that maybe Nolan would be the exception in her life.

“Then you know that this moment, which in the grand scheme of things is nothing, can lead to a huge something in my family’s life. I’m not asking you to break any laws. I’m just asking you, this once, to look the other way.”

He was considering it. She could tell.

An unfamiliar sensation bubbled up in her belly. It was hope.

Nolan closed the distance between them, coming so close Kat could feel his body’s heat engulf her, his confidence surrounding her like a blanket, and his strong hand wrapped around hers. All she’d have to do was lean forward and she’d be in his big arms. She wondered if this was what it felt like to be under someone’s protection. To have someone other than herself give a shit about what would happen to her sister.

“I can’t,” he said softly, and she had to shake her head to make sure she heard him correctly.

“What?” she asked, because she’d asked for help and his badge and superhero complex said that he was the one to follow through. It was in his job description, right? Protect and serve.

But while she needed protection, he was about to serve her up to the courts as an unfit guardian.

“You can. It’s a choice, Nolan.” *Please choose me.*

“A gun was fired in the middle of a group of teens. Last month two kids ended up in the hospital because of some designer party drugs. Your sister might be a witness.”

All her words dried up in her mouth because she was terrified for Tessa. She got that he was doing his job, but she was trying to do hers as the grownup. Tessa was in the wrong place and made a stupid decision.

So many people had failed Tessa when it came to love and structure, and Kat didn’t want to be the latest in a long line.

She lifted a dismissive hand. “You know what? Never mind. I’ll see you at the station.” Kat grabbed Tiny Dancer by the leash and led him to the car. She flung open the door and paused. “Oh, and don’t call me Kitten.”

Nolan Carmichael knew from the age of twelve what he wanted to be—a special agent for the US Forest Service, Investigative Service Branch. After all, it was an ISB agent who located him and his kid sister when he'd gotten turned around in the woods during a brutal winter storm. That officer not only built a shelter to protect them from the worst of the blizzard, he'd taught Nolan how to use the land as a tool, and saved their lives. That moment defined the direction of Nolan's life.

He was already a protector by nature, but serving his community became a passion. Didn't mean that he wanted to spend his night off dealing with a bunch of pissed off PTA parents, who'd come down to the station to collect their drunk kids after curfew.

But he wasn't after the kids, he was after one kid.

He'd been investigating this case for three months and still had no hard proof of who was involved. Nolan had his suspicions, but a petty thief like R. J. wasn't smart enough to pull off this kind of operation. Missing game consoles from the back dock of a local electronics shop, sure. Selling fake IDs to high schoolers? Right up his alley. But dealing in homemade ecstasy? Way out of his league. Which meant he

had to be working with someone else. And the only way to get to that someone else was through R. J.

Sitting in his cruiser outside the station with Tessa, he was having a hard time convincing her R. J. was not what he seemed.

“What I’m going to tell you is not public knowledge, but I want you to know the kind of guy you’re sneaking around to see. He’s wanted in connection to a ring of drug dealers and a shooting that involves a federal agent. My former partner to be exact. And we both know it was the same gun R. J. had at the party.”

She remained silent. Then said, “What do you want from me?”

“Just if you hear or see anything sketchy, promise you’ll call me first.”

“Are you asking me to snitch?”

“I’m asking you to do the right thing.” He programmed his number into her phone.



Thankfully one of R. J.’s buddies was rounded up with the rest of the partiers.

Nolan rested his elbows on the metal interrogation table and leaned in—all the way in. At six three and two-twenty, he knew he was an imposing man and he often used it to his advantage.

“I’ve got you on providing alcohol to minors,” he said to Chet, a kid he’d arrested for selling stolen vape pens at the trailhead last fall. Instead of pressing charges, Nolan pressed him for information about R. J.

Chet sat back in the metal folding chair with enough fake bravado to have Nolan chuckling. He might be feigning smugness, but he was shitting his pants. “One more arrest on my record and this time they’ll try me as an adult.”

“You are an adult, so why were you partying with a bunch of high schoolers?”

“They joined our party, man. Not the other way around.”

“Were you selling drugs?”

Just like that, all the attitude vanished. “No way. I might have brought a few six-packs, but I’m not into that stuff.”

“Someone at the party was selling weed and ecstasy, and since the dealer was described as wearing a gray hoodie, black jeans, and red ball cap, that someone is sounding a hell of a lot like you.”

“Shit,” he said, leaning back in his chair. He ran a hand down his face in a nervous gesture. “I was selling weed, but that’s it. I don’t screw ’round with the hard shit.”

Nolan believed him.

“What do you want?” Chet asked.

“The truth about tonight.”

“When have I not come through?”

“The last time you passed me info, it was wrong and one of my agents got hurt.” On his watch. That’s what pissed Nolan off. He should have trusted his gut, called it in, but his partner didn’t want to risk losing their first chance at stopping the dealers.

Retired IBS Agent Eli Brannon and Nolan got to the old hunting cabin in the woods right as the suspects were fleeing the scene—as if they’d had a heads-up that agents were headed their way. In the chaos, he and his partner had split up

and Eli had been shot, ending his career. The dealers and drugs had vanished.

“What I told you was true. I overheard R. J. talking about meeting some guy at the old Jessup Cabin,” Chet said.

“Then tell me what I’m missing.” Because from the word go, Nolan felt as if he’d been one step behind the manufacturers. But he couldn’t figure out what he was overlooking. “Did you double-cross me and tell R. J. we were coming?”

“No, man. I swear. I didn’t say a word.”

“Then who did?”

Chet shrugged. “I don’t know. Honest. But it wasn’t me.”

And the only evidence they had that R. J. was there was the word of small-time dealer who wanted a get-out-of-jail-free card. “What about the gun tonight? Did you see it?”

“No, but R. J. was bragging that he had some stolen gun.”

Nolan’s heart stopped. “You want a pass, you’re going to have to help me prove it.”

“Like wear a wire?” Chet shook his head. “No way. R. J. finds out and my life will be over. I’d rather take my chances with a judge.”



“And what happens next? Do you lock us up and throw away the key?” Kat asked Deputy Carl, who was the intake

officer. He'd been giving the same answer, which was clearly from some HOW TO PISS OFF A CIVILIAN handbook.

"The sheriff's on it, Miss Rhodes," Carl responded, shuffling nervously from foot to foot. He was built like a pitbull, one with puppy-dog eyes and a kind smile. They'd gone to school together and he'd always been nice to her. She knew he was just doing his job, but right then she needed that big goofy guy who used to hug her in the hallways and cheat off her papers in math class.

"You said that four hours ago and yet here we are. It's one in the morning. Every other kid has gone home."

"Their parents have come to get them."

"We both know my dad isn't coming," she said, and Carl lowered his gaze to the floor because Abe's dead-beat syndrome was well-known within the community. "Don't punish my sister because he won't answer his phone."

They'd already tried Abe three times, and after the third strike Kat was out of options, leaving her with the only lifeline left to her—begging.

"Just say my dad answered. No one will know," she said.

"I could lose my job," he said with so much apology in his voice Kat wanted to cry. It reminded her of the way Nolan had looked at her right before he'd put Tessa in his cruiser, apologetic but determined to do his job.

But in order for them to do their job, they'd blocked Kat from doing her job—which was protecting her sister.

She was trying so hard to keep it together for Tessa. Putting her fist through the glass window protecting the deputies from people like her would only make the situation worse. She took a deep breath.

Carl glanced around as if he were about to impart the launch codes to nuclear bombs. "I'm not supposed to say anything, but the sheriff is trying to get ahold of Judge Cramer to see if we can release her into your custody."

Her heart sank to her toes, and the bile that had been roiling in her gut rose to her throat. She'd been thinking that she'd hit the worst-case scenario. She'd been wrong. *This* was now the worst-case scenario.

“You need to stop him!” Kat said so loudly that the station came to a halt to see what the hysterical woman was going to do next. So she took a breath. “Please, Carl, you have always been a nice guy to me. And now I need your help. Judge Cramer is the judge presiding over the custody hearing. If he gets word about tonight, I’m sunk.”

She glanced over at her sister sleeping on the bench and tears swelled up. Kat had one month to polish her reputation to that of guardian status, and that mean keeping the judge in the dark about tonight.

“What the hell are you doing?” a familiar and annoying voice came from behind, his tone implying that she'd chosen to spend the night at the station.

“Living the dream,” she snapped back. “What the hell does it look like I’m doing? I’m cleaning up the mess you started when you just had to take my sister, who knew nothing by the way, in for questioning.”

She clung to her false bravado and suppressed the urge to make a run for it. Her heart lodged itself painfully in her throat as she watched Satan himself pass through the swinging front doors to the sheriff’s station.

Anger and fear filled her chest as she mentally struggled to keep it together when Nolan’s intense blue eyes locked with hers. His voice went low, almost a whisper. “Are you okay?”

She was about to tell him to go fuck himself but was thrown by the gentle concern in his tone. Concern for her. It was something foreign and unexpected when it came to the men in her life. He wasn’t exactly a fixture in her life, but he was about to become her best friend’s brother-in-law, which would make them family of sorts.

“Do I look okay?” she answered, rubbing her arms to rid of herself of the sudden onslaught of goose bumps. He

mistook her actions for a chill because he took off his jacket and slid it over her shoulders, zipping it up.

It was still warm from his body and smelled like yummy man and the early morning air. It also threw her off-balance because it was a shift in their normal spiteful banter. And she didn't know what to do with this side of Nolan.

"I don't need to wear your coat," she said and began to unzip it.

He stopped her and when their hands touched, she lit up like a Christmas tree. "Maybe not, but I need to know you're okay. And that means that you're warm. It's freezing out."

"Thank you?"

A small smile touched his lips. "Was that a question or a statement?"

"Both?"

His smile faded. "Is accepting help from me really that hard?"

Accepting help from anyone was hard. Kat had learned the hard way that the only way to avoid disappointment was to rely on oneself. She knew guys like Nolan, had dated one, and once their excitement of walking on the wild side wore off, they went looking for a woman who was marriage material. And Kat was definitely not marriage material. Not that she was looking for a husband. She barely had time for more than a one-night stand.

But accepting help was like admitting defeat. Accepting his help felt like she was saying yes to something she didn't quite understand yet.

"I just didn't want to give you mixed signals, that by wearing your jacket there was any chance of us going out on that date you were talking about earlier."

He did that mind-reading thing of his, studying her with intention, so she flattened her expression, but not quite fast enough because his gaze zeroed in on hers and didn't falter

when he quietly said, “My offers don’t come with strings. Ever.”

She felt exposed and naked standing there, as if he’d stripped her bare and could see the parts of her soul she purposefully kept hidden for exactly this reason. Because once a man knew her weak spots, he knew how to hurt her. So she did what she always did when confronted with her fears, she met it with sarcasm.

“Just your Superman complex in action?” she said.

His look said he’d let her get away with it this time, but before he spoke, she felt a hint of disappointment roll off him and, surprisingly, it felt like a wrecking ball to her chest.

“From what I understand, you were the Superman earlier, acting as legal counsel for each and every kid, not letting them speak to the deputies until their parents got here,” he said.

“I made the mistake of trusting a cop when I was a kid. Gave into the whole Good Cop act and ended up with a record. So yeah, I don’t trust law enforcement, and I’d rather go to jail than have those kids get jammed up like I did.”

“You know we aren’t all bad, Kitten,” he said.

“Prove it.”

“I do every day,” he said, his chest puffed out with pride. “Come on a ride along with me and see.”

She crossed her arms. “That sounds an awful lot like that date I said no to.”

He snorted. “Trust me. A ride along is as far from a date as it can get. And it will show you that there are good law enforcement officers out there.”

“And let people think I’ve been arrested? I’ll pass.” Because it wouldn’t matter if she were in the front or back of that cruiser, people would talk. And the talk wouldn’t be good. “Plus, being locked in the car with you would be like being crammed in a soup can with Thor.”

“Thor, huh?” He puffed his chest out more, if that were even possible, and Kat told herself not to look, but she

couldn't help herself. Damn, if the way he flexed said anything, he noticed.

"I'm more of a Dr. Strange myself. Brains over brawn."

"Good thing I'm both."

She rolled her eyes and that smile of his was back. "Tough girl, my ass. Beneath the steel-toed boots you've got a big heart, Kitten."

"I hate it when you call me that."

He threw a wink her way. "I know. Now tell me how I can help."

She huffed at the ceiling, then opened her eyes as if looking for divine intervention. When none came, she gave in.

"Get me and my sister out of here." He hesitated long enough that she cursed herself for even asking and mumbled, "*Good cop, my ass.*" Louder, she added, "You know what? Never mind, I'll figure it out." She turned to punch the bulletproof glass wall when he caught her by the hood of the coat and held her in place.

"I was just strategizing. Why wasn't she released with the others?"

"Because, like I tried to explain earlier, I am not her guardian. So until they can reach my dad they won't release her to me." And then it happened, the tears she'd been holding back silently slid down her cheek. Not a lot but enough to have her hiding her face in embarrassment.

Showing weakness was not something she did. Showing it in front of a guy who had it all together—talk about horrifying.

"I didn't think they'd keep you overnight," he said, and to her surprise he tilted her chin up and caught a tear with his thumb. "I'll fix this."

"Why now and not earlier?"

He looked genuinely confused and hurt. "Because this is my fault. And because while I was listening, I wasn't hearing

you and that's a problem I need to work on."

Kat wasn't used to people, especially men, admitting when they're wrong. Or what their weaknesses were. She'd rather string herself up by her shoelaces than give someone that kind of power over her.

"Normally I wouldn't need your help," she stated, and he smiled. "But today is your lucky day. The sheriff is trying to get ahold of Judge Cramer to get permission to release Tess to me. But if that happens, he'll find out about tonight and it will sink my chances for custody."

"So you need me to stop the judge from being notified?"

She nodded with uncertainty. Because what she was asking him went against everything he stood for. Just look at earlier. But to her surprise, he turned to Carl and said, "Please tell the sheriff that ISB Agent Carmichael is picking up the witness Tessa Rhodes and escorting her home."

Carl stood and looked around for someone, anyone, to step in and help. "I don't think the sheriff will like that much. I was specifically told to keep them here."

"Then I'll tell him. Buzz me back."

Without further question, Carl buzzed him back and she watched as the imposing man moved gracefully through the maze of desks and walked right into the sheriff's office. He was inside for under thirty seconds and then he was making his way back to her.

After he walked through the door, he said, "Ready?"

"That's it? Just like that, we can go?" she asked, astonished.

"Yes."

"No strings?"

"No strings."

Kat was speechless. He hadn't just lived up to his word. He'd also helped her for the sake of helping her. "What did you say to him?"

“That this started out an ISB case and that the ISB will finish it.”

“And he just signed off?”

“Not many people say no to me.”

“*Psh*. I do all the time,” she said with pride.

He grinned wickedly and her tummy flipped. “I know it.” He said it as if he liked it.

Kat crossed her arms. “What’s the catch?” she asked skeptically. With the exception of a select few, in her experience, nothing was for free. “I mean, doesn’t going against the rules make you break out in hives or something?”

He laughed. “Something like that.”

“Then why?”

“I don’t know. Maybe there’s a lesson in here.”

“Be still my heart,” she deadpanned.

He ran his thumb down her jawline. “Or maybe it’s because I like to see you smile.”

“So Kat’s kid sister puked in your car?” Harris, Nolan’s oldest brother, asked, and his three other siblings burst out laughing.

He’d just watched Kat speed off in a cloud of dust, then he’d met his family at the base of the family lodge for breakfast. He’d ordered the blue plate special. A short stack, three eggs—over easy—bacon, home potatoes, with a side of biscuits and gravy.

Jax Macintyre, his best friend and as much of a brother to Nolan as his own blood, made a low whistle in the back of his throat. “I heard it was on his shoes.”

Actually it was his flannel, his pants, even his favorite pair of boots—all of which would have to be burned. Jackson Pollock would have been impressed with the kid’s projectile radius. But he’d keep that to himself; his siblings didn’t need that kind of ammo. He’d already been ripped a new one by his boss for his solo act last night. Then abusing his badge by asking the sheriff to make an exception and interfering.

“Did Kat junk you for arresting her sister?” Lucas, Jax’s identical twin and the workaholic of the family, asked. His tie was loose, his shirt had seen better days, and his eyes were

bloodshot—likely from lack of sleep. The guy looked like he'd crashed at the office last night—and he probably had.

“No.”

It was even worse. He'd hurt her. Deeply. He was surprised that she'd let a single tear spill from those gorgeous green eyes, but the sheer panic over what could happen to her sister, how it would affect her quest for guardianship, splintered something inside him. He'd almost, *almost*, let Tessa off at the trailhead with a warning, but he wasn't about to release an intoxicated minor into the custody of someone the court was investigating for parental custodianship.

And it's not like he could let her go after taking the rest of the kids into custody. Nolan's gut told him Tessa knew more than she was letting on. She might not have seen R. J. with the gun, but his instincts were screaming that she knew something. And his instincts were rarely wrong.

“I also heard that you told the sheriff off and rescued Kat from punching him,” Brynn said with a big-ass grin.

“She wasn't going to punch him.” Not yet anyway. Given the opportunity it could have gone either way, but he hadn't given her the chance, instead handling the situation in a diplomatic way.

“The sheriff was being a stickler about the whole thing. I just pointed out how bad it would look when Kat told the *Sierra Vista Herald* that a minor was held for questioning overnight when she was only a witness to a crime of which they had no proof.”

“Isn't that the pot calling the kettle black?” Harris asked. “I mean there isn't a stickler with a stick more firmly planted up his ass than you.”

“I am a stickler for the law, but when someone abuses that power, I have no problem stepping in.”

“So it had nothing to do with the woman wearing your jacket?” Jax said. “Because according to Milly, you were pretty adamant that she wear it like it was your letterman jacket or some shit.”

He *had* been adamant. And he had felt like a stupid teen seeing her in his jacket, so he was disappointed when she had handed it back before getting into her car.

“What is this, high school?” Nolan asked, shoveling in a forkful of potatoes covered in homemade gravy.

“Speaking of high school, didn’t you invite her to prom?” Harris asked.

“No, he wanted to, but he chickened out,” Jax said around a mouthful of breakfast burrito.

He had wanted to ask her, but she’d just been suspended for hacking into a corporate server. He’d just been accepted into the ISB training academy. They were like vinegar and water, their lifestyles would never mix. “I wanted to go with Gabrielle James.” And that’s who he’d gone with.

“Did you know that Kat had heard around school that you were going to ask her?” the waitress, Denise, informed him while refilling his coffee.

“How do you even know that?”

“People talk,” she said with a wink, then went on her merry way.

The only person he’d told was his sister, who was overly interested in her hash browns. He should have known; she was always a tattletale.

“You stand her up for prom, then arrest her kid sister. Can you spell *asshole*?” Harris asked.

“N-O-L-A-N,” Jax said, and the whole table burst into laughter.

“First off, I didn’t stand her up. I never said I was taking her. Second, no charges were filed last night. It was more of a scare-the-shit-out-of-them tactic,” he said.

“Let me guess, your decision?” Jax said—again with the laughing. “Man, do you know how often Mom and Dad would have grounded us if the cops had busted us every time we were caught partying up at Sunrise Falls after dark?”

“You’d have never seen the light of day again,” Brynn, the baby of the family, said with a sunny smile. She was so petite her legs were dangling off the booth’s bench. And she was so loving, her brothers acted like invisible Bubble Wrap to protect her from the assholes of the world.

Today Nolan felt like that asshole. Which was why, after a long, hot shower, he’d joined his siblings at Bigfoot’s Brews, a bar and grill located next to Sierra Vista Lodge, his family’s hotel that he and his four siblings owned and ran, for their regular brunch.

Three months ago, his parents dropped the bomb that they wanted to sell the lodge and retire to Santa Barbara. While Nolan was all for them enjoying their golden years to the fullest, he couldn’t stomach some big corporation coming in and gutting the legacy that had taken the Carmichael family sixty years to build. So the siblings had stepped up and taken over.

Nolan oversaw every aspect of security, Jax secured event sponsors, Harris made sure that the buildings were properly maintained, Brynn worked closely with Search and Rescue and ski patrol, while Lucas was acting CEO—a position he was not happy to inherit. In fact, he was the only sibling who objected to their takeover and yet he’d been the one to make the most sacrifices for the family. Which was why he’d given them a year to get the company in order and train a new CEO, and then he was done.

Something Nolan and his other siblings hoped to talk him out of. Lucas was burnt out and needed to get a life, sure. But if he walked away from the company he’d spent the past several years growing, he’d regret it. Everyone knew it—even Lucas. He was just too stubborn to acknowledge it.

In a way, Nolan got it. Most days he felt like he was burning the candle at both ends, but standing alongside his siblings while they continued the family’s legacy was worth every sacrifice. This lodge and this town were home—and Nolan would protect them at all costs.

“Things are different now,” Nolan said.

Harris snorted. “Okay, Grandpa.”

“Yeah, did you have to walk to school through wind, sleet, and snow, going uphill both ways?” Jax asked, and the two high-fived.

Nolan flipped them the bird, then took a long swig of hot coffee. “The longer this case goes on the more I get this feeling that the answer is right in front of me. And the only reason I brought all the kids down for questioning is one of the kids said R. J. was bragging about having a gun.”

“Then arrest him,” Brynn said.

“No one will admit that they actually saw him with the gun. So the best I can do with that information is bring him in for questioning.” And R. J. would show up with his city councilman father and a team of lawyers. Been there, done that. He needed tangible proof.

“Well I hate to take your day from bad to worse,” Lucas said. “But the bookkeeper pointed out that we’ve either been shorted supplies from multiple vendors or someone is helping themselves to the bar’s storage room.”

Nolan pressed his palm to his forehead. He did *not* need this right now. “How bad is it?”

“We won’t know for sure until I look deeper into things,” Lucas said.

“You’re already pulling twelve-hour days,” Nolan said, hoping to God that it was just some invoice glitch. Everyone who worked at the lodge was like family, and he’d hate to have to fire someone he cared about. “Plus, it’s my job to keep people safe and accountable, this falls to me. I will figure out what’s going on.”

Someone was sucking on her toes.

“Five more minutes,” Kat mumbled, rolling over on her stomach and throwing the covers over her head.

Now she was being watched—she could feel it. Someone—or *something*—was in the room with her.

Kat pried open her lids to find Tiny Dancer staring at her. His chin was resting on the corner of the mattress, his thick lashes batting her way.

“You snuck out of your pen again, didn’t you?”

His answer was to snort.

“Well, I need five more minutes, or I take you to the glue factory.”

Neigh.

“Ugh!”

Kat was neither a night owl nor a morning person. She was a bona fide sleep connoisseur. So functioning on three hours’ sleep was going to be impossible without two or ten cups of coffee. It’d been after two when they’d finally arrived home.

Neigh!

Kat threw back the covers and sat up, rubbing her hand down her face. “Fine. Breakfast, then factory.”

She picked up her phone to see if she still had time to feed Tiny Dancer and then come back to bed when panic kicked her in the gut like a bucking bronco.

“Shit!” It was nearly eight thirty in the morning, which meant Tessa would be late for school—again.

Kat grabbed her robe—she wasn’t going to be accused of prancing around in her skimpy pj’s today, no sir—and ran down the hallway. She pounded on Tessa’s door. “We’re late. Train leaves in ten minutes. You’d better be on it.”

She raced into the kitchen and started the coffee—priorities—then opened the fridge to make Tessa lunch when the felon of the hour padded in.

Tessa’s hair was sticking up in the back, her eyes were puffy from crying, and there was a sheet mark on her cheek. She looked more like the kid sister from a year ago. The kid sister who loved school, loved life, and didn’t give a rat’s ass what boys thought of her. The kid sister who was forced to grow up too soon because of shitty parents. Something Kat could relate to.

By the time Tessa was seven, Tina Rhodes was MIA from her daughters’ lives. It was a pattern that had plagued their childhood. After the divorce, Tina would just disappear. To gamble, to travel, to date America’s least desirable men. Eventually she’d come back wanting to be Mom of the Year, only to disappear when the next butterfly blew past. But ten years later, Tina had yet to come home again.

While Tessa pretended she didn’t care about Tina, Kat knew that there was still a little girl inside her who wanted her mom to come home. For her mom to choose her. Hell, either parent to choose her.

Kat had the same little girl inside her.

While their dad might not have been a stable fixture in their lives, he’d been a constant fixture. At least until he’d injured himself and went from lumberjacking to driving a big

rig. After being stuck in the small ski town of Sierra Vista for his entire fifty years, Abe loved the freedom that the open roads brought. Only that freedom came at a price.

It came at his daughters' happiness and well-being.

Kat was all about the "You do you" mentality when it came to life, but there were a dozen other professions her dad could have chosen. And he'd picked the only one that affected everyone else in his life. Not only did Kat have to walk away from school, but she also walked away from her own dreams.

Okay, so there had been a little misunderstanding at MIT, but she was in the middle of fixing that when her dad had called to say he needed her at home to help out with Tessa. He'd promised her it would only be a semester, just until he got his new gig up and running. But that semester had turned into spring, then summer, and here she was, three years later still living someone else's life in the town she'd tried so desperately to flee.

Instead of being some big cybersecurity expert, she spent her days as an IT manager for the county, which was pretty much like being the Geek Squad for the DMV. And was still struggling to pay off her college loans for a degree she'd didn't finish. And to cover her sister's needs and the mortgage on her dad's house.

Abe had let the property taxes lapse a few years. It had been toward the end of his accident when he'd been injured and unemployed.

Kat wouldn't go as far as to say her life was empty. She had the best group of friends a girl could ask for, but her tank was definitely running on fumes.

"Why are you still in your pj's?" she asked her sister, who had slid onto a bar seat at the counter.

"I don't feel good. I think I'm coming down with something."

"It's called a hangover."

Tessa rolled her eyes so hard Kat was surprised they didn't fall out of her head. "What happened to *no questions asked?*"

Kat walked over to her sister and pulled up the stool next to her. Yes, they were late, but what was another ten minutes? This talk was a long time coming and it was too big of an opportunity to pass up.

“I’m trying really hard, Tess,” she said honestly. “I’m trying hard to give you the space you need to make good decisions, but you’re not making this easy on me.”

God, this was hard. Parenting someone you should be best friends with. Being a role model and being a parent were two vastly different things, she was coming to learn. Tessa had been failed by their mom, left behind time and again by their dad whenever he got a haul he just “couldn’t pass up,” and she’d still been young when their grandpa Bill died. Kat might not have had a lot of direction in her youth, but she’d had guidance.

Tessa only had a sister who was stuck in a dead-end job she hated, living in the same bedroom she’d slept in when she’d been a kid, and was still trying to cope with an absent parent in her life.

“I don’t see the big deal. You did stuff like this all the time,” Tessa said.

“This *is* a big deal and the consequences to your actions could have been so much more serious.”

“I have my freedom except when I’m forced to stay with you,” Tessa spat.

“I’m not the bad guy here. Mom left and that sucked. Dad’s never around, I get it. But I’m here.”

“It’s only a matter of time before you leave too.”

“Three years, Tessa. Three years I’ve been here. I’m not going anywhere until you’re in college and settled. And if you keep this up you might not get the chance to go to college,” she said.

“You’re being so dramatic.”

“If Nolan hadn’t stepped in, we’d still be at the sheriff’s station.” A fact that Kat was grateful and angry about. She’d

never watched someone fly in with his big cape flapping in the back and come to her rescue. She'd also never owed someone a favor for being rescued. And that was what ticked her off. He said his help didn't come with strings, but she wasn't quick to trust in that.

"I'm trying to get guardianship, but if you keep this up, they're going to take you away from me and put you in foster care."

The silence was so thick even her army knife couldn't cut through it.

"Is that what you want?" Kat continued.

Did her sister really not want to stay with her? Was Kat the only one in this fight? She'd spent her entire life fighting for people who refused to fight back, and she didn't think her heart could handle one more person choosing an out.

"Does Dad want you to live with me because I'm too much trouble?"

"I want to live with you because I love you. But you have to want to live with me back."

"I do, but you're just so strict."

"Look at the kind of trouble you're finding yourself in. I told you how I felt about your spending time with R. J. He's trouble and too old for you. In fact, he could be arrested if you two go all the way. And I will make sure he is punished to the fullest extent of the law."

The minute the words left her mouth she regretted them. Because instead of scaring her sister, she just erected another wall between them. Gave Tessa another reason to keep secrets from her. The last thing she wanted was for Tessa to have sex with R. J. Even worse? For her to have sex with him and not feel comfortable coming to Kat to talk about it. And Kat just ensured that the latter would happen.

Kat ran a hand down her face. "I shouldn't have said that. I'm just scared right now, and I spoke without thinking. I promised you no questions as long as you call. And I need to

practice what I preach. So I am going to live up to my promise and just give you a hug. Is that okay?"

Tessa shrugged as Kat pulled her into her arms, taking in her overly perfumed scent, the way she fit in her arms, and the way her blond hair rolled down her back in waves. Kat took it all in because she didn't know when she'd next be gifted such an embrace.

When they pulled back, Tessa picked at her nail with a hint of boredom. "What's it to you anyway?"

"Honest?"

"Yeah, honest."

"You mean everything to me," Kat replied, her voice cracking with emotion. "So when you sneak out and lie to me to hang with some guy who's no good for you, I freak out."

"He's not dangerous," Tessa protested. "He's just misunderstood."

"Misunderstood?" Kat snorted. She knew firsthand the stupid shit girls did to impress boys and she wasn't going to let Tessa make the same mistakes. "He's got a juvie record a mile long and has been involved in all sorts of shady dealings."

"How would you know?"

"The whole town knows," she lied. "And you want to hang out with him?"

"He's different with me," her sister insisted. "He's sweet and kind and he really cares about me."

Kat shook her head in disbelief. "That's what they all say," she muttered.

"Just because your ex didn't want to marry you, doesn't mean that I'm not girlfriend material."

Tessa could have slapped her, and it would have hurt less. Not only had her ex, Ryan, said she wasn't wife-y enough, he also said he had a hard time picturing her as a nurturing mother.

Kat swallowed the hurt and said, “Truth time. Who had the gun?”

“I didn’t see. I swear. I was talking to Kristen when I heard the shot.”

“I need you to be able to trust me. I promise that whatever you tell me stays between us.”

Tessa eyed Kat, as if trying to decide if she could be trusted. Kat softened her features so that her sister could see the desperation and concern in her eyes. It must have worked, because Tessa whispered, “I didn’t see it, but I heard about it. Supposedly, he found it and he was just showing it around when it went off.”

Found it, my ass. Stole it was more likely.

“R. J. would never hurt me. He’s not what people think, and I really like him, Kat.”

He was exactly what people thought. He was bad news with a rich dad to cover his ass when shit got real. As in first name Douche and last name Canoe.

“Just work with me for the next few weeks until the social worker signs off, so we show her that we’ve got this.”

Tessa never got the chance to answer because there was a knock at the door. Kat stood. “We’re not finished with this conversation.”

“Lucky me,” Tessa said.

Kat opened the door and her stomach sank to her toes. “Ms. Woods,” Kat croaked out. And here she’d thought her day couldn’t get any worse. The joke was on her.

Sierra Vista County social worker Nancy Woods stood on the porch in a navy pantsuit, crisp white blouse, and a file folder the size of the Bible. She was a gatekeeper, and Kat had never done well with gatekeepers. They always seemed to be able to sniff out her BS.

Kat smoothed down her hair and tightened the belt of her robe. “What are you doing here?”

“I heard there was an incident last night. I wanted to come check on your sister’s well-being,” she said.

Kat was going to be sick. Nerves and anger swirled in her stomach. Anger at herself for letting things with Tessa get this far. For working a job that required her to be absent on school nights, giving Tessa the freedom to make bad decisions. And this decision might have just cost them their family.

“How is Tessa?” Nancy peeked over Kat’s shoulder, then sent Kat a scathing look.

Kat already knew what she saw, a hungover teen who was playing hooky from school, and a wannabe guardian who looked like she’d spent the night at the police station bailing out her kid sister.

The next day, Nolan hadn't expected to spend his morning scraping dried eggs off the front windows of Bigfoot's Bar and Grill with his siblings.

In addition to being the locals' favorite hangout and bar, the resort-style lodge boasted a hundred luxury rooms, a gift shop, equipment rentals, and an outdoor café where every table was equipped with its own firepit and a s'more station. There were a half dozen other buildings on the property, including a bunkhouse for ski patrol, search and rescue, and some of the seasonal instructors. Atop a small bluff was a little amphitheater used for hosting weddings and events.

But it was the location of the lodge that drew people there. Bordering the Tahoe National Forest, Sierra Vista was surrounded by dense sequoias, sugar pines, and Douglas firs, giving the feeling that one was in the middle of a forest rather than a five-minute drive from the quaint downtown. With gas lamp-lined streets, shiplap-fronted shops, and a million strung twinkle lights crisscrossing overhead, Sierra Vista was the gem of Lake Tahoe. And with views overlooking the crystal-blue lake and backdrop of mountains, it was a prime destination for tourists and locals alike.

For Nolan, it was home, a place he'd give his life to protect. But he'd never imagined protect and serve would include solving who was behind what looked to be a Costco-sized egging attack. The eggs were dry and frozen to the windows and log exterior, which meant whoever did this had attacked after last call.

"You got any ideas on who's behind this?" Harris asked, toeing an empty egg carton that had been discarded on the ground.

"My guess? It's a kid," Nolan said. His breath turned to vapor in the early morning chill. Even in a parka and beanie he could feel the last of winter trying to hang on. "Not that we'll figure out who is was." Nolan jerked a chin to the security cameras which were covered in yolk.

"That is one hell of a shot. I mean one camera, lucky. Three cameras with a bull's-eye is talent," Jax said.

"Why didn't the alarm sound when the cameras were taken out?" Harris asked.

"For some reason the alarm wasn't armed last night," Nolan explained. Otherwise he would have been notified the second that first egg made contact.

Jax stilled. "That's the third time in two months."

Nolan ran a hand down his face, last night's scruff coarse under his palm. "Tim swears he armed it."

"Do you believe him?" Harris asked.

"Yeah, I do." The bar manager, Tim, might be a little too flirty with the customers and a little too friendly with the staff, but he was reliable and honest. "The guy's never given me any reason to doubt him."

Brynn's smile faded. "What does the security company say?"

"That there is nothing wrong on their end. They're sending out an IT person later today to check the wiring and motion detectors on our end. But I looked and everything seemed to be in working order."

“I think we should call the cops and report this,” Brynn said, and the rest of the siblings rang in with their agreement.

“I *am* the cops,” Nolan said.

Harris patted his shoulder. “I think she meant the real cops. You’re more lost hikers and illegal bonfires.”

“I carry a gun and just rounded up a group of crackheads who were using an RV camper as their own personal lab.”

“Yet you can’t seem to catch a teen with a grudge,” Jax snickered.

“What do you want me to report? That someone toilet papered the men’s room and egged the bar?” He’d be the laughingstock of the department. Plus, it would only prove what his boss had been hinting at: Nolan was spread too thin. Between his job and the lodge, he hadn’t caught more than six hours of sleep in any one stretch. As for a social life? Unless he counted poker night with his siblings, it was nonexistent.

“We all know that someone is R. J. Locke,” Brynn said.

“Knowing it and proving it are two different things,” Lucas said.

“Maybe it was one of the kids you arrested the other night,” Harris added.

Hell, it probably was. Nolan looked at his siblings who were all looking at him expectantly. “Why do you guys think *I* was the intended recipient of such a gift?”

Jax used his fingernail to scrape off some eggshell that had dried to the window. “You were the one who arrested a bunch of kids the other night. And this looks like kids to me.”

“Again, I didn’t arrest them, just scared them straight.”

“Well, it worked. Kat is scared,” Brynn said quietly, and his gut turned inside out. “I guess the social worker caught wind of the arrest and showed up at her house.”

“I didn’t arrest her,” Nolan clarified.

“Doesn’t really matter, the end result was the same. The social worker now has one more reason to say no,” Brynn said.

“Kat is already struggling to overcome her parents’ reputation, prove that she isn’t a flake, and between her past antics and then the night at the sheriff’s department, she’s going to have a hard time.”

“Antics?” Nolan snorted. “She was a teen when all of that went down.”

“This town has a long memory,” Jax said. “According to Milly, the social worker assigned to the case is the same one who investigated Kat’s parents back in the day.”

“That sounds like a conflict of interest,” Nolan said, going through a mental Rolodex of who he knew at the county that he could call on Kat’s behalf.

“That sounds like small town living,” Lucas said, making it clear that it was not complimentary of Sierra Vista. “Just another reason why I’m counting down the days until I can get back to New York.”

Harris slung his arms around Lucas and, yanking him over at the waist, gave him a noogie. “I’m counting down the days until you realize you’re being an ass and that your place is here. With your family.”

“Right.” Lucas shoved Harris, then picked up an eggshell and tossed it in the wind. “And miss all of this? What am I thinking?”

“You’re not,” Jax said. “Just like Nolan wasn’t thinking at that trailhead.”

After the other night, Nolan felt like an asshole. There were a dozen different ways to have handled the situation, but given the extraneous situation of the gun, there was only one right way. Then why did he feel as if he’d made a wrong step?

Because you made her already difficult world that much more difficult. He’d been just another in a long line of people who were only looking out for their own ass.

“Things are different now,” Nolan insisted, feeling guilty as hell.

“A lot has changed, I just don’t think you understand what has,” Brynn said cryptically.

Kat had lived five lifetimes between Ms. Woods's drop-in yesterday and now. She was three hours into her second job and hadn't eaten since lunch. Not even caffeine could help her at this point.

Which was why she'd tied on her ballbuster cloak tighter than normal—something she did whenever she felt vulnerable. And, damn, she felt raw. Knowing she was failing as a parent was bad enough, but to see the look of premeditated disappointment on Ms. Woods's face had been like a kick to the baby maker.

It was as if the woman had expected nothing less than a situation exactly like that. Like Kat had handed the woman all the proof she needed to write her off as an irresponsible guardian.

At this point, Kat wouldn't be surprised if news of Tessa's late-night shenanigans had burned through town like wildfire. When Nolan brought Tessa to the station, he effectively announced to the entire town of Sierra Vista her greatest insecurity, that Kat was failing at life.

Spectacularly.

God, something had to give or she was going to go down harder than the time she'd been caught using a backdoor hack into the SAT test's servers, which belong to the College Board, a nonprofit organization. It had been a dare, which she'd accepted, then stole the answers to the test and sold them to half the junior class. She looked at it as a way to expose how wealthier students, who have more access to test-prep tools and tutors, historically benefit from the financial divide. The school board hadn't viewed it the same.

Not only did it cause a scandal between the SAT board and Sierra Vista High, but the parents of the kids who had cheated, the golden kids who could do no wrong, banded together and put all the blame on Kat, and wouldn't stop until she was punished.

The other students were issued a warning and allowed to retake the test the following month. Kat was banned from entering the statewide robotics tournament, which had a five-thousand-dollar scholarship—a scholarship she desperately needed. She was suspended for two weeks and given three-hundred hours of community service—and she hadn't even cheated. Hadn't needed to.

College was her chance to start fresh without the baggage of being a Rhodes and she wanted to get in on her own merit. But since she didn't have proof she hadn't cheated, her score was also zeroed out. If it hadn't been for her grandfather, those parents would have pushed until Kat wasn't able to take the test at all.

Kat still remembered the day she and her grandfather sat in that big room at city hall, just the two of them against the town. She was only sixteen, staring down an angry PTA board, who called her the worst names known to man, placing all the blame on her, and going as far as to reach out to her top college picks to notify them of Kat's wrongdoings.

Kat's stunt cost her four of her five top picks and a chance at valedictorian. It also cost her a broken heart. Because her partner in crime, a close friend and the inventor of the plan, had feigned innocence, leaving all the blame on Kat. The friend's parents lawyered up, claimed that she had no previous

knowledge of the hack, and was another victim of Kat's SAT scam just like the others.

The IP address used was Kat's, so she took the fall. It was her word against a rich girl. Guess who they believed? Which was how Kat ended up in junior college taking classes part time while working full time to help with bills, and her sister and dad.

It took her an additional five years to earn a two-year associate degree and clean up her past before MIT finally accepted her. But when it came to rebuilding her trust in humanity, that ship had sailed long ago. Which was why Kat constructed walls thicker than a bank vault door to keep out the people who would take advantage of her. After her ex, she added an encrypted password to protect her heart.

So far it was working, but man, was it lonely. She didn't miss Ryan, but she missed the companionship—having someone to lean on. Being so far from home in Boston, Kat didn't have anyone to rely on, so when Ryan came along she thought she'd found her rock, someone she could give her heart and trust to, someone who would treasure them and treat them with care. Man, was she wrong.

So she'd recommitted to going it on her own, and just accepted the side effect of being alone even in a crowd of people.

Take tonight, for instance. It was Body Shot Saturday at Bigfoot's, where the body in question was a ten-foot wood carving of Bigfoot himself, with a shot glass-sized hole in his bellybutton. Combine that with two-dollar tequila shots, and it brought in double the customers, double the crazies, and double the tips.

That's why there was a queue to get in the joint, cash lining the bar, and at least six bachelorette parties present. And somehow Kat felt all alone. She'd battled imposter syndrome since she was little. There were bits of her that she kept hidden from even her best friends. Insecurities and vulnerabilities that made it impossible for her to trust other people to do the right thing.

Well, she'd trusted one person with everything. But Zoe was gone. She'd passed away last year from breast cancer. But until her dying day she'd been more of a sister to Kat than a friend. They shared everything: secrets, hopes, dreams, and fears. There wasn't anything she kept from Zoe and wow, what a void was left behind in her absence. While Kat had two besties, no one would ever come close to Zoe.

With a heavy sigh, Kat made her way down the bar, from one end to the other, collecting the bills and dirty glasses, and refilling mugs like it was an Olympic sport. Even on her off days she could fake being on.

She could fake a lot of things. It was just a matter of if she could fake it when it came to the important stuff—like her sister.

Kat looked at the empty barstool next to her friend Gemma and rolled her eyes. "Milly's still not back?"

"Should we send out a search party?" Gemma asked.

Gemma was dressed in wide-legged jeans, a flowy yellow shirt, and had paint stuck under her nails. The perfect uniform for an award-winning mural artist on a girls' night out. Their third musketeer, Milly, and dependable GNO partner was suspiciously MIA. Not an uncommon occurrence these days.

Zoe's younger sister, Milly, who had become one of Kat's best friends and one of the few people Kat could rely on for just about anything, had arrived thirty minutes ago, ordered a s'more-tini—one of the bar's signature drinks—then just so happened to need the restroom the moment her fiancé, Jax, walked into the bar. They'd both been missing ever since.

Kat was supposed to be a part of said GNO but couldn't pass the chance to pick up an extra shift, especially since she could pull in nearly a grand in tips. She'd made sure Tessa had supervision by dropping her off at her friend's house, after reconfirming from the mom that the girls were to be indoors all night, then headed straight to work.

"And see things we can't unsee?" Kat asked. "I was the last search party, and I still can't bleach those images from my

retinas.”

That was the last time Kat would ever enter the back office without knocking. There were just some secrets friends shouldn't share.

Gemma's face softened. “I heard what happened the other night. You want to talk about it?”

Not really. Kat had been thinking about it nonstop. Thinking of all the ways that night could have gone differently. But it hadn't, and Kat was, if anything, a realist. She was in real trouble.

“I think I'm going to lose her,” Kat admitted. “It's like no matter how hard I try, I keep coming up short and Tessa's going to be the one to pay the price.”

Gemma pushed her martini glass to the side and reached across to take Kat's hand. “That night was on Tessa. She made a choice, and she has to deal with the fallout.”

“Even if that means I lose custody?”

She wanted to blame it on Nolan, but he'd come through for her in the end. Or had he? He'd just happened upon them; he hadn't come looking for them to right a wrong. In a way it reminded her of her dad. He'd cause all kinds of problems, then come home with some kind of big gift or grand gesture and act as if he hadn't caused the problem to begin with.

Kat had fallen for it hook, line, and sinker. Every time. Well, she wasn't going to fall for it again. For Nolan, his job would always come first, this she knew all too well. And she wasn't going to let one act of kindness erase what he'd done at the trailhead. He had jeopardized everything because of a stupid rule.

“That is not going to happen. Any judge in their right mind will see how much you love her.” Gemma rested her hand on Kat's. “I'm sorry. I know how much stress you're already under. But remember, none of this is on you. Tessa made a stupid decision that all teenagers make. And this would have happened regardless of who she was staying with, you or Abe.”

Kat took a deep breath. She'd never been one to give into tears—had learned early on just how pointless they were—but damn if she wasn't fighting some back right then. "Nolan didn't even care about my situation."

"He was doing his job," Gemma whispered.

"But why is it that people doing their job always exceed me trying to do mine? Every time I try to get ahead, some man stands in the way of my dream. I'm sick of it."

Gemma wasn't just talking about the loss of her dream of a family, she was talking about the pain that followed. She knew deep loss. Understood the long-term ramifications. Not only had Gemma lost her baby, Sydney, two years ago to a rare birth defect, but her husband had been unable to deal with Gemma's grief and bailed. Then last year they'd all lost their fourth ride or die, Milly's sister, Zoe, to breast cancer. It had been the event that cemented their sisterhood—turned them from friends to family.

"Do you want me to talk with Tessa?" Gemma asked, and Kat seriously considered it. Like Gemma, Tessa was a creative. She was a photographer who was hoping to get into UCLA on a scholarship. Even though she and Gemma had little else in common, that artistic side created a bond. Plus, Gemma had been in their lives since Tessa was a baby.

"I'm willing to try anything," she said.

"Even if it means sending over Ranger Tight-ass to scare her?" Milly said, sliding onto the barstool and taking a sip of her drink like she'd hadn't disappeared thirty minutes ago.

"You got a little something right here," Kat said and tapped her lips.

Milly wiped at her own lips. "Did I get it?"

"No." Kat reached across and stopped inches from her friend's mouth. "Oh, my bad. It's residual O face."

"You're right," Gemma added. "I was so blinded by *that* thing I nearly missed it."

Milly held up her hand and wiggled her ring finger, flashing her new four-karat accessory. With her long, curly hair and girl-next-door face, she looked like a blond Minnie Driver.

“Watch out.” Gemma shielded her face. “You might knock someone out with that rock.”

A few months ago, on the same night Kat had kissed Nolan, Milly had slept with Jaxon because of her sister’s dying dare. Only she’d mistakenly slept with the wrong twin, then somehow convinced Jaxon to go along with this farce that they were dating. But that fake relationship became real for them both and now her friend was wearing a dopey grin twenty-four seven.

Kat was happy for her. She really was. Milly deserved some happy in her world after caring for her sister the last year of her life. Being Zoe’s home-care companion had taken everything Milly had. Then, just when things were at their bleakest, Jax appeared and filled up her passion cup again. But there was a small piece of Kat that envied her. Envied the ability to open one’s heart and take a chance on love.

Something that would *never* happen for Kat. She wasn’t the kind of woman men saw long-term in. She was a college dropout with a checkered past, a troublesome teenaged sister, and enough debt to make the US deficit look like monopoly money. And according to her ex’s mom, her harsh edges made her too complicated and complex to fight for.

Which was why she’d become the queen of one-night stands. She purposefully chose men who were emotionally unavailable and just looking for some fun. Kat might not trust men, but she loved men. Alpha men with a touch of bad boy. There was the way they smelled, the way they walked like the world was theirs to conquer, and the way they talked dirty in bed. She especially liked the last part.

She got all the fun benefits without the drama. But lately it hadn’t felt like enough. The encounters felt empty, and she couldn’t figure out why. Hell, she hadn’t even kissed a guy in months.

In fact, the last guy she kissed was— *No way*. Ranger Tight-ass? How could it be that awkward, awful kiss was her last run-in with a man? It must have been even worse than she remembered.

Or that good, a little whisper said.

Definitely bad, she decided. It was a teeth-clashing, tongue-twisting, real failure-to-launch kind of kiss that rom-coms made fun of.

“You know, if it weren’t for Barney Fife being a rule-abiding tight-ass none of this would be happening.”

“We’re all very grateful for that tight ass,” Gemma said, eyeing Kat over her cocktail glass with a knowing smirk.

“Look who’s talking! The woman who hasn’t so much as swiped right in over two years,” Kat said.

“Doesn’t mean I can’t look.”

“Let’s be real, there are better asses in town,” Kat said.

“Name one,” Gemma said.

Kat opened her mouth and closed it. If there were a contender, his name was failing her at the moment. Not that she’d admit that to anyone.

“I’m standing right here. I’m a ten out of ten on the Brad Pitt scale of butts,” Tim, the bar’s manager, and Kat’s boss, said. “Although mine isn’t quite as butt-tacular as yours, Gem.”

Gemma went stiletto-heel red because, not only had half the bar seen her butt up close and personal, Tim had autographed it with a Sharpie because of a dare. That same night Kat had been issued a dare as well—and won, she might add. She was given thirty seconds to take off the belt of the next guy who walked into the bar—with her teeth. That man just so happened to be Nolan.

And if there was one thing Kat never backed down from, it was a dare. Not only had she gotten his belt off with her hands behind her back, she’d done it in under twenty seconds. Kat had expected that uptight officer to look horrified, but instead

he'd just stood there, smug as hell, challenge in his eyes. So she'd planted one on him—and that was how she'd taken part in the worst smooch in the history of the ever-smooching-world.

“I'm going to need another one of these,” Gemma said, downing her martini and wiping her mouth with the back of her hand.

Tim looked at Kat, who didn't move.

“You're the bartender on duty,” he pointed out, and Kat shrugged.

“I'm on my break. And how can we be sure you're a ten out of ten if we can't see it in action?” she said.

“I'm only doing this to prove my prowess, not to reinforce your bad habits of taking breaks whenever your friends drop by,” Tim said with no heat, because they both knew that she worked her ass off from the time she clocked in until closing. She was his best employee, that was a fact.

Hot-headed at times, stubborn to a fault, but a hard worker. She wasn't living the dream, but tending bar was a hell of a lot more exciting than her day job troubleshooting IT problems—which ninety-nine percent of the time were user errors.

“Be sure to factor in the swag,” Tim said and turned around, swaying his hips like a Latin ballroom dancer.

Gemma waited until Tim was gone, then asked, “So the home visit? On a scale of one to ten, how bad did it go?”

If Kat were one to drink on the job, she'd pour herself a shot of tequila. “Remember that time Zoe and I got caught hacking into the McDonald's drive-through and hijacking the speaker system?”

“You told Principal Beekman that she'd get free fries if she showed her titties at the window,” Milly said.

“And the sheriff just happened to pull in behind you and take away your grandpa's CB license.” Gemma snorted.

“You guys were escorted home in the sheriff's cruiser,” Milly said. “My parents were so pissed that my dad had The

Look plastered on his face for a full week.”

Kat had been on the receiving end of The Look a time or two. Not by her own parents. They didn't give two shits about what she did, as long as her rebellious nature didn't spill over onto them. Zoe always complained about how strict her parents were, but Kat would have given anything to have had parents who cared enough to set limits and enforce them.

No matter how much of a ballbuster Kat became, Abe never cared or chimed in. He had parented the way his parents had parented—completely hands off. So hands off that Kat finally pushed so hard that she'd gained a reputation for being a partying troublemaker—when all she really wanted was a sliver of attention. Proof she mattered.

“Howard would have given me The Look for this,” Kat admitted. “I mean, Tessa didn't get dragged out by the arm and Ms. Woods didn't say I'd lost the battle, but I'm scared.” Kat's shoulders sank. “Really scared. Let's just say I'll be picking up extra shifts for future bail money for my felon sister.”

“You were the OG Sierra Vista Bad Girl,” Gemma said. “And you turned out just fine.”

Kat gave her a long look. “I'm nearly thirty, single, work for the county, and moonlight at a bar named after a conspiracy theory. Not really living the dream.”

“If you could live your dream right now, what would it be?” Milly asked.

“If time and money weren't an issue it would be to go back to school,” she said without hesitation. “Go back to MIT and claim my rightful spot in the computer science department.” Maybe it also would involve a new job, one that challenged her, and maybe it would include a little fun now and then. Once upon a time it would have included a man, but that boat had sailed when her ex bailed at the first sign of trouble.

“Tessa is so set on gaining R. J.'s attention I know it's going to lead to trouble,” Kat said. “I don't want her to make the same mistakes I did. I want to save her from all of that.”

“You can’t save her from that, sweetie,” Milly said. “People have to make their own mistakes.”

“Yeah, but does she have to be an underage felon?”

Her friends both snorted. “Are you forgetting when you went into the essay business and wrote essays for Brandon Sikes and his buddies?”

“That was monetarily motivated.” She’d been so broke back then, she’d desperately needed the cash, for things like school clothes and lunch money. Huh, it looked as if things hadn’t changed much. “The problem is Tessa is under the influence of a boy I don’t trust or know. And what I do know scares me.”

“You dated bad boys.”

“He’s not just bad, he’s bad news. And I never tried to impress them. It’s like Tessa will do anything to gain his validation.”

As if the universe reached down and slapped Kat, the bar door opened and in strolled R. J. and two of his buddies. She could tell by the volume and vocabulary that the little pricks were already shit-faced.

“The line starts back there, buddy,” Kat hollered, but they ignored her, taking their entitled attitudes across the bar like they owned the place, stumbling onto three empty stools at the far end—but not before R. J. shoulder checked a passing customer.

“I smell trouble,” Kat said as that familiar rage, which came with forced proximity with bullies, began to bubble in her belly. “I should throw them out before they have a chance to ruin my night further.”

Kat spun on her heels to do just that when Tim stepped in front of her, blocking her way. “Slow your roll. Let security handle it.”

Kat looked over at Eli, their new security guy and Nolan’s former partner, who was swiping through social media on his phone. “How do you think that will go down?”

Eli seemed like a good guy, but when it came to deep-pocketed customers, he had a habit of looking the other way. Kat didn't know if it was because he was older or injured, but what she did know was that something was off with him.

"He's right," Milly said. "You don't get paid enough to handle idiots. Let me call Jax."

"His dad practically runs this town," Tim reminded her, glancing at R. J. "You don't want to mess with that. Not with the hearing coming up."

Tim had a point, but it still took everything Kat possessed to stand down. Didn't stop her from shooting R. J. a death glare, who answered back with a shit-eating grin. Kat mimicked putting on lipstick—with her middle finger.

"Asshole or not, he's a paying customer," Tim said. "So unless he breaks a bar rule, he's free to go about his business."

Kat looked over her shoulder at the list of rules and nearly rolled her eyes. No doubt that the rule-following, rule-enforcing Carmichael was behind it.

1. HYDRATE WITH BEER
2. KEEP YOUR HANDS TO YOURSELF
3. ACT LIKE YOUR MAMA IS WATCHING
4. YOU DRIVING? MORE THAN ONE, YOU'RE DONE
5. IF YOU SEE BIGFOOT, BUY HIM A BEER

The last one was definitely Nolan. The guy might be an armed-to-the-teeth hall monitor, but he was quick with his words. In fact, some might call him verbally charming. Kat was not one of those someones.

"I think you're forgetting the golden rule," Kat said, grabbing a Sharpie from behind the register. She hoisted herself up on the bar, which drew catcalls, and added her own rule.

GOLDEN RULE: BARTENDER IS ALWAYS RIGHT.

She turned to the crowd and hollered, “Anyone have a problem with that?”

“As long as the next round’s on the house,” Stan, a regular, said from a booth in the back, and the bar broke out in applause and boisterous hollers.

“You offering to buy?” Kat asked. Stan shook his head vehemently. “Didn’t think so.”

“I’ll buy the next round,” R. J. said, his voice dripping with sleaze, then patted his lap. “If you come sit that pretty ass right over here and share a beer with me.”

Kat knew people liked her as much as they feared her, but not a single peep came up from the crowd. Not even from Eli, who was supposed to be the enforcer.

“That’s a hard pass,” Kat said, knowing he was baiting her. And damn, she wanted to take the bait.

“Then how about you?” R. J. said and grabbed Lena’s arm.

Lena was a new server. Freshly twenty-one and freshly out of college. It was clear this was her first job, because she held the record for the most broken beer mugs in her first week. But she was sweet and tiny. Stick-her-in-your-pocket tiny.

Now, at five seven, Kat could hold her own, but compared to R. J.’s height and steroid-induced bulk, she was no match for him. But that hadn’t stopped her before.

“Rule number two, R. J.,” Kat warned.

But instead of letting Lena go, he pulled her onto his lap. Lena gasped with fear. R. J. tightened his grip. Kat saw red. She knew what it felt like to have someone put their hands on you and she’d be damned if she let it happen to another woman.

Not on her watch.

Sure, Eli rose in a show of authority, but Kat, who was still standing on the bar, took off in a dead sprint. Twenty steps and a few dodged beer bottles left ample time for the anger and fury to reach dangerous levels. Thankfully she had the perfect target to unpack her crap day.

Kat reached the end of the bar and hopped down, getting in R. J.'s face. "You have until the count of three to let her go," she said.

R. J. stood until he was towering over Kat, his hand still on Lena. "Or what?"

"Or the entire bar is going to see you get your ass kicked by a girl."

"Let her go, man," one of R. J.'s friends said, but R. J. was already a six-pack into the night. And he was a mean drunk. Just like Kat's mom.

"We're just having fun," R. J. said. "Aren't we, Lena?"

"Read the room, buddy, she doesn't want to wait on you, let alone talk with you."

Finally R. J. let go of Lena, who scrambled away. R. J. sat back down and, with a smile, said, "You were saying?"

Rage fisted her hands and they clenched and unclenched several times. Then she took a deep breath, remembered that he was a customer and that she didn't need another night at the jailhouse on her record. "You're not worth it."

R. J. wiped the corners of his mouth with his hand and whistled low in his throat. "I wish Tessa was this mouthy."

Her body froze at the mention of her sister's name. *Oh no he didn't!*

Kat stepped into him, craning her neck to let him see the whites of her eyes and menacing scowl. "My sister is off-limits. Understand?"

"That's up to her, now isn't it." And Kat realized her mistake. She'd just made her sister a challenge, one that R. J. had readily accepted.

"She's seventeen, you're twenty-one. Jailbait is the word that comes to mind. So find someone your own age instead of sniffing around the high school like a has-been."

R. J. stood once again, so close he was invading her personal space bubble. And Kat didn't like people in her

bubble. Especially cocky, disrespectful, misogynistic pricks. “You offering to take her place?”

R. J. slid his hands around Kat’s waist and tugged her roughly. Fear lodged painfully in her ribs. She knew guys like R. J. They were rich, spoiled, untouchable. Kat could handle herself, she had to as a kid. With a mom whose mood fluctuated between maternal and ambivalent, it was like calling open season on her. So she’d grown up tough. And while R. J. wasn’t any tougher, he played dirty.

Kat scanned the room for Eli. He was watching the scene play out but hadn’t taken a step toward the impending action, leaving Kat in a place to fend for herself. A place that Kat had been her entire life.

“Get your hands off me.”

R. J. looked at his buddies and they both laughed. “Make me.”

“Your call.” Kat put her palms on R. J.’s chest and shoved with a force strong enough to send him stumbling into a chair. R. J.’s face went red with embarrassment and vengeance, and before Kat knew it she was being thrust backward with enough force to knock her into the bar. She caught herself on a barstool, but not before smacking her cheekbone on the edge of the bar top and—*pow!*

Pain shot through her skull, but she immediately righted herself and braced herself for the next blow. But when she looked at R. J., he appeared stunned, like he hadn’t meant to shove her so hard. Didn’t matter, a bully was a bully.

Finally everyone jumped into action and before she knew what was happening, Tim was over the bar and Jax appeared out of nowhere, the two of them shoving R. J. against the wall.

She felt the bar close in around her, regulars and friends closing ranks, defusing the fight, having her back. But she couldn’t let it go. Kat shook off the ringing in her head and used some swift fist action—landing a blow straight to R. J.’s jaw.

It was a cheap shot and she knew it, but there wasn't a rule book when it came to protecting her sister. She went after him again but was brought up short as two hands clamped around her waist like a vice. She tried to jerk free and couldn't. He was too strong. And she knew it was a *he* by the testosterone filling the space. Testosterone and fury.

Lifting up a leg and kicking backward, Kat landed a hard blow to a shin that was so solid her foot ricocheted. Fear laced through her like a shot of whiskey, disorienting her for a moment.

“Let me go or I swear I *will* unalive you.”

She reared back with her elbow pointed at her assailant, but he dodged the blow. She tried to hit him again, but he said, “It's it just me, Kitten.”

Nolan.

At that low, assured voice, her body sagged with the release of fear and exhaustion. For the first time in days, she felt as if she weren't in this crazy world alone. Which was stupid because his actions the other night had sent her world spiraling into chaos.

“I got you,” he whispered. “I got you.”

There was so much conviction in his voice. She wanted to believe him, wanted to let him take the weight for a moment, but history told her not to go there.

Protective hands turned her in his arms and when her eyes met his, all the emotions and adrenaline of the past few seconds flooded her veins. He was still in his uniform, gun strapped to his belt, looking big and bad-ass and like a hero-for-hire.

I don't need a hero, her brain insisted. But she let herself pretend for just a moment that she did and one had actually shown up—for her.

He reached out to ... she wasn't sure, but—call it habit or scars from her youth—she flinched. Not enough for other people to notice. But he noticed because his hand stilled mid-air.

“Did he hit you?” Nolan whispered, and that’s when she realized he hadn’t seen the whole ordeal.

Slowly, so as not to spook her, he touched her cheek and she shied away again. Which pissed her off. She’d promised herself she’d never flinch beneath someone’s hand again.

She saw worry turn to rage as he slowly dropped his hand. Man, she must have looked as bad as she felt because his eyes narrowed into two furious slits and his gaze went over her head to R. J.

“You son of a bitch.” He took a single, purposeful step forward and she put herself between him and what she knew could cost him his job.

“Let it go.”

“Not happening.” He started to move forward again, and she placed a palm on his chest. His eyes dropped to her hand and then met her gaze.

“I’m fine. I swear.”

“I’m not,” he said quietly. “Nowhere near.”

“He fights like a girl.”

“No one should hit you. Ever.”

Where had men like Nolan been when she’d been growing up and constantly defending herself on the playground?

“I’m really fine.”

He gave an evaluating look to see if she was really okay. Kat put on her best ballbuster facade, the armor of steel that she needed to look like she had it all under control when in fact her world was spiraling.

Kat had had so much practice over the years of portraying confidence and capability, people always fell for it.

Not Nolan. He could see right through her and that hit a vulnerable spot that made her uneasy. If she let him in any closer, would he see through her mask to the terrified and scared girl beneath?

With Tessa's custody up for grabs, and Nolan being law enforcement, she couldn't risk it. Plus, after her ex, she promised she'd never date an uptight judgy person again. And while Nolan appeared to be non-judgmental in his personal life, he wore a badge that made him the judge and jury.

"Tell me exactly what happened. I'm going to nail this guy," he said.

Kat looked away, embarrassment creeping up her neck. "I'm not pressing charges."

"Why the hell not? He hit you. That's assault."

"He shoved me. After I shoved him in front of a bar full of witnesses, and that's how the report will read." And no matter how much she wanted to see his smug face behind bars, she knew he'd be out by morning. Or she'd be the one behind bars. He had more money, more connections, and more of everything that put Kat at a disadvantage. "I can't risk it."

An hour later Nolan still sat vigilant at the bar. He should definitely go home, but he was finding it impossible to pull his keys out of his pocket and hit the road. Once he'd seen the purple mark on Kat's cheek, his body ignited with so much rage he could barely make out anything in the room except for the big red target now affixed to the center of R. J.'s face. He was afraid that if he got in his car he'd make a detour to Councilman Locke's house and have a come-to-Jesus with his son.

Hell, had Nolan's brothers not been there he would have beaten R. J. to a pulp in front of two hundred witnesses.

But no matter how badly his fist wanted to make connection with R. J.'s entitled face, his immediate concern had been for Kat. He hadn't witnessed the fight, he'd walked in right as Jax was coming out of the employee hallway and rounding the bar, but he'd seen the aftermath. The swollen cheek was one thing. Her flinching away from him as if she'd expected him to hit her was a clear sign this wasn't her first go-around with a bad temper.

And that would haunt him for a long time to come.

He'd seen domestic abuse cases on the job, and they were always the hardest to swallow. The inability to help the victim unless they were willing to press charges always left him feeling impotent. So when Kat had refused, it left him with an ache so deep he didn't think he'd ever really be able to touch it. Oh, he'd tried to change her mind, but she'd gotten frustrated and walked out on him, then disappeared down the employee's hallway, but not before the beginnings of tears filled those beautiful emerald eyes.

Tears didn't scare him. Growing up with a kid sister who'd had a heart condition, he'd witnessed his fair share. Even wiped some away when the pain or unfairness of it all got too difficult for one little girl to handle.

But these? These were different.

Kat wasn't crying from pain or even anger. She was crying out of desperation—and that was a feeling Nolan could relate to. He'd had an awesome childhood with the best family one could hope for, but when his ex, Nina, cut ties with him after meeting her now husband, she'd thought it was best for everyone involved that they make a clean break. Claimed it would be too confusing for her son, Tommy, whom he'd spent three years raising, to have two father figures in his life.

He knew the order to stay away had been issued by her new husband. But what was Nolan to do? He had no legal rights to the kid, so it was up to Nina to deliver the verdict—which had not been in Nolan's favor.

It's why he now steered clear of single moms. When things ended—and they would because what kind of woman wanted a guy who chased bullets for a living?—he'd lose out. And he didn't think his heart could take another shot like that.

He'd spent those first few months drowning in desperation. Desperate for her to change her mind, to see Tommy again, hell, even just to be able to call him on birthdays and holidays. That had been over a year and a half ago and he still felt his absence.

It was a little like how he felt right then about Kat. He knew she needed space to process what had happened. Just

like he knew she was likely beating herself up for how she'd handled the situation.

What the hell had she been thinking taking on a guy his size?

She hadn't been and that was part of the problem. Kat ran hot. She was like lightning in a jar, colliding with everyone and everything in her path. Nolan found it both attractive and infuriating. All she'd had to do was call out to his brother or ask Eli for help.

"You going to sit here all night and stew or are you going to go find her?" Jax asked, resting a hand on Nolan's shoulder.

Nolan snorted. "I'm the last person she'd want to see right now."

Jax and Milly exchanged a whole conversation in a single look. They were at *that* stage of their relationship. Reading each other's thoughts, inside jokes, playful secrets. Nolan had been there once and he really did miss that kind of connection.

"Don't you find that interesting," Milly said.

"That she'd more likely knee me in the nuts than accept a hug?" he asked. "No, I find it terrifying. And why aren't you two out there?" He looked at Milly and Gemma. "You're usually attached at the hip."

"Because she'd just tell us she was okay," Gemma said.

"I bet she'd tell you to fuck off," Milly said to him. "Then she'd get all pissy and blame you for the whole night."

"Your persuasion tactics are seriously lacking," he said as he took a last sip of his iced tea and stood.

"Then where are you going, bro?" Jax asked.

"I guess to get a knee to the nuts."

Nolan could hear them laughing the entire way as he made his way through the employee hallway. He checked the lunchroom, the back office, even knocked on the bathroom. She was nowhere to be found.

For a brief moment, he wondered if she'd bailed, not that he'd blame her, then reminded himself that Kat would never leave anyone high and dry. She might be a firecracker with a short fuse, but she was loyal to a fault, and a hard worker, which only left one place for her to go.

The cellar.

He walked down the steps into the basement and, sure enough, there she was, ten feet away, holding a clipboard in one hand and what looked like an icepack to her cheek in the other. The way she stalked back and forth, with her shoulders squared, told the tale of a woman who was still swinging—this time, though, the targets were only visible to her.

He was about to ask her if she was okay when she did something very un-Kat-like. She dropped down on her haunches and let her head hang, her dark, silky hair falling around her face like a protective wall between her and the world. Her hands fell to her knees and hung limp as if she'd succumbed to the reality of the situation, her chin was touching her chest.

It was as if now that the anger was gone, she had to face the ramification that came from shoving a customer, who was already whining like a baby that he was going to press charges. Everyone Nolan had talked to made it more than clear that R. J. was the instigator, but Kat had shoved him first. And while R. J. wasn't hurt, he was a vengeful little prick.

Deciding he'd rather take a knee to the nuts than watch her crumble, he walked into the room. The scent of hops mixed with aged cedar wrapped around him, so did the chilled air. It had to be forty-five degrees down there, the ideal temperature for beer and wine, but not for a woman in nothing but a tight **BIG FEET APPLY HERE** tee, even tighter black jeans with rips strategically placed to show off the fishnet stockings beneath, and purple steel-toed boots.

He knew the moment she became aware of his presence because she lifted the clipboard and scribbled something down.

“We're missing a case of whiskey,” she said.

He took the clipboard from her hand. “I don’t give a shit about missing inventory.”

“You should,” she said, finally facing him, that tough-girl expression back in place. “It’s the third one this week. And we’re talking top-shelf whiskey. Three hundred bucks a pop. Though somehow the invoices don’t reflect that. Something’s off.”

Yeah, it was on his list to check into it, right after finding evidence against R. J. and getting the camera system running correctly. But first on his list was checking on Kat.

He took a final step closer, until he could smell a faint hint of her shampoo, a delicate floral scent with a hint of all things feminine. She was a contradiction. “Again, I don’t give a shit.”

She gave a single nod and snatched the clipboard back. To keep himself from reaching for her, he shoved his hands in his pockets. He waited for her to have some pissy retort, but she surprised him when she whispered, “Thank you.”

He lifted a brow. “For not giving a shit?”

“For stopping me from making an even a bigger mess back there.”

He smirked. “Does that mean you were happy to see me?”

She gifted him a small smile. “I wouldn’t go that far.” She smacked the icepack to his chest and walked past him.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“My break is up.”

“You might have a concussion. I heard you hit your head pretty hard.”

“It’s just a little bump.” She tapped it with her finger to prove she was okay, but he could tell she was holding back a grimace.

“You can’t even move your head without wincing.” He touched her cheek and probed at her head.

This wasn’t his first go-around either. He’d seen enough bar fights in his time to know the difference between a bump

and a crack. He pulled out his flashlight and shined it into her eyes.

She squinted and shoved his hand away. “Did anyone ever tell you that you’re more dramatic than a teenaged girl? And I know because I was one *and* I’m raising one.”

“And you wonder why Tessa acts the way she does with you popping off without thinking. It must be a Rhodes trait.”

He meant it as a joke, but immediately regretted his words. Kat’s face went slack as if he’d just announced her biggest insecurity to the world. But as fast as the hurt flashed so did the anger.

She shoved at his chest. “Us Rhodeses pop off because people are constantly trying to shove us down. We can handle ourselves.”

He ran a frustrated hand down his face. “No shit.” He lowered her voice. “Let me take you somewhere, just until you get your bearings.”

“You haven’t even bought me dinner yet.”

“I was talking about the hospital, smart-ass.” He paused, surprised because hell yeah, he was attracted to her, but he never imagined she felt anything for him other than irritation. “Are you saying if I asked you out, you’d say yes?”

Confusion lit her eyes.

Welcome to the club, babe.

“Didn’t think I was your type. You know, popping off and all.”

“I guess we’re both surprised.” She looked down, unable to meet his gaze. Wasn’t that interesting. “Please let me take you to get checked out.”

She hesitated for a split second, enough to let him know she was in sizeable pain to even consider admitting she needed help.

“After work. I need the money,” she admitted, and he saw how embarrassed she was. Yet she stared him down, as if

daring him to feel sorry for her, but it wasn't sympathy he was feeling, it was something more dangerous. Something closer to affection.

He reached around in his pocket and came up with a few hundred bucks. "Here."

"Of course that's your answer," she said, offended. "I don't need your money. I can make my own."

"With a concussion?"

"I've worked through worse."

He wasn't surprised, but that didn't mean he had to like the implications behind that statement.

"Now get out of my way before I call the cops. And yes, I see the irony here."



"Fired?" Desperation was seeping into Kat's words. "That's what he said?" Kat asked Tim, referring to Eli, who, it seems, had gone running to Lucas about what had happened. The owner had zero tolerance when it came to the rules. And it would be impossible for him to ignore this when the councilman's son was involved.

Tim squeezed the back of his neck. He hadn't wasted any time escorting her into the manager's office. The second her shift had ended he'd asked if they could talk. At first, she'd assumed he wanted to check on her, make sure she was okay—which after that talk with Nolan she was not.

Nolan's genuine concern had left her shaken. Literally, her hands had been shaking, which was why she'd bolted.

Never let them see your weakness.

She should have known something was off when Tim hustled her to the back office instead of the break room.

Tim held up his hands. "I'm not sure, I just want you to prepare yourself for the worst case. I overheard Eli say that the rules of conduct are clear. You instigated the fight and assaulted a guest, even after you were told to wait for security to get involved."

Right! Like that would have turned out well. "When would that have been? When he was done scrolling through TikTok or after R. J. assaulted Lena with a smack to the ass?"

"I'm on your side here. But Eli was saying something about how R. J. had let her go by that point. Then he'd brought up Tessa and you lost it. If you were any other employee, you'd have been tossed out along with R. J."

Kat felt her quills prickle. "What does that mean? If I were any other employee?"

"We both know that you're given a wide berth because Milly is engaged to one of the owners. You get the best shifts, you make more than any other bartender, and the flexibility you get with your schedule is unheard of."

"Or maybe it's because I kick ass at my job," she snapped, and Tim gave her a *That's what I'm talking about* look. She let out a big breath. "Does Milly know about this decision?"

"I don't think so. But if I were you, I'd reach out to her and see if she can have her fiancé talk some sense into Lucas. Jax was there; Lucas wasn't."

"I don't want to do that."

"Why not?" Tim asked quietly. "Jesus, she's your friend, Kat. You're practically sisters and what you did for her sister, being there her when she was dying, that's the least Milly could do to repay you."

“I did what I did because my friend needed me. No other reason. Especially not for any down-the-road marker I could cash in. Friends don’t drag other friends into their drama.” And Kat’s past few years have been drama-centric.

Tim rested a hand on her shoulder. “I know you’re an island of one, but why is it so hard for you to accept help?”

“Because help comes with strings or consequences.” This she knew for a fact. “And I don’t want the consequences of my actions to get between my friend and her fiancé.”

“If you were in a situation to help her, would you?”

“Of course,” she said with zero hesitation.

“Then why wouldn’t you give her the same opportunity? What can it hurt?”

It could hurt her relationship with one of her best friends by putting Milly in an awkward position with Jax. She would fight to the death for Kat to keep her job, even if it meant going over Jax’s head to his family members. It was unlikely that Jax would side with Eli, but on the off chance he did, Kat refused to be a wedge between them.

They’d done enough for her over the years; she wasn’t about to abuse her relationship with Milly or the Carmichaels to save her ass. Not when she’d created the situation.

“If you ask me, Eli is overreacting,” Tim said.

“He always does when it comes to me,” she said, and defeat sent the air whooshing out of her lungs. It was true, Eli seemed to have it out for her. From the moment he’d started working at the bar he’d looked at her like she was still the bad girl with the juvie record and string of questionable decisions.

“Why is that?”

“Remember when I hacked the SAT answers and sold them to my classmates?”

Tim snorted. “The queen bee and her posse were all suspended.”

“Eli’s niece was the queen bee,” she said, and Tim barked out a laugh. “Not only was she suspended, but Harvard rescinded their admissions offer.”

“Ouch. But she shouldn’t have cheated.”

“And I shouldn’t have hacked into their system. But what Eli doesn’t know was that his niece was the one to come to me with the plan. Her mom knew one of the board members for the testing school and that was my in.”

Kat had made two grand that quarter—two grand that went toward her college fund. Her stunt had also cemented her reputation for being Sierra Vista’s problem child. A reputation that still followed her. A reputation that turned any future acts of Good Samaritanism into a crime.

“Besides, I shoved R. J. hard.” She paused. “Why do you think Eli even let me finish my shift then?”

A strange suspicion started in her belly, a feeling that she was missing an important piece of the puzzle.

Tim looked at the ground when he spoke. “Maybe because he didn’t want to cause a scene. Or maybe it’s because everyone knows you need the money.”

She felt her cheeks heat. It wasn’t a secret why Kat moonlighted at the bar. But knowing that people were aware of just how desperate things had become was humiliating. Not to mention how it could affect the custody hearing.

“I was defending myself and my staff.”

“One of many reasons that R. J. is now banned for life. But he’s threatening to sue the lodge,” Tim said, and Kat rubbed her forehead. She could already feel a knot forming.

“Of course he is.” She could press charges, but what would be the point. Going up against a guy whose dad had more pull around town than the mayor would be a waste of time and energy—two things she was desperately short on.

Tim put his hand on her shoulder. “My cousin works at the Italian place on Cyprus and Pine. I can ask if they’re hiring.”

She shook her head. “Once word gets out about tonight”—and it would, secrets were like a commodity in Sierra Vista and rumors of the fight would spread faster than wildfire—“no one will hire me. I’ll probably lose my job with the county. All for doing the right thing.”

“Lucas still hasn’t spoken to you about it, so maybe he’ll change his mind.”

“Fat chance.”

“If you want, I can take this matter straight to Nolan. He is technically in charge of security, and this was a security issue,” he said, and Kat felt like she was going to be sick.

“Does he know?” she asked, surprised at how hard it was to get the words out. “About me being fired?”

After the Carmichael siblings took over the lodge, they split up the responsibilities, each overseeing a different part of the company. Responsibility over the resort’s security and bar and grill fell to Nolan.

“No, but I can call him if you want,” Tim said.

She couldn’t ignore the rush of emotion that came with the knowledge that Nolan had, in fact, not been a part of her possible termination. A part of her wondered what he would have said had he known, and where he would side on her termination. But a bigger part, the part that would rather bathe in acid than admit to him that she needed his help, had her shaking her head a big fat no.

“It’ll all work out.” When Tim didn’t look so convinced, she added, “I’ve made it through worse.”

Like her grandpa had always told her, sometimes doing the wrong thing for the right reason had consequences. And the consequences for her actions fit the crime. That still didn’t lessen the blow.

“*All work out, my ass,*” Kat mumbled as she yanked open the office door. She stormed past the break room, past three worried coworkers’ faces, and—ignoring the steady drizzle—across the employee parking lot.

She was met with the full force of a Sierra Nevada April night. The temperature wasn’t snow-worthy, but it was cold enough to freeze her nose. The wind sturdy enough to sting her eyes and cut through the denim of her jeans. But she didn’t let it slow her down.

Compared to the brutal winters in Boston when she was in college, this was child’s play. She rounded the side of the building, not stopping until she reached Bette Davis, sitting in a darkened corner of the lot. A corner that had been directly under a lit streetlight when she’d pulled in earlier.

The light had been busted out.

Unease pinched between her shoulder blades and a quiver of tension put her body on high alert. She whipped her head around and quickly scanned the parking lot, then scanned it again, releasing a relieved breath when she found herself alone.

Taking out her keys, she rounded the back of the car and came to a full and complete stop. Anger and resignation coiled in her gut and ate its way up her spine as fear gave way to frustration. Because there, spanning the entire length of the driver's side, from the undercarriage all the way to the window trim, scraped deeply into the steel, was a title she'd spent most of her life trying to live down: BITCH.

A title she'd have to endure, at least until she had the extra cash to get it buffed out. Which would be in a thousand years. Some would say it was just a car. But it was more than that. It was Bette Davis, her grandpa's pride and joy. The car that had driven Kat to school a thousand times, had rescued her when her parents' arguments hit welfare-check status, and the car they'd spent countless hours rebuilding from the ground up.

She traced the first two letters, her heart aching when she felt just how deep it was. Deep enough that no amount of buffing was going to undo the endless wrongs of the night.

The light drizzle became more of a mid-spring storm, and she looked up at the sky as droplets stuck to her hair and lashes. Beneath the light of the moon the rain looked like a million shooting stars coming down to earth. If she believed in wishes, which she did not, she might have taken a breath and begged the universe for a break.

But then she moved her foot and a grainy substance shifted under her boots. Sand. She didn't have to look to know what it had been used for. Tina had pulled this stunt with countless ex-boyfriends.

Kat looked at the gas cap, which was open, and the sandy residue around the rim. Pulling back her arm, she smacked it hard enough to make it rebound back and forth. It also left a gash on her knuckle, but she didn't care. R. J. or his minions had poured sand into her gas tank, which meant she'd have to replace it before she could even start the engine.

"Mother," she hit the cap again, "fucker."

And when that wasn't satisfying enough, she kicked the tire—which had been slashed—and heard a tear. She'd split

the toe of her favorite boots. The boots she'd inherited from Zoe after she'd passed.

Even worse, she thought, resting her head against the top of the car and letting out a stifled snuffle. R. J. hadn't just vandalized her car. Between four slashed tires, a toxic tank, and a keyed door, he'd also put her out of commission. Probably even cost her her damn job.

“Moth-er. Fuck-er!” She kicked the tire with every syllable.

A low masculine whistle made her stop mid-kick. “Assaulting a patron, and now an innocent car? Those boots come in steel toe?”

Kat spun around, ready to show him just how painful her purple Doc Martens could be, when she stopped. One look at him and everything inside her went still and she felt like she was going to crumple to the ground.

Nolan stood with a shoulder against the fender of the car, one ankle crossed over the other, his arm resting leisurely on the roof, looking like the poster child for badassery. He also looked warm and safe.

Gone was his uniform and armed-to-the-teeth persona—although she'd bet her best bottle of whiskey that he was still packing—and in its place was a dark gray beanie, a really warm-looking coat, and that sexy grin which always managed to make her stomach do these silly little flips. The man looked so at home in his own skin it pissed her off.

“You know me, always popping off,” Kat said, proud her voice gave off that unaffected tone she'd mastered over the years.

He pushed off the car and started for her, his boots clicking on the concrete in the empty lot, louder and louder the closer he came, not stopping until he was standing so close she was enveloped by the scent of lumberjack and fresh rain.

“Maybe you pop off because you're not used to having backup,” he said quietly, repeating her words from earlier.

“Are you offering to be my backup, Ranger Carmichael?”

She'd said it as a joke, but he didn't crack a smile, just studied her intently. Her chest tightened and she felt this urge to lean forward and disappear into his big, strong arms, just for a minute to know what it was like to have someone to break on. But she wasn't sure if he'd hold her back and, she realized as a drop of rain spilled off her lashes, she was drenched.

“Would you accept if I were?”

What was she supposed to do now? How was she going to get Tessa to school in the morning, not to mention her job at the county. And if Kat managed not to get fired from Bigfoot's, and that was a big if, she had an additional four shifts scheduled at the bar.

She pressed her fingers to her forehead. What a mess. How was anyone going to look at her and grant her custody?

Maybe she wasn't out of tears after all, because her vision went suspiciously blurry, so she dropped her head to study her boots, telling herself it was just a raindrop spilling down her cheek.

“I've been solo for so long, I'm not sure I'd know how to accept help,” she admitted.

“Let's start here,” he said with an unhurried patience that made a tiny crack in her fortress walls. Nothing visible, but she could feel the energy ever so slightly shift in her foundation and that scared her.

Before she knew what he was doing, he'd taken off his jacket and slid it over her shoulders. Gripping the tab, he zipped it up around her. It was still warm from his body heat and smelled like him—mysterious and manly as hell—and felt like a reassuring hug. The kind of hug her grandpa used to give her when things got hard.

Only the feelings his gesture invoked were as far from paternal as feelings could get. His touch was laced with fire and made her insides flutter.

And when she thought he was going to pull her into his arms, use the moment to try and turn the night into his favor—

something she was used to men pulling—he took a respectful step back and shoved his hands into his pockets.

“Does it still hurt?” He tilted his chin toward her cheek, which was throbbing and likely still red.

“It is what it is.”

He gave a sad smile and she felt as if she’d disappointed him, so she looked away.

“I’ll take that as a yes.” When she didn’t answer, he squatted down to run his finger through the pile of sand, then looked up. “R. J.?”

“That’s my guess. But the lot was empty when I came out.”

“We have security cameras covering the entire lot. Let me go check.” He turned to leave and then stopped, letting out a string of words. “The cameras are damaged. I meant to clean them off today, but I ran out of time. I am so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“But it is. Keeping people safe is my job and I screwed up. Maybe there is still something visible on the recordings.”

“This isn’t on you.” Before she could stop herself, she put a hand on his bicep. It jumped and flexed beneath her touch. He froze, except for his eyes which locked on her hold, then back to her gaze.

A delicious sensation slid up her arm, down her torso, going between her breasts, and pooling between her thighs. It was a simple case of animal magnetism, she told herself. Chemistry. Sexual awareness. But her hormones were allergic to his specific brand of testosterone, end of story.

So while she wanted to catch that little prick R. J. red-handed, the last thing she needed was to be stuck in a small office reviewing security footage with a man who could make her toes curl with a single quirk of the lip.

She snatched her hand back and there went that quirk, followed by a toe curl. It had been a long time since a man had this kind of effect on her. And he knew it.

If it were any other man, she'd simply ask him if he wanted to go back to his place, burn off some steam, take a little spin around his bedroom. But this wasn't any other man—this was the man who drove her nuts with his law-and-order vibe. And nothing about them was simple.

Kat only had room for short and casual flings—emphasis on the short. Going to La La Land with the brother of her best friend's fiancé was a bad move. Going to La La Land with a man who made her toes curl was bad for her well-being.

If anything went wrong, and with her history the odds weren't in her favor, then she could complicate things within their friend group. Kat's friends were her family, and she couldn't afford to lose any more family.

"You didn't screw up, Nolan. Shit happens. You couldn't have foreseen this," she said.

Ever so slowly, he reached out and tucked a stray hair behind her ear, sliding the strands between his thumb and finger as he followed it down her neck. When he reached the bottom, he pulled his hand back.

"We'll have to agree to disagree."

Maybe she was wrapped up in the anger from her vandalized car, or maybe it was the way he was looking at her, but she hadn't stopped to wonder why he'd come out after her. In fact, as far as she knew, he'd taken off for the night. He'd sat vigil at the end of the bar, like her own personal protector for about an hour, then said goodbye to his family and bailed.

"I thought you already went home," she said.

"I did."

He'd likely pulled a ten-hour shift, learned that someone was stealing from him, then had to deal with a mouthy employee.

Shit.

Panic shook her hands, so she stuck them in the jacket pockets as her mind raced for ways to fix this mess. She'd meant what she'd said to Tim about not liking to owe favors,

and she already owed Nolan for getting her sister out of the sheriff's department. She couldn't stomach going over Eli's head and asking the big boss to make an exception. But before she could stop herself, she asked, "Did you come back to fire me?"

His eyes narrowed with confusion, followed shortly by anger. "You're not getting fired. You think I blame you for tonight?"

She just shrugged.

"Never," he whispered and raised his hand to cup her cheek. But right before he made contact, he froze, letting it drop to his side. Like he couldn't stand to touch it. "I'm here to make sure you're okay and promise you that things will be changing. I am going to double security so that nothing like this will ever happen again."

"Oh," was the only response she could think of. She'd never been on the receiving end of that kind of fierce protectiveness as she was right then. And she didn't know how she felt about it.

"I also want to assure you that the company will cover the cost of repairing your car."

A sting of pride had her chin going up. "Why? Because I'm broke?"

"Because it happened on company property, while you were working. That's a security problem on our end." He was talking to her in this gentle tone she'd heard him use with his friends and family—never with her. With her he acted as if she were a speeding ticket at the end of a very long shift.

"I don't even want to think about what would have happened if you'd interrupted them."

"But I didn't," she assured him. "And R. J. is all bark and no bite." He looked at her cheek and lifted an argumentative brow. "Honestly, he was more shocked than I was when I stumbled into the bar."

His jaw clenched so hard she was surprised it didn't dislocate. "I want to kill him."

“You shouldn’t say things like that, because when I kill him I can always point the finger in your direction.”

“I’m serious. When I saw where he touched you...” He shook his head. “The only thing between him and a shallow grave was my brothers.”

“I can take care of myself, big guy.”

“I know. But you shouldn’t have to. Why the hell didn’t you ask security to walk you to your car?” he asked in a piercing tone that had her hackles bristling.

“Eli?” she asked with disbelief. “He’d have to put down his phone for that.”

Nolan looked genuinely confused. “What does that mean?”

“He spends more time monitoring his phone than the patrons. And he hesitated, Nolan,” she said. “When everything went down, he just stood there as if hoping someone else would step in and solve a headache he didn’t want. So I stepped in.”

Nolan shook his head. “Eli was a good agent. Good at his job. We were partnered for six years.”

Kat gave an ironic laugh. What did she think was going to happen? That just because he was being sweet a moment ago that he’d side with her over one of his oldest friends? Still, it stung. “Believe me or not, I don’t care. But as an employee speaking to her employer, security around here sucks.”

Good and pissed off, Kat shoved her keys into the car door and unlocked it. She yanked the door open and was about to slide in when Nolan said, “Kat?”

She whipped around. “What?”

He looked at her tires and the weight of the night came crashing down. Too much to bear, she slammed the door shut. “God, I can’t even storm off in a cloud of dust!”

He reached into his coat pocket—the coat she was wearing, which meant she could feel the pressure of his hand against her belly—and pulled out a set of keys. He dangled them in front of her. “Here, storm off in my truck.”

Kat couldn't help it, she burst out laughing. "You'd let me speed and drive erratically in your truck? Is this some kind of trap?"

"Would it make you feel better?"

"Hell yeah, it would," she said.

"Then have at it." He took her hand and dropped the keys into her palms, then closed her fingers around them. He didn't let go right away, just held her hand in his, his thumb gently brushing over the inside of her wrist. "Just promise you won't go driving over to R. J.'s looking for round two."

She turned toward where his truck was parked nearby, but he held firm. "Promise?"

"I promise." she said. When he lifted a brow, she added, "I swear."

"Good, because he may be just a punk but he has dangerous connections, and a rich daddy in his back pocket. He practically has diplomatic immunity in this town. So whenever you think about running him over, just think about Tessa and the custody hearing."

"That's not fair," she whispered. "I'm trying to keep her safe. I'm doing this for her because I wish someone had done it for me."

"Done what for you?" He waited for a response, but she remained quiet. "Done what for you, Kitten?"

"Cared," she whispered.

"I care. Very much. Too much," he whispered back.

"You shouldn't say things like that," she managed through the growing lump in her throat. He was giving off this tender comfort she wasn't used to experiencing with men. It brought back the unwanted and embarrassing moisture to her eyes.

If his face had been full of concern a moment ago, now it was overflowing with a protectiveness that had her heart ricocheting off her ribs. He reached out and caught the first tear as it began to fall.

“It’s just rain,” she whispered, but didn’t step back. Instead, she uncharacteristically tilted her head higher so that he could see the vulnerability bubbling up within her, a side effect she assumed, from exposure to a good man.

He smiled. “I know that.”

She was so tired and couldn’t even think straight so she dropped her forehead to his chest. His arms slid around her and pulled her into a hug. And wow, it was the best hug she’d ever been on the receiving end of. Strong and assured with gentle curves and possessive angles.

Her head told her to abort, but her heart begged her for just a moment to pretend that this was her life. Not with Nolan, because they could never work, but with a man like him. That pretending lasted long enough to be genuine comfort and she wondered what it would take to be hugged like this by a man every day.

As they stood there, the rain coming down in sheets, plastering her hair to her head, and his shirt to his chest, she closed her eyes and gave into the moment. She tightened her arms around his waist—he was such a big man her hands hardly touched in the back and her head barely made it past his chest. His arms tightened gently, embracing with a tender assuredness. One hand slowly moved up her spine to tangle in her hair. He didn’t fist or pull or do anything overtly sexual, he just cradled her head to his heart. But her body responded as if his hands were running over her bare skin.

Unable to help herself, she ran her palms up his back, enjoying every muscle as it flexed beneath her touch, then she came around the sides and back down, her fingertips dancing over his impressive abs.

“Kitten,” he groaned, “this isn’t why I came here.”

And that made it even sexier.

That protectiveness of his went to a possessiveness that had genuine, tumultuous lust scrambling through her and, as if unable to stop herself, her body molded to match his—and she might have rolled her hips into his.

“I know what you’re doing,” he whispered as he nuzzled her neck. “It won’t work.”

Oh, how she loved a challenge. “What won’t work?” she asked coyly.

He tilted her head back so that she could meet his gaze. *Not working, my ass.* The man was looking at her as if she were a bottle of fine scotch waiting to be savored. And she knew how much he liked his scotch.

“You’re trying to make this about sex,” he said, and she felt a little quill bristle. She knew when a man wanted her. And he wanted her. Badly.

“So you want to have sex with me?” she asked.

He tugged her against him. “Too much.”

“This is an interesting turn of events,” she pointed out. “Usually you’re citing me for ridiculous infractions or reminding me how much I drive you crazy.”

“What drives me crazy is that when I had the chance a few months back to kiss you, I blew it.”

She snorted. “It was a really bad kiss.”

“The worst. Good thing for you, I’ve never been a believer in first impressions. People deserve a second chance.”

“Wait—you’re saying I was the bad part of the equation?” Kat asked incredulously.

“I’m saying that a first kiss between two people who have this many sparks shouldn’t be on a drunken dare in front of a bar full of people.” He slid his fingers out of her hair, down her cheekbone, until his thumb brushed her lower lip.

“No, it shouldn’t.”

“But I’m glad to hear you admit it,” Nolan said.

“Whoa,” she backtracked. “This is just sex. I’m not asking for you to get down on a knee.”

“You don’t want to know the things I can do to you while I’m on my knees and you’re riding my face.”

Heat swirled between her thighs and she felt her panties dampen with need. Need for Nolan.

The man who drove her crazy with his rules and need for order and fairness. The man who woke up early to see what pj's she had on that day. The only man, besides her grandpa, to come to her rescue.

She wasn't looking to be rescued, but the feeling of someone having her back, looking out for her well-being like he had earlier, was as unexpected as it was moving.

Nolan Carmichael moved her in many dangerous and unpredictable ways. Which was why she had to bring this back to a place that she was familiar with.

Chemistry.

Want.

Desire.

Two bodies desperate for mutual release. Two people looking for a physical connection that could go no further than a sexual quenching.

She pressed her palms flat against his abs, his taut and delicious abs, and slid them lower and lower until her fingers twisted in his belt loops. "Why don't we play a little game of show not tell?"

"Kitten," he said in warning, but he didn't move away.

"Ranger," she whispered back, her thumbs toying with his belt buckle.

His eyes held and held ... and held.

"What's it going to be?"

"The best fucking kiss of your life."

Before she could move, his mouth crashed down on hers. It was no gentle meeting of the minds. It was raw and hungry, but practiced and finessed. And it *was* the best fucking kiss of her life.

In fact, it felt like a rebirth, erasing every kiss that had come before, until the past, present, and future all focused on this one moment. Like some kind of space-time continuum. Part of her was aware that she was standing in the rain in the employee parking lot, kissing El Jefe in front of God, Elvis, and Bette Davis. But the other part of her was so consumed by the sensation of his mouth on hers, the way their rain-slicked lips glided over each other, and how feminine and delicate she felt in his I-bench-press-tree-trunks-for-fun arms she couldn't focus on that nagging in the back of her brain saying *Run, don't walk, to the nearest exit.*

How could she ever have thought he'd be a bad kisser? His attention to detail, his velvet touch, the sheer span of his hands—which were resting on the curve of her ass—and those magical fingers slipping under the hem of her shirt to gently stroke the bare skin beneath. His mouth made him a god among men.

All she could do was hold on for the ride. So she held on, her hands fisted in his hair, her body plastered to his.

A gust of wind kicked up and the rain really started coming down, and still they didn't stop. Then he did this thing with his upper body, curling it around her and backing her up against his truck, sheltering her from the weather, from her shitty night, from the world that had come at her swinging, so many times. It made her feel ...

Oh god. It made her *feel*. Things she had no business feeling. Things she'd promised herself she'd never fall prey to again.

Panic started swirling in her belly, acute and violent at how easily she'd fallen into the role of a woman who needed to be sheltered. Because, as she well knew, shelter could disappear at the first hint of a storm.

She needed to get this moment back into what it was meant to be. She relaxed her body in almost a bored posture and started undoing his belt. But no matter how hard she tried to unbuckle it her fingers kept slipping. They were shaking, she realized. And it wasn't from the chilly evening air.

She knew the moment he felt the shift in her, because he slowed his mouth, gentling his kisses as if trying to comfort her. But she didn't want to be comforted. She just wanted to be taken—away from the night, her problems, her life.

Their mouths became entangled in a war, him trying to salvage the moment they'd been working toward and her trying to ruin it. To run from it. She didn't want tender, didn't know what to do with tender. She wanted rough—because that's what she was, right? Rough around the edges and complicated.

She went for his buckle again and his hand wrapped around her wrists, shackling them together and holding her still.

He pulled back and looked down at her, confusion etched into his expression. She thought she'd schooled her features fast enough, but something must have escaped because his confusion turned to gentle understanding—the jerk.

She didn't understand what had happened so why should he?

“This isn't a race,” he whispered, using his free hand to cradle her head. “We have time to take this slow.”

“Are you saying you don't want to have sex with me?” Because that was all she had to offer. She didn't have time or room or the courage to take things slow.

“Desperately,” he said.

She went for his buckle again. And again he stopped her.

“Then what's the problem?” The second those words left her mouth, this unwanted but familiar feeling of embarrassment heated her body until she felt like her skin was too tight to hold her together.

She was the problem. Hell if she'd admit that though. So she did what she always did when feeling judged, she unsheathed her quills.

“Oh. Is this an inability to launch problem? You know, they have pills for that.”

“This has nothing to do with my abilities,” he said, sliding an arm around her waist and pulling her to him and, *whoa baby*, based on the bulge in his pants, his missile was fueled and ready to take some lucky lady to deep space nine. “And everything to do with you not being ready.”

His words hit harder than R. J.’s. “Well, you snooze you lose. The offer is no longer on the table.” She tried to pull back, but he held on. “Let. Go.”

God, why did his rejection hurt so much? She’d had a lifetime to get used to the feeling, but this time it felt all-encompassing.

“Kat,” he said quietly.

“I said, let go.” She jerked back so hard she stumbled. He reached out to steady her, but she rejected his assistance. “Have a good night, Ranger.” She turned before he could read anything else she worked so hard to keep hidden.

“Where are you going?”

“Home.”

“You can’t walk home in the rain,” he said.

“Watch me.”

And he did. Prince Nolan drove five miles per hour the entire walk home, using his high beams to light the road ahead of her. He even followed her into her driveway and pulled into her drive. It wasn’t until she was safely inside her house that she heard him shut off the engine.

As far as Kat was concerned, the other night never happened.

She hadn't kissed Nolan, she hadn't embarrassed herself, and she hadn't run away like a scared little girl. And she hadn't spent all day yesterday replaying what had gone wrong. And what had gone right.

And that was the problem. Too much had felt right for this not to be wrong. So very wrong. Or maybe she was the common denominator in this never-ending equation of broken relationships. Because no matter how hard she tried, she wasn't enough.

She wasn't able to give what Nolan was looking for. He wanted it all, was the kind of man who deserved it all, yet she barely had anything left to give. Reason number one for why she wasn't looking for romance, and why she hooked up with guys who didn't put much stock in long-term investments.

Romance was nothing more than a marketing tactic masterminded by big corporations to capitalize on love. And like all things manufactured to manipulate emotions, it only ever ended in disappointment.

And Kat had had enough disappointment to last a lifetime.

She'd gotten Tessa off to school, and now, ready to start her own day, Kat opened the front door and looked up at the summit in the distance, the outline of beautiful mountain peaks silhouetted by the rising sun.

A new day full of endless possibilities, she thought.

"Time to grab a morning nibble of spring," Kat said to Tiny Dancer, who was chomping at the bit to escape and make short order of the tulips that had sprouted in the flowerbed that lined the easement between her and Nolan's yards.

One of the things Kat loved about her neighborhood was that there were no fences. Living in the mountains meant common spaces. Her street backed up to National Forest land, so she had the benefit of neighborhood living with the beauty of wide-open spaces.

She watched Tiny Dancer trot down the front steps and onto the lawn, but when her gaze landed on the truck she came to a hard stop.

Her heart, on the other hand, raced in ways that she'd never experienced before. If she hadn't known better, she'd place the feeling in the 'fluttering' category. And all because Nolan's 1973 classic Ford pickup sat in the driveway. Not his driveway, but Kat's. Freshly washed, keys on the dash, a still-steaming cup of coffee in the cup holder, and on the bench seat, *be still my heart*, a pink pastry box from Just Holes—only the best doughnut shop in the county.

Her kryptonite.

With her own car in the shop undergoing emergency transplant surgery, and Milly and Gemma on the other side of town, Kat was left with no other choice than to a) call in sick—which she couldn't afford—or b) walk the two miles to work in chilly temperatures. Then Nolan had left her his truck.

Damn flutters.

She'd been prepared to be mad at him today. Mad for teasing her and for making her feel like an idiot the other night. His whole "You're not ready" BS had kept her up all night. Or maybe it was the way her body turned into an

incinerator every time she thought back to just how solid he felt beneath her hands.

Solid. Steady. Stoic.

And straight as an arrow. It was the last that should have had her flutters slamming on the brakes.

But God, she'd felt so feminine and delicate in his embrace. Two words no one had ever said in regard to her. But she felt how she felt, and no matter how many times she'd tried to tell herself she'd imagined the whole thing, the sensation remained.

Now, in addition to sensations and flutters, there were confusing feelings. Feelings she didn't have the space or bandwidth for. Good thing she was turning over a new leaf and making decisions based on logic rather than the seat of her pants.

A brisk breeze blew off the evergreen Sierras, causing the freshly bloomed wildflowers to sway. The morning air smelled like fresh pine, the rising sun warmed her from the inside out, and the crystal-blue sky made everything seem brighter.

Spring had finally made an appearance. And what an appearance it was. After a particularly long and white winter, the change in season was more than welcomed. As was Nolan's thoughtfulness.

"Let's return the good neighbor gesture and poop on our own lawn today," Kat said to Tiny Dancer, who was already making her way to Nolan's property.

Neigh!

"Don't make me take out the leash," she threatened.

Tiny Dancer snorted and stomped his back legs, flicking up chunks of lawn. He hated his leash. It was pink with metal spikes. A real Rage Against the Machine meets My Little Pony vibe. It wasn't the fashion choice that was the issue. TD viewed the restraint as a sign of the Man trying to hold him back from his constitutional freedoms.

“Get a move on,” Kat said. “We’ve got places to go and people to assist with all of their county office needs.”

Tiny Dancer pranced around the yard in three precise circles and then did his business, followed by a frolicking case of the zoomies. When he was done, Kat locked him up in his pen and hopped in the truck. There went that fluttering again.

Stuck to the steering wheel was a sticky note. It was nothing more than a dozen words scribbled on a piece of paper with a simple N for the signature, but it was the sweetest thing anyone had ever said to her because it meant, unlike most people she dealt with throughout her day, he’d listened to her.

*In case you need to storm
out in a cloud of dust.*

~N

FIGHTING A GOOFY SMILE, she started the truck and gave the engine a few roars before letting it idle. While the cab heated up, she picked up a doughnut hole and popped it in her mouth, moaning aloud when the rich sweetness hit her tongue. She washed it down with a gulp of piping hot coffee—black and strong enough to eat through dentures.

Just how she liked it.

It was an unexpectedly perfect start to what could have been a crappy Monday morning.

She gave the engine one last rev and put the car in reverse. She was about to push the gas pedal when her phone rang. Before she could stop herself, her mind went straight to Nolan, wondering if that was him calling to make sure she saw the keys.

She fished her phone out of her pocket and every single flutter died a fiery death when she saw the caller ID lit up.

The high school.

Not just the high school. But Principal Beekman’s personal extension.

Suddenly the coffee tasted like acid in her mouth.

Six months ago, Kat would have been terrified that a call like this signified Tessa was injured or sick, but recent history told her to prepare for battle. While Kat had been leisurely sipping her morning coffee, Tessa had likely been staging a coup.

Pulling on her big girl panties, she answered. “Good morning, Principal Beekman.”

“Um, it’s me,” Tessa said quietly, but there was a hint of teenaged boredom rounding out the end of each word.

“Why are you calling me in the middle of class? On the principal’s phone? And if it’s to claim cramps to get out of PE, then the answer is no.”

“Oh my god, can you not say that?” Tessa whisper-yelled. “Why do you always think I screwed up? Maybe I just need a change of clothes.”

“Do you?”

“Yes.”

“Seriously? That’s it? Just a change of clothes.” Relief teased Kat’s shoulders and she popped in another doughnut hole. Clothes were no problem. Easy fix. She could be in and out in under five, hit the high school, and get to work with time to spare thanks to Good Neighbor Nolan.

Good Neighbor Nolan who kissed like a gold medalist.

“Preferably a skirt. And one that doesn’t make me look like a loser.”

“I’ll leave the muumuu and Birkenstocks at home,” Kat joked, turning off the engine and opening the car door. “Can you meet me at the curb?”

There was a long, *you don’t have the whole story* pause.

“Tess?”

“Let me ask.”

She heard Tessa’s hand cover the mouthpiece and caught only a few muffled words.

Violation.

Last warning.

Suspension.

“Um, you kind of have to come inside and talk to Principal Beekman.”

Kat dropped her head against the window and felt a tic begin under her right eye. “May I speak with her now?”

There was an elongated pause before her sister answered. “Just promise you won’t freak.”

Kat ran a hand down her face. “Hand over the phone. Now.”

There was some rustling around and then Principal Beekman’s voice cut through any good in Kat’s morning. “Miss Rhodes.”

“Good morning, Principal Beekman.”

“That’s up for debate,” Beekman said, her authoritative tone making Kat feel like she was a bad seed of a teenager all over again.

“What can I do for you? Is Tessa okay?”

“Physically, yes. Attitude, questionable. Decision-making, not the wisest.” It was said as if it was a given that Tessa would act out like Kat. And that pissed her off. Tessa might be pushing the limits, but she was a good, kind, loyal honors student.

Kat grimaced and she thunked her head against the steering wheel. Twice. “What can I do to help?”

“You can come pick up your sister who is suspended for the rest of the day.”

Kat’s head flew up. “Suspended? For what?”

“Besides cutting PE? An egregious violation of the school’s dress code.”

“That’s still a thing?”

There was a long, scolding pause on the other end of the phone.

“I just meant that I thought we were past silencing kids who are exploring the beauty of self-expression and making a statement about who they are.”

“Her *statement* is distracting for other students.”

And that sour stomach burned with anger. “Let me get this straight. Because some little prick can’t keep his eyes on his own paper, my sister either has to extinguish her female fire or get suspended?”

“We don’t refer to our students using those labels.”

This was where Kat would normally blow her top. “Pop off” as Nolan said. But then she thought about how it would look to Tessa to see her guardian go toe to toe with an authority figure. How it would appear to Ms. Woods if she were standing there witnessing the ordeal. What Nolan would say.

The last thought shocked her. Since when did she care what he thought about her parenting skills?

Since he would know how to navigate this situation like water over rocks, she thought. Rather than bang into every obstacle, Nolan would glide around them, pacifying the situation, and getting what he wanted without raising his voice or throwing around words like *prick*.

And if she wanted to stand a chance of being a good role model then maybe it was time she took a different route. Kat closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and channeled her inner Nolan.

“You can see then, how being labeled as a *distraction* could negatively affect my sister’s self-esteem. And I know none of us here want that.”

“Well ... no. Of course not. It’s a simple matter of following the rules.”

“Cutting class? I agree and I will handle that when she gets home. But there is nothing simple about censoring my sister’s

right to dress in a way that makes her feel good about herself,” Kat said. “Tessa is an honors student, co-captain of the cheer team, and a good kid. She goes to school to learn, yet you’re sending her home to miss an entire day of learning because you don’t like her skirt?”

Kat could almost hear Principal Beekman removing her foot from her mouth before she spoke. “Maybe suspension was too extreme. But this was the third time she’s been caught skipping class.”

“I wasn’t aware,” Kat said honestly.

“And that’s part of the problem. This is her junior year. An important year of her schooling and I’d hate to see everything your sister has worked for be all for nothing.”

“I agree,” Kat whispered, feeling the burn of blame like a shot of whiskey stinging all the way down to her stomach.

When Ms. Beekman spoke again her tone was soft with pity. “I know that you are trying your best to raise your sister, but it seems that things are falling through the cracks. I have a meeting with Tessa’s social worker at the end of the week and I want to be able to give a glowing review, but as things stand now, I’m not sure I can.”

“Let me assure you that Tessa will show up every day as a star student. And let me prove to you that I am *the* best choice for her guardian.”

She could hear the older woman considering, hesitating to commit one way or another. She nearly cried when Beekman said, “You both have two weeks to prove that this can work. As for skipping class? One hour of study hall after school as punishment for each violation.”

“And the skirt?”

“I think it’s time to revisit the dress code,” the woman said, and Kat nearly fell out of the car, she was so surprised.

Had it worked? Had she just talked her way into a positive outcome?

“Thank you,” Kat said sincerely. “May I speak with Tessa?”

Tessa came back on the line and Kat said, “We’ll talk about this tonight at dinner.”

“I thought you worked at Bigfoot’s tonight.”

Kat scowled. She did work tonight. The happy hour shift, which put her there from five until nine—straight through any kind of conventional family dinnertime.

Think. How could she make this work? How could she work, have a family dinner, and make sure Tessa wasn’t sneaking out instead of remaining at home where her butt was very grounded. The solution shouldn’t be so hard. Single moms did this all the time, and with little ones who weren’t self-sufficient.

“I am. Which is why you and I will have dinner together on my break. As for the rest of my shift, you’ll sit in the restaurant area doing your homework and studying for the SATs. And rather than complaining, you should be thanking me for saving your ass from a suspension.”

“Thank you,” she said, and Kat heard the bell ring in the background. “I gotta go if I’m going to make Chemistry.”

“Make good decisions today,” Kat said. “Oh, and before you go, what skirt could you possibly possess that set off Principal Beekman like that?”

“I don’t. You do. I borrowed it from your closet.”



By the time Kat made it home from her day job, her head was pounding, her feet ached, and her shirt had a smudge of doughnut icing on it. She'd also written out an agenda for tonight's family meeting.

With the potential for things to get really heated really fast, she thought it best to have some kind of structure going in. She'd even spent her drive home having a one-on-one with the universe about how she'd like things to go down. But the universe clearly wasn't on that Zoom call because Kat pulled up to her house just in time to see a lanky boy with a can of spray paint gleefully tagging Nolan's garage door. Neon-orange spray paint went from one end to the other.

Kat couldn't help but let out a laugh as the kid stepped back to admire his handiwork. She had to admit, the kid had some serious artistic skills. His spelling, on the other hand, could use a little help.

Kat quietly hopped out of the truck and made her way to the edge of the drive and took a moment to appreciate the kid's freedom of speech. She should call the cops. She really should, but something in the set of the boy's shoulders told her there was more to this story than a random prank.

The next smart move would be to call Nolan, but she wasn't feeling all that smart, because instead of pulling out her phone, and employing that voice adults use as if they never screwed up as a kid, she said, "You know there's a C between the U and K."

There was a clank of the spray paint bottle as it hit the ground and the boy spun only to freeze when he caught sight of Kat. His eyes went wide with fear. He was maybe ten and sporting black-and-white checkered Vans, jeans that were a few inches too short—like he'd just gone through a growth spurt—and a white hoodie with a SANTA CRUZ logo on the back. His hair was floppy in the kind of way that would have to be constantly flipped to keep it out of his eyes. His expression was somewhere between *Oh shit* and *I'm gonna puke!*

The kid's gaze flickered to a skateboard resting against the side of the garage and Kat knew he was going to bolt. He worried the corner of his lower lip in consideration.

He was weighing his options. Make a run for it or risk grabbing his board. She debated if she should let him go. Reprimanding him would include dealing with the situation, and Kat had enough situations to deal with in her own life, she didn't need to insert herself into someone else's screw-up. Plus, who was she to lecture the kid on delinquent behavior? She'd come out of the womb with her middle finger extended to the world.

But there was also Nolan's neighborly gesture to consider. He didn't have to lend her his truck or bring her doughnuts. But he had, and, in turn, she kind of owed him.

Kat groaned.

This! This is why she didn't do neighborly. It involved markers and favors and owing people. And Kat hated owing people. But she owed Nolan big time so when the kid positioned himself like a runner about to do a four-minute mile, Kat said, "Don't even think about it. Because if I have to chase you down, I'll kick your ass."

The kid considered her commitment to the cause, so Kat cracked her knuckles to let him know that she was fully invested.

"You can't kick my butt?" he said, but it sounded more like a question than a statement.

"*Butt* is a pretty tame word for someone who wrote F-U-K in neon paint on the garage door of a federal agent who carries a badge and a gun," she said. "And try me."

"You're an adult," he lectured like she was the guilty party here.

"That's up for discussion," she said and, arms casually at her sides like she was approaching a feral cat, Kat walked over to pick up the spray can, which fit in her hand like an old friend. She extended it to him. "You going to finish?"

His expression was one of skepticism. “Why? So you can video it to show the cops?”

“I’m not going to call the cops. And it’s the owner you should be scared of,” she said, but she didn’t believe it. Nolan might be a glorified hall monitor, but even he’d be able to see the pain in the boy’s eyes. He was here because he wanted to be heard.

Kat had tagged a few buildings in her youth because she felt invisible to the world. She was angry and confused and hurt by her parents’ disinterest, by labels bestowed on her, and by the boxes she was locked in.

She saw that same hurt-filled defiance in this kid. And something about that pierced the *I don’t give a shit* cloak she used to protect herself from further disappointment. But in for a penny and all that.

With a sigh, Kat said, “You’re this far in, might as well make your statement clear. I mean, you wouldn’t want to be misunderstood, would you?”

Her gut said that’s what this kid was grappling with, being misunderstood. Kat could recognize a confused and angry soul when she met one—and he was hurting, which broke her heart. He was too young to have been let down.

“I’m Kat,” she said, handing him the can. “What’s your name?”

He stared at the can, then at her, his lips pressed into a thin *I ain’t gonna tell you* line.

“I just figured that since you dragged me into this, I should at least know who my partner in crime is.”

When he didn’t answer, she breezed past him and lifted the can and aimed it at the wall. Before she pressed down on the button, she looked over her shoulder with a raised brow. “You sure you don’t want to tell me your name? I can always call the cops.”

“Tommy,” he said.

“Tommy what?”

“Tommy Kincaid.”

“Well, Tommy, I guess you’d better get painting before we attract the attention of Ms. Greenwald, who will call the cops.”

He froze in his little skater shoes. “You want me to finish?”

“You don’t strike me as a quitter. Are you a quitter, Tommy Kincaid?”

“Nope,” he said with as much attitude as a five-foot-tall kid could muster and took the can from her. With his tongue peeking out the side of his mouth, Tommy squeezed in a sideways C between the FU and K, then stepped back.

“Feel better?” she asked, and a tiny smile tickled the corner of his lips.

“Sorta.”

“Sorta? This is a hell of a lot of risk for a ‘Sorta.’”

He gave a tiny shrug of the shoulder.

“Yeah,” she said with a sigh. “I’ve been there too.” In fact, she’d been there just this morning, but she’d picked the right path. Maybe all the kid needed was someone to point out that path. That it was her made her snort. But there they were.

“Being a hot head doesn’t always pay off. Trust me.”

He blinked up at her. “Why?”

“Sometimes things that we do in a moment of anger only make the problem bigger.” As she could attest to.

Tommy studied the ground as he scraped at the driveway with the toe of his sneaker. “What helps?”

Just last week she would have said, “*Tequila, ax throwing, a good old-fashioned bar fight.*” But she knew that they were about as useful as spray-painting the F-word on someone’s house, particularly for a kid. In fact, the only thing that had helped lately was—God, was she actually going to say it?

“Talking it out.”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” he said so quietly she barely heard him. Now the tears in his voice, that came through loud and clear.

“Okay, then why don’t we talk about why you picked Nolan’s house.” Because Tommy had picked this house and that word for a reason, and she had a feeling that was a big piece of the puzzle.

“Why? You his girlfriend or something?”

Kat snorted. “No. I am most definitely not his girlfriend.” Guys like Nolan might want to sleep with girls like Kat, but they definitely didn’t want to date them. Oh right, she forgot, she was a distraction he didn’t want to sleep with either. “In fact, I’m the polar opposite of girlfriend when it comes to him.”

Tommy looked relieved. And wasn’t that interesting. “Then why are you driving his truck?”

“My car was vandalized.” She looked up at the garage door and let out a breath. “Was that you?”

“What?” he stammered. “No! I swear. This is the first time I’ve ever...” He looked down at the spray bottle and shrugged. “Well, the second time, but the first time I used eggs.”

The kid looked ready to pee his pants, but she could see the genuine confusion in his expression. Maybe she was a sucker for a five-foot-tall rebel in skate gear, but she believed him. Whatever led him here today was personal, and the person at the center of all that hurt and anger was Nolan.

Which was something she had a hard time picturing. She’d seen Nolan with his niece, doting and patient, like a giant teddy bear with a PhD in kid speak. She’d also watched him interact with kids at the lodge. He didn’t handle them with kid gloves, instead meeting them at their level, always encouraging and supportive. And funny. Annoyingly funny in a way that only a man comfortable in his own skin could pull off.

When he wasn’t arresting teens for partying, kids actually flocked to him. If Kat were looking for a future Father of the

Year, she'd be impressed by his many talents. Good thing she was immune to white-picket-fencers with mini-van dreams.

Which was what he wanted. If his last relationship hadn't ended the way it had, he would have become an insta-dad to his girlfriend's kids. According to his sister, Brynn, Nolan had purchased the house next door to move his ready-made family in after the wedding.

There had been no wedding. Just a handful of broken hearts. Another reason it wasn't smart to entertain long-term. The potential for it to blow up was too great. Her parents couldn't even deal with her stubborn, wild side. What made her think a man would? Especially a man like Nolan.

Not that she thought of him in those terms. In fact, the only reason she was thinking of him now was because of the current situation.

And his sweet gestures, her head whispered.

"You know, out of all the houses you could have picked, you picked a federal agent's house."

"I know."

"So you admit you picked it on purpose?" Kat didn't know why it was so important to get this kid talking, but there was some kind of bond between them that she couldn't explain. So she sat down on the curb and patted the spot next to her.

The sun was ready to clock out, but the concrete was still warm from the day's heat. Kat closed her eyes and took in a deep breath of spring air, her lungs filling with the scent of pine oil, spray paint, and long-ago summers.

"You can tell me or you can tell the cops."

"I knew you weren't cool."

"I'm as cool as they come, so fess up. Why Nolan's?"

It took him a moment, but Tommy warily sat down. "Because he told me that a real man doesn't go back on his word, then he did."

That didn't sound like Nolan. He might drive her crazy with his rules, but he'd never go back on a promise. Would he?

“What kind of promise?”

“When he and my mom broke up, he promised it wouldn't change anything between us.”

That's why he looked so familiar. “You're Nina's son?” she asked, referring to Nolan's ex. He gave a tiny, barely visible nod and her heart went out to the kid. She knew what it felt like to have a parent figure turn their back on their kids or disappear altogether. Kat lowered her voice and scooted a little closer. “The breakup must have been hard on you.”

“He promised he'd be there for birthdays and junior search and rescue and stuff, but he lied. Mom says he's too busy and that it's my stepdad's job now.”

“And does your dad go to search and rescue and stuff?”

“Stepdad,” he clarified. “And sometimes. He used to when he first started dating my mom. Then ...”

The resigned disappointment in Tommy's voice told her that his stepdad stopped paying him attention after he won over Nina. That's how the men in her mom's life had been, at least when her mom had pretended to show interest in Kat. Play the doting father figure as an in with the mom, when really they never wanted to be a dad.

Kat didn't know Nina or her new husband, but she did know enough about Nolan to know that Nina was a flat-out liar. That he'd never do something to hurt someone, especially a kid. But what did she know about the situation? Sometimes people with the best of intentions were the ones who hurt others the most.

“Now they've got my baby sister and there just isn't enough time to go around,” he said, and it broke Kat's heart because that was clearly something he'd heard from one of his parents.

“You know, Nolan might be a lot of things, but I don't think he's the kind of guy to go back on his word.”

Tommy remained tight-lipped.

“Maybe there is more to the story you don’t know.”

Tommy looked up with a flicker of hope in his eyes. “Really?”

Kat threw her arm around his shoulders. “There’s always two sides to every story.”

“Then why did he just stop calling and showing up to my Junior SAR meetings?”

“I don’t know, but here’s your chance to ask him,” Kat said, jerking her chin to the federal cruiser coming down the street.

Tommy leapt to his feet and was grabbing his skateboard before Kat could even stand. He dropped the board to the ground and looked ready to roll.

He skated past her, and Kat grabbed the back of his hoodie and yanked him off his board. “Wait—you’re going to leave me holding the bag?” she asked him.

“I don’t want him to be mad at me.” Now there were tears in his eyes. “Promise you won’t tell him it was me.”

“You want me to lie to him?” she asked, and something that wouldn’t have phased her a few days ago suddenly felt like a burning stone in her belly.

“Please,” he pleaded. “He’ll hate me and then he’ll lock me up.”

“He won’t hate you.” She didn’t think he’d lock him up either, but hadn’t he just brought Tessa down for questioning for simply being at the wrong place at the wrong time, wearing the wrong jacket?

“Please.”

Kat looked up for divine intervention and puffed out a breath of air. “Fine. I won’t lie to him, but I won’t out you unless he asks.”

Tommy flung his arms around her waist and her heart grew two sizes. Before she could respond to the embrace, the kid

wiggled free and skated down the street—in the opposite direction of Nolan’s car.

Fuk indeed.

On his porch stood Kat, looking delicious and guilty as hell. After his day she was the last person he'd expected to see, but the first person he'd wanted to see, which was the only reason he could think of for why his heart began to race.

Nolan had had a busy day. When nine-to-fivers grew tired of the routine and wanted to come vacation in Sierra Vista to blow off some steam, that meant hiking, biking, boating, and camping. And beer. Lots of beer. Which led to a lot of drunk and disorderly, trespassing, and lost hikers, which led to paperwork.

In fact, he'd spent the better part of the afternoon filling out reports because of a couple of tipsy campers who'd driven their speedboat into a ten-mile-an-hour buoy while doing thirty. Thank god no one was badly injured. That was followed by a bachelorette party who decided to go skinny-dipping in the lake, where spring temperatures and ice runoff were sitting around forty-five degrees; a group of lost hikers; and a tourist who climbed a cliff to get a photo of the lake, only to remember halfway up he was afraid of heights—earning Nolan a cold beer of his own. Which he intended to savor on

the back porch while watching the sun set over the Sierra Mountains and decompress from the day.

Alone.

He didn't miss his ex; he was over her, his heart had healed. It wasn't fully intact, but betrayal would do that to a man. What he did miss was the companionship that went with a romantic connection like having someone to share his day with. Then again, that was part of the problem. Nina couldn't handle the dangerous parts of his job. She wanted someone who, when shots were fired, ran in the opposite direction. Probably why she married a periodontist.

Running toward danger was ingrained in Nolan's DNA. He couldn't imagine running away from a chance to make a positive impact, even if that meant putting himself in harm's way. Nope, his hours, aspects of his job, even how much time he spent with his family weren't the right fit for Nina.

And how could he blame her? Fostering a healthy relationship when he worked twelve-hour days was difficult at best. It was why divorce was so high in his field. Then there was his responsibility at the lodge—a responsibility where he was falling short.

Entertaining anything close to a relationship was a bad idea. Yet he'd been thinking about Kat nonstop. Another thing he'd been thinking about was that kiss. A kiss he'd been dreaming about for months.

It had started because he wanted to wipe that challenging look off her face. God, he loved a challenge in shredded black denim, and it had quickly turned carnal. Scratch that: she'd turned it carnal. Taken something that had depth and was growing legs to superficial.

Nolan didn't do superficial in his professional life and it no longer interested him in his private life.

So he'd pulled back.

Following her lead would evolve into touching, and touching would lead to a quickie in his truck. That seemed to be her MO. All fun. No ties. Which was how he'd spent most

of his time since his and Nina's split. But there was something about Kat that he couldn't seem to walk away from.

And he'd be damned if he was about to be just another guy who breezed through her life, even if that's the desire she portrayed to the world. She wanted connection, he saw it with how she interacted with her friends, her sister, even her coworkers. She knew everything about everyone, was the kind of person to step into the ring to protect her loved ones, yet from what he could tell she had a hard time accepting help for herself. It was like she was afraid to hope, only to be let down.

There was another reason he'd stopped himself. For the first time since Nina, he wanted more than meaningless sex. He wanted her to like him because he liked the hell out of her. Which complicated things.

He didn't have the time or the inclination for a relationship, especially with someone who had a dependent—been there, still had the tire marks on his heart—not to mention she had a penchant for breaking the rules. She was far from the girl-next-door that he usually went for. Ironic since she literally was the girl next door. Scratch that, the woman next door with a smart mouth, a wild streak wider than the Sierra Nevada Mountain range, and the saddest fucking eyes he'd ever seen.

Yet there he was, his heart racing at the thought of seeing her. He just hoped she wanted to see him back. Sure he'd lent her his truck because it was the neighborly thing to do, and he'd have been worried at the thought of her walking home from her shift at the bar in the dark. Especially after the other night. But a selfish part lent her his truck because it gave him a reason to check in on her.

And now here she was, he thought, as he slowed down to pull into his driveway. Because there standing on his front porch, leaning against the rail like she owned it, with her hip popped out and that smile full of 'tude, was the woman in question.

Then there was her outfit. A fitted black skirt, red top that bordered on the edge of professional and provocative, and

black leather boots that went an inch above her knees, the heel high enough to make a man weep. Suddenly the stress of the day vanished, and he felt energized.

Hot damn, his plan had worked better than he'd hoped.

Nolan parked his cruiser. He was counting all the ways this conversation could go and that's when he saw it. Giant neon letters spanning the length of his garage door. He'd been so focused on Kat when he'd arrived, he hadn't even noticed the graffiti.

He got a squirrely feeling in his gut. The same one he had when he found Kat next to her vandalized car and when he was cleaning egg off his property. He immediately went into investigation mode, because what were the odds of these vandalisms happening randomly within the past few days? In his town? Nil.

Locking gazes with her, hand on his service weapon, he stepped out of the car and made his way to the porch, not breaking eye contact until he'd invaded that personal-space bubble she clung so tightly to. And before he knew what he was doing he was gripping her by the shoulders. "What happened? Are you okay?"

She looked at him like he'd lost his head. "I'm fine."

Needing to see for himself, he ran his hands down her arms and scanned the rest of her body.

She held her arms out to her sides and did a twirl. He was too focused on what could have happened to notice her glorious ass. "Look, I'm fine."

"Did you call the cops?"

"Nope," she said, looking not an ounce guilty. "Figured you'd be all the badge we'd need."

"Was this R. J.? Was he here? Did he threaten you?"

"No, it wasn't R. J. And no, I wasn't threatened."

"But you were here?" he accused, his world tilting all kinds of wrong.

“For part of it.”

He ran a hand down his face. “So you what—just decided to wait around to see if they’d come back?”

“I saw you drive up and didn’t want to head to my shift without making sure *you* were okay.”

“And who would make sure *you* were okay? Look at what happened to your car.”

“Different person. I can take care of myself. And why are you yelling at me?”

He stepped in dangerously close. “You should have called me from the safety of your home, behind locked doors.”

“And miss out on this fun moment?” she deadpanned, then turned to walk away. “And what makes you think I didn’t do this?”

He caught her elbow and gently tugged her around. “Did you?”

She cocked a hip and stared him down. Man, he’d gotten her good and mad. “I may have assisted in the final stretch. More of an art director role than the artist himself. Just having a little fun with you. You down for some fun.”

He rested his hands on the railing, one on either side of her, effectively caging her in, and watched as her breath caught. “Is there a question mark at the end of the word?”

She laughed. “You wish.”

“I like it when a woman is direct with what she wants.”

She crossed her arms, as if she needed the barrier between them. “I was pretty clear the other night. You passed.” Her tone was full-on sass, but there was a hint of what sounded a lot like hurt deep beneath that bravado, and that didn’t sit right with him.

“A decision I have come to regret,” he whispered, gently tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

“You have?” she said just as softly.

“I have.”

His answer hung between them and so did a warmth that went beyond chemistry. But as quickly as it appeared, she trampled it with that *Can't touch this* attitude she was famous for.

“Well, the moment has officially passed, Ranger.”

His lips curled into a smile. “Until the next moment presents itself.”

“Good luck with that.” She tucked his keys into his duty belt and then ducked under his arm.

“Your car fixed?”

“Not yet.”

He took the keys and tossed them back to her. “Keep the truck until it is.”

It was like a game of hot potato, the moment the keys touched her hands she threw them back. “That could be weeks.”

He took her hand and placed the keys inside, then closed her fingers around it. “Then you can give these back in a few weeks.”

She looked puzzled. “Is this your inner Superman complex coming out?”

“Maybe,” he said. “Or maybe I want to be one of the people who make your life a little easier rather than harder.” When she tried yet again to hand them back, he shook his head. “You’re still working nights at the bar?”

“Do unicorns fart rainbows?”

That got a little chuckle out of him. “Then you need transportation.”

“I need a new job,” she mumbled. “And I can find my own way to work.”

Hand still closed around hers, he gently squeezed it. “Keep them, Kitten.”

Her eyes were locked on their connected hands, but she didn't move. "What did I say about calling me that?"

"Then why do you blush every time I do?"

She jerked back. "It's an allergic reaction to prolonged exposure to nice guys."

He chuckled. "You say it like that's a bad thing."

She rolled her eyes. "Haven't you ever heard that nice guys finish last?"

Nolan leaned in until his lips grazed the outer curve of her ear and whispered, "As long as you finish first, I'm good with that."

"Nolan," she said in warning, but he noticed that she shivered. "We are not having sex any time soon, big guy."

"Soon. So that means it's still on the table."

"It was never on the table."

"Hmmm."

"What?"

"Never took you for a liar." He looked at the garage. "Now you want to talk about that monstrosity?"

"Not necessarily."

"Then why are you waiting on my front porch with a can of orange paint?"

"You saw me before I could flee the scene of the crime. And the spray paint isn't mine. A friend left it behind."

"What friend?" He lifted her right hand and brought it to his lips, then kissed her fingers that looked to be covered with Cheetos goo.

"I plead the Fifth."

"Is that your final answer?"

"Why?" She jerked her hands back. "If I don't answer, are you going to cuff me, Ranger Carmichael?"

“*Agent Carmichael*,” he corrected and then gave her a long once-over. Man, was she sexy. “Now all I can think about is you cuffed to my bed.”

“I’m not into bondage.”

“What are you into? You know, so that I can file it away for when the next moment presents itself.”

“I think you’ll be too busy repainting your house to engage in anything else, *Ranger*,” she mused, leading him in the direction of the garage door.

“Did you at least enjoy yourself?”

“Watching someone take on the great Agent Carmichael? Top ten moments of my life.” She laughed. “I’m more of a letting my horse poop on your lawn kind of woman, which, if you’ll notice, I did not do.”

“I noticed. Does this mean I’m growing on you?”

“I guess it means that being a good guy sometimes does pay off,” she mused. “Although an argument could be made that someone saw beneath the Superman exterior to the secret jerk lurking beneath.”

“I’m nowhere near perfect, but I’m not a jerk. What you see is what you get, Kat. You have my word on that.”

She gave a major eye roll, but not before he saw a flicker of uncertainty, as if that old adage had never worked out so well for her. Another thing he wanted to change.

She glanced at the door and back to him. “Well, someone disagrees.”

“You happen to know who?”

“I can, but I gave my word that I wouldn’t rat him out,” she said.

“So it wasn’t R. J.?”

“Do you think he’d still be alive?”

Nolan laughed. “Fair enough. But it is a he?”

“A very young he who has a very valid reason for doing what he did. But if it makes you feel better, he regretted it the minute he was done. In fact, he made me promise not to tell you because he thought you’d be mad at him, and he couldn’t stand the idea. He looks up to you.”

He didn’t like the sound of that. Nolan worked hard to be the kind of man people could depend on, the kind of man who went out of his way to make others feel loved and accepted. The idea of some kid being afraid of disappointing him didn’t sit right.

“I’m drawing a blank here, Kitten. You’re going to have to help me out, because I need to fix whatever is broken and I can’t do that unless I know what I did.”

He knew the moment she gave in. She worried that lower lip and her eyes went soft with understanding. “This hits close to home for you. Really close.” She rested a gentle hand on his pec. “It has something to do with your ex.”

“Ah, shit,” he said on a breath. “Tommy? I thought they were in Montana.”

“I don’t know about that, but it seems like he misses you and doesn’t know how to say it.” Her palm slid up to cover his chest. “It kind of broke my heart.”

It didn’t break his heart, it shredded it. It felt like the wind had been knocked out of him. He walked backward and sat hard on the porch step, then rested his head in his hands. That same pinching sensation in his chest he felt whenever he thought of Tommy became acute.

“What did he say?”

“What did he say or what does he think?”

“Both.”

Kat sat next to him, so close their thighs were touching and lowered her voice. “He said that you’d gone back on your word about how things wouldn’t change after the breakup.”

“It wasn’t my fault.” But was it? Should he have tried harder? It was a question that had haunted him for the better

part of last year.

“I know,” she said. “But all he knows is that you were there and then you vanished, breaking promises. I know what that feels like.”

Nolan didn't know a lot about Kat's childhood, just what he'd heard around town over the years, but he knew enough to understand that Kat had had a rough upbringing. Her mom was a mess and her dad was ill-equipped to raise kids. Hell, she was trying to gain custody of her sister because her dad couldn't be bothered to be there for his daughters.

He'd never really thought about how hard this all must be on her. To go from having all the freedom and possibilities in the world, to being stuck in a dead-end job and an insta-mom.

He'd struggled at first to catch up when he'd started dating Nina, but he'd had a guiding hand. And Tommy was young enough to be open to the idea of a male influence in his life.

That kid had soaked up all the love he could get. Absorbing it like he'd been deprived. Nina was a good mom, but she struggled to find balance between her career and being a single parent. That was until Nolan came along and she was able to cut her hours in half and be there when Tommy got home from school.

To help make that happen, Nolan picked up extra shifts so he could buy a house, which he had. Nina's dream house. But only a week after he'd closed escrow, she'd broken things off. It wasn't until her new man came into her life, which was within a month of their breakup, that she closed the door between him and her kid.

“Did he say anything?”

“Just that his stepdad doesn't seem all that involved in the kid's life and he was angry. But really, I think he is confused and hurt.”

“God, I don't even know how to fix this,” he admitted.

Kat slipped her hand through his and gave it a gentle squeeze. The sensation was so right that it tilted his world. “You're a good guy, Nolan. I have no doubt you will fix this.”

A lot could happen in two days. Like Kat had officially become a criminal. She didn't even want to think about how many laws she'd broken today.

It had started off as an innocent thought, a *What if* that morphed into a *Well that was easy*, and now she was armed with information that she couldn't do jack shit with. If she told her sister what she'd learned about R. J., then she'd have to admit that she'd illegally hacked into his police file, including his sealed juvie record. And what a file it was.

R. J.'s father must have made cleaning up after his son a part-time job. But she'd caught R. J. sneaking around Tessa's window last night after curfew and didn't know what else to do. Had she not gotten up to put TD back in his pen she would have been none the wiser.

"He was brought in for questioning six times in the last few years," Kat explained to her friends, who'd dropped everything to meet Kat at Grind Rush, a café located in the heart of downtown.

Nestled between her favorite candle shop, Big Wick Energy, and Gemma's soon-to-open art studio, Sip and Splatter, Grind Rush was the local favorite. Not only was their Black Diamond Drip the best coffee in the Sierra Mountains,

they also served doughnut holes from Just Holes. Which was a necessity when having an emergency meeting.

“Everything from assault to petty theft,” she went on. “But his dad got him off on each account. He was even accused of roughing up his ex-girlfriend, but she recanted her statement a week before she moved to Los Angeles,” Kat explained.

“That’s terrible,” Gemma said. She was dressed for work: boyfriend-cut overalls, an IF LOST RETURN TO ART STUDIO tee, and a light speckling of paint covering her from her Converse to the cute pink-plaid do-rag tying her hair back.

“That’s what money can do,” Milly said. “Buy people off and silence them.”

“Well, I’m not going to be silenced. This prick has his sights on Tessa and there is no way I’m going to let him get close enough to even sneeze on her.”

“How are you going to do that? Tessa seems dead set on tangling with trouble,” Milly said.

Kat popped a jelly-filled hole into her mouth and glanced around the café. With its floor-to-ceiling windows she could see Town Square and its manicured lawn and giant sequoias. Dwarfed by the mountains in the background, it was a sight to behold. It was also probably not the best location for a covert meeting.

Gemma leaned on the table. “What did you do?”

“What makes you think I did something?”

Milly rubbed her hands together with excitement and sat forward. “Is this about you kissing Nolan?”

“Who said anything about kissing Nolan again?” she said, purposefully holding her friend’s gaze so as not to look guilty.

“*Again?*” Milly said loud enough for the entire café to hear. “When?”

“None of your business.”

“Oh no,” Milly said. “You were all up in my grill about Jax when we were dating.”

“Fake dating,” Kat corrected. “A fact you conveniently left out.”

“I hated keeping it from you. But I promised Jax I’d keep it a secret.”

“Great, well maybe I promised to keep a secret too.”

Gemma’s face went bright with excitement. “So it wasn’t just a kiss. It was a secret kiss, which led to you driving his truck. Are you official now?”

“He lent me his truck to be neighborly and as for the title, you ladies know me better.”

Milly snatched up the last jelly-filled doughnut and held it hostage. “We do know you. Better than anyone on the planet, which is why we find it curious that you’re keeping all the juicy details to yourself. Usually you’re practically showing us a dick pic of your latest hook-up. Yet you kissed Nolan and it is suddenly a matter of national security? That must have been some kiss.”

It was some kiss, alright. A kiss that had scrambled her mind, which was the only reason she could come up with for why she said, “It was the night of the bar fight.”

“How romantic.” Milly swooned. “First he saves you from R. J. and then he kisses your boobos away.”

“You make him sound like some knight in shining armor.”

“Because he is.”

Truer words had never been spoken. Nolan was one of the good ones. And wasn’t that a shame. She didn’t go for good ones. Hadn’t a clue as to what to do with them.

“He might be a knight, but I am no damsel in distress. I rescued myself. All he did was follow me home to make sure I got there safely.”

“Back to the kiss,” Milly said. “How was it?”

Amazing. Mind-blowing. Life-altering. “It was okay.”

Both friends shot her a look, the same look they’d given her when she’d been eight and Tina failed to show for Kat’s

birthday party and she said she didn't care. "Fine. It was epic."

Gemma rested her chin on her folded hands. "Define *epic*."

"I was in a shit mood, he kissed the crap out of me, we argued, then he drove behind me while I stomped all the way home."

Both women burst out laughing. The kind of laughing where they were wiping the tears from the corner of their eyes.

"So it was your dream date," Gemma finally said.

"It was something and, oh no, I see what you're both thinking and it's not like that."

"Like what?" Gemma asked innocently.

"Like it's going to happen again."

"And we see the look in your eyes," Milly said with a smile. "And it is so going to happen again. There will be a whole lot of happening going on around here."

"Nope. He had his chance and he passed," she said and felt her face heat with residual humiliation.

Milly blinked. "He passed? On sex? No way. I don't believe it. That man has had eyes for you for a long time."

"He might have eyes for me, but he refused to put his hands on me."

Okay, that wasn't exactly true. He had his hands all over her, just not in the places that would take things from PG to *Please, Nolan, please*. She knew he was attracted to her, the bulge in his pants made that clear. So then what was the problem?

"What did he say?" Milly asked.

"That we had time and didn't have to rush it."

"And you said?" Gemma asked.

"I think I told him to screw off; instead he followed me home. But he did not come in. In fact, he just watched me go inside and then he went to bed. Alone."

“I bet he took that kiss right to his spank bank,” Gemma said.

He wasn't the only one.

“Whatever he did, that's all he's ever going to get.”

“Why? He's obviously into you, wants to do things right, and you think he's hot. What's the holdup?”

Me! I'm the holdup. I'm rough around the edges and my life is a three-ring circus. For god's sake, she'd just hacked into confidential police records. All that she'd accomplish by going after Nolan would be to complicate his life and endanger his job.

“Kat?” Milly said softly. “What's the holdup?”

“He's too good,” Kat said quietly. “I don't know what to do with good.”

“What if you let him teach you?” Gemma said. “Your life has been so hard, maybe it's your time to cash in on some good.”

Kat wanted to snort. If anyone deserved some good, it was Gemma. Not only had she lost her baby, she'd lost her husband and career in the grief. It had been two years and she was just now starting to come out of the fog.

“I can already hear you coming up with reasons to say no. What if you said yes?” Milly asked.

“I can't give him what he wants.”

“How do you know what he wants? Did he tell you?”

“Well, no.”

“Then why don't you ask him before you shut it down?”

Milly had a point. Had Nolan really put the demands on them or had she just assumed? And did she really want to know the answer to that question?

“Let's just call this what it is. A Zoe-inspired clusterfuck,” Kat said.

Gemma burst out laughing and Milly, in mock horror, slapped her hand to her chest. “Are you saying my sister came back from the grave to screw with your life and get you in an awkward situation with Ranger Tight-ass?”

“That is exactly what I am saying,” Kat said, eyeballing each friend.

After all, it was Zoe who had visited from beyond the grave to issue the dares, thrown her own Ghost-lorette Party, and was the only one who had known about Kat’s secret crush on Nolan in high school.

Kat wouldn’t be surprised if her friend had gone as far as to make it so Nolan was the guy to walk through the door at that exact moment the belt dare was issued, knowing how much he irritated Kat. That’s how Zoe was, a real take-risks, live-in-the-now, don’t-look-back, never-regret kind of woman whom Kat looked up to.

Since Zoe’s passing, she and her two other besties, Milly and Gemma, had felt the loss of their friend deeply. It was as if a Zoe-sized hole had been ripped from their hearts. Even now, there were days Kat would forget her friend was gone, and she’d reach for the phone to call her for advice or just for a laugh. Lately her need for her friend’s advice had become stronger and stronger.

Advice about Tessa, about the hearing, and now about how to deal with these confusing sparks with a man she can’t stand, yet like clockwork she wore silky pj’s for.

“I’ll think about it. Now can we get back to talking about the criminal who is trying to corrupt Tessa?”

“Fine, but we’re circling back to the Nolan situation,” Milly said, and Kat knew she was telling the truth. Milly had this enchanting way of getting people to spill their guts. It was annoying.

“Cone of silence?” Kat asked.

“Cone of silence,” they said in unison.

Kat looked around again, like she was in an episode of *Mission: Impossible*, then lowered her voice. “I talked to one

of R. J.'s exes today and she told me everything. I guess he never actually hit her, but he certainly shoved her. Most of the abuse was mental. He'd gaslight her and then lovebomb her until she was confused. She said that Councilman Locke paid her five grand to leave town."

Gemma slapped a hand over her mouth. Eyes wide with horror, she whispered, "That's horrible."

"And she's not the only one," Kat said. "There are others. And I want to talk to each and every one of them."

"How did you get their information?" Gemma asked, suspicion lacing her voice. "Please tell me you didn't—" Kat distracted her mouth with another doughnut hole. "Kat, this is so bad. Look what happened last time you hacked into something."

"I didn't know what else to do. Tessa keeps sneaking out of the house."

"Trust the cops. Trust Nolan," Milly said. "He wants to bust R. J. too and he always gets his man."

Kat didn't doubt that was true. Nolan was damn good at his job. He was determined, dedicated, and dangerous as hell when on the trail of injustice. "I'm just not sure he can get him before R. J. does something to hurt my sister. Nolan wants to put him behind bars, I want to scare the hell out of Tessa so she dumps his ass."

"Tread lightly," Milly warned. "I don't want to see this backfire. I wouldn't be surprised if the councilman could get you fired from the county if provoked. Just look at what his son did to your car. I don't want to see this escalate any further."

"I don't know what else to do. I figure if maybe I can get some of his exes to talk to Tess, it would knock some sense into her."

"I'm surprised that she's still even entertaining a relationship with him after he shoved you," Gemma said.

"According to R. J., he was just trying to defend himself and I bounced off his body."

“Speaking of bouncing off bodies.” Milly wagged her brow suggestively. “Nolan seemed pretty intense about the whole thing. He couldn’t take his eyes off you.”

“He was just making sure I wasn’t going to pop off again and punch a customer,” Kat said.

“It looked more like he was fighting the urge to surround you with all of that yummy protectiveness he’s known for,” Gemma argued.

“He doesn’t get that way with anyone but family, so his behavior was interesting,” Milly said, and she’d be the one to know. Ever since becoming engaged to one of the famous brothers, she was the expert on all things Jax—including his family.

“Well, I don’t need protecting.”

While those words were true—she could handle anything that came her way alone—they didn’t feel as empowering as they once had. In fact, all that statement made her feel was lonely. That was her superpower. The ability to feel alone even when surrounded by people who loved her.

When she was with her friends, she was engulfed in love, she knew this. The whole island of one thing was all on her. But opening herself up to accepting love was difficult, if not impossible. Too much rejection at such a young age had demolished her ability to trust that love.

“Honey, if a man as good-looking as Nolan wanted to be my knight, I’d let him. Especially if he showed up in his uniform and cuffs. The man is *fine*,” Gemma said. “And I’m officially on a man-free diet.”

“With his family, once you’re in, there is no escaping the coddling,” Milly informed her with a gleeful smile. “And it will come from all directions.”

“Good thing I’m not, nor will I ever be, in,” Kat said. “Besides, I barely know his family. Other than working at the bar, and that party I crashed a few months back, I’ve never been around them since high school. And even then, we hung in different groups.” She was the goth girl with a crush on the

town's golden boy who always had a nice word to say but never showed any interest in getting to know her better.

Kat didn't have much experience with healthy families like Nolan's. Hadn't a clue as to how to navigate that kind of situation. He came with a large, loud, and loving family and even after a year of dating she'd never made it to the "meet the family" with the limited few who made it boyfriend status.

Another gift from her ex.

It was the first, and only, time meeting Ryan's family and she'd been on her best behavior. She'd been affectionate, attentive, and everything that a girlfriend should be when meeting her future in-laws. It had gone swimmingly.

Or so she thought. Instead of singing her praises, his mom warned him that Kat wasn't the one. Not only didn't she fit in with the family, she wasn't the kind of nurturing woman who would make a good wife or mother. Two things Kat's childhood hadn't prepared her for. Instead of fighting for her and defending her, Ryan cowered to his mother's opinion and that very next day he'd broken things off.

After her coward of an ex, Kat decided it was best to avoid serious relationships. Especially ones that lent themselves to family get-togethers.

She stuck to a strict two-week regiment. Just enough time to have a little fun but not long enough for things to progress into something deeper. Something that had the possibility to break her when taken away. Because it would always end, history had taught her that.

Something she desperately needed to keep in mind, because she couldn't afford to break, not with so much on the line. So this fun flirtation with Nolan could never go beyond that.

She wouldn't allow it.

“What do you mean the security feed is missing?” Jax asked.

“Just what I said. The cameras that are in the back parking lot were mysteriously not working during the time that Kat’s car was vandalized,” Nolan explained, guilt and anger roiling through him.

Making sure his people were safe was his responsibility. And he’d failed on that count.

Again.

“Was it damage from the eggs?” Brynn asked. She sat at the end of the conference table in the back offices of the lodge where they held their weekly board meetings. And since the board was made up of their family, it included bickering, pestering, and a lot of disagreements. But it also included a lot of love.

They’d always been a tight bunch, exploring the mountains like it was their own personal backyard, having each other’s back, celebrating successes, and calling out BS when needed. But when they stepped up to take over the lodge that bond had quadrupled leaving Nolan with, not one, but four ride-or-dies.

Which was why it was so important for him to keep up his end of the deal—and that meant protecting them. From threats—inside and out.

“No, this was different.” This wasn’t some kid’s prank. This was done by someone with skills. The eggs—that was done by someone with a kid’s grudge, like Tommy. “The cameras were disabled.”

“Like broken?” Brynn wanted to know.

“No, they are working fine. There was still some egg yolk on the lens, but the feed from that night goes black for twenty minutes and when it comes back on, Kat’s standing over her car taking in R. J.’s handiwork.”

And working her ass off not to cry. He’d seen it in her eyes when she’d turned around to face him. What he hadn’t seen was the absolute fear that the camera showed. The way her gaze shot around the parking lot, the way her body fell in on itself as if trying to become as small as possible. It was a far cry from the tough girl who’d met his gaze head on five minutes later.

He wasn’t sure what made him angrier, that someone had put that fear in her eyes or that she’d gone out of her way to hide it from him. He knew it wasn’t personal, she’d hide any sign of weakness from whomever had found her in the dark parking lot. She’d walk through hell with a smile. But it didn’t take away how impotent he felt knowing she didn’t want his help.

Jax ran a hand down his face and leaned back in his chair. “So someone either erased the footage or stopped the cameras.”

“Yup.”

“Something else is going on,” Lucas said, and a heavy weight blanketed the room. “We’ve had three calls in the last week from guests with suspicious charges on their account after visiting the lodge. Maybe it’s a coincidence.”

Nolan believed in coincidence about as much as he believed in leprechauns. “I don’t think so. Between the

missing alcohol and ski supplies, something bigger is going on.”

“What’s the update on the missing whiskey?”

“According to our invoices we have the exact amount in our storeroom as were ordered.”

“But?” Brynn ventured.

“But when I called our distributor, he had a different number of cases delivered. The invoices don’t match up.”

“We don’t have the best security,” Jax said in a tone that told the room he wasn’t surprised. “It’s not you, Nolan. It’s a leftover from Dad.”

Jax and Lucas hadn’t had the best of luck when it came to trust. Their ability to rely on others had been ripped out of them in childhood. Before they came to live with Nolan and his family, they’d been neglected and abandoned by the one person who was supposed to love them most.

Kind of like Kat, his inner protector whispered.

“I’ll look into this further this weekend,” he said, calculating just how many hours his work week would include. Between his job and the lodge, and now this, he’d be lucky if he pulled four hours’ sleep at any one stretch.

“No,” Brynn the caretaker said. “You’re already spread thin. We should hire someone to fix the problem. There’s a company in Tahoe who specialize in this kind of thing.”

Nolan shook his head. “This is my responsibility. When Mom and Dad wanted to sell the place, I stepped up and said I wanted to keep it in the family. I promised to keep the place safe. This is my problem.”

“You promised along with the rest of us. And when one of us is strapped, the rest of us pitch in,” Lucas said, like he wasn’t already cuffed to his desk.

Harris coughed *Bullshit* into his fist. “You’re the last one who should be talking. You spent half the week sleeping at the office.”

“Which is why he is also going to be hiring some help,” Jax said.

“I have to get the books in order before I can even think about bringing on help,” Lucas said.

“Well, Mom and Dad are coming next month and if this isn’t cleared up you all know what’s going to happen,” Brynn said.

A collective groan went up in the room.

“So I suggest we all work together and solve these problems,” Brynn added.

“Fine. But we tackle the security breach first. And I get to hire who I want,” Nolan said.

Which meant it was Nolan’s time to follow through on his word and find someone who knew as much about computers as he did investigating. Because while he could locate a lost hiker in ten square miles or find enough evidence to put away the bad guys, he knew jack shit about computers. At least the interworking of the lodge’s interface.

“I’ll start putting out feelers today.”

“And just who would you be feeling?” Brynn asked with a mischievous grin. “The girl who’s been driving your truck around like it’s your letterman’s jacket?”

“Your truck?” Harris asked, aghast. “That’s the equivalent of handing over your balls.”

“Oh, he handed those over months ago,” Jax said, and Nolan wanted to throttle him. He may have told Jax, in confidence and over a pitcher of beer, that he had a little thing for Kat. Jax swore to take it to the grave.

So much for brotherly loyalty.

“Screw you,” Nolan threw back. He did not, repeat, did *not* want to discuss him and Kat. At least not until he’d had a proper discussion with Kat. She was jumpy enough about what was happening between them as it was, he didn’t need his bonehead family making matters worse by butting in.

“You’re not my type, but you should look into that since you clearly aren’t getting any.” Jax laughed.

“No one likes a bragger, Jax,” Brynn said. “No one. And I think it’s sweet that goodie-goodie Nolan has a crush on the town’s bad girl. And I give that title with respect.”

“She called you sweet,” Harris joked, and Nolan felt his inner grizzly being prodded. He was an easygoing guy most of the time. This was not one of those times. Between the bad girl comment and his crush being sweet, like he was some lovesick teen, his irritation was at an all-time high.

“I have a name for you,” he said to Harris. “Want to hear it?”

The whole table went silent at the growl in Nolan’s voice. His siblings all exchanged looks and Nolan knew he’d made a mistake. He’d given himself away.

Harris let out a low whistle. “So it’s like that?”

“It’s like that.”

“Which is why you’re going to hire her instead of a company that specializes in creating firewalls?”

“I’m going to add her résumé to the pile because she’s the best.” And if the family and IT team thought she was the best fit, it would be a pay increase. In fact, Nolan would make sure it paid enough so that she could quit her day job *and* bartending, and just head up security for the lodge’s IT department.

Jax looked at his twin. “You going to let him hire a woman he’s sleeping with? You blew a gasket when I started dating Milly. And she was a contractor.”

“Kat will be a contractor until the project is finished,” Lucas said. “And I trust Nolan will do the right thing.”

Jax snorted. “Yeah, good luck with that, bro.”

Lucas was right. Hiring her would make her off limits. He couldn’t, in good conscience, date someone whom he was in a position of power over. Yet he’d only had a taste of her and he

wanted more, and he wasn't sure that something like an invisible moral line would stop him.

Shit, what was he even thinking? When it came to his moral compass he knew right from wrong. But being with Kat had felt so damn right. Sleeping with her would be inappropriate on so many different levels, but not offering her the job made him an even bigger ass.

"Change your mind?" Harris asked with an all-knowing smile.

"Nope, just thinking this project through."

"Well, whatever you're going to do, you need to do it soon. I don't want Mom and Dad finding out about this at Emma's birthday party," Harris said, referring to his almost four-year-old daughter. "And I don't want her big day to be overshadowed by Dad freaking out about things and wondering if he made the wrong decision in letting us take over."

"One whiff and he'll spend his vacation sticking his nose into everyone's business and making a mess of things," Lucas warned, and he had the most to lose. As the former CEO of Sierra Vista Lodge, Kent Carmichael had a hard time handing the reins to Lucas, even though Lucas had spent the past five years running the business.

But Kent suffered from extreme FOMO, which meant that he was constantly checking in on his kids to make sure they were running things right. Which they were. But if he found out "right" wasn't "his way," he'd sell their retirement house in Santa Barbara to relocate back to Sierra Vista to oversee things. And Nolan couldn't let that happen. His parents worked hard to give their kids everything they could hope for, a safe environment that was filled with unwavering love and support. The perfect balance between guidance and the space to become the people they were meant to be. They'd sacrificed so much over the years that Nolan wanted to make sure that this was their time. All the siblings felt that way.

His job was to keep the guests, employees, and hotel safe and he'd failed multiple times in the past weeks. Something he

planned on fixing. Even if it meant he'd cock-block himself.

There was a gentle tap on the door and then it opened. Lucas's latest assistant, Jane, nervously peeked her head in as if there were an IED on the other side of the door.

He went through assistants like most men went through underwear. He was such a demanding boss that this was his third assistant this year—and it was only April. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but Nolan, there's someone here to see you. She doesn't have an appointment, but said you'd be expecting her. Should I take a message?"

"No." A stupid grin slipped out before he could stop it. "We were just finishing up."

"We've only tackled item one on the agenda," Lucas said sternly, like if they postponed the meeting, he'd have a coronary.

"Tell her I'll be there in a minute. Please bring her to my office." The last thing he needed was his family's face plastered to the conference room window watching on as he tells Kat about the job and that she should submit her résumé.

"Now when she thinks of you, she'll think that you're the minute man. Smooth," Harris said, and again they all burst out laughing.

"We're done here." Nolan stood and headed toward the exit.

"Oh, we're just getting started," Jax said, still laughing like this was all some big game.

Nolan spun around and, puffing out to his two-twenty, six-foot-three frame, he eyeballed each and every one of them. "You can tease me, but don't do it in front of Kat. She's going to have a hard enough time accepting help and applying for the job, you assholes will only make it worse."

With that he slammed the door and made his way down the hallway. He must have been wearing his resting death face because every assistant and employee he passed looked up at him and directly away, as if afraid to make eye contact with the big bad bear. Which was why when he got to his office, he

let out a big breath and thought about all the reasons Kat could have come to see him.

He smoothed down his hair, did a quick breath check, and by the time he opened the door he was feeling giddy and light. Like the sun had finally come out and he was basking in it.

Okay, so maybe she was the sun with a category 5 hurricane that ripped his hair from his scalp as it blew past, but he'd always liked a good bluster.

"Hey, you," the woman in the chair said, and his smile faded as she turned to face him.

"Nina?"

"Hey, Nolan." She stood and gave him a hug. He was too shocked and angry to really hug her back.

"I thought you were in Montana. Is everything okay?" he asked, his heart pounding with fear.

"No, it's not." Her voice was rough like she'd been holding back intense emotions.

He ushered her back to the chair and when she sat, he rested a hip against the front of his desk. "Talk to me."

"It's Tommy."

His heart fell and he took her hands. "Is he okay?"

"He's in one of his stubborn phases, you know the one." Nolan did, that kid could outlast wet paint drying if someone told him it was a waste of time. "He is going to ask you to be his partner in the navigation part of his junior Search and Rescue badge."

A hopeful bump ricocheted off his ribs. "He is?"

"Yes. And you have to say no. I told you we'd moved to Montana to make a clean break, but we've been nearby."

The next bump knocked him back a step. "What? Why?"

She studied her clasped hands as she spoke. "We had an agreement, Nolan."

“I never agreed to anything. You just said that I was out, then you cut off all contact.”

“It’s called breaking up and moving on.” This time when she spoke, it was directly at him, with tears in her eyes, like he was the one who left her life in tatters.

Normally Nolan would have put his feelings aside to be there for Nina, tell her that Tommy would be okay. But he remembered what Kat had said about knowing he’d figure out the right thing to do.

“It’s called cruel. To me and Tommy.”

She clasped her heart as if he’d shot it with a bullet. “You know I had to. It was just too confusing—”

“I call bullshit. It just pissed off your husband and you caved. He was like my kid, Nina. *My* kid. Three years together like a family and then one day, *poof*, he’s taken from me.”

“I did what I thought was best for him.”

“You did what was best for you and you know it. Otherwise Tommy wouldn’t be sneaking over to my house or thinking that I’m not man enough to keep my word. I promised him the world and you denied me the chance to be the kind of role model he deserves.”

“I’m sorry, I really am. But Dale feels threatened by you, said that he wouldn’t be able to be a proper father figure with you hanging around the sidelines.”

“He can have the sidelines. I want to be in the game. Running defense for the kiddo, protecting him.”

“Tommy is going to come and ask you to be his partner for the badge qualifications. You need to say no,” Nina repeated.

Nolan crossed his arms. He knew when he stood to his full height he was intimidating, but he didn’t give a shit. He wanted her to know he wasn’t backing down. Not this time. “No can do.”

“What does that mean?”

“You don’t want him around me, you explain it to him. I’m not going to be the reason your kid feels abandoned.”

Kat stared at the moonlight dancing across her bedroom walls and sighed. It was after midnight and even though she'd had a day longer than the Truckee River, she couldn't keep her lids shut for more than a second before they snapped back open.

She was too excited. And nervous.

She'd been in the middle of her shift at the bar when her phone rang. It was the IT department at the lodge telling her about a job that she should apply for because they thought she could be a good fit. A job that would require her to use her boss skills and create, from the ground up, a new back end for the lodge's interface and secure any weak spots. She'd also get to play detective and figure out who'd been sneaking around and playing naughty games.

Kat was the OG Sierra Vista hacker and genesis of naughty games, so she was excited to see who'd followed in her footsteps—and catch them.

But something was bugging her. How the job came to be. It wasn't like she knew the woman who'd called, and she hadn't applied for the job. She'd pressed Milly, who swore she wasn't behind it, pulling favors through her fiancé.

Which left Nolan.

And that one word was why she asked the woman if she could get back to her on Monday. It shouldn't matter that the job came through Nolan, she was more than qualified, but it felt like a handout. She hadn't opened up to him the other day to press him for a job. She knew how many people asked him and his siblings for favors and she didn't want to be that kind of person.

But, man, she wanted that job. She didn't even know all the details and already she was dreaming in code. Lines and lines of code. They actually wanted her to hack into their system and find the loopholes. She'd get paid to hack!

Neigh... Tiny Dancer whispered in a tone that was equivalent to a little kid crossing their legs because they had to pee.

“You just went out. Go back to sleep.”

TD blew a raspberry, which rained slobber down on Kat's cheek.

“Gross.” She wiped her face on her pillow, which now smelled like carrots and horse breath.

Neigh, TD said back, more urgent.

“This is why you need to sleep in your pen.” Kat sat up. “Fine. It's not like I'm going to get any sleep anyway.”

Swinging her legs over the mattress, she rubbed her hands over her scratchy eyes. “But you're on the leash tonight. I don't want to have to chase you into Nolan's yard because you decide you just had to christen his flowerbed.”

TD didn't even bother to deny it.

Slipping on her flip-flops, she grabbed the leash from the hook near the back door and quietly stepped out into the evening air. It was the kind of night that took a person's breath away. The moon was filling the background, giving millions of twinkling diamonds the stage as they lit the sky. There was a stiff wind coming off the mountains, reminding everyone that

even though it was spring, winter wasn't all that distant of a memory.

While most people loved the peaceful side of living in a mountain town, Kat appreciated the complexity of the seasons. In April, one never knew what they'd wake up to: sun or fresh powder, migrating geese or a hungry brown bear.

The wind blistered past, and goose pebbles speckled her arms and legs, her nipples immediately waking up. Pending hypothermia felt a lot like a shot of caffeine.

"Make it quick," she whispered to TD while running her hands down her arms to keep the circulation moving.

"I'm more of a take-my-time kind of guy," a male voice said, and those goosies doubled in size.

Kat squinted through the inky darkness. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust, but when they did her flesh went from frigid to molten. Because there, coming out of the rising steam like a Roman god, was a shirtless, slick Nolan, taking a midnight dip in his hot tub.

The lights in the tub weren't on, leaving her to wonder if he bothered to put on a swimsuit since he was all by his lonesome. Kat had wondered about this on multiple occasions. Fine, she wondered about it every time she heard the hot tub jets whirl up. And her answer was always the same.

Nolan didn't strike her as the kind of guy to bother with a suit. Or at least that's what Dream Nolan would do.

But right now, it wasn't Dream Nolan in front of her with slicked-back hair and dripping abs. It was Real Life Nolan. The same Nolan who had kissed her silly, then rejected her.

He did say he regretted turning her down. Was that the truth or just something he'd come up with to make her feel better? She'd never know unless she asked.

Kat was never shy about what she wanted. She was upfront and blunt, like a bull in a fight. Some men liked it, but most men found it intimidating. Where would Nolan fall?

This was her chance to find out. It was also her chance to discover if he was behind the job offer. And if he was, what did that mean for her?

“Can’t sleep?” she asked, putting TD in his pen, then stalking across the lawn toward the hot tub.

Nolan watched her from behind hooded eyes, taking a long sip of beer. Kat knew what she looked like. In tiny black silk pajamas with spaghetti strings and a plunging neckline, her hair bed-tousled, she was a Victoria Secret’s model: Bad Girl edition.

“Long week,” he said, and she could hear the exhaustion in his voice.

She reached the tub and sat on the edge, so close she could smell the chlorine on his skin, see the droplets of water bead on his lashes, feel the chemistry crackle between them. “Want to talk about it?” she asked, surprising herself.

Since when did she shoot the shit about her day with a man? *Just a few nights ago.*

“I got a visit from Nina,” he said, and Kat felt an unexpected and unwanted ping of jealousy at the news. Why would his ex pay him a visit? “I guess Tommy announced at dinner that he wants me to be his partner for a search and rescue badge test.”

“Nolan, that’s great,” she said, unable to hide her delighted smile. “I knew you’d figure out the right thing to do.”

“Nina shot it down. Told me that I needed to tell Tommy I can’t do it.”

“What a bitch.” Kat reached out and rested a hand on his bicep. It jumped under her touch. “I’m so sorry. What are you going to do?”

“I told her I’m done taking the blame and if she wants to keep Tommy from seeing me, then she needs to tell him the truth. I’m not a liar, Kat. And I definitely won’t lie to him.”

Kat felt a rush of pride. Nolan was such a giving and considerate guy that he always made sure it was easy on other

people—even if it meant handling the fallout on his own. But he'd drawn the line today, an important line, and she knew that must have been hard on him.

“What are you going to do when he shows back up?”

“Tell him I miss him and I love him, then call Nina's husband and tell him that this shit needs to stop,” Nolan said quietly.

Kat's heart melted. What she would have given to have someone fight for her like that when she'd been young. She'd had Grandpa Bill and Zoe who'd fought for her, but they were gone now. What would it feel like to have that kind of fierce protectiveness and love directed solely at her? The idea alone terrified her as much as it intrigued her.

Remember, curiosity killed the cat, Kat.

“Now your turn. Why are you up so late? I'd imagine after pulling a double shift you'd be exhausted.” Nolan took a pull of the beer, then handed it over.

When she took the bottle, their fingers brushed and her nipples wanted to reach out and touch someone. Nolan being that sexy someone.

“Thinking about the week. Did I tell you my sister nearly got suspended for a dress code violation? With the offending article of clothing being my black leather skirt.”

The corner of his mouth hitched. “I know that skirt.”

She smiled back. “Yeah?”

His eyes roamed her body. “Oh yeah.”

Her stomach bottomed out at the amount of sheer male appreciation in his voice. The man hadn't been trying to make her feel better. He wanted her. Possibly as much as she wanted him. But before they went there, she needed to know...

“I got a job offer today,” she began. “Was that you?”

“If I said yes, would you submit your résumé?”

“Depends.”

He rested his warm, wet, manly hand on her bare thigh. It wasn't a sexual gesture but one of caring and support. Still the feel of his skin on hers sent a shiver through her body. "On?"

"Why did you do it? Because I hinted that I needed a new job?" she asked. "I'm not a leech. I don't use my friends."

He twisted his body so that he was facing her fully. "I never thought you did. And I did it because I need the best and you're the best."

"So this has nothing to do with your Superman complex?"

That crooked grin was back. "Is there anything wrong with wanting to be your Superman?"

"I don't know," she answered honestly. "I don't know what to do with that side of you." She placed her hand on his and slid them further up her thigh. He groaned. "This side, however, I know exactly how to handle."

He gripped her hips and twisted her as far as he could without her falling in, then rested his forehead to her stomach. With a groan, he asked, "Did you submit your résumé?"

"I told her I'd let her know on Monday."

He looked up at her through his lashes. "Don't pass because of me. You're really the best person for the job. I need your expertise to keep my family's company safe."

There he was again, thinking about his family first. She knew that if she took the job, he'd never cross that line, and it was clear that he was desperate to cross that line.

"It's not just you," she admitted. "Judy made it clear that it's a contract job, which means I'd have to keep my job at the county to maintain my insurance, and to ensure that when the project is finished, I still am gainfully employed like a proper adult."

"You can work from home, set your own hours, do whatever works for you. And since you won't have to work at the bar any longer, you'd have the time. Plus, you'd get to keep an eye on your sister."

“Oh, Tessa’s just going to love that.” She became serious. “Would those be the rules for anyone you hire for the job or just me?”

“Does it matter?”

“Yes.”

“Then regardless of who we hire, those will be the terms.”

Kat regarded him for a long moment, taking in the honest vulnerability in his gaze, amazed at how easy it was for him to show all of himself. It was brave, she decided. And she wanted to be brave too.

“I’ll call Judy on Monday,” she said. “And send in my résumé.”

“Are you giving me notice for the bartending job?”

“Yes.”

“Accepted. And since you haven’t technically signed on with HR for the IT job—” His gaze lingered on her thigh.

“I still have to interview.”

“You’re the best for the job, I have no doubt.”

“No pulling strings. Repeat that,” Kat insisted.

“Scout’s honor. I will not pull strings.”

“I know it’s the truth because I can see you being a scout.”

“Eagle Scout.”

She laughed. “Of course you were.”

“Well, this means you don’t work for my family.” His hands tightened on her waist, his fingers traveling up her sides, his intentions no longer pure.

“Not until Monday.”

“Good.” One minute Kat was sitting on the edge and the next she was engulfed in deliciously heated water on Nolan’s lap. And her dream was a reality because Real Life Nolan didn’t bother with swim trunks either. The hard proof was pressed against her hip.

“What are you doing?” she squeaked.

“You looked cold. I’m warming you up.”

“I’m all wet,” she complained, looping her arms around his neck.

“How *wet* are we talking?” he asked hoarsely.

“Why don’t you check and see,” she said, and spun her body until her back was pressed to his front, and she was sitting on his legs like a seesaw. Nothing but his massive nightstick and her silky bottoms between them. “Or do you need me to spread them, Agent Carmichael?”



There were a lot of things Agent Carmichael needed at that moment. And none of them were beyond arm’s reach.

One minute he’d been alone in the hot tub, thinking about his shit day and asking the universe for a reprieve and the next there she was. Dressed in nothing but goose bumps, black silk, and golden moonlight, Kat appeared on her back deck like out of a dream—his dream.

He’d sunk back into the shadow to watch her, told himself to let her do her business and go back to bed, then against better judgment he called out to her. And now she was in his lap, her legs dangling over his, her green eyes looking boldly over her shoulder as she met his gaze dead on.

The air between them electrified like a lightning storm was overhead.

“Unless the moment is once again going to pass us by,” she challenged.

“Kitten, you aren’t ever going to get past me again,” he said, and to prove his point, he ever so slowly spread his legs, taking hers with him until her thighs were completely open and she was forced to lean back against his chest to maintain balance. “And the only thing you’re going to need to do is sit back and enjoy each and every moment.”

“I prefer to ’m more of a hands-on, do-my-part kind of woman.”

She rested her palms on her thighs as if trying to sit up, so he jerked her legs even further apart, causing her to lose balance and collapse back against him. Then he threaded his fingers between hers and ran their laced hands up her thighs, slowly exploring every inch of satiny skin.

She had great legs. Miles and miles of toned, tan, tantalizing legs that he wanted to commit to memory. First with his hands, then his mouth, and eventually—when she was panting his name—his tongue.

“When this becomes an all-hands-on-deck kind of situation I’ll let you know,” he murmured into her ear.

He guided their hands over the curve of her hip, up her flat stomach—“But for now, just let them rest”—over the swell of her tits, where her nipples beaded against the thin material—“right”—dipping into the hollow of her throat, where he felt her pulse racing—“here”—then wove her fingers into his hair and tightened their grip. “Now hold on, nice and tight.”

She made a fist so hard that his scalp got a painful tug. “Like this?” she asked.

“Just like that.” He smiled into her neck. “Now I’ll need to do a full and complete search just to be sure you aren’t concealing anything unlawful.”

“Because there’s so many places for me to hide things.”

“So many,” he agreed, and she laughed.

He started at her waist, spanning his hands while slowly running them first around from the dimples at her lower back to her front, eliciting a moan when he traced around the edge of her belly button, then he went on an expedition up and under her camisole. Her skin was slick with water and silkier than the material, which clung to her every curve and slope, revealing a set of perfect tits that had his dick going impossibly harder.

Nolan had always considered himself a legs man, but when he cupped Kat's tits he knew that he'd always been a breast guy, he just hadn't met the right breasts—until now. His hands were so large they covered the entirety of each globe even as he pressed his thumb over the taut nipples.

“Nolan,” she groaned, her back arching slightly as he massaged and worshipped her.

“To be safe,” he said against her shoulder, raining kisses along the slope, “I’m going to need to remove this. See what’s underneath.”

She rested her head back on his chest and looked up at him. “I think you’ll like what’s underneath.”

Like? He had a feeling that he was going to do a whole lot more than like everything he uncovered tonight—and that made him nervous. Kat was three years into a four-year sentence, and he was pretty sure that she'd pop smoke the second her sister left for college. Yes, she had her friends here, the house, but she'd left a whole other life behind when she'd returned home to care for Tessa. Without that tie binding her here, where would that leave them?

Christ. What was he thinking, *them*? There wasn't any *them*. There was just Nolan, Kat, and Chemistry right now. But he knew that after tonight there would be more. Did he want that? Did she?

He knew the answer to the first but hadn't a clue to the second. Even worse was that he didn't think Kat knew how to answer that question either. He couldn't blame her. She'd been so busy being everything to everyone, that there wasn't anything left for herself.

That's what this is about, remember?

This was about reminding Kat that she was beautiful, desirable, deserving, and so much more.

“Kitten, *like* doesn't even begin to cover how I feel about you in this number.” He ran his hands up her arms and took the top with him, the wet material making a plopping sound when it hit the deck. “Or out of it.”

Nolan looked down at her body and, *holy shit*, what a picture she made. Sitting on his lap, her arms still looped around his neck, back arched provocatively, her tits bobbed up and down at the waterline as if they were a pair of X-rated buoys gently swaying with the tide.

“I'm guessing you like the ‘out of it’ part better,” she teased.

“Very much.”

Where most women would have self-consciously sunk beneath the water, Kat sat proudly letting him look his fill, completely unabashed by her state of dress—or undress. God, he loved a confident woman.

“Well, that's only because you haven't seen me in my green nightie,” she said.

Oh, he'd seen her in the green nightie. It was silky, see-through, and matched her eyes. It was also his wardrobe of choice for Fantasy Kat when she visited him in his dreams. Now she was visiting him in his hot tub.

Fantasy Kat had nothing on IRL Kat.

“Is that your way of saying ‘Next time?’” he asked.

“Depends on how this first impression goes,” she said with a challenging smile.

He couldn't help himself, exploring each rib, down and back up until he was holding her breasts, pressing them together to make a defined valley between. “Honey, I'm going to leave such an impression you won't be able to walk tomorrow.”

She cocked a brow. “That’s some mighty big words.”

“I’m a mighty big guy, and I like a challenge.”

He wasn’t sure what he said, but she recoiled on the last word like it hurt. Some of the spark in her eyes dulled and her smile bottomed out around the edges. All of that confidence disappeared, leaving heartbreaking uncertainty. “I’m about as challenging a person as you’ll ever meet.”

She said it like it wasn’t a compliment. Like being a challenge was a death sentence when it came to receiving love and care. He didn’t know a lot about her dating past, but from what he knew of her childhood, she’d had it rough. And that tore at him.

Nolan tightened his arms around her so that there was no way for her to escape the moment when he said, “In all the right ways.”

The still night air hung thick, nothing between them but moonlight and steam, then she met his gaze and her eyes were dilated with surprise. Then disbelief. And that last part had him cursing every man who’d come before him because beneath the storm of need was a hint of something raw that punched him in the gut.

“You don’t have to sweet-talk me. I’m the sure thing, Nolan.”

“This isn’t sweet talk, this is me stating facts. You are amazing and adorable and aggravating and addictive as hell.” She looked so goddamned lost and uncertain that he gently kissed her before continuing. “You’re also smart and sharp and sexy as hell. If some asshole can’t see just what you have to offer, then they don’t deserve you. *They* don’t deserve *you*. Not the other way around.”

He watched her struggle to process his words and take them as fact. He also watched her eyes moisten and her throat bob from swallowing back the emotions fighting to escape. It made him wonder just how many assholes there had been in her life. Then it made him promise he wouldn’t be another in that long line.

“Your complexity is beautiful, Kat. Don’t let anyone else tell you differently.”

“Don’t go getting all Good Guy on me.”

“I wouldn’t think of it,” he said, and to prove he had a bad-boy side, Nolan gave her nipple a pinch before soothing it with his thumb.

“Nolan,” she said on a moan.

“Yeah, Kitten?”

“I’m done talking. Can we get to the hands-on portion of the evening?”

“Like this?” he asked, tilting his head so that he could take her mouth with his.

Ten years on the job had earned Nolan a PhD in nonverbal communication, so he took her tongue in his mouth as an affirmative that she liked what he was giving, and the way her ass rubbed against his hardness as a green light that this was happening.

With her hands still gripping his hair, Kat yanked his head down further to fuse their lips together and the kiss went from crazy to carnal. Teeth and tongue nipped and teased, one moment in sync, the next clashing in a fight for dominance.

Nolan’s hands were filled with her tits, his mouth filled with her breath, his head full of lust. The kisses grew hotter and hotter, one blending into the next, until they were both gasping for the same air, but neither backed down.

He massaged her breasts, finding a balance between taunting and teasing that had her hips rolling back against him. Her body arching in a way that told him she wanted him to move the party a little south.

When he didn’t move fast enough, she placed one of her hands on his, and tried to pull it down her stomach. Nolan chuckled into her mouth. With a frustrated groan she tried again. And again he dodged her intentions.

Normally Nolan would let the woman set the pace, but there was something intoxicating about the issued challenge

that had him in knots. Kat somehow managed to turn foreplay into a fight—and he loved it.

To show her just how much, he sank his teeth into her lower lip and gave it a bite. Just a little one.

Shocked, she pulled back on a gasp, her fingertips touching her lip, which was a tad bit swollen from his nip. Her eyes were wide and a little dazed, her nostrils flared, and then that smart mouth turned into a wicked grin. “I think it’s cute that you think you’re in charge.”

That smile still in place, she detangled herself from Nolan’s arms and turned to face him, then danced those talented fingertips down her body, making a big show of sliding them down her neck, over her throat, between her breasts, and beneath the water. Eyes never leaving his, she went lower and lower and, *holy Christ*, Nolan knew the moment she hit the waistband of her pajama bottoms, because his dick twitched.

Her other hand disappeared beneath the water and her legs briefly came together. When they came back up, she had those bottoms in her hand. Dangling her arm over the side of the tub, she dropped them on the deck.

Nolan watched through hooded lids as she slowly stood, her body rising out of the water like she was some kind of nymph. A siren with her long dark hair falling in waves, droplets sluicing over her tits and taut stomach, steam flirting around her thighs.

She was stunning. And completely naked. Standing in front of him, with her hip popped suggestively and her teeth worrying that lower lip in a suggestive way that had his blood racing. Kat Rhodes was all prowess and confidence—two things that he found incredibly attractive.

Chin tilted slightly, Kat let her head fall back as her hands roamed her body seductively, her mouth parting on a breath when she cupped her breasts.

Someone moaned—and he was pretty sure it was him—as she squeezed and rubbed before making her way down to the

V between her thighs. The lower she went, the harder he became and just when he thought she was done with the teasing, she slid a finger inside. And to prove she was in control, she slid in a second and they both moaned.

Unable to look away, he watched her as she started to pleasure herself. And she watched him, as if she liked rubbing one out with an audience. Scratch that. As if she liked rubbing one out with him as her audience.

“You know what I think?” he asked.

“What?” she said, with a challenging lift of the brow.

“I think it’s cute that you’re pretending you’d rather ride your own hand than mine.”

She gave a simple shrug. “A hand is a hand.”

“Clearly you’ve never had mine, because one touch and you’ll never be satisfied by anything else ever again.” He stood and without another word grabbed his throbbing cock, giving it a long stroke, loving how her eyes fixated on his movements. He gave another pump. “Now, do you want to play games or come over here and take me for a test drive?”

She licked her lips. “Why don’t *you* come over *here* and find out?”

He laughed. This woman had to control every aspect of every moment. It was as if she were afraid she’d look weak if she wasn’t the one issuing the orders. Well, he’d give her this one, but as soon as she was in his arms, he was going to be the one issuing orders. “I’ll come to you, but then you’re going to come all over my hand.”

And she did the most unexpected thing, she made the first move. She didn’t just close the distance, she obliterated it, molding her hands to his shoulders, lining up all of the good parts, eating up every inch of space between them until their bodies were a tangle of limbs.

The heat radiating off the water was almost as intense as the big freaking hot ball of fire that raged between them. Part pent-up tension and part bone-deep lust made for a whole hell of a lot of nuclear hormones.

And, man of his word, Nolan got down to business, trailing open-mouthed kisses down her throat to the creamy cleavage he'd been dreaming about. She smelled good. Insanely good. Like turned-on woman and cool spring nights.

She felt even better. Soft and curvy and—*holy shit*—her hands were doing some business of their own, gripping him at the base and moving up his shaft. The sensation was so insane his knees nearly buckled right there.

Knowing he wouldn't be able to make it through any more strokes without blowing his top, Nolan broke the kiss and spun her around until they were facing the forest, her back pressed to his chest.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“This,” he said into her ear as he slid one finger into her and, *damn*, she felt amazing. Hot and slick and so ready for him, it was intoxicating. “Now hold on, Kitten.”

She rested her head back against his shoulder and glanced up at him through her lashes, before linking her arms around his neck. He wasn't sure if it was the tentative look in her eyes or the way she gave herself over to him, but he realized that he could easily fall for her.

He pressed in again, this time adding another finger and she pushed against his hand to quickly create a friction and rhythm that made his chest seize up. He pumped over and over, working her in a way that had her gasping for release.

“Nolan.”

He felt the soft lull of her breath against his neck as she spoke, the ends of her wet hair stuck to his chest, and everything in the air shifted to something much more intimate. Vulnerable. He had shared a part of himself, and now she was offering him a chance to experience an important part of her.

“I got you, Kitten,” he vowed. He was shocked at how true that statement was.

“This feels so good.”

“I'm shooting for something closer to fan-fucking-tastic.”

He curled his finger at just the right angle, and she bucked so hard they both nearly lost their balance. He did it again, and this time gave a little twist, at the same time pinching her nipple with his other hand and, *bingo*, that was the right combination because she came apart in his arms.

There was no warning; her orgasm just exploded, and what an orgasm it was. Head thrown back so all that glorious hair spilled over her shoulders. Body arched, pushing her glorious breast into his palm. Her mouth parted on a breath that seemed to be stuck in her lungs.

The way she tightened around his finger was enough to drive a man insane. With every wave of her release, she gasped and bucked, pushing against his hand to squeeze every last pleasure. He rode it out with her to the last vibration, until she was limp in his arms and then he wrapped her legs around his waist, lifted her and stepped out of the hot tub.

“Where are we going?”

“To work on that fan-fucking-tastic.”

She tightened those thighs, locking her ankles at the base of his ass. “I thought you’d never ask.”

Nolan couldn't get into the house fast enough. His body was so hot for her it didn't even register the cool night's air on his wet skin. He didn't care that he was leaving a trail of water from the sliding door, into the kitchen, and around to the family room.

Why? Because she had her tongue in his mouth the whole time, never breaking contact. Not even to breathe. She slid her hand between them and down his stomach until she—*holy mother of god!*

Those talented fingers wrapped around his erection, which was rock hard between their bodies, and his knees nearly buckled. Her second pass made all of the blood rush south and he stumbled until they were like a wrecking ball knocking into Sheetrock and bumping off furniture.

Man down, a table lamp fell victim, crashing to the floor and plunging the house into darkness. Good thing Nolan was a master at navigation as he worked their way down the hallway and into the bathroom.

“Where are we going?” she asked, her breathing heavy.

“Bathroom. Condoms first, bedroom second.”

“You know you can let me down.”

“Kitten, now that I have you in my arms, I don’t think I’ll be able to let go. Not until I’m buried deep inside you.”

“Then why wait?” She rolled into him and then she did the most unexpected thing. She flicked on the lights.

He lifted a brow.

“I like to see what I’m getting.” She looked down and licked her lips.

Nolan sat her on the bathroom counter and backed away to let her look her fill. He knew he was well above average when it came to size, had been told several times by several different women. And he knew by the way her nostrils flared that she liked what she saw.

To give her a little more to go on, he grabbed himself and gave two, long, purposeful strokes that had her quietly moaning. “So?”

“I prefer self-discovery.” She slid off the counter and stepped so close, his erection pulsed as if begging to get closer. Then she kissed his chest, his abs, using her tongue as she followed the path to his cock—her tits scraping against his skin as she went.

Then, *holy god*, then she dropped to her knees and looked up at him through her lashes. Not coy—Kat would never do coy—but with a confident gaze that let him know she was about to rock his world.

“The last time I was on my knees in front of you, we had a belt and bar full of people between us,” she said.

“We don’t have that problem now.”

“No.” Her gaze went all the way south and back up. “We don’t.”

Without looking away, she took him into her mouth. She didn’t ease him in or tease her way down. Nope, in total Kat fashion, she took him in one swallow, pulled back, and took him again.

His head fell back on a groan, his hips lunged forward, and he prayed to anyone who’d listen that he didn’t embarrass

himself.

She slowly pulled back and released him with a pop. He wanted to be inside her when he came but he wanted more time in her mouth. Just one more glide of her tongue.

“Don’t worry, big guy. I’m just fixing my hair.”

It was such an unlike-Kat thing to say that he chuckled. But sure enough when he was able to lift his head off the wall he looked down and she’d pulled a hair tie off her wrist and was pulling her hair back into a ponytail. “I needed to give you something to hold on to.”

Before he could reply, she took his hand and fisted it around her ponytail so he could give a yank that made her head fall back. “Is that all you got?”

“Hell no.” Nolan had never really been into yanking and spanking, but he was a ladies’ choice sort of guy and, lucky SOB as he was, she wanted a little yanking. So he did and her head went all the way back so that she looked like a goddess on her knees in front of him, giving him power over her.

At least for the next few minutes. Nolan knew without a doubt that the second things got real, Kat was going to take charge.

“That’s better,” she said. “Now where do you want me?”

“Right here.” Nolan moved so quickly that she gasped and then she was gasping for a whole other reason. He gentled his grip, but she reached up and tightened it. Before he could explain that he didn’t want to hurt her, she plunged in, and his eyes rolled to the back of his head in ecstasy.

“God, Kitten,” he groaned, his voice rough. “Just like that.”

His praise seemed to turn her on, so he said it again. Her name, how he liked it, where he liked it. Nolan had never thought much about talking during sex, but now he strung together words that went past dirty talk, into verbal foreplay. Until he couldn’t talk past the pleasure, which gripped him by the throat.

He moved in and out, picking up in pace and going as deep as he could. She met him pump for pump. Flattening her tongue against his shaft, sucking in the hollows of her cheeks, cupping his sac and massaging it. Nolan couldn't help it. His control snapped as his hips thrust forward and he hit the back of her throat. He was riding her mouth hard and fast.

He felt his balls tighten and what was left of the blood in his head did an emergency evacuation and rushed down to his other head. His thighs tightened and his back arched and, *shit*, he was about to blow in that talented mouth of hers. But he'd be damned if he was the reason this night was cut short. Because he knew that the moment this was over, she was going to burrow back into herself.

Tugging her hair, he slid out and pulled her to her feet. "Not like this."

She smiled with satisfaction that she'd got him so wound up that he'd nearly lost his mind. "Then how, Agent Carmichael?"

"Like this." He gripped her around the waist and plopped her on the counter. Reaching behind her, he grabbed a condom out of the medicine cabinet and slid home in record time.

They both sighed as waves of ecstasy throbbed through them. He yanked her hair to the side exposing that elegant column of her neck and buried his face in the curve. "You smell amazing."

"Bet I kiss even better." She rolled her hips. "Want to see?"

The question must have been rhetorical because before he could answer a *hell yes* she took his mouth with a ferocity that could only be described as carnal. Her hands slid through his hair, tightening to the point of pain, and she held him there. Passive Kat was replaced with a lioness who knew what she wanted and took it.

A very naked ass cheek in each hand, he yanked her flush against him until not even air could pass between them. He moved back a hair and then thrust in again. She seemed to like

that since she captured his lower lip between hers and gave a little love bite.

“You like that?” he asked.

Her answer was to lock her ankles behind his back and pull him all the way forward. She leaned back, resting on her palms, and loosened her legs only to tighten again until he was sure he'd suffocate.

“How about this?” Nolan pulled one of her tits into his mouth and gave her nipple one of those love bites she was so fond of. She arched even further, egging him on, so he did the same to the other side, going back and forth between until her thrusts verged on desperation.

He could feel her tighten around him, sense that she was on the edge, but something was holding her back. No matter how much traction was created it was as if she was fighting the fall.

But what hit Nolan like a sledgehammer to the gut was the rightness, as if he'd been waiting for this moment his whole life.

He looked into her eyes and beneath that fiery verdant green was a pensive shimmer in the shadows that he'd never seen before. It was like she feared what was happening. Terrified of the unfamiliar emotions passing between them.

Welcome to the club, baby.

He knew he could either have a little freak-out of his own or be there for her. And damn if he was going to let her go through this alone.

He cupped her cheek. “I've got you.”

Her face clouded with uncertainty. “I don't believe you.”

Another sledgehammer to the gut that nearly blew him back. “Then I guess I'll just have to prove it to you.”

“Many men have tried and failed,” she said as if she were the problem in the equation.

“I’m not any man,” he assured her. “And when I make a promise, I keep it.”

“And just what are you promising?” she asked quietly.

“That I won’t hurt you.”

There was still an obstinate uncertainty in her eyes, a stubborn streak that said he was going to have to do a hell of a lot to prove himself. But Nolan had never backed away from a challenge and he wasn’t about to start now.

“We’ll start slow,” he said.

As if wanting a fight, she crushed her lips to his letting him know that the talking portion of the evening was over. *Got it.* Making it clear that she was in charge, she began to move at a frantic pace. It took Nolan a minute to catch up, but when he did, *holy hard-on*, when he did the raw passion between them ignited.

Her ass was slapping against the tile and her legs were vicing him so tightly he thought he might just pass out. His legs, on the other hand, were hitting the edge of the countertop so hard he was going to have bruises tomorrow.

While the idea of making her his, staking his claim in a possessive way, tempted him, he’d never forgive himself if he hurt her. So he slid his hand beneath that glorious ass and, in one fluid motion, picked her up and spun her until her back was to the wall.

“More,” she gasped.

“More it is.”

Nolan moved as if his life were depending on it. Moved until she stopped breathing and all that was coming out of her mouth were hard exhales of air. Using one arm to secure her to him and the wall as leverage, he slid his other hand around and between them until he found her pleasure button.

It was like he’d fired up a nuclear powerplant. One minute she was moaning and then she was tightening around him, harder, coiling and vibrating, then she snapped. She wrapped her arms around his neck and buried her face in his shoulder.

That's when he felt her teeth sink into his flesh, not enough to break the skin but it was going to leave a mark.

Since all was fair in love and war, he put his mouth on her shoulder and sucked hard until he left a mark of his own. In that moment she exploded, loud and hard. Wave after wave of her orgasm rippled around him until he lost control in the pleasure and broke.

"Kat," he ground out.

He wasn't sure what happened next, but when he came back to himself, he was sitting on the floor with Kat wrapped around him, arms and legs like a post-coital pretzel. Both breathing hard, slick with sweat, they just sat there trying to regain consciousness.

She was limp in his embrace, so soft and languid he couldn't help but to cradle her to him. And, wish of all wishes, she let him.

He took in the moment, breathed her in while his fingers skated up and down her spine. Then it happened. She began to pull back. She went stiff, not ramrod but enough that he felt the shift in energy.

"You okay?" he asked gently.

"Yeah, why?" She didn't look up, just kept her face buried against his neck. Gone was the open girl from a moment ago and in her place was the suspicious, roll-of-the-shoulders Kat he usually got.

Not wanting to let her hide, he braced the base of her neck and lifted until their gazes met and, *yup*, those walls were being erected. "You got quiet on me."

"Maybe it's because I just had a sex marathon in high altitude on your bathroom floor," she said with a teasing smile.

Nolan looked around and silently cursed. Here he was trying to prove he was different from the other guys in her past and he'd taken her against the wall like she was some barfly he'd picked up at happy hour.

He brushed her hair back. “I should have taken you to my bed.”

“You don’t need to do that.”

“Do what?”

She lifted a slim shoulder and let it drop. “Make something more out of this than it is.”

“Asking if you’re okay is too much?” He had further to go than he thought in gaining her trust. And it wasn’t going to happen by screwing her every chance he got.



Yes, she thought. Because right then everything felt like too much. The way he was holding her, the way he looked, even the way he gentled his words when he talked to her. As if she were something to be careful with. No one had ever been careful with her. Not even her grandpa who loved her to pieces. It made her heart race in ways that were dangerous.

“You want to see if I’m okay.” She took his hand and ran it down her body to her legs. He moved it at the last minute to cup her thigh.

“I’m being serious.”

And she wasn’t? She was the one keeping the level head, keeping that wall up so that no one got hurt and there weren’t any mixed feelings.

“Are you calling me shallow?” she asked.

“I’m calling you confusing.”

“What’s confusing?” She permitted herself a withering stare because it was better than exposing just how much that comment affected her. “We both had an itch to scratch.”

Curses fell from his mouth. “Is that all you think this is?”

“I think it’s called animal magnetism.” Feeling too exposed, she pulled a towel off the rack and stood, wrapping herself up. “I gotta go.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

“How did you mean it?” Because to her, being called confusing while sitting naked on the floor after a little wall-banging wasn’t a compliment.

“It’s just that you take things head on, but whatever just happened between us you’re dodging. Pretending that it was just chemistry.”

But it *was* just chemistry. Right? He wanted her, she wanted him, they had a chance encounter when they both needed to blow off some steam. Nothing more.

“I can see where your brain is going.” He stood and took her hand in his masculine one. “Don’t let it.”

“I can’t help how my brain works,” she argued. “This is who I am. Take it or leave it.”

The moment those words left her mouth she wanted to take them back. Force them down into the hollow pit in her stomach where reality lived. Because she’d just implied that she was open to more. That it was his call.

Shit, she’d just put the ball in his court, and she felt like, when it came to him, she didn’t have a racket.

“Forget I said that.”

“I can’t,” he teased. He wrapped her in his arms. “Stay. Don’t leave mad.”

Mad was a hell of a lot safer than what she was feeling right then. “This carriage is about to turn into a pumpkin.”

“I like pumpkin.”

“Tessa might wake up and then what kind of example would I be setting?”

“Hey, you’re doing more than most people would.”

She swallowed hard and cursed the stinging behind her eyes. “According to her principal, I need to do better.”

And she did. She needed to stop acting without thinking and remember what was important. Making a safe and stable home for Tessa.

“Tonight was all I had to give, Nolan. I don’t have any more.”

More wasn’t something she was remotely interested in courting. She knew what men saw. From the outside she came off as a mysterious ballbuster, a challenge. But behind closed doors, her life was nothing but a challenge. And in the end that was always the kiss of death with men. If he thought she was complicated now, just wait until he realized just how big of a mess her life was. The kind of mess that no man in his right mind would want to put up with on a daily basis. And that’s what this would eventually become—Nolan putting up with her schedule, her sister, the money problems, juggling two jobs, the drama...all the things.

Her best friend was going to be his sister-in-law and now she had a job on the line. Not that Nolan would ever fire her over something personal, but how awkward would it be for him if things progressed and then crashed. Because they would crash. Like two bullet trains whose brakes had been cut.

“Things between us are already too intertwined. Between Jax and Milly and this new job, I don’t want to make a mistake and ruin things for everyone.”

“Take everyone else out of the equation and tell me what you want.”

A partner. She didn’t have the time nor was she in a position to entertain one now, but a girl could still dream. And Kat’s dream was that, one day, after things were more settled, she’d find a man who could put up with her bullshit and

ballbusting. A man who could handle everything that came with dating Kat Rhodes.

Nolan wasn't the man and today wasn't the day. Hell, it wasn't even the year.

"I want to give Tessa a good life, I want to not be drowning in debt, and I want to have a job that I love. And I want to finish my degree."

He tapped a finger over her heart. "But in here. What do you want in here?"

"I don't know."

"I think you do, you're just too scared to say it," he said in such a gentle voice that it felt like a caress, almost making up for the fact that he'd called her a coward. *Almost.*

"You want honest? I don't want to promise you things that I can't deliver on."

With that she turned to walk away. He held on to her hand for a brief moment, then released his grip, letting her go. The moment she got her freedom she wished he'd held on.

This was a case of too much, too soon, Nolan thought as he walked behind the bar at Bigfoot's Brews on Wednesday afternoon. He hadn't heard anything from Tessa, but he'd still pressed the judge for a warrant to search the Locke residence. He'd only been granted access to R. J.'s room. If he'd just waited, found more evidence, then they might have been issued a warrant to search the entire residence.

"I think this calls for a shot of whiskey," Nolan said to Eli, who was already there, sitting on a barstool.

Eli had texted him about an hour ago and wanted to meet. Nolan was almost home, and in desperate need of a hot shower and a cold brew, when the phone pinged.

Eli: We need to talk. Meet me at Bigfoots in an hour.

That was it, but Nolan didn't question. He already knew what his former partner wanted to talk about. Nolan screwing the pooch and possibly blowing up the case. While Eli was no longer his partner, Nolan knew he was still invested in what had been his last case. So he'd answered that he'd be there.

"Maybe two shots," Eli said, with that same irritated expression Nolan had come to learn meant he was worried.

There was a small frown marring his brows, and his lips were tilted down at the corners. The grimness in his posture was a perfect match to what Nolan was feeling.

Nolan looked around the quiet bar. There were a handful of regulars scattered around and a few ski bums who were trying to catch the last runs of the season. Tim and Lena were working the bar without Kat, which put him in an even worse mood.

When they'd come up empty-handed, all he thought about was how great it would be to get home and have someone there waiting to hear about his day—to distract him from his massive screwup.

That someone hadn't had a face for over a year, but lately it had been that of the prickly and opinionated Kat.

Nolan grabbed two tumbler glasses from beneath the bar and their top shelf whiskey. He looked at the glasses and laughed. It was going to take more than a couple fingers to get him out of this funk, so he poured three shots' worth, then set the bottle on the bar top between him and Eli.

"I should have listened to you," Nolan said. He felt like he had that night Eli had been shot. Eli had wanted to wait, but Nolan was so hell-bent on catching R. J. he pushed for them to enter the premises before anyone showed. From the moment they entered the remote cabin turned lab, his spidey sense had gone on high alert.

The cabin was empty. The lab equipment was still there, but it was like the crew knew they were coming and had cleared out moments before Nolan kicked in the door. They hadn't even had time to turn off the burners.

Nolan had run out the back and Eli had taken the side exit. He caught sight of a shadow zigzagging toward the woods and went in pursuit. He'd barely made it ten feet when he heard two shots fire in rapid succession.

It was as if time stood still. So many thoughts penetrated his head all at once, his instincts at odds, forming a big, complicated mess in his gut. Follow the perp or go and check

on his partner? Determined to get to his partner's side and have his six, he stopped chase and hightailed it in the direction the shot had originated.

When he arrived, Eli was sitting up against a tree trunk holding his shoulder and his chest, with no one else in sight. Nolan saw the blood coming out of his partner's body and immediately feared that it was a chest shot. Then he remembered they'd put on their vests before heading in, so a chest shot would have left nothing but a nasty bruise and maybe a cracked rib.

The blood was from a hit to the arm, but Nolan would never forget how helpless and angry he'd felt. Helpless because his partner had been shot, and angry that his partner had been shot on his watch. Nolan had made a risky decision going in and it hadn't paid off.

"How were you supposed to know that the kid had enough brains to either have lookouts or someone on the inside? Or that he'd have enough time to gather most of the supply and dump or hide it," Eli said.

"I know enough about R. J. to bet that he wouldn't dump the supply. He's too arrogant to think he would get caught. It was probably hidden somewhere in his daddy's place." Nolan lifted the glass to his lips and downed it in three swallows. Then he refilled the glass.

"That's twenty-five-year-old whiskey. Not some cheap shit to get trashed on because you had a bad day," Eli said.

"Today wasn't bad. It was shit."

"You'll get him next time."

"What? And just hope in the meantime that he doesn't sell bad drugs to some kid or up his game from vandalism to assault?"

"Ah." Eli laughed. "This is more about the girl than the case."

Nolan began to deny it, but that would be a lie and they both knew it. That was another example of how he'd asked for too much, too soon.

Kat needed time to face what was happening between them. Instead of giving her what she'd asked for, he'd pushed hard enough to scare her off.

It had been five days since their night together. She'd gotten the job at the lodge but besides watching her skitter away every time he entered the office, he hadn't seen more than a glimpse of her. Jax joked that he'd been ghosted. To Nolan it felt like he'd been abandoned.

What he'd felt couldn't have been one-sided. Could it?

"Want to talk about it?" Eli asked.

Nolan wasn't one to kiss and tell, but he needed advice and who better to have his back than his partner who'd been blissfully married for fifteen years.

"I think I blew it. She told me upfront she wasn't looking for anything serious. Then I get my chance to crack the door open a little and ended up kicking it in like a no-knock warrant. I took it from casual to serious in one sentence. Now she's avoiding me like the plague."

"What did you expect?" Eli asked. "You hooked up with a woman who is notorious for hooking up. Hell, she wrote the woman's guide to leaving them wanting more. Half the regulars at the bar have a thing for her."

A zing of jealousy shot through him, which was irritating. Nolan didn't do jealous or have caveman possessive tendencies. Either a woman liked him or she didn't. He never tried to change their opinion of him. But with Kat, her opinion meant more than it should.

"That's not who she is," Nolan argued, and in his gut he knew it. She wasn't some siren luring men to their death, she was a woman who'd been hurt. Badly. He didn't know much about her dating history before she moved back to Sierra Vista, but he'd seen the heartache in her eyes when she'd returned home. It was the kind of heartache that could take a person out at the knees and erect walls nearly impossible to scale.

Nolan had those same walls. A parting gift from Nina, but he'd like to think that he'd worked through that. He no longer

mourned her, but did mourn the dream of finding his person. Over time he'd started to take down those walls, brick by brick, until he could finally see over them. And what he saw was a sexy and stubborn smart-ass, who'd been burned by love.

Nolan wasn't thinking about love. They barely knew each other. What he did know about her he liked—it made him want to explore more. And not just the physical more. He wanted to get to know everything about her.

“Then who is she, Dr. Phil? I mean besides a bad choice for someone in law enforcement?” Eli asked.

Nolan's quills stood at attention. “What do you mean, bad choice?” Even the words felt like acid on his tongue.

Eli held up a hand in *I come in peace*. “Whoa, I didn't mean it that way. I just meant that she's hot-headed, makes rash decisions, and has a checkered past. You do know that she was arrested for hacking into the SAT servers.”

It reminded him of what Kat had said. That she pops off because people are always trying to knock her down. He was starting to see how impossible it would be for her to change what people thought of her when her past was constantly thrown in her face.

“It was just a test and she was a kid. We've all done stupid shit when we were younger.”

“Name one thing you did when you were a kid that reflects badly on you now?”

Nolan opened his mouth and closed it. He wasn't a perfect kid by any stretch, but as the mediator of the family he did his best to stay out of trouble.

“Exactly. And you're talking about a woman who should have been charged with assaulting a customer.” Eli took another sip of his drink.

Nolan rolled his eyes. “We both know that R. J. baited her.”

“But she took the bait, man. Do you really want to have to defend your girlfriend every time she spouts off? How would that look on you? To the department?”

“Isn’t that what we get paid to do, defend people? What’s so wrong with wanting to have her back? Did part of me want to find the knife in R. J.’s shit so I could link him to her car? Hell yeah, I did.”

Nolan wanted to nail the prick and then put him away for vandalizing her car, not to mention other things. But he really wanted to prove to Kat that she wasn’t alone. That it was okay to rely on someone else. That he meant what he said and he was going to do everything he could to earn her trust.

“What more could you do? You paid for the damages and at the speed that she got her car back, I’m betting you paid extra.”

Double. Nolan had paid double to get her car back that quickly. But the morning after their hot tub tango, he’d found his truck in his driveway with the keys on the floorboard and a simple note:

THANKS FOR EVERYTHING.

I’M DONE BURNING OFF STEAM FOR A WHILE.

K

He wanted to take the damn keys over and demand that she keep using his car, but then she could add controlling to the never-ending list of reasons why she didn’t think they were a good fit.

He didn’t want her to think she owed him one for the car, so he just dropped it off in her driveway and put the keys in her mail slot before he came to the bar. He hadn’t heard from her, but she was also working from home today.

“No comment.”

Eli chuckled and Nolan shot him a look that would have had most men wetting themselves. Not Eli, he just kept chuckling.

“So, I know you didn’t want to meet to talk about my shit day. What’s up?”

Eli’s face broke out into a hesitant smile. He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a folded letter, then handed it over.

Nolan opened it and his brows folded in on themselves. “St. Ignatius? I didn’t know you were Catholic.”

“I’m not.” Eli snatched it back and shoved it into his pocket. “But it’s a private prep school. All girls, academic forward, has one of the best soccer programs in the state.”

“Why do I think that it was the ‘all girls’ that caught your attention?”

“Have you seen what kids wear these days? And Sierra Vista High isn’t what it used to be. With this whole drug thing and kids carrying guns.” He shook his head. “Not for my kid.”

Nolan clapped him on his good shoulder. “Congrats, man. I’m happy for you guys.”

“Well, don’t congratulate me yet, I still have to figure out how to pay for it. Which is why I wanted to meet.” Eli took a big breath. “I hate to play the friend card, but I’m willing to do anything to get Hannah into this school.”

He hated to see his friend in a jam over something like money. Nolan wasn’t rich by any sense of the word, but his family’s lodge had really turned the corner these past few months and he and his siblings were looking at a pretty nice setup when all was said and done. Plus, Nolan pulled in a paycheck from the government as well as the lodge.

“I can take some money out of my 401K and spot you,” Nolan offered.

Eli looked offended. “I don’t want your money, man. I was talking about more hours at the lodge. Do you have anything for me?”

No, he didn’t. In fact, he was giving Eli hours that the bar didn’t even have which meant he was already exceeding the security budget. Lucas was going to have a fit.

Nolan must have lost his poker face or maybe it was that Eli knew him so well, but he waved a hand. “Forget I asked. You’re already doing so much for me and mine.”

“No, I’m sure we can work something out.”

“I heard that you were having some security issues so you’re beefing up the security around here.”

A prickle started at the base of his spine. “Where did you hear that?”

“I overheard Jax talking to Milly about it. She was worried after the night Kat’s car was vandalized and Jax was reassuring her that you had it handled. Let me help. I know I’ve never run logistics for private security, but I’ve been running task forces since you were in diapers. The same skills apply.”

Nolan chuckled. Eli wasn’t that much older, but he’d give the guy leeway to make his point.

The problem was that Nolan was just as good, if not better, at those same skills. He already had a solid plan for the project, and he was going to oversee it himself. Then again, he’d been scrambling to find the time to actually get the security vendors out there to install all of the devices and cameras the lodge needed.

“I can move you from working security at the bar to helping me fix this mess.”

Eli stuck out his hand. “This is great, man. I can’t thank you enough.”

Before Nolan shook, he wanted to make it clear what he was offering. “You’re going to be doing a lot of grunt work. Calling different vendors and companies, giving me options on equipment, putting together a proposal with choices that I can take to the board.”

“It will be the best damn proposal you’ve ever seen.” They shook. “Now I just have to have Hannah teach me how to use PowerPoint.”

Jesus, what had he gotten himself into?

It was late in the evening by the time Nolan was ready to pack up. Thanks to Wine Wednesday the bar was loud enough to penetrate all the way back to his office. Everyone was looking to burn off some of their mid-week energy. Nolan not so much.

He was so tired he could barely keep his eyes open but, thanks to another missing case of top shelf liquor, he still had a couple of hours of paperwork to try and get some sense of where the lodge would need to beef up security. Their budget was tight, so he needed to be as efficient as possible.

First, they were going to double their cameras, placing them higher so someone couldn't get to them and lob eggs at the lenses. Then there were the scanners he was going to install on all office and supply room doors, so that an employee would have to swipe a unique card to gain access. Hopefully it would deter whoever was behind this, at the very least the resulting log of usage would make it easier to catch the SOB who was stealing from his family.

Needing a cup of coffee to get through the next few hours, Nolan headed to the break room. He reached the back hallway when he caught a glimpse of movement in the parking lot. He

ducked so he was out of sight and stealthily watched as a shadow moved closer to the back door of the bar.

If this was R. J., he was going to catch him red-handed stirring up shit. Thank God Kat wasn't working tonight. She and her car were safe and sound back at home.

He could feel the itch make its way up his spine, a telltale sign that his gut was communicating with his brain. The shadow was only a few feet away when something stood out.

His vandal was maybe five foot one. A hundred and ten pounds. Slim build. Wearing dark pants and a too-big hoodie. Skateboard under one arm and a smallish rectangular box in the other. Probably an egg carton.

His shadow belonged to a kid. No more than ten or eleven.

Then the new motion detector went off and in the split second before the whole parking lot was illuminated, Nolan knew who it was.

The kid froze like a deer in the headlights. Tommy.

He was bigger, leaner like he was going through a growth spurt, but his hair was still in that floppy boy phase and his eyes were still that hopeful blue.

Anger and longing bubbled up, fighting for domination. He wasn't sure who he was angry at—himself for letting things get this far or Nina for doing what she did ... stealing his kid from him. Tommy might not be his kid biologically, but in every way that mattered, that kiddo was his. His for three long years and damn, Nolan missed him with every ounce of his being. It was the kind of loss one never got over.

And he hadn't been the only one to miss out. His family had treated that kid like their own. It was as if Peggy and Kent had another grandchild to dote over. His siblings took the kid snowboarding and fishing. Hell, Jax was the one who taught Tommy how to skateboard. He belonged to Nolan's family. Until he didn't.

And that was on him. He'd never put himself or his family through that ever again. Which made Kat's situation with raising Tessa sound the alarm bells. Did he want to get heavily

involved with someone who had a dependent—a dependent he could come to love and care for, only to lose them? He suddenly wasn't so sure.

He waited until Tommy was a few feet away and he could positively ID him, then he opened the door.

“Paintballs do more damage from that distance,” he said.

Startled, the kid dropped the carton of eggs and looked behind him as if doing the math on who was the fastest runner. Then his eyes met Nolan's and everything from apology to awe to good old-fashioned anger crossed his face.

I know, kiddo.

“I promised that I wouldn't spray-paint your property anymore or Kat would kick my ass. Her exact words.”

Had Nolan not been wrapped up in being this close to the kid, he would have laughed. But he was as startled as Tommy. Being in law enforcement, Nolan usually knew the right thing to say to defuse a situation. But all his skills had gone on sabbatical because he didn't know what to say to make this better. Other than, “I didn't know you were trying to reach out to me. Not until the other day when you spray-painted my garage.”

“I knew she wasn't cool enough to keep it a secret.”

God, he'd grown. He no longer came to Nolan's hips, he hit mid-chest, and he was all arms and legs—and heart-crushing disappointment.

“She didn't rat you out. I guessed.” He could see that Tommy didn't believe him. “I swear. I thought of who would hate me enough to do that and the only person I could think of would be you.”

“I don't hate you,” Tommy said, but his voice told a different story. A story this kid had lived through twice. First being walked out on by his own dad, then Nolan, and, from what he could gather, his stepdad wasn't all that present in Tommy's life either.

“I wouldn’t blame you if you did,” Nolan said and took a step down the stairs. Tommy’s eyes went wide, and he took a step back. Nolan swore under his breath. He didn’t want to scare the kid, he wanted to get him talking. “But you have to believe that I would never leave you on my own accord.”

Nolan took a seat on the cedar step in a sign that he wasn’t going anywhere, then scooted over so that there was room for Tommy. Tommy didn’t exactly jump at the gesture, choosing to remain where he was.

“Then why did you leave?” he asked, disbelieving that there could be any answer that could take away the hurt.

“Your mom and I broke up and it was too hard for me to still be hanging around.”

“Too hard for who?” he said quietly. “You?”

“No way, kiddo. Cutting things off has been one of the hardest things in my life.”

“Then why?”

Nolan patted the patch of step next to him and let out a breath when Tommy claimed it. “It’s complicated.”

“That’s what adults say when they don’t want to admit that they screwed up.”

“You’re right. I screwed up. When you mom met your dad—”

“Stepdad.”

“When your mom met your stepdad, she thought it would be better if I disappeared so that it could give you and your stepdad time to bond.”

Tommy looked at the toes of his Converse. “Well, she isn’t the boss of you. You could have told her no.”

“No. I couldn’t. Legally, I have no rights to demand anything from your mom. What she says goes and I need to respect that.”

“How about your promise to me that you’d be my navigation partner for my Search and Rescue badge? You

didn't respect that."

Nolan ran a hand down his face. "No. I didn't. You're right. I figured that you'd want to partner with your stepdad."

Tommy mumbled, "*Like that would happen.*" And Nolan started to form a picture of what his homelife must be like and it rubbed him wrong.

"I heard you have a new sister."

"Yeah, she's pretty cool. But babies are a lot of work," he added in a mature way that had to come from repeating what he'd overheard or been told by an adult.

"I was the middle kid in my family, which meant that my parents had their hands full with my other two siblings. Then Jax and Lucas came along and there was nowhere for me. Or so I thought. But deep down I knew my parents loved me just as much, they were just putting their limited energy into who needed it most. I was so self-sufficient I didn't get much of the attention."

And even though he understood, it still hurt. He'd never told anyone in the family how he'd felt. That would go against his lone wolf method of living. It reminded him of another lone wolf and how stubborn she was to accept help. The difference between them was that Nolan's family was constantly offering to help and Kat was really in it alone.

Was this how she'd felt as a kid? Like Tommy? With a family who was too busy to meet her needs? No, he thought. Kat's life had been a hell of a lot worse than a neglectful stepdad and tired mother. From the sounds of it, she'd had her grandpa for some of the time, then she was on her own. Now she was still on her own, but with Tessa depending on her.

"But that changed when I got older."

Tommy side-eyed him. "How?"

"I finally started asking for help."

"But what if you ask and they still don't listen?"

Nolan nudged Tommy's shoulder with his own. "Then you keep asking until you find someone who will."

Tommy took a gulp of air and let it out in a rush. Still looking at the ground, he said, “What if I asked you for help?”

Nolan’s chest cracked in two. He hadn’t meant himself, but if he didn’t step in and try to do something for Tommy, he’d just be another person in the kid’s life who ignored him when he was crying out to be seen.

Nolan had a way with words. Could talk a man with a gun into surrendering. There was no reason he couldn’t convince Nina to let him back into Tommy’s life. And he wouldn’t stop asking and pushing until she did.

“What do you need?”

Tommy’s head flew up. “Seriously?”

“Will it stop you from vandalizing my property?” he joked.

“Yeah,” he said. “Will you be my navigation partner?”

Nolan yanked the kid’s hoodie off his head and smiled. “As long as I get a hug out of it.”

Nolan had meant after they won the navigation portion of the badge ceremony, so he was surprised with Tommy threw himself into Nolan’s arms. He was quick on the uptake, pulling him into his arms and giving him a big hug. His arms were a little longer and he came up higher than he used to, but he still fit perfectly into Nolan’s arms.

“You’ll talk to my mom?” Tommy said into Nolan’s chest.

“*We’ll* talk to your mom,” he corrected. He pulled back and looked Tommy in the eyes. “Now, does she know you’re here?”

Tommy studied the strings on his sweatshirt.

“Right. I take that as a no.”

“Are you going to tell her I had eggs and painted a bad word on your garage?”

“No, kiddo.” Tommy let out a pent-up breath and his little shoulder sagged with a relief which quickly vanished when Nolan added, “You are.”

After a long day at the county clerks' office, Kat dropped Tessa off at a friend's to do her homework, then headed to Bigfoot's for what would be Kat's next to last night bartending, and she was running on fumes.

At least she had her car back, thanks to a sexy neighbor who now knew what her O face looked like. A sexy neighbor she'd been doing her best to avoid. Like all her past hookups, she was the one-and-done sort. But with Nolan, once wasn't enough and that was becoming a problem. Hence, the cat-and-mouse game they were playing.

Could it be considered a game if only one side of the party was participating?

She still couldn't believe she'd slept with him. Had initiated it! Their lifestyles and personalities didn't mesh. If she were to ask anyone in town about the two of them, the townsfolk wouldn't even say they were friends. Yet they'd had a sex-a-thon in his hot tub, for the whole world to have seen—including Tessa.

All her sister had to do was look out her window and see something that resembled a Cinemax movie, with her sister cast as the star. It would give Tessa fuel to call Kat a hypocrite and possibly sleep with R. J. in retaliation.

The old Kat never thought through the repercussions, but she'd worked hard to overcome that. One glimpse of Adonis in steam and she'd gone back to being reckless, irresponsible Kat. This was a problem of epic proportions.

But then there was sweet and stable Nolan who had dropped off her car, which had a new gas tank, tires, and the word BITCH buffed out of the door, which also meant Bette Davis had been given a new paint job. Still banana boat yellow, but shiny and sans the scratches and door dings Bette'd racked up over the past fifty-plus years.

Her granddad's old Ford Fairlane 500 had been given a new life. And that made Kat smile, even letting a snort-giggle escape when she saw it parked in her driveway.

Until she reminded herself how she'd reacted to the kind gesture. Which was to do practically nothing.

The proper etiquette would have been to walk over and thank Nolan in person, but for some reason saying those words to him felt like baring her soul. Plus, he wouldn't want a big hurrah over something he felt was simply the right thing to do. Would he? So she'd left him the note, which she hoped he found funny, and left it at that.

He hadn't called, texted, or reached out. His annoying way of letting her know that the ball was in her court. And something about that touched her deep inside, in a place usually reserved for arguing and payback. Most guys would have come with their chest puffed out, looking for an atta boy—not Nolan. He'd left it in her driveway without a word because he knew it wasn't about him.

Insufferable man.

Now she felt that her response had been juvenile and a call to arms—exactly what he expected. What kind of woman just leaves a sticky note with an inside joke as a thanks? A scared Kat, that's who.

The kind of woman who was too prideful to give a heartfelt, real thank-you from the soul. And a woman who was afraid of what that kind of raw conversation could turn into.

And it could turn quickly when it came to Nolan. She'd seen firsthand how he could get people to open up and spill their deepest darkest secrets. And Kat had a lot of deep secrets, dark enough to chase away a quality guy like Nolan.

The real question was if she wanted to catch him. And for how long?

Hence the avoidance. Until she knew where she stood on both subjects, it was necessary to maintain a healthy distance. But he'd thrown the gauntlet, and what was a girl to do besides come back swinging?

"Have you seen my brothers?" Brynn asked in a whisper-hush while leaning over the bar top. She was dressed in a very uncharacteristic outfit of a short, fitted skirt, a tight, cleavage-showcasing top, and fuck-me pumps. She was also a bit sweaty, and her eyes were round and big with paranoia—like she was being chased by Big Bird.

"I haven't seen Nolan for days."

Brynn smiled. "I said *brothers*, as in plural, but I think it's interesting that you singled out a specific brother by name. Any reason?"

Kat felt her face go flush and turned around to stick her head in the fridge, pretending to grab a beer. "He's just usually sticking his nose in everyone's business is all."

"Funny, he's the least of the busybodies in the family. Yet he's always up in *your* business. What do you think that means?"

"That he likes to torment me."

"I think that sentence should be, 'That he likes me.' The end."

Kat set the beer on the bar top and popped the cap off before sliding it to Brynn. "The only end to this story is someone getting hurt. From the outside, the edgy wild girl seems fun and exciting, but once he sees just how crazy my life is, he'll be out of there as fast as a wildfire in the Sierras in July."

“Or maybe he likes your kind of crazy and would stick like gum on a shoe.”

“Or like a snowflake at first snow. And gum on a shoe is gross.”

“I could say your crush on my brother is gross, and totally breaks girl code, but I think it’s kind of cute.”

“I don’t have a crush on him,” Kat insisted.

“Then why are you whispering like you’re saying the word *sex*?” Brynn slapped her hand over her mouth. Eyes big as beer goggles, she said, “Oh my god, you’ve had sex!”

“Many times. It’s called being a sex positive woman.”

“No, I mean you and Nolan.” Brynn looked perplexed. “I don’t know whether to be excited or sick. I haven’t seen him this googly-eyed since Nina.”

Now it was Kat’s turn to be perplexed. She didn’t know whether to be excited or sick. “Well, I am no Nina.” Kat grabbed a rag and wiped down the bar top.

Brynn’s face fell, and Kat felt like she’d just kicked a puppy. “I didn’t mean it like that. Of course you aren’t. You’re Kat and that’s why he likes you and—Oh shit!”

Brynn looked over her shoulder. Then, without warning, she ran behind the bar and squatted down like a child hiding from her parents after being caught red-handed with her grimy mitts in the cookie jar. “Did Jax and Lucas just walk in? Look. But don’t be obvious.” She said the last part with sheer desperation and panic in her voice.

Kat went up on her tiptoes and peered over the crowd of customers and, yup, Thing One and Thing Two had entered the building.

“I said don’t be obvious,” Brynn hissed.

“You want to tell me why you’re hiding like a dog who peed on his owner’s favorite shoes?”

“Because I have a date and like an idiot, I agreed to meet him here. He’s staying at the lodge, so it was convenient. Also,

I was hoping you could suss him out before I agree to go to a second location with him.”

Kat chortled. “If this guy is hot enough to endure the wrath of your brothers, why ask someone whose second location would be the closest flat surface to suss him out?”

“Because tonight, I want to be like you. I want to have a no-strings, fun time, ending with a man-made orgasm. I want to not overthink things and go with my bad girl side.”

“That statement is as ridiculous as Pollyanna saying she wants to join a biker gang.”

“Hey!” Brynn hissed. “I don’t have to be confined to the good girl box all the time. I thought you’d get that.”

Translation: You’re a bad girl. Not something she wanted to be reminded of when fighting to prove to the town and a social worker that she’d changed.

“But my brothers will ruin it for me if they see me with a man. They will intimidate him, hound him, even threaten him, until he leaves and then they will lecture me on the rules of safety when dating as a woman.” Brynn looked up at Kat with wild eyes. “Do you know the last time I had a man-made orgasm?”

“Not really interested.”

“Nine months ago.”

“TMI, but go on.”

“I went to a Search and Rescue conference in Reno, and no one knew who my brothers were. There was this guy, he was hot, it was amazing, then I never heard from him again.”

“He ghosted you?” That was a play right out of Kat’s handbook.

“Sucks, right? But at least we both got something out of it. In Sierra Vista, men either know about my heart defect and treat me with kid gloves, or one of my brothers manages to sniff out when I’m on a date, crash said date, and tell the guy what will happen to his balls if he even lays so much as a hand on me. Even women won’t look my way.”

“Do you want women to look your way?”

“Not necessarily, but I’d like that decision to be mine.”

“Sounds rough.”

“It’s the worst. And now my date, who’s a weekend warrior with no idea who I am, is supposed to meet me here and the twins will tag team him.”

“You want to know what I would do?”

“Yes!” Brynn’s eyes brightened.

“Tell them both to fuck off and then walk right out that front door with your weekend warrior on your arm. Then I’d flash these at your brothers.” Kat handed over a six-pack roll of condoms that she kept in her purse. “They will be so stunned, they won’t know what to say and you can make a run for it.”

“You’re a genius! I want to be you when I grow up.”

“It sounds cooler than it really is, but I think your weekend warrior just walked in. Tall, built, ginger?”

“That’s him.”

“Well. Get a move on, Taylor Swift. It’s time you got yourself a man-made orgasm.”

Brynn stood and gave Kat a big hug, which Kat endured. She wasn’t big on public displays of genuine emotion. Stick her tongue down a guy’s throat, whatever. Girl hug? Hives galore.

Kat watched like a proud mama as Brynn strutted across the room, ignoring the death glares coming from the cockblockers in the back, and gave her Prince Harry a big, brotherly hug. Huh, it seemed her brothers weren’t the only thing working against her. She’d friend-zoned herself in two seconds flat and didn’t even realize it.

When the twins went to pounce, Kat hopped the bar and cut them off short. Not that she needed to intervene. Brynn pulled out the ribbon of condoms and wiggled them in her brother’s faces, then strutted out the bar.

Jax and Lucas stood there, confusion and a ninety percent chance of puking in their expression, and Kat laughed.

“Sucks to lose at your own game, doesn’t it?” Kat asked the twins.

“Did you just give my sister a condom?” Lucas demanded to know.

“No. I gave her a roll. I hope she puts them to good use.”

“I think I just threw up in my mouth a little,” Jax said.

“You don’t know the first thing about that guy,” Lucas said, puffing out his chest and trying to be intimidating.

Kat was unaffected. She went toe to toe with him and said, “Neither do you. What if he’s Brynn’s soulmate or some shit other women believe in, and you blew it for her?” She looked at Jax. “How would Milly react?”

Sweat broke out on Jax’s forehead. “She’d kill me. Are you going to tell her?”

“Depends. Are you going to track down your sister like a pack of wild dogs?”

Jax backed up in surrender. “Not anymore.”

Lucas exploded. “What do you mean, ‘Not anymore’? We don’t know the first thing about this guy.”

“And you don’t know the first thing about relationships, man. I’m not willing to jeopardize my sex life to scare the shit out of some guy who may or may not be a prick.”

“Great, then you go home and we’ll pretend this never happened,” Kat said.

Jax sprinted out of there like the hounds of hell were on his tail. Lucas gave Kat a hard look, which she returned with a nut-freezing glare. The standoff lasted for about sixty seconds before Lucas sighed. He pointed two fingers to his eyes, then at her, like *I’m watching you*.

Kat flipped him the finger and walked off with a grin from ear to ear. Brynn might not have won the war, but Kat helped

her win the battle and damn, it felt good. So good she went looking for another fight to dominate.



After reinterviewing a half dozen kids from the party and filling out mounds of paperwork still left over from Glock-Gate, Nolan dragged his tired ass home. He locked his gun in the safe, grabbed a cold brew from the fridge and drank it while soaking in a hot shower.

A stall with water shooting out of the wall was more like it. When he'd first bought this house two years ago it had been with a family in mind, and he'd spent every free hour renovating it from the studs up. Until Nina called things off, then everything came to a screeching halt.

Sure, he'd painted a few walls, finished off what would have been Tommy's bedroom—which was why a grown man had race car wallpaper—and was halfway through the kitchen remodel made for a woman. But what was the point of turning this into a family-ready home when apparently people didn't consider him a family-ready guy?

Beer demolished and hot water drained, he stepped out into the foggy room and dried himself off. He threw on a pair of ratty jeans, an old university sweatshirt, and work boots. He had plans tonight. Unfortunately, it wasn't with a smart-assed woman who drove him crazy.

Nope, instead of participating in an all-night sex-a-thon, he was going to fix the pipes under the kitchen sink so that the faucet actually shot out hot and cold water when their

respective knobs were turned. And he was going to get rid of the incessant dripping that kept him up at night.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

On the way back from shutting off the water supply to the house, he grabbed his toolbox from the garage and made his way to the kitchen where he had a staredown with the sink.

“You and I are going to hash this out. Once and for all,” he said, flipping the wrench in his hand like it was a revolver and he was Billy the Kid.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

He set the toolbox on the counter and, with the wrench in hand, knelt in front of the sink.

“If that was all it took to get you on your knees, you’d have half the town’s population calling you about leaky faucets,” a smoky and incredibly seductive voice came through his open kitchen window.

He looked up and saw trouble dressed in form-fitting black jeans—and what a form—a fuzzy teal sweater that couldn’t decide if it wanted to stay on her shoulder or not, and a peek of something lacy black beneath. In her hand was a giant take-out bag from Bigfoot’s.

“You throwing a party?” he asked. “That bag is big enough to feed a family of four.”

“Or one hungry federal agent.”

His face melted into a buttery smile. “You cook me dinner, Kitten?”

“I packed the bags at Bigfoot’s after my shift. That’s about all you get from me in terms of a home-cooked meal. Take it or leave it.”

The way she said it was like she was testing him. As if somehow that made her unworthy of a relationship.

“Then I’ll take it.”

With a shrug she strutted her fine ass around the front of the house and let herself in the door. By the time she made it to

the kitchen her sweater had decided it didn't like to be confined to her shoulder and was halfway down her arm. Showing more than enough black lace to drive a man crazy.

She walked over and hopped up on the counter next to his toolbox, then looked at the towel on the floor in front of the open cabinet and the wrench in his hand. "Having a little problems with your pipe, Ranger?"

"You didn't seem to have a problem with my pipe the other night."

She shrugged and her shirt fell a little lower. She didn't notice but his dick did. "Maybe I was faking it."

"Oh, you weren't faking it. You could barely walk after. Plus, you were moaning like you'd just run the Iron Man."

"Are you sure you want to bait the person who's bringing you dinner?" she asked, and he held his hand up in surrender. "And don't get used to this. This is a onetime thing as a thanks for the truck, the car, and the job."

He walked over and slid right between her legs. She spread for him to make room. He put his hands on her thighs. "Did you get it?"

She ran her palms up his biceps. "Of course, and thank you. But you already knew that."

He did know. He'd tracked her every movement without looking like a creeper and gave her the space to see what she wanted to do next with regard to them. He did not want her to think that his favors came with expectations. "You don't have to thank me, you got the job on your own," Nolan said.

"Maybe, but I know that you brought my résumé to Eli."

"All I did was deliver it, I didn't get involved. Like I promised."

She studied him. "Wow, I believe you. That must have been hard. Putting your cape away for ten minutes."

"Painful."

“Well, thank you. It’s nice to know I got it on my own. I mean, Eli hired me even though he doesn’t like me.”

Nolan was taken aback. “What makes you think Eli doesn’t like you?”

“The looks, the curt answers, the way he didn’t jump in when R. J. shoved me. I know when someone doesn’t like me, Nolan. I know I’m not everyone’s flavor, and I am not Eli’s. And that’s okay,” she said like it was no big deal.

“Has he treated you poorly since he started working for me?”

She bit back a smile. “I thought I worked for Eli and that was your way of avoiding me.”

“You work for Eli because I slept with you. And I want to again.” He slid his hands up her thighs. “And again. And again.” He kissed her jaw and her head fell back with a moan. He kissed his way down her neck, over her shoulder, skating down her arm, taking that scrap of lace with him. “Did I mention I want to fuck your brains out?”

“What happened to one night because I didn’t work for you yet?”

“I’m rescinding that statement.”

“I’m not.”

He stopped mid kiss and lifted his head to meet her gaze, which was sex-hazed. Still, he scooted out from beneath her legs. Because in his world no meant no. Regardless of what the woman’s body was saying or how mixed the signals she was shooting off.

“Do you mind telling me why?”

She looked at her swinging legs. “I’m a onetime girl. I thought you knew that. I don’t have the time or inclination right now to take on any more. Between my new job, my county job, this custody fight, and keeping my sister out of jail, I just can’t. I already feel like I’m failing at everything.” She met his gaze with honesty and bravery. “I can’t fail at one

more thing, Nolan. And eventually I'd fail at you. And I can't do that to you."

She hopped off the counter. "I should go. This was a bad idea. I don't know what I was thinking trying to be Holly Homemaker."

But he couldn't let her end tonight on this note. So he gently grabbed her elbow as she started to walk away.

"Message received and you won't get any pressure from me to be more than friends. But you're wrong, our lives are already intertwined. We're neighbors. Your best friend is marrying my brother. We will be forever connected, so we can't pretend nothing happened. We can't go back to not being what we were before."

"I'd never make Milly choose," she said vehemently, as if she'd rather distance herself from Milly than cause any trouble. Like Kat wasn't worth the fight.

So Nolan felt like a class-A jackass when he was forced to agree with her. "You may have a point. Milly would feel like she'd have to and I want to have a close relationship with my new sister." But he couldn't lose Kat altogether.

"So then we keep things friendly?"

"You're friends with all your other flings, right? Then what's different with this?"

She swallowed hard and that told him everything he needed to know. He wasn't the only one who knew there was something different between them and that night proved it.

"Nothing," she said nonchalantly. "Friends it is."

"Then don't leave. Let's eat dinner and you can be my assistant while I fix this sink."

"We'll eat, but I'm no one's assistant. I'll fix your pipe."

"Now you're just talking dirty." Since he didn't have a kitchen table, Nolan grabbed the bag of food and walked into the front room and sat on the couch.

He took out the burgers, handed her one and kept the other two for himself. They ate in silence for a while, then she asked, “So how did you convince Eli to hire me?”

Not wanting to get involved with hiring a woman he was seeing, he’d handed the role over to Brynn. She said that Eli had balked when she delivered the résumé and even tried to talk her out of hiring Kat, saying she wasn’t trustworthy and possibly behind the missing whiskey. But Brynn explained in the simplest terms that Kat was the only applicant qualified for the job. But how did Kat know that?

He could lie to her, but she could always see through his BS. Plus, he wasn’t a liar, and he didn’t want any untruths to come between whatever this new friendship was.

“Eli wasn’t on board right away, but I promise you that I didn’t intervene. I didn’t have to, all my siblings were behind this hire, not just me.”

“Because of Milly?” she asked casually, but he saw right through her. She attributed her hire to Milly. He knew that she knew she kicked ass at what she did and applied herself, but she was clearly suspicious of being given a chance.

He took a sip of his soda. “Because you’re the best person for the job.”

“Even with my history?”

“You were a kid. Kids mess up. That’s a fact. If I was judged on everything I did when I was a kid—”

“You’d still be the town’s golden boy.” She took a big, weighted breath. “I didn’t tell Eli this because I knew he’d use it against me, but it’s only fair, now that we’re friends, that I come clean.”

Nolan went still. Was she involved in the string of missing things at the lodge? His gut said no, but her face said she was about to drop a bomb.

“I didn’t come home from MIT on good terms. I was accused of cheating and I’m pretty sure if I’d stayed, I would have been expelled. And in case you’re wondering, I didn’t cheat, my boyfriend did.”

“Did he get expelled?”

“No, his parents were alumni who hated me from the second Ryan brought me home to meet them.” She laughed, but there was no humor to it. “Imagine me, a blue-haired biker who wore steel toes like sorority girls wear Prada, walking into a house that was the size of Hearst Castle. Ryan assured me they’d love me, but they took one look at me and their minds were made up. I was more than just trouble, I wasn’t legacy material.”

“Wait, he was your boyfriend and he didn’t stand up for you and tell the truth?” Rage bellowed in his stomach.

“His dad told him not to throw away his future on a relationship that wouldn’t last.” She shrugged as if she’d expected it. As if that were just how her life had gone. “I was headed home to help Tessa, my dad was hurt, my grandpa had passed, and I didn’t have any bandwidth left to fight it. And seriously, who would they believe, the kid whose last name was on the athletic arena or a scholarship kid?”

Her resistance to relationships became more and more clear and his heart went out to her. His fist wanted to punch her ex in the nuts, but his heart wanted to wrap itself around her like Bubble Wrap against the world and prove to her that there were nice guys out there.

Kat looked around and changed the subject. “You’ve been here over a year and it looks like you just moved in.”

“Tease all you want,” Nolan said, “I’m barely keeping my head above water. Between my job that I love, this case, and helping with my family’s lodge, I’m spread thin. Had you not brought this take-out I probably would have had a frozen pizza. Now that there’s really no one to fix it up for, what’s the rush.”

She was thoughtfully quiet for a moment, then shrugged. “Good point.”

He chortled. Leave it to Kat to be honest.

“Who would have thought we have something in common,” she said.

“I feel like I’ve been on the hamster wheel my whole life,” he said, surprised at the words coming out of his mouth.

“You mean you were this uptight as a kid?”

“I had to be. Between the twins moving in with us and Brynn’s heart issues, my family was crazy all the time.”

“And you were stuck in the middle.”

“That’s what a middle child is for.”

“That can’t have been easy.”

“Don’t get me wrong,” he said, taking a bite of fry. “My family is amazing, but my parents were stretched thin.”

“My grandpa was pretty amazing too, but he wasn’t always able to be around when my parents were dropping the ball.”

“You were so young to take on mom, dad, sister, enforcer.”

“That’s what family does. You know that.”

Yeah, he did. More than most. “Doesn’t make it any easier.”

“Is that why you don’t date? Too much responsibility?”

“You’ve been keeping tabs on me, Kitten?”

“You know how gossip is in this town. Nothing is sacred.”

“No, I actually love the responsibility of a partner. When my ex left and I lost Tommy, it was like losing my own kid. I was devastated. It took me months to even start to bounce back. I don’t think I could go through that again.”

“So single moms are out?” She couldn’t even meet his eyes, instead taking a big bite of burger.

“I’m starting to reconsider that. What about you? Do you want kids, Kitten?”

“Maybe. If I ever find someone I can trust enough to let in. Then...” She shrugged. “Maybe,” she repeated.

She wasn’t the kind to bring dinner. She liked sex, this he knew, just like he knew she never took things past a night or

two. Yet here she was, sitting on his couch, asking him about his ex, talking about her past, sharing pieces of herself he'd bet she hadn't even shared with her closest friends.

"The more you tell me, the more curious I become about your life," Nolan told her.

This was the part where she shut down. Used that key to lock her heart up tight and close the walls around it. Which was why he was so surprised when she said, "Well, hell. What do you want to know?"

Not expecting that, he bumbled a bit, then said, "Whatever you're willing to tell me."

"You can ask anything, and you waste it by giving me an easy out? My favorite food is Pop-Tarts."

"I didn't officially ask."

"But you left it open."

"Okay, fine—"

"Nope." She stood and grabbed her garbage. "You had your chance. Time's up on this kumbaya unless you want to braid each other's hair. Now let's go save your pipe from premature drip. No woman likes a drippy pipe. Especially a premature one."

Nolan had started his day at four a.m. with a call for a pair of lost hikers, a local teen and his buddy, who never made it home last night. The immediacy was that one of the kids was diabetic and didn't have his insulin on him. A SAR trailing dog and its owner found them around noon about five miles up the mountain, cold, dehydrated and in diabetic shock.

Nolan had checked in on the kid at the hospital and discovered he was going to be fine. He also promised to never leave home unprepared again. Then Nolan had another search warrant to execute. Tessa had remained mum, but after considerably more legwork, he now had three witnesses who chose to remain anonymous but had seen the handgun, and he'd been issued another search warrant, this time on the entire Locke residence. But the family had been given a heads-up, giving plenty of time to get rid of any and all evidence they might have had, which was ridiculous. But the judge and Mr. Locke were golfing buddies.

I guess it paid to be a government official.

They came up with jack shit. Even with all of that, Nolan was still in a good mood, and he couldn't explain why. Okay, he could, but he needed to stop thinking of Kat like that or he

was bound to get hurt. Distance was going to be his friend in this situation. Friends. But a distant friend—

Who happened to live next door and share the same friend group, and, soon, Milly.

Nolan's stomach growled like a grizzly. Even though it was nearly dinnertime, the days were getting longer and the sun was still high in the sky. It had been a picture-perfect day in the Sierras, attracting all sorts of visitors.

Even now, the roads were packed with cars with out-of-state plates. But Nolan didn't care. The sky was a clear blue, the sun reflecting off the last of the melting ice and mimicking sparkling diamonds. The normal hustle and bustle didn't bother him. Even though it made him fifteen minutes late to the weekly family meeting. Which they had moved to later to accommodate his chaotic schedule.

With a perma-smile on his face that had been there since the other night, he waltzed into the boardroom and came to a sudden stop, that smile widening. Because there, sitting at the conference table with her back to him, was Kat.

Her hair was pulled back into some kind of messy knot that looked like she'd haphazardly twisted it up, but he knew she'd spent time on it. She was dressed in a black skirt that had inched up to mid-thigh, a blue blouse, and sleek knee-high black leather boots.

Today she was dialed into Professional Kat. A side of her he'd never seen before—and he liked it. Not as much as Ballbuster Kat, but it was a close second. He normally went for the girl next door who had maternal instincts, a mini-van, and a white-picket fence stamped into her DNA. Don't get him wrong, she was maternal and protective as hell over Tessa, but it was on her own terms and in her own way. And it worked. He didn't think she allowed other people the privilege of seeing that side of her, but she'd gifted him with a glimpse and he liked it. A lot.

He just hoped that the social worker saw that amazing piece of Kat because it was special and unique. And made her the best person to raise Tessa.

She hadn't noticed him yet because she was speaking, and that smoky voice did all kinds of things to his body.

"I don't know who is behind it, but I will definitely find out. I just need a few more days," Kat vowed.

Brynn met Nolan's gaze and a bright smile lit her face. "Glad you could make it."

"Rough day," Nolan replied.

Eyes never leaving Kat, he watched as she visibly tensed, her shoulders climbing to her ears and her spine going ramrod straight. She slowly turned toward him and he noticed that her blouse had these tiny buttons spread from neck to navel. The top three were undone, giving a tasteful hint of cleavage that made him want to undo the rest—with his teeth.

Professional Kat was smoking hot.

"Yeah, we heard about the lost kids," Lucas said. "We wouldn't have blamed you if you hadn't showed up at all."

"And miss this?" His eyes went back to Kat. "Nah."

She spun back around in her chair and nibbled at her cuticle, something he realized she did when her nerves got the better of her. Which meant he got the better of her. Strange reaction for someone who told him she wanted to just be friends.

"Kat was just telling us what she's discovered about the invoices and missing inventory," Jax said. "It's a bigger problem than we thought."

"*You've* got a lot of problems, it seems," Brynn said to Nolan, with a teasing smile.

"You want to catch me up to speed?"

"First off," Kat said. "I was able to break into your firewall in less than five minutes. Access your customers' info in less time than it takes Tiny Dancer to doodie in your yard. Including their credit card info." The whole table erupted into snickers.

Nolan wiped a hand down his face in frustration. “Why am I the only one taking this seriously?”

“We all are.” Brynn rested her hand on his. “We’ve just had more time to process the info. You just walked in. And laughing is better than crying.”

He put his hand over his sister’s. “You’re right. I’ve just had a long day, and this is the icing on a shit cake.” He turned to Kat. “So you know who did this?”

“It’s complicated,” she said. Nolan had become accustomed to all of her looks over the past few weeks, but he didn’t recognize this one.

“How?” he asked.

“Someone logged in from inside the firewall.”

“How is that possible?” Lucas asked.

“It is someone with access to your system.” Kat carefully read the room and with a gentle voice she said, “Probably an employee.”

A blanket of disbelief tented the room. Their business was a family. Trust ran deep with their employees and, to date, that trust had never been broken. Not that they knew of.

“Are you sure?” Brynn asked, her voice quivering with emotion.

“Who is the son of a bitch?” Lucas roared.

Kat’s gaze went back to Nolan. “This is where it gets complicated. It was Nolan’s login and password being used. But when I glanced at some of the times, you weren’t here. Well, at least one for sure.” Her cheeks heated and he knew what night she was talking about.

Based on the shy way she looked away with embarrassment, the whole room was now privy to that information. And for a woman who proudly wore her one-night-stand badge, that interested him.

“Have you had a chance to look into the invoices?” Jax asked, his voice shaking with rage. His fiancée, Milly, placed a

calming hand on his back and made soothing circles.

Something inside Nolan, something close to jealousy, prickled up his spine at the supportive and loving gesture.

“I have and even though I haven’t had time to compare it to the inventory, I can assure you that they’ve been doctored.” She looked up at him. “I’m really sorry. I know this isn’t what you wanted to hear.”

“It’s not your fault,” he said, pulling out the rolling chair next to Kat and taking a seat, but not before giving her shoulder a reassuring squeeze.

She was startled by the show of affection, as was his family. Which was strange because Nolan was an affectionate guy, always the first to initiate a hug or an *atta boy*. Even with his brothers. It’s what made him a great agent—his compassion for the victims. So why were they so surprised by his outreach to someone who was clearly uncomfortable being the messenger of bad news?

“I’m just glad we’re getting some answers,” he said. “Did the extra security cams I installed catch them in action?”

“They turned the cameras off from inside,” she said.

“Shit.” Nolan pressed his palms to his forehead. He was starting to feel a headache form behind his right eye. “I was so sure it was R. J. that I never suspected it was someone we know. I didn’t even think to put some up in the storage rooms.”

“Why would you?” she said, and this time it was she who made the first move, resting her hand on his leg. It was only for a split second, but warmth spread through his body like wildfire.

“Why did you say *they*?” Brynn asked. “Do you think it’s more than one person?” She sounded so betrayed that more than one person could be in on this.

“Yes. Because it would take one person to shut off the cameras and security system. And at least two to carry out the boxes,” Nolan said. “I’m really sorry, guys. I’ve been so wrapped up with other things, I didn’t get on this fast enough.”

The minute the words left his mouth he wanted to suck them back in. He was talking about work, but Kat would assume he was referring to their time together. Which couldn't be further from the truth. But now that he thought about it, maybe she was right that this was bad timing for both of them to play around with being anything other than friends—without benefits.

He'd been distracted by her on the night one of the robberies had occurred. Had one taken place the night they'd had sex?

Avoiding his gaze, Kat stacked her papers and stood. "That's all that I have for now. I'll work on figuring out a way to narrow down who it could be and how much stock is missing. And I will reset everyone's passwords, and start building a new firewall, but I'll have to start from the ground up."

"That works for us," Lucas said. "Better safe than have something like this happen again."

She looked at Lucas with so much hesitation and insecurity in her expression Nolan wanted to pull her into his lap and cradle her until she knew that it wasn't her fault. That it was all on him. He'd made the decision to fool around. He was a big boy, and he could take the heat.

"Anything else?" Lucas asked when she hesitated.

"I was going to email you, but I figured it was a family decision so I might as well bring it up here," she said, then looked down at her boots in a rare sign of vulnerability. "I don't know if you've all heard that I'm fighting for custody of my kid sister and it's a big fight. A letter of reference from my boss stating that I'm now working a respectable job would go a long way in convincing the social worker and judge that I'm fit to care for my sister."

"Not a problem," Nolan said with a fierce protectiveness coursing through his body.

"I addressed the entire family," she said. Then she whispered for his ears only, "I don't want special treatment

because of ... you know.”

Again addressing the group, she continued. “You don’t have to answer me now. In fact, take your time to think and discuss it. And thank you all for giving me this opportunity.”

With that she turned to walk out of the office. Nolan couldn’t help himself. He stood and held open the door for her. She shot him a look cold enough to cryogenically freeze his nuts. As she passed through, he caught a whiff of that surprising floral perfume she always wore.

Chin up, she walked down the hallway, her hips swinging in a show of what he was never going to have. And it wasn’t his dick that was aching—it was his heart.

The door shut and everyone burst out laughing.

“No problem?” Lucas, the only one not laughing, said, repeating Nolan’s earlier statement. “Your girlfriend’s been working here less than a week and you’re ready to give her a company-backed recommendation.”

“She’s not my girlfriend and, yes, I am. She’s been working for us down at the bar for nearly three years and she’s a damn hard worker. She’d also make a great guardian for her sister. Hell, she’s already the parental figure. Plus, I’ve seen her with Tessa, and she loves that kid. Would do anything for her. We’re writing the letter.”

“Nolan’s right,” Milly said.

“I’m with Milly,” Jax added.

“You can count me as a hell yes,” Brynn said.

Nolan didn’t usually use his size to intimidate his brothers, but this subject was a nonstarter. They would write that letter and Lucas would sign it on company letterhead. Nolan puffed out his chest and stood to his full six foot three, just to make sure Lucas knew what was what.

“Not your girlfriend, my ass.” Lucas rolled his eyes. “Can we get back to business? I have back-to-back meetings today.”

“Works for me. But for the record, I’m trying to respect her wishes.”

“Glad to know. Now back to beefing up security. What else are we doing?”

“After learning that, I’m putting up covert cameras that will work on a separate system so that no one but the people in this room and the people working on the project will know about it. I’m also having all the locks rekeyed, and adding locks with keypads so everyone will have their own code so we know who’s going where and when.”

Brynn raised her hand. “I hate to even bring this up. But should we tell Mom and Dad?”

All four brothers said no in unison.

“How can we not tell them?” Brynn, the family blabbermouth, went on.

“Do you want them to give up Santa Barbara and move back to Sierra Vista?” Harris asked.

“Yes,” she said. “Yes, I do. I still can’t believe Mom and Dad are selling the house.”

“I’m thrilled for them,” Nolan said. “They deserve this. After all the shit we put them through as kids, and all the years they ran this lodge, I’m glad they’re putting themselves first.”

“I am too, obviously,” Brynn said. “But do they really have to sell the house? I mean, all our memories are there.”

Nolan had a moment of reflection. He hadn’t thought about some other family living in his house. Not having Christmas morning there around the fireplace, picking their own tree from their vast yard of sequoias and Douglas firs. Then there were his parents. They were no longer going to be a car ride away. They were eight hours away, which hadn’t been so bad, but that had only been three months of separation. Without his mom’s pressure would the siblings really keep up with weekly family dinners? And BBQ on Monday Night Football?

Then again, she wouldn’t be there to meddle in his love life. Actually, he could use some old-fashioned mom-meddling. *Note to self: call mom when you get off work tomorrow.*



An hour later Nolan found himself at the bar with only the craft beer for company. That perma-smile he'd sported all day was officially gone. He'd blown it at that meeting.

He'd promised her a friend, no special treatment, no pressure. The first chance he was given to prove that he could handle that and he'd acted like a Neanderthal—again. He was surprised he didn't throw her over his shoulder and carry her to his lair.

He couldn't help himself. When it came to Kat, something possessive kicked in and this protective nature took over.

He might as well kiss this relationship, whatever you'd call it, goodbye. But he'd known how hard it had been for her to ask for that favor, especially with him and Milly in the room to witness it. The hit her pride must have taken to even bring it up in such a public setting. So of course, they'd write the letter. It was a no-brainer.

He raised his hand to signal Tim for a second beer. He needed a third and maybe a fourth, which was why he'd booked himself a room at the lodge. He could get shitfaced and not have to worry about how to get home. Although he was only three-quarters of his way through his first beer, he planned on getting hammered. It had been a long time since he'd let loose and drank out his frustrations. The last time had been when Nina cut off all access.

Nolan had gotten so inebriated that night, his collective brothers had to carry him out, pour him into the back of Jax's

truck and drive him home, where he'd awoken on his front lawn at the crack of dawn with a raging headache, still drunk, and soaked because the automatic sprinklers had kicked on at five a.m.

What supportive and thoughtful assholes.

"You want to talk about what happened back there?" Jax asked, sliding onto the barstool next to him, a big-ass knowing grin on his face.

"You want to get punched in the nuts?" Nolan asked, taking a pull of beer.

"Whoa, man." Jax put his hands up. "I was coming to offer some free advice or someone to drink in silence with since you look a little pathetic over here drinking all by your lonesome."

Nolan lifted a brow.

"Okay, Milly made me come over," his brother admitted.

Nolan looked over his shoulder and Milly waved. Nolan waved back, which, of course, Milly took as an invitation to join the group.

"Is she going to lecture me about Kat and get all up in my business?"

"Most definitely," Jax said. "And since I want to get laid, you will listen to every word she says. Understood?"

"I'd rather drink my beer all by my lonesome."

"Too late," Jax whispered seconds before Milly slid between Jax's opened thighs.

"Hey, baby." She gave him a kiss that had Nolan looking away. "Did you ask him about the whole girlfriend thing?"

"Didn't get a chance to. You walked your fine ass over here, even though you promised to leave it up to me."

"Nolan invited me over. Didn't you, Nolan?" She gave him a kiss on the cheek and Jax shot him a death glare over her head.

“Of course,” Nolan said with no enthusiasm behind him. “But talking about Kat is off-limits.”

“You mean your girlfriend?” Milly said, and with a sigh, Nolan rested his forehead on his hand. “Funny thing about that is that she’s been driving your car, has been rumored to bring you dinner, and I know for a fact that you guys have at least kissed. Yet she says you’re just friends.”

He snapped his head up. “She told you all that?”

“Nope. Heard it around town, which is even more surprising because she tells me and Gemma everything,” Milly said. “And I mean *everything*. The woman has no filter when it comes to her sex life. But with you she’s tight-lipped. Why do you think that is?”

“Maybe there’s nothing to tell.”

Milly thought about that, but she wasn’t buying it. “So she’s not your girlfriend?”

“No.”

Milly narrowed her eyes into two slits that scared the shit out of Nolan. For a tiny little thing she could be intimidating a hell. “Then stop acting like it. My friend acts like she’s all big and tough, but she’s at a really vulnerable and confusing place in her life, and the last thing she needs is a man coming in and confusing the situation further.”

“I’d never hurt her.”

“You just did,” Brynn said from behind, then took the stool next to him. He jumped with a start.

“Jesus. The women in my life are multiplying. Where did you come from? Did someone feed them after midnight?”

“I came from a second date, where we kissed,” Brynn said with a goofy smile.

The two women high-fived and Nolan gagged a little. “Things about my baby sister I don’t need to know. And how did I hurt Kat?”

The women shared a glance as if he were dense, but it was Brynn who spoke. “With that whole ‘I’ve been so wrapped up with other things, I didn’t get on this fast enough’ thing. That was rough. The Nolan I know would never say something so hurtful,” Brynn whispered.

“I’m with the ladies on this one. That was rough,” Jax said. “I have no idea what has happened between you two, but clearly your relationship has changed and calling her a distraction hurt her. I don’t know her very well and I admit I haven’t seen her upset all that often. But she’d been stripped of her ballbuster shield with one sentence.”

“Shit,” Nolan said, hanging his head until his chin touched his chest. “I didn’t mean her. I just meant this investigation, my job, redoing the house, Tommy coming back into my life. There’s a lot going on. But I didn’t mean her.”

“Maybe you should be telling her that and not us,” Brynn said softly.

“I’ll clear things up,” Nolan said. And he would. He would do whatever it took for her to not feel like he was one more guy who found her distracting or not enough. “But just so it’s clear, I will reiterate, we’re just friends.”

Brynn shook her head. “How stupid is that? Walking away from something that could be good because one bad thing happened to you.”

“It wasn’t just bad, Brynn. It shredded me.” Not so much losing Nina, but losing Tommy. He’d really pictured being a dad: big moments, little moments, all the ones in between. Nolan collected people and brought them into his heart since he was young. That’s how Jax and Lucas came to live with them. Tommy had felt like his and now he was gone, and he’d left this gaping hole in his soul that Nolan didn’t know how to fix.

“The odds of that happening again are like three trillion to one,” Brynn said.

“Is that newfangled math?” he asked.

She flipped him off.

“And like I said, she was the one who friend-zoned me. Not the other way around.” His phone rang and he pulled it out of his pocket. He tried to hide his smile, but he couldn’t.

“I don’t need three trillion guesses to know who that is,” Brynn said.

Ignoring the peanut gallery, he answered. “Hey.”

“Nolan?” Kat whispered, and the tone in her voice triggered all his agent instincts.

He was out of his seat and headed toward the office, where he stored his service weapon when off-duty in public. “Are you okay?”

“I think so. Are you in the backyard?” Kat asked.

He was out the door and in his truck in record time. “No. Talk to me.”

“I just heard someone at the back window.”

“Lock the doors and don’t answer for anyone but me.”

“Don’t be scared,” she said to Tiny Dancer, who had been snuggled at her feet while they had been sharing a bowl of popcorn and watching reruns of *The Blacklist*. They were currently in the bathtub with the curtain drawn, sitting on the cold plaster, finishing the popcorn.

If she was going out, she was going out with a bang.

Neigh.

“*Shh,*” she hissed quietly. “You’ll bring unwanted attention to us and we just have to hold on until the ranger gets here. He’s big and bad-ass and super sexy, but don’t be drawn into his charms. Our life is way too crazy for him. Like he said, like all that came before, were a ‘distraction.’”

For the first time in her life, she was grateful that her sister was out for the night at Gemma’s and not at home. And for the first time in a really long time, she was happy she wasn’t in this alone. But she didn’t like the idea of Nolan putting himself in danger for her.

She looked at her phone. Maybe she should call him back and say it was a mistake and just call the cops instead. Nah, he’d hear about it and come anyway—only with a prepared lecture ready.

She looked at her phone again. She'd hung up with Nolan three minutes and sixteen seconds ago, and it was just over a ten-minute drive—without traffic. Then again who would be on the road at nine at night?

“We just have to hold on and pray the intruder gave up or isn't smart enough to get in for another six minutes and forty-seven seconds,” she said.

Six minutes forty-six seconds.

Forty-five.

Forty-four—

A knock sounded at the back door and Kat jumped. She wasn't one for hysterics, but she felt a little hysterical at the moment. Not only had she heard a noise, she'd seen a shadow of a man in a ball cap.

Her phone buzzed with a text.

Nolan: At back door. Let me in.

Kat: How do I know you aren't the peeper who knocked Nolan out and is pretending to be him?

Nolan: I left a hickey on your right breast.

Definitely Nolan. She stepped out of the bathroom and she and Tiny Dancer walked to the back door and let Nolan in.

He cupped her chin so he could see her eyes. “Are you okay?”

“I am now.”

“Stay right here. Understood? Don't move until I come back and get you.”

Nolan had his weapon drawn and started clearing the house. He took six steps, and not wanting to be alone, Kat followed, Tiny Dancer hot on her heels. His hooves gave them away.

Nolan turned around, he whispered. “What happened to staying put?”

“I don't take orders all that well.”

“Don’t I know it.” With a sigh, he took her hand and tucked it into his back pocket which gave her a nice grope of his ass. “Hold on and be my shadow. I move, you move. Understood?”

She nodded.

“Say it out loud.”

“Understood.”

With accuracy and skill, he cleared the entire house room by room, closet by closet, with her right behind him. The house was empty.

He holstered his weapon. “Are you really okay?”

She nodded and before she knew what he was doing, he pulled her into his arms and wrapped his body around her.

At first, she endured the hug, then she realized she was trembling and wrapped her arms tightly around him, pressing her cheek to his heart. “I don’t know why I’m shaking,” she said, her words muffled by his chest.

He held on tighter, as if he was afraid he’d lose her. To reassure him she wasn’t going anywhere she scooped closer, something she rarely did.

“I don’t know why I’m shaking,” she repeated. “I’m not scared anymore,” she admitted, and it took Herculean effort just to come clean about that truth.

“Adrenaline, Kitten. Your body is pumped full of it and now you’re coming down from it.”

She leaned her head back to look him in the eyes, “I don’t like it. I feel like I’m out of control.” It felt like the day she learned her granddad died. “How do I get rid of it?”

“Honestly?” he asked, and she nodded. “This isn’t a come-on, but sex is a great stress reliever.”

“It’s also against our no benefits promise.”

He backed away. “Then I need to stop rubbing your ass in these tiny, silky bottoms, and you need to stop playing with my belt buckle.”

Neither of them stopped. Nolan cleared his throat. “Clearly I have to be the adult here.” He took a big step back and sat on a lounge, gesturing for her to take the couch. Tiny Dancer sat at her feet like a Great Dane.

Nolan pulled out his official-looking notebook and a pen. “Did you see anybody?”

“I just saw a shadow. It was dark.”

“Height?”

“Maybe five eleven.”

“Weight?”

“Average build.”

“Hair color?”

“It was too dark, but he was wearing a ball cap.”

“Anything distinguishing? How he walked? Did he limp, have tattoos, anything else you can remember?”

“I only caught a glimpse of him on the deck and then I closed the curtain and called you.”

As if the distance were too great, he walked over to sit next to her, then pulled her onto his lap. “No sex, I just need to hold you.” He nuzzled her neck and took in a deep breath. “Jesus, when I got that call, my mind went to the worst.”

“Did you see anyone?” she asked. A strange sense of vulnerability took up residence in her gut and expanded. “Do you think it was R. J.?”

“I’m not sure. But what would his motive be? I found the lock to your shed cut and it looks like something was dragged across the floor recently.”

“It wasn’t me. I haven’t been out there in months,” she said trying to remember the last time she’d set foot in the place. It had been Christmas.

“How about Tessa?”

“Tess? Willing to go where spiders actively live?” She snorted. “Never in a million years. She’s at Gemma’s working

on an art project.”

“There are also footprints in the mud going from the side yard to the street. What’s in there that someone would want?”

“Nothing. All that’s out there is Christmas ornaments and my grandpa’s old things. Nothing of monetary value. Nothing of value to anyone but me.” She paused. “How did you make it so fast?”

“I flashed my lights and ran every red that popped up.”

“Can you get fired for that?”

“I wasn’t really thinking clearly at that moment. All I could concentrate on was getting you in my arms.” He pulled her further onto his lap.

He tugged her into him and all she could do was wrap her arms around his neck. But even with all the lingering stress after the shock she’d been dealt, Kat was enjoying the comfort. Which was new.

Kat didn’t like to be coddled. But right then, she couldn’t seem to let go.

He ran a hand down his face. “Pack up, you are coming with me.”

“There is no way I’m moving into a guy’s house with the custody hearing so close.”

“Good point. Then I’m sleeping on your couch.”

Part of her was stunned that someone would uproot their life for her. Nobody had done anything like that for her since her grandpa. Her mom bailed, her dad was Peter Pan, and Ryan was a coward. Yet here was Nolan, who barely knew her and was putting himself out to help her. The other part, her feminist part, roared that she didn’t need a man to get through this. She was a competent, capable woman.

“I can’t ask you to do that,” she said.

“You didn’t ask. I’m offering.”

“Why? Because I gave you a few orgasms?”

“This is more than that and you know it.”

“You were the one who said you don’t have any room for distractions. And this,” she pointed to Tiny Dancer who was trying to hatch a tampon he’d stolen from beneath the bathroom sink, “is the definition of distraction. Hell, it’s the definition of crazy.”

“I didn’t mean you earlier. I meant everything else going on in my life, and if you’d stuck around long enough, you would have discovered that.” He tilted her chin to meet her emerald eyes. “You, Kitten, are the only thing that makes sense in my life. And I know you said we’re just friends, but if we’re going for honesty here, I’m holding out for more.”

She started to speak, and he placed a finger over her lips. “You don’t have to answer now,” he repeated her words from the meeting. “In fact, think about it. But until then I’m sleeping in either your bed or on the couch. You choose.”

“While I’d love to get you in my bed, not with Tessa in the house.”

He moved closer. “You said she was at Gemma’s.”

“Are you doing this because you care or because it’s the right thing to do?”

“If it was the right thing to do, I’d call in someone to put a car on your house and go home. But around you I can’t seem to help myself.”

“Then let me show you where the spare blankets are,” she said, and he groaned. “I’m thinking about it.”

T *hink. Think. Think.*

That was the problem. She'd been thinking for over an hour and kept coming back to the same conclusion.

Seemed her hormones were running the show and in charge of all cognitive thought processes. Otherwise, why would she even be considering inviting Nolan into her bed? Not for cuddles either. Nope, what she had in mind was raw and carnal and bordered on illegal in at least thirteen states.

"He is bad for you," she whispered to Tiny Dancer, who she'd let sleep on the floor. Because let's be honest, he'd just break out of his pen anyway. "So completely, totally, deliciously, and devilishly bad." Bad for her sanity, for her rational thinking, for her mental health, and especially for her heart. He was definitely bad for that. So perfectly bad it was practically good.

"So good that once isn't enough to get him out of your system. That's what this is. Getting him out of your system," she said to the ether. "*If* you decide to go through with it."

It was like an out-of-body experience as she pushed the covers aside and swung her legs over the bed and stood. She was in nothing but the same teal silk pajama set, a camisole

and short-shorts with black lace on the hem. The top said *Sex me up!*, and the bottoms said *Doggy style, anyone?*

Okay, so she was doing it.

She could have changed before leaving the room, but that would imply she was only looking for a little comfort. Just a warm body on what had turned out to be a confusing and scary night. But instead, she bypassed her fuzzy robe and flannel pajamas and tiptoed down the hallway.

She could already smell his unique scent of fresh pine and gun oil from the threshold. She heard the steady breathing of a man deeply asleep. She considered turning tail and running back to her room where no one would be the wiser.

She spun back around to leave when a sleep roughened voice said, “Never took you for a coward.”

“I wasn’t sure if you’d mistake me for a bad guy and shoot me.”

“I started tracking you the second you got out of bed and made your way down the hallway. You walk like a bull in a stampede and smell like a bouquet of wildflowers.” He lowered his voice. “Can’t sleep, Kitten?”

She shook her head.

He lifted his blanket in an offer to join him on the couch, and while her bed was three times the size, she climbed in, her back to his front. He scooted back as far as he could go and then pulled her as close to him as possible. He bent his legs behind hers, causing her body to conform to his, her bottom wiggling against his erection which was ready to give the old Boy Scout salute.

He groaned.

Maybe this was a bad idea.

“Ignore him,” he said, holding her tighter. “He just wants to come out and play. He’ll get the idea and calm down in a bit.”

Kat looked over her shoulder and sent him a narrowed glare.

“Fine, as long as you’re in the same room I’m always sporting wood, but it’s a state I’m getting used to.” His hand was on her thigh, making lazy circles on her bare skin.

“Every time?” she asked surprised, because surely not *every* time.

“No matter how many times I rub one out that morning or the night before or both, I see you and I can’t control it. I’m like some horny teen all over again. It’s damn embarrassing, if you must know,” he said.

He buried his nose into her hair and breathed in. “Now, you in these silky things you call pajamas? That image will accompany me in my morning shower. So you might want to shower before me, because I’m going to use up all the hot water trying to get you out of my system.”

His words were genuine and honest and erotic in a way that made her pajama bottoms go wet, because beneath the silk was nothing but skin. A conscious choice, one she’d made when thinking about him.

“What if I need to get you out of my system too?”

His fingers came to a standstill.

“What does that mean?” he asked.

“That you’re not the only one who can’t stop thinking about how good it was and wanting to do it again,” she admitted. Thank God she was facing away from him, or she wouldn’t have been able to admit anything at all. “I know this is crazy, and probably a mistake for the both of us, but how can a mistake feel so good?”

“You are not a mistake,” he said vehemently. “You got that? Nothing about this is a mistake. Is the timing off? Maybe. But if we keep passing up opportunities, I don’t know how many more the universe will give us before it’s game over. Do you want to give this a chance, Kitten?”

“I don’t know,” she said honestly.

She could tell that was not the answer he wanted to hear, but instead of anger he met her with patience.

“Do you want this to be a short fling that ends in a few weeks?”

No,” she said, surprising them both. “But until I get custody of Tessa, I don’t want anyone knowing. I get that there’s already speculation, but I don’t want to confirm it until the judge makes his ruling and Tessa is mine. And once she’s mine, she’ll be my number one for a long time. I know what it feels like to come in last, and I don’t want that for her.”

“Are you saying you’re accepting applications for number two?”

She rolled onto her back and lolled her head to the side so she could see him. “That’s the problem. You deserve to be someone’s number one. I can’t give you that. And I don’t know when I will be able to give you that. If ever.”

“I’m a patient man.”

“I’m a mess.”

“Your mess doesn’t scare me. In fact, it attracts me. I have to be perfect for everyone. My job...on and off hours. My family, my friends, the lodge. But with you, you accept me as I am.”

He moved his hand from her thigh to her stomach, where he slid his thumb under the fabric, right above the elastic of her pajama bottoms, and ran it back and forth along her bare skin. Goosies rose in a blast, like whiteout conditions in a midwinter storm.

“What would people say? An ISB agent with a stellar reputation spending time with Tina Rhodes’s daughter. Hell, with Kat Rhodes?” She was no longer tied to just her mom’s reputation. She’d built one of her own and it seemed no matter how hard she’d tried to overcome it, make up for it, it still followed her around like a lost puppy.

“I don’t care.” The way he said it, so quick and as if it was a topic he’d already put some thought into, told her one thing.

“You’ve already had to defend me to someone?”

He rested his head up on his elbow to look down on her. “Does it matter?”

Her stomach roiling, bringing her back to that visit with her ex’s parents, she nodded.

“Then yes,” he said.

Kat tossed back the blanket to leave. “I won’t come between you and your family.”

“Whoa.” He wrapped his big biceps around her stomach like a bike lock and pulled her back to him. “You think my family doesn’t want us together?” He kissed her nose. “Kitten, it’s the exact opposite. They’re all for it.”

“Really?” It came out in a whisper.

“Just tonight they were trying to convince me to tell you the truth about how I feel. But I was afraid you’d run.”

They were encroaching on dangerous territory. Like walking through a field full of emotional land mines with Tiny Dancer leading the pack. His answer could blow up everything they had going, but so could her silence.

“Why are you so sure this will work?” she asked, every insecurity and bad word said about her rising to the surface.

“Why are you so sure it won’t?” he countered.

“I am as far from your normal type as one can get.”

“There must be something here if you’re paying close enough attention to know my type.”

“Your kind always has a type. A Holly Homemaker who wants somewhere between three and five kids that they will name after a state or something obscure like *Corduroy*. They drive a hybrid crossover, do Pilates, volunteer as snack mom, and wear lululemon pants like it’s a uniform.”

Nolan snorted. “Anything else?”

“They think Doc Marten has a PhD, horses belong outside, classic cars are death traps, and once a bad girl, always a bad girl.”

“Good thing I don’t want a girl. I want a woman. A ballbuster with a soft interior who knows her mind, calls me on my shit, challenges me, loves her family and friends, and is loyal and tough as the steel on the toes of her boots. I want you, Kat.”

This is your time, girl. Put up or shut up. Ask him what you really want to know.

“What if your parents don’t like me? What then?”

It was as if she’d sucker punched him in the gut the way his expression hollowed out. He cupped the back of her head. “While my parents’ opinion is valuable, my happiness and instincts are more important. And they’d support that. But, just like with anyone I’d deem worthy to bring home to meet them, I know that once they got to know you, they’d love you.”

Unable to look at him when she’d asked the question, she rolled back on her side and took his hand, threading their fingers and pulling it to her chest. “What are your instincts saying?”

“That this is right. That for me, you’re right. And I know that we fit. We didn’t have the best of beginnings, but we’ve had one hell of a time since and I want to keep going and see where this ends.”

“I do too. I think I’m just scared of being used again or getting hurt when it does end. Because in my world it always ends.”

“You don’t think I’m scared too? I’m terrified. But to me, exploring this with you is worth it. And I promise you I am not like those other people in your past, and I think I’ve shown you that.” He pulled her against his chest and said against her neck, “I would never hurt you or Tessa.”

A foreign heaviness filled her chest and stung the back of her eyes. She wasn’t sure if she liked the feeling—she was scared it would stay, but terrified it would go away. But the more they talked, the more panicky she felt, until she began to question why she’d come out here.

To get him out of her system. Right!

“Then can we start the exploring portion of the evening now? I’m done talking,” she said, sliding his hand down the center of her cleavage, under the elastic waist on her bottoms, and placing his palm on her core. He paused, as if not sure how he felt about the abrupt change in direction, but he didn’t press her, and she liked him even more for it.

Sneaky man.

“It seems like I have been neglecting my duties,” he growled. “How long have you been like this?”

“Since you pulled out your big gun and saved me from the bad man,” she said.

He ran a finger down her center. “You liked being saved?”

“I know. It surprised me too.” It also ticked her off and he knew it by the way he chuckled.

“I like to surprise you,” he admitted. “Somehow I get the feeling that you haven’t had many good surprises in your life. That’s going to change.”

“Enough with the chitchat, Ranger.”

“When did I get downgraded from Agent to Ranger?”

“An agent would assess the situation and get to work. A ranger would talk to the tourists, the birds and bears, gab with just about anything that came across his path. Oh!” she yelped.

One minute she was on her side, the next her bottoms were on the floor, and she was kneeling over his face.

“Is this assessment correct?” he asked and, before she could answer, he buried his mouth in her slit.

Hands on her bare hips, fingers digging deliciously into her sides, he held her in place while he gorged and feasted. Kat let her head fall back and ran her hands over her breasts, the silk of her top creating an erotic sensation as she pinched her nipples.

She wasn’t shy about getting herself off or doing what needed to be done in the spirit of team play. Which was why when Nolan pushed his mouth up, she pressed down,

smothering him until he had to lift her hips to get oxygen. He drove her closer and closer to the edge, never letting up or slowing down. They created a rhythm that had her holding her breasts to keep them in place and causing a suction to start between the two of them.

“Nolan, I’m about to come,” she moaned, pinching her nipples tighter. Her fingers and toes tingled, her belly flipped, and that delicious heat started in her belly and moved south toward her core. She was about to detonate when suddenly all the pressure was removed and she was on her stomach with Nolan pressed up behind her, his erection in the crack of her ass.

“Why did you stop? I was almost there!”

“I never took you for someone who liked things to come easy. And, Kitten, you’re going to come so hard you’ll need to be lying down. Now get that pretty ass in the air.”

He gave her a cute little smack and she played along with him, lifting her butt. He placed a pillow under her stomach and pulled her right leg up to her side.

She heard the tear of a foil wrapper and then he was inside of her, and they both sighed in unison. It felt so good. Damn near perfect. Not that she’d admit it out loud. He might have put some of her worries to rest, but she was still holding back remnants of her heart—just in case.

She was no longer afraid that he’d hurt her—she’d believed every word he’d said. She was afraid that she’d still manage to somehow screw this up. Because that’s what Kat did. She made rash decisions and blew up her life, leaving a blast zone with a mile radius.

She couldn’t afford to do that anymore. Tessa—and now Nolan—were counting on her to get, and keep, her shit together. Make the right decisions, choose the right directions, spend time with the right kind of people.

She’d given her life a complete makeover, now she just needed to keep up with the maintenance.

“Hey,” he whispered in her ear, sending chills down her spine. “Where did you disappear to?”

That was a worry for another day. Today she was in the arms of a genuine, caring, and sexy as hell man who wanted all of her just how she was—crazy and all.

“I’m back now,” she said and pushed back so hard his balls slapped her underneath. She withdrew and did it again. It was his turn to be surprised, but he quickly caught on and they created a pace and friction that had them both revving their engines and going from zero to sixty in under six seconds flat.

Slick skin on slick skin, his chest rubbing up and down her back as he slid in and out, building the pressure to an all-time high. There was nowhere left but to fall.

“Nolan!” Kat screamed, her body tightening around him and her core coiled to the point of pain.

“Let go, babe. Just let go. I’ve got you.”

It was the gentle reassurance in his voice that turned what they were doing from sex into something much deeper in meaning. She felt water prick the corner of her eyes while these little somersaults happened in her chest. And then there was this feeling of free-falling without a chute. It was thrilling and terrifying and everything in-between, but, true to his word, he was there to catch her when she reached the bottom.

She heard him roar her name and thrust into her one last time and then everything went black while little lights danced behind her eyes. When she opened them, she was on her side, cuddled into Nolan. His arms were around her, their fingers interlaced, and there was nowhere else she wanted to be.

“Don’t bruise my peach,” Kat said.

“There you go with the dirty talk again,” Nolan said, slicing the peach into quarters and placing it onto the fruit plate he was assembling. She was scrambling up the eggs and making bacon, while he’d put on the coffee and offered to make the fruit salad.

It was usually awkward, that morning-after dance people did. He’d expected to play that game with Kat. Especially after how much she’d opened up to him last night. He’d expected her to retreat back inside herself and hide behind her shield of steel. But he’d awoken to the best blow job of his life, followed by her asking him to stay for breakfast. It was the polar opposite of how she’d been up until last night. It gave him hope.

And that made this thing between them pretty damn serious. She felt it too. He knew it. It was in the way she touched him this morning, cuddled up to him all night, even clung to him while they slept on the couch.

He wasn’t sure if she knew what she’d done in her sleep, but he knew. It said a lot for a woman who didn’t like to show emotions or feelings.

The coffee maker was done percolating, so he poured them both a cup, hers black without the frills. Just how she liked it.

He slid up behind her and caged her in, setting her mug on the counter in front of her. She smelled of tangled sheets, long nights, and the flowers that cover the Sierras during early spring. He wrapped his arms around her and curved his body to conform to hers.

She snatched up the coffee and took a big gulp of the steaming liquid. She hummed in ecstasy. She met his gaze over her shoulder. “You’d better be careful. You’re walking a fine line into good guy territory.”

“I don’t mind coming last as long as you come first, remember? And if I remember correctly, you came first all six times.”

She turned in his arms and circled his neck. “That’s what happens when you date a ballbuster. We take what we want, when we want it, without apology.”

Nolan slid his hands around to her front and between the gap in her fuzzy house robe to the teal silky stuff beneath. “What do you want right now?”

“You’re the special agent. Assess and get moving.”

Without another thought, Nolan dropped to his knees and looked up at her. Even with bed-tousled hair and not a speck of makeup, she looked beautiful. “Yes, ma’am.”

He reached for her belt, and she shook her finger. “Uh uh. With your teeth.”

He flashed his sexiest grin, and she lifted a brow in challenge, and it reminded him of their first kiss in the bar, only the roles were reversed. Then he thanked God for second chances. Without that he wouldn’t be standing in the kitchen with the woman he was pretty sure he’d fallen in love with.

“I bet I can do it with my hands behind my back and my eyes closed,” he said, upping the difficulty level higher than Kat’s had been.

“Just remember I did it in under twenty seconds,” she bragged. “The clock starts now.”

Nolan didn't waste a second. He knew the bottom of the tie was right near her center and he could find her delicious core like there was a homing beacon on it. On instinct he found it and, parting the fabric with his nose, placed an open-mouthed kiss right on her kitty cat.

She threw her head back and laughed, holding her robe to her tummy. The sound was like music.

“No one likes a bragger, Nolan.” She was still chuckling. “No one.”

“But everyone loves some good oral.”

“And you think you can weasel out of this deal by tempting me with oral, then you're—”

Knock. Knock. Knock.

Kat went completely still. All the laughter left her and when he looked up, she was clutching her bathrobe belt like it was the only thing holding the Earth on its axis.

“What if someone saw us?”

“Kitten. They'd have to be in the backyard.” He stood and peeked around. “We're in the clear.”

Knock. Knock. Knock.

“Well, someone knows.” The panic was very real. “The cat's out of the bag. This is bad. Really bad.”

While he didn't like to be called bad, he understood her fear. Understood what was at stake for her. And what she perceived the issue and problems to be.

“Why don't you just go answer the door.”

“What if we pretend we aren't home?” she whispered.

“It's your call,” he said, and like a dumb-ass, he tried to stand and knocked over a chair. It clattered to the ground, sounding like a semiautomatic going off at a firing range.

She threw her hands over her face, about as inconspicuous as Charlie Brown hiding behind a tree.

“Hello?” came from the front porch.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

“Ohmygod,” Kat said in one low breath. “It’s Ms. Woods. The social worker.”

She looked at her silky pj’s, then at him in nothing but boxer-briefs and a hard-on, and sheer panic lit her face. He’d never seen her so scared.

“You can’t be here. You can’t. If she sees you...” She looked at his erection. Then covered it with her hands. “Put that away.”

He tilted his head down to meet her gaze. “Kat, this is going to be okay. I will go hide in the bedroom while you answer the door and see what she wants.”

“She wants to take my sister away. And today she’s going to get her wish because I completely spaced and it’s the home inspection. So there *is* nowhere to hide.” She looked around frantically, clocked all six foot three of him, eyed the cupboard, refrigerator, and under the table, then spotted the pantry. “You are going in here.”

“I can slip out the back.”

“It will be too loud. And you’re naked! Someone might see you. Now don’t say a word.” She shoved him toward the door.

He looked inside. “Kitten, I won’t fit in there.” It would be like trying to shove a shark into a sardine can.

“For me, can you at least try?” she whispered, and she was so close to tears he couldn’t help but try to cram his too-big frame into the child-sized space.

“You bet.” Without so much as a kiss, he felt two hands shoving at his back. If she weren’t so upset, he’d laugh at being manhandled into a closet while half naked. Before he could get the last part of his right leg in, she slammed the door on his shin.

“Ow!” he muttered.

The door swung open. “Not a word. You know what? Don’t even breathe. And here.” She thrust his coffee mug at him, then quietly shut the door.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

“Coming,” he heard her call out. A moment later the front door opened. There were muffled voices and greetings.

“I wasn’t expecting you until ten.”

“It’s five till. Would you like me to go wait in my car until ten on the dot?”

“That’s silly. Please, come in. I was just making us coffee and fruit and didn’t get around to changing. Shall I—?”

He could hear the stress in her voice.

“Don’t worry, this will be a quick meeting. In and out, I promise. Casual and as you’d normally be on an average Saturday morning.”

“Average Saturday, right. Well, I’m in my pj’s, so I bet that counts as casual.”

“It will go down as the most casual home visit to date.”

“Are you writing that down on your form?” Kat asked.

“Just putting the date, dear.”

The way it was said had undertones of judgment, as if she’d expected Kat to screw this up. She had been right all this time and he’d acted as if she was a conspiracy theorist who thought everyone was out to get her. He’d honestly believed that people would give her a fair shot.

That wasn’t what was going on here. And that pissed him off. He made a mental note to look into Ms. Woods and see how many times she recommended guardianship to a sibling over putting the child in the system.

“Is your father back yet?” Ms. Woods asked.

He could feel Kat’s hesitation even through the door. “Is that relevant?”

He had the same question. If Abe were in the picture, then Kat wouldn't be in this situation.

"It would help your case if he was in touch."

He winced. Nolan knew Abe was hard to get a hold of and worked weeks on end, but he assumed Abe was helping with the case, not hindering it. So essentially Kat was doing this alone. That was news to him.

"Tessa shouldn't be punished for my dad's absence," Kat said, and he knew she was crossing her arms, calling on her inner ballbuster. *Atta girl!*

"Is Tessa here?"

"She had a sleepover at a friend of mine's. She's working on a photography project for school."

There was an elongated silence.

"Why are you writing that down?" Kat asked.

"Just taking notes. Shall we move into the kitchen?"

"Um, well, sure," she said, all bright and cheery and guilty as hell.

He could see two shadows move between the slats of the pantry door. One was Kat, who leaned against the counter, her right leg shaking with nerves like ants were crawling down it. The other was a smaller and rounder form, who sat at the table.

"Would you mind getting us some coffee, perhaps?" Ms. Woods asked.

"Sure, but wouldn't you like to see Tessa's room or her study area? I turned my dad's old bedroom into a space for Tessa to study and hang out with friends."

Ms. Woods stopped her scribbles. "So your father isn't home enough to warrant his own room?"

He watched as Kat ran a hand down her neck. "This is why I am seeking guardianship of Tessa. So she can have the consistency of growing up in her own home, surrounded by family who loves her."

Ms. Woods made a few more scribbles and Nolan wanted to rip the pen out of her hand and stab her with it. There were so many ways people in authority could handle situations, and this was one of the worst he'd seen. Then again, he'd been the one to bring a bunch of kids to the drunk tank to get intel on a single perp. So who was he to judge?

But Nolan had no idea the scrutiny Kat was under. No one asked other people if they were fit to be parents, and yet Kat was doing her damndest to give her sister a stable home and was getting reamed for every infraction. He'd asked the same kind of invasive questions on calls, but he'd never been on this side of it. On the emotional and personal side.

"As for the sleepover, it's with a trustworthy friend. I dropped her off myself."

"I called your employer and was notified that you are no longer working at Bigfoot's," Ms. Woods said.

And here was a bright spot in the story.

"I'm still working at Sierra Vista Lodge."

"I was told by an anonymous source that you were let go for getting into a fight."

Anonymous, his ass. It was R. J. or his father. The little prick.

"That's not the whole story," Kat insisted.

"You need to be making smarter decisions now."

"And I'm working in the IT department at the lodge now, and it pays enough so that I don't have to work at the bar, so I can be around more. Do family dinners every night and things like that."

Kat was grasping at straws to present what a normal family would look like. He knew what one was because he'd lived it. But it was becoming clear that they'd had very different childhoods. And that broke his heart.

"How do you take your coffee?" Kat asked.

“Oh, none for me. I just figured you’d want some while I take a look around the house.”

Kat straightened. “You want to look at my home? By yourself?”

Hold it together, baby. Act like you have nothing to hide.

“It’s standard. We like to see the home in a natural state without feeling as if we have someone looking over our shoulder. Is that okay with you?”

“Sure.” Kat flapped a noncommittal hand.

The second Ms. Woods left the room Kat’s head dropped to her chest, as if she were scolding herself. Ripping herself a new one because she’d been dealt the worst social worker on the planet. His heart broke for her.

But instead of breaking down, she did the most surprising thing. She walked over to the pantry and rested her forehead against the door and closed her eyes. Lifting her hands, she put her palms flush against the door and wiggled her fingers through the slats. He immediately met her halfway, lacing his fingertips with hers.

They stood like that, silently connecting, until Ms. Woods’s heels clicked on the front room tile and into the kitchen. By the time she walked in, Kat was sitting at the table, drinking her coffee like a boss bitch.

“Find what you needed?”

“I’ll just need your new boss’s name and contact info. We need to dot all the *i*’s and cross all the *t*’s. And again, a letter from Abe would go a long way.”

Kat rose to stand and the older woman waved her off. “I can see myself out.”

Kat released a deep breath when the front door shut with a *click*. She walked to the counter where her shoulders sank in on themselves. Without a word, he exited the pantry and came up behind her, wrapping his arms around her middle, pulling her back into him.

“How much did you hear?” she asked after a moment of silence.

“Enough.”

“I’m sorry I locked you in the pantry. I just freaked out. God, I am so screwing this up.”

“No, you aren’t. That woman is setting you up to fail. It’s like she already had her mind made up before stepping in here.”

“She was the social worker who worked my parents’ case when I was young. She left me in the home with my mom. Three months later, my mom ran off with some guy from church and my dad was in a rage. The first time I saw Ms. Woods with regard to this whole Tessa thing she told me it was a mistake she’ll never make again.”

“Well I’m going to do some digging into her background to see what I can find.”

She spun around in his arms. “No! I don’t want you to do something that could get you fired. And I don’t want you to do something that could ruin my case.”

“I’d never do anything to ruin your case.”

“**Y**ou have to come clean,” Gemma said through the phone’s screen, and Kat could see the seriousness in her face. “With Tessa *and* with Nolan.”

Kat looked out the window at the light spring drizzle painting the driveway with tiny specks of water. It was a gloomy day that matched the dark cloud hanging over her life.

“They will kill me,” Kat said, but she knew Gemma was telling it like it was. That was why she’d confessed to her friend about talking to R. J.’s exes, because Gemma always went straight to the heart of things. And that was the kind advice Kat needed right now.

Kat had done the deed and now it was confession time. She’d had lunch with R. J.’s third ex and it was the same story. But she hadn’t signed an NDA, hadn’t taken the money, and was willing to sing—like Adele in Madison Square Garden.

She’d confirmed everything Kat believed about that bag of dicks. And more.

“At first, but then it will bring you closer, I promise. Last night, when Tessa slept over, I got the feeling that all she wants is your honesty. After all the people in her world have

lied to her and let her down, she just wants to know that you aren't like the rest.”

Kat stared right into the screen with a stern face. “I’m not.”

Gemma’s expression softened. “I know, but she doesn’t. And she won’t until you show her again and again. She reminds me of another stubborn, hard to break, hard to trust Rhodes.”

If only that were still true. Because someone had broken through her walls. He’d done a spectacular B&E, sneaking past all her defenses, accessing the darkest and softest parts of her soul. And, more concerning, her heart. He owned it hook, line, and sinker—not that she would ever tell him and give him that kind of power over her. She was leaving after all, headed back to MIT, giving her a little over a year to screw this up. And even if she managed to not screw things up, there was no way they’d survive long distance.

Then again, he’d been pretty convincing last night. But he didn’t know just what he was stepping into. Dating her was difficult. He was so inflexible when it came to right and wrong, and Kat tended to flex just to prove that she could. Yet there was still a part of her that wanted to try.

He’d said he’d never hurt her, all she had to do was trust in that. It would be hard, but could she at least give it a try? Was he worth the risk?

Her heart said *Yes*. Her brain said *Get out while you still can*.

But could she? Still get out? Or was she already in too deep? She guessed the next few hours would prove that, now wouldn’t they. How he reacted to the truth of what she’d done would determine if they had a future or if, once again, her hot-headedness was too much to handle. She wouldn’t blame him if he ran. What guy would stick around after learning she’d illegally hacked into the sheriff’s department? Especially a man who lived his life by the letter of the law, like Nolan?

She looked at Gemma. “What if I tell Tess but skip the whole Nolan part?”

“What was the point of doing everything you did? Sneaking around behind everyone’s back to meet with these women if not to share the information you got?”

“This is where doing the right thing can lead to serious repercussions, huh?”

“Yup. But it was the right thing to do, and so is confessing,” Gemma said. “It’s like when my marriage was falling apart. I knew David would never leave me and letting him go was the right thing to do even though it would destroy what was left of my heart. But I still let him go.”

“And your heart?” Kat asked, because her friend rarely, if ever, brought up that time in her life.

“It’s still shattered, but I think it would have been anyway, even if he was still with me. It just would have added guilt and sadness to the package knowing he didn’t want to be in the marriage anymore and that being around me reminded him of Sydney. My grief was so strong after losing her, that it still takes me under some days. Releasing him from that heaviness was the right thing to do, but the repercussions for me are still paralyzing sometimes.”

Kat knew this about her friend. There were days that Gemma couldn’t even leave the house she was so riddled with loss. But the way she showed up for her friends, you’d never know it. She hid the worst of it from the world, so most of the town thought she’d moved on from losing her daughter, but Kat doubted she’d ever move on completely.

“You know I’m here for you.”

“Just like I’ll be here for you for when you come clean.”

“Hypothetically what would happen if I didn’t? With Nolan.”

Because she could already hear his lecture—and see his disappointment. And she’d be putting him in a position where he’d have to choose her over the responsibilities of his job. And she wasn’t sure who would win out.

“The girl said he was selling drugs. Drugs like the kind Nolan found at that cabin. You have to tell him. It could give

them the evidence he needs to arrest R. J. Isn't that what you want?"

Kat hopped up on the kitchen counter with a loud groan. "Yes. You're right. I'll tell him the next time I see him."

"Tell me what?" Nolan said from the kitchen doorway.

He was armed to the teeth and dressed in his uniform which displayed his biceps and abs beautifully, which meant he'd come directly here before going to his place to change. Then she saw his duffel bag at his feet and it all became suffocatingly real.

He was actually moving in.

Sure, he'd said he was, after she saw that guy creeping around her house, but she'd only half believed him. Now that it was a real thing, she felt all clammy and short of breath.

"What's that?" she asked, unable to take her gaze off the bag, staring at it as if it were a ticking time bomb with only five seconds left and counting down.

His upper lip tilted at the corner. "Just what it looks like. The question you should be asking is where you think I'm going to put it. At the foot of your bed or at the foot of the couch."

"My vote is the bedroom," Gemma said, and since she was on FaceTime her voice carried through the kitchen.

"Thanks for the support," he said with a big-ass grin.

"You're welcome. And I am also voting for Milly who seconds that."

"Goodbye." Kat hung up. Then to Nolan, "What are you doing here so early?"

"I just got off. And I thought I made myself pretty clear last night. Until we figure out what's going on, we're like glue. Either I stay here or you and Tessa move in with me."

"I am *not* moving in with him," Tessa said stubbornly, and Kat jumped. Gemma could have at least given her a head's up that her sister was on her way home.

There in the doorway, with her backpack on and arms crossed stubbornly, stood Tessa. “Why is the ranger here?”

“I’m not a ranger. I’m a federal law enforcement agent.”

Tessa crossed the kitchen, dropped her backpack on the counter, and opened the fridge. “Whatever. Give him a doughnut and maybe he’ll go away.”

He looked at Kat and raised a brow. Like, *you want to tell her or do you want me to?* This was a mess.

Kat ushered them to the table. “Let’s all take a seat and have a family meeting.”

“He isn’t family and I have homework.”

Kat sighed. This wasn’t going to plan. Then again, she didn’t have a plan and that was part of the problem, she was realizing. “This is serious, we need to talk.”

Tessa rolled her eyes so hard Kat was shocked they didn’t fall out. “You had your chance to talk about this and you blew it. So we can keep secrets from each other. Good to know. Later.”

Tessa started to leave, but Nolan stuck out his arm stopping her. “You want the truth? Last night there was a near break-in. Someone was in your shed, so I stayed here to make sure your sister was okay.”

Tessa’s eyes went wide with a combination of fear and concern. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I checked this morning and nothing was taken,” Kat said.

“You checked?” Nolan snapped. “By yourself? Jesus, anyone could have been out there.”

Kat ignored this and continued speaking to Tessa. “You were at Gemma’s and it’s hard to talk to you when you’re always locking yourself in your room or storming off. But you’re right, I should have called you and told you this morning. In the future I will tell you everything.”

“Like how he’s moving in,” Tessa said with a face that looked like she’d just bitten into a lemon.

“He’s sleeping on the couch. It’s temporary,” Kat said and, even though she knew that was not the answer Nolan wanted to hear, he didn’t even flinch. “Just until we figure out who was in the backyard and why.”

“It will be like I’m not even here,” Nolan said.

Tessa looked Nolan up and down, took in his enormity, and snorted. “Right. Well, if that’s it, I have homework.”

Tessa stood again and Kat placed her hand on Tessa’s but didn’t say a word. When Tessa lifted a single brow in question, Kat added, “There’s more.” She glanced at Nolan and gave him a look that she hoped he interpreted as an apology. “I met with someone today and it affects both of you.”

“O-kay,” Tessa drawled out.

Nolan remained silent, but she watched as his Sherlock Holmes skills kicked in.

“I met with a woman named Noelle. She’s actually the third woman I’ve met with recently who once dated R. J.”

“What?” they said at the same time.

“Why are you spying on my boyfriend?” Tessa asked at the same time Nolan said, “You promised to leave it alone!”

“One, you told me he wasn’t your boyfriend, and you would stay away from him,” she said to Tessa. She sent Nolan a glare scathing enough to make his balls disappear. “And two, just because you’re sleeping on my couch, Nolan Carmichael, doesn’t give you control over my person. And shouldn’t you guys be asking what I found out? Like how all three girls said he was a bully and emotionally controlling. He never hit them, but he was rough with them. Noelle said he gaslit her all the time, making her feel as if she were always screwing up.”

“For the record,” Tessa said angrily, “he told me about Noelle and she’s a nut job. She totally stalks him on Insta. So if that is the proof you have, then I am out of here.” Tessa stood. “Nice talk. And so much for trust between sisters!”

“Tessa, come back.”

The slamming of the door was her response.

Kat rested her head on her hands. “I am messing everything up.”

“You’re not.” He ran his fingers through the hair at the base of her neck and massaged her spine. “That was just a lot of information to digest at once. And I was a part of that. I’m sorry, I figured you’d already told her or I wouldn’t have come over until later. I should have called first.”

“I should have told her first thing. I just wanted to do it in person.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about meeting with these women?” So much for helping her relax.

“Because then I’d have to tell you how I learned about them,” Kat said with a too-bright smile.

Nolan pressed his palm to his eye socket. “Kitten, please tell me you didn’t hack into the sheriff’s department.”

“Okay, then I won’t tell you.”

He lifted his head, his eyes pleading.

“It’s not my fault they need stronger security walls. If you want, I can hack into their system and show you where their weaknesses are.”

“Did you just confess to an officer that you hacked into a law enforcement database? You could lose your job at the county, which means losing your health care! Or worse.”

“If I don’t convince her that R. J. is trouble, I could lose my sister.” After their morning with Ms. Woods, how was he not seeing the seriousness of the situation?

He ran a hand down his face. “Kitten, you could lose her anyway, doing something like this! Do you have any idea the sentence something like this can carry?”

“I’m too good. They’ll never even know I was there. I might not have graduated, but I was top of my class at MIT. I have the college debt to prove it. And it was also how I found two claims of domestic abuse from R. J.’s exes. After some more digging, I was told that they were paid off by his dad to drop their charges,” Kat said.

“You stole witness information from a sealed case file and reached out to them? Talk about invasion of privacy. I’m not even allowed to do that!”

“Well, it paid off. One girl didn’t sign an NDA. Noelle. She also said that when she was with R. J., he sold drugs. He was working with a bigger supplier, and she was hesitant at first, but then said she’d be willing to talk to you. Off the record. You said you needed proof, she’s your proof.”

He stood so quickly his chair tumbled backward. “I can’t use any of it!”

“Why not?”

“The info was obtained illegally. Not to mention I’d have to explain how I got it, which would mean I’d have to turn you in.” He spun around, his eyes lit with fury. “Do you have any idea what you’ve done?”

“I thought I was helping.” The minute she said it, she knew it was a lie. She’d done it because she’d wanted to, repercussions be damned. She was mad—at herself. So she did whatever she did when she was mad at herself—she deflected.

“Things like this is why you guys can’t find your head from your asses.”

He shook his head sadly. “Things like this is why you’re going to end up losing Tessa. And it won’t be because of your mom or your dad or your past. It will be because you can’t stand to ask for help. Your inability to trust will cost you what you love the most.”



It was two in the morning and Nolan hadn't slept a wink. He couldn't erase the image of Kat's face crumbling at his statement. He'd terrified her with the truth. Broken her heart with a single sentence. Every insecurity she'd shared with him he'd used against her because he was scared himself.

Scared of what could happen to Kat if anyone found out about what she'd done. A few weeks ago, he would not have even hesitated at turning her in, but not now. Now he knew that sometimes people did stupid things out of desperation. And no one was hurt in the act.

He had, on occasion, looked up boyfriends of his sister to vet out the losers. The only difference was he carried a badge. The violation of privacy was the same.

Jesus, look at him justifying breaking the law. What the hell had happened to him? His moral compass had always pointed due north. But with Kat he was starting to see that the law didn't always work the same for everyone as intended. He didn't endorse breaking them, but he understood why Kat found the need to stretch a few from time to time. It was how she'd survived this long.

Something shifted in the air and his spidey senses went on high alert. It wasn't Kat, her footsteps were heavier. And it wasn't Tiny Dancer. Nolan had fixed the pen's lock so he couldn't bust out of it anymore.

He heard another footstep coming closer. The person was intentionally walking lightly, trying to make themselves as

small and as quiet as possible—while walking on wooden sticks.

Nolan grabbed his gun and was about to slide from the couch into the shadows when he smelled it. Pleather, overly sweet perfume, and hairspray.

Tessa.

She rounded the corner and made a beeline for the back door.

Nolan stashed the gun and shook his head. Amateur. “Next time put your heels on after you get outside.”

She jumped, but then collected herself and feigned boredom. “What are you going to do, arrest me?”

“If you hang out with R. J. Locke much longer, the answer’s probably going to be a yes.”

“Why are you going after R. J. so hard? Why can’t you just leave him alone?”

“Because he keeps breaking the law. Did you know he’s been arrested five times? Three times for assault, and a few times for possession of an illegal substance,” he said repeating information that was classified. There he was, acting as bad as Kat.

“He’s never hurt me.”

“He hurt your sister.”

Tessa lifted a slim shoulder and let it fall. “That was an accident.”

“Is that what R. J. told you? Are you really going to believe some guy over your sister?”

“I don’t know.”

“Really? You don’t know? That’s your takeaway? Your sister loves you. She’s given up a lot so that you two could stay together, but you’re not making it easy on her.”

“She’s the one who’s not easy.”

“Are you kidding? She works two jobs, takes care of you, is keeping this house afloat. She does all that for you.”

He could see his words start to permeate her brain. Man, R. J. had done one hell of a job on her. What was it about that kid that allowed him to charm the hell out of the ladies. He watched Tessa slink back to her room, and could only hope that when it came down to it, she'd do the right thing.

Kat had woken up somewhere between pissed off and scared. Pissed off because of what Nolan had said and scared because it was true. There was also a bit of ache in there that he'd said it knowing it would hurt her—and it had.

Sure, she'd made one of her usual snarky remarks, but his were intended to leave marks. She had never seen that side of him and she didn't like it. Then again, nothing he'd said was wrong, and he hadn't said it in a cruel fashion.

Her first thought had been to send him packing, but she'd grown over the past few weeks and instead of popping off, she'd let herself sleep on it and she was glad that she had because now she was starting to wonder if his statement was that big of a deal.

It hadn't been so much as a blast to her heart as it had been to her ego. It rattled the chip she wore so proudly on her shoulder, like a direct hit in the game of Battleship. Enough to grab her attention but not enough to sink her.

He could have turned her in—he hadn't. He could have lectured her all night—he hadn't. He could have removed himself from the situation—he hadn't. In fact, the only thing he had done was given her the blunt truth. She just hadn't

wanted to hear it at a time when she'd already felt vulnerable and exposed—like a loser.

And now instead of walking into his office to apologize, because he'd been gone all day, she was walking into the boardroom to deliver what was going to be a blow to the entire family—but especially Nolan.

Unable to sleep last night, she'd worked on uncovering the doctored invoices and she'd found her thief. At least the one who worked at the lodge. And while it didn't surprise Kat, she knew it would break Nolan's heart. Lucas had wanted to call a meeting as soon as she told him she had the information, even though it was a Sunday. This couldn't wait.

As Kat walked into the boardroom, her gaze immediately went to Nolan's, and by the bloodshot eyes and lines bracketing his mouth, she knew he hadn't slept much either. That gave her comfort. The situation meant enough to him to keep him awake too.

She gave him an encouraging smile and he smiled back. But it was not encouraging in the slightest. Had she blown it by being rash? She was going to apologize and tell him that she wasn't going to give up. In fact, she was more determined than ever to stick it out.

Lucas waved her in. Kat closed the door behind her and said, "I have something to tell you all that you aren't going to like."

She sat down but held the iPad to her chest. Nolan was still watching her but hadn't said a word. It was as if the room was holding its breath waiting for him to speak, and when he didn't, Brynn sent him a strange look.

Filling the silence, she asked, "Does it have to do with the iPad you're clutching?"

"I've only been on this job for a week, and I've really liked it, but I just found something that's going to make you want to fire me." Her cheeks went pink and she swallowed hard. "I, uh, I think I found out who's behind the missing inventory and

supplies. And who's been screwing with the system and going into guest records."

Her gaze swung around the table back to Nolan. "It's Eli."

Nolan had zero reaction.

"How can you be sure it's him?" Brynn asked in an argumentative tone.

"I looked at the schedule and everyone who was working when the stuff went missing and the system was accessed. There were only three people who crossed over at every time, and Eli is the only one who had enough access to do it."

It was as if the air had been sucked out of the room at the news. Every face was lit with shocked disbelief. Every face except one. Nolan.

She didn't expect him to believe her, but she'd hoped that he would. Which was why she'd brought hard proof.

"You don't have to believe me, but if you'll just take a look at these..." She cast her tablet's screen to the flatscreen on the boardroom wall. A spreadsheet of employee work times correlating with the break-ins sat side by side.

Nolan's eyes never wavered. "I don't need to look."

She felt her heart sink. Was he going to outright dismiss her work because of yesterday and her slipup in judgment?

"I can assure you that all of this info was gathered legally," she explained.

"I never had any doubt," he said. "I believe you."

"You do?" she whispered.

"Yeah, Kat, I do."

A warmth slid through her like the rising sun heating the shadows beneath a canopy of pines. "Why?"

"Because after last night I learned that even when it gets hard, you'll never keep something from me. You're good at your job. If you say it's true, it's true."

A shy uncertainty came over her at the unexpected and foreign praise.

“Which is why, while you were digging into this last night, I called in a favor with a buddy of mine at the DA’s office to get R. J.’s juvie file unsealed. Eli’s offenses get worse. Guess who was R. J.’s arresting officer in all three drug charges?”

“Eli?” Jax asked.

Kat clutched the tablet to her chest again. “You listened to me?”

“I might not always agree with your methods, but I will always listen to you and try to see your side. And that’s what I should have said last night.”

“What happened last night?” Brynn practically giggled, resting her chin on her steepled fingers and batting her lashes.

“Yeah,” Milly butted in. “What happened?”

“Nothing that’s anyone’s business and it’s going to stay that way until after the custody hearing,” Nolan said with so much authority, a delicious shiver when down Kat’s spine. She liked this bossy, authoritarian side of him. Maybe he could use it in the bedroom sometime.

As if reading her mind, he smiled. A wicked smile, then he winked, and her thighs clenched. She watched as his smile faded, as if just realizing what she’d said, and he stood. “You didn’t think I’d believe you?”

“It was fifty-fifty. He was your partner, after all.”

“We’ll have to circle back to what I’m doing wrong that you’d think this way, but right now I need to go find Eli. He has some explaining to do.”

Kat jumped to her feet and rushed around the table, blocking his exit. “Please, don’t go alone.”

“I might have a Superman complex, but I know when to call in Batman and Wonder Woman.”



An hour later, Kat found herself at the bar with Milly and Brynn, all three of them anxiously waiting to hear something, anything, from Nolan. But he'd gone radio silent. Jax had assured them it was because they were creating a task force, getting their ducks in a row, and acquiring the right warrants to arrest a former agent.

It was a tricky situation and they needed to do it quietly and by the books.

As far as Kat was concerned, a swift kick to the nuts followed by cuffing him to the back of Bette Davis to be dragged through town as a guy who makes drugs to sell to kids should be the first steps of justice.

"I can't believe Eli would do that to my fam..." Brynn sucked in a sharp breath, placing her hand over her heart. She breathed again and again it was cut short.

"You okay?" Milly asked, placing her hand over Brynn's.

"Fine," Brynn said, but she didn't look fine. "Just heartburn. Too much pizza earlier. Now stop fussing, you're as bad as Jax."

Milly put her hands in the air in surrender. "I won't fuss, as long as you promise me that if it starts to hurt, you'll tell me."

"Pinkie swear."

There was an exchange of glances that led Kat to believe that Brynn would rather suffer a heart attack alone than worry her family any further. Brynn shot Kat a *Help me* look. Kat

didn't know much about Brynn's heart issue, but she knew what it felt like to be cornered so she said, "Nolan looked really upset earlier."

With a *thank you!* in her eyes, Brynn gleefully took the change in subject. "I'm not surprised. Eli has been like a part of the family for years. When he got hurt, Nolan took it hard. Even gave him a job when his security team was already full. I can't believe he took advantage of our trust."

"I had no idea the connection went so deep," Kat said, feeling all kinds of protective feels for Nolan in that moment.

"This is a huge betrayal to Nolan. He needed another betrayal like he needed a hole in his head. He's been misled and lied to so many times by the people he loves," Brynn said.

Her heart ached for him. She hated that he'd gone through this and she, more than anyone, knew what it was like to be let down by the people who claim to love you.

"Which is why I have to ask, what's going on between you and my brother? I know you aren't typically a relationship kind of girl, while my brother has relationship in his DNA. We all do."

And here she'd thought his family was cheering for them.

"Don't worry, we aren't even in R-word territory. Couldn't hurt him if I tried," Kat said.

Her heart was in R-word territory, even if her head told her not to be. But no one would believe them even if she told them because, to the people of Sierra Vista, Kat was still a one-night wonder.

Brynn reached over the table and took her hand. "It's not like that. I think you are the best thing to happen to Nolan."

"Really?"

Brynn gave a soft smile. "Really. I just know how much he cares for you, and I don't want to see him hurt again."

"If anyone's going to get hurt here, it's going to be me," Kat said honestly.

“Nolan would never hurt anyone,” Brynn assured her.

“And Kat would never hurt him,” Milly jumped in to defend Kat, which warmed Kat’s heart. She’d never had many people rush to defend her. But when it came to Milly and Gemma, they were the Three Musketeers, all for one and one for all.

In Kat’s life words mattered, but so many people threw them around when they weren’t true. Nolan was more of an action guy, and his actions showed her that he cared for her.

Her phone rang and she pulled it out of her purse. “It’s Tessa.” Her alarm bells went off. “She’s supposed to be at cheer practice.” She answered. “Hey, sis.”

“Thanks for calling,” Tessa said, a weird undertone to her voice. “What do you want?”

“You just called me.”

“Oh no, I’m just hanging out here with R. J.”

Kat went into protector mode. Something was up and she immediately fished her keys out of her pocket. “Are you okay?”

“No. No, not at all. In fact, the turtle got out this morning.”

Kat’s heart dropped. Those were the code words she’d given Tessa when she’d been younger to use in an emergency.

“Where are you?” Kat asked.

“At home.”

She covered the phone and looked at Brynn. “Call Nolan and tell him Tess is in trouble. She’s at home and R. J. is there.” Then back to Tessa, “Put the phone in your pocket and leave it on. I’ll be with you the whole time.”



Kat parked her car three houses down the street, wanting to be as incognito as possible. She needed access to the backyard to be in striking range before R. J. had a chance to make a move.

She raced up the street, sure to stay on the front lawns so as not to make a sound. By the time she made it to her house she was soaked with sweat—partly from exertion but mostly from fear. Fear was a powerful motivator.

So many what ifs spun through her mind like the tilt-a-whirl at the state fair. Like what if she'd been firmer with Tessa about R. J., would they be in this situation? What if he hurt her? What if he was there to get back at Kat by using Tessa? What if she said no and he got rough with her?

On the way, she'd strained her ears to listen to their convo through the phone, but a lot of it was muffled by Tessa's pocket. She'd pick up words here and there. From what Kat could piece together, Tessa had forgotten her cheer shoes and come home to get them, surprising R. J., who was sneaking around in the yard.

Had he been the one in the shed? And why?

“Why don't I give you a ride to practice and then after I'll pick you up and we can go to dinner. Pizza or maybe the Brown Bear Diner?”

“That sounds nice, but I am not really feeling all that well. I don't think I'm going to go back to practice after all,” Tessa

said, her voice shaking, and Kat prayed for her to hold it together. Just until she could come up with a plan.

Kat peeked her head around the corner of the house.

Shit. Tessa had her arms wrapped around her stomach like it was all that was holding her together. And R. J. was just a few feet away. Close enough to grab her if things got sketchy. So while Kat wanted to get her sister, it was better to stay hidden until things changed.

“Then why don’t you let me tuck you in.”

“No!” Tessa said, taking a step back.

“What’s up with you?” R. J. said, sounding suspicious.

“I told you. I don’t feel well.”

He took another step forward and Tessa jumped back, confirming R. J.’s suspicion. He grabbed Tessa’s arm. “Looks like you’ve been talking to your bitch sister. I heard she’s been asking about me around town. You believe her, baby?”

“No.” Her tone was a clear yes.

He jerked her closer and Tessa yelped with fear.

Time was up. Nolan wasn’t going to make it. Besides, Kat had never needed to wait for a man. She was a bad-ass ballbuster who didn’t hit like a girl, threw punches like a pro.

Kat stepped out from the shadows and puffed up to her full size. “Let her go,” she demanded in her scariest voice.

“You called her?” R. J. hissed at Tessa. “What happened to believing in me? You saw me in the shed, didn’t you?”

“She didn’t see anything. And even if she did, we won’t say a word,” Kat said, lifting her hands in peace and slowly walking toward her sister.

“I’m sorry,” Tessa whispered to Kat.

“It’s going to be okay,” Kat reassured her. “Right, R. J.? Everything is going to be okay.”

“Stop moving,” R. J. said.

Kat kept moving, but slowed her pace.

“I said stop!” he shouted.

And that’s when things went to shit.

Before Kat knew what was happening, the sun glistened off the metal barrel of a gun that R. J. pulled from the back of his waistband. He still had one hand on Tessa and the other on his gun—a gun she’d bet the house was Eli’s.

“Whoa. Okay, I’m not moving.”

R. J. was clearly amped up on adrenaline and unsure of his next move because he kept swinging the gun between the sisters, his twitchy finger on the trigger. Whatever he’d been looking for, clearly he hadn’t anticipated anyone being home. He was in way over his head, and he was starting to see that. Desperation crept up his expression like the acid in Kat’s stomach. Desperate men did desperate things.

“Just point that thing at me,” Kat said, sounding like she’d put on her big girl panties that morning when all she really wanted to do was go back to bed and hide. But she needed to be strong—show no fear. “And let my sister go.”

When he looked confused, and panic filled his eyes, Kat lifted her hands higher to make herself the bigger target. She’d take a bullet if it meant her sister got away. Her tactic worked because he kept the weapon pointed at Kat.

“Now let us go. Right now, nothing has happened. You can walk and no one will be the wiser. We won’t say a thing.”

He seemed to contemplate this for a moment, sweat dotting his forehead as if he’d never in a million years imagined this scenario. His arm was shaking and he kept blinking like the scenery would somehow change. He wiped a hand over his forehead and Kat saw her moment.

“Run!” Kat screamed.

Tessa yanked her arm free and raced away from R. J. while Kat ran forcefully into danger. Going at full tilt, she lowered her shoulder and prepared for impact. When she made contact with his chest, it felt as if she’d slammed into a brick wall, but she blasted him with enough power to send him tumbling

backward onto his ass, cracking his head on the ground and sending the gun flying backward.

Kat took the element of surprise to leap onto him and sucker punch him right in the nose. It felt like hitting a boulder, but it was followed by a loud *crack* and a piercing “Fucking bitch!”

She’d busted his nose—and her hand in the process.

R. J. recoiled his arm and went in for a swing, but Kat dodged most of the blow with her elbow. She still saw stars for a moment but kept her bearings long enough to deliver a swift knee to the nuts that had R. J. rolling over in agony. It was in that split second that Kat scrambled toward the gun, sharp gravel cutting into her knees and palms.

A rough hand clamped down on her ankle, yanking her back with a searing pain, but she kicked with her other foot, making contact with, well, she wasn’t sure, but R. J.’s shout let her know she’d hit a tender spot. She didn’t hesitate and crawled forward another few feet and snatched the gun, rolling over and aiming it at his head right as he’d regained his bearings and stood over her like a WWE champion readying to deliver a smackdown.

He moved as if to lunge at her and she held the gun with both hands to steady it, since her right hand was likely broken.

“I will shoot and you know it,” Kat said, not even flinching at the idea of taking the life of someone who was considering taking her sister’s.

“Back up and lay on your belly,” she ordered. Then to her sister, “Tessa, get some rope from Grandpa’s fishing box.”

Kat kicked R. J. in the side. “You little prick. That’s for Bette Davis. And this is for my sister.” He grunted at the blow to his ribs.

“Um, Kat?” Tessa said.

Kat looked over to see her sister with one of her granddad’s old boxes, only when she tilted it, instead of being full of rope and fishing hooks, it was filled with stacks of money.

“Where did you get the cash, R. J.?” Kat demanded to know. When he didn’t answer, she said, “Drugs?”

Guilty silence.

“That’s okay, you can tell it to Nolan, who’s on his way here.”

“I plead the Fifth.”

“Does this look like a courtroom, you idiot?” Kat considered hitting him for being a moron, but then thought about Tessa and how scared she must be. Then she thought of Nolan and how she didn’t want to jeopardize his case—or her custody hearing.

At the thought of Nolan, tears began stinging the backs of her eyes. Yes, she was a boss bitch who could save her family, but right then she wanted to be a part of a team, one where she wasn’t the only one fighting for justice. She wanted Nolan. And she was going to tell him as soon as this was all said and done.

“Call 9-1-1,” she said to Tessa, just in case Nolan hadn’t gotten the message from Brynn. “Tell them to send the police.”

Tessa took out her phone and started swiping.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

Kat slowly turned around and saw yet another barrel pointed in her direction. She nearly laughed. Since it was the second one of the day, she’d think she’d be used to it, but she wasn’t. Especially since this wasn’t some dumb kid with a bad trigger finger. This was a trained shooter with everything to lose.

“Eli?” R. J. said. “What took you so long?”

And for the first time that day her fear turned into sheer terror. Standing there, more what ifs spun through her mind. What if Tessa died? What if she never got to tell Nolan she loved him? What if she never got to officially adopt Tessa and her sister went into the system? What if she died and the two

most important people in her world didn't know how important they were to her?

All she could do was hope that Nolan got the message and made it there before Eli realized that the only way out of this mess was to kill Kat and her sister.

The drive from Eli's house to Kat's was the longest fifteen minutes of his life. Going to Eli's had been a gigantic waste of time. He had already packed up and cleared out. His wife had no idea where he was and hadn't seen him since the day before. Which meant his gut was right and Eli was behind more than a few cases of missing whiskey and stolen credit card numbers.

He was somehow involved with the drugs. They had a forensic team ripping apart his house now to see if there was any evidence left behind—and there always was. Especially when someone rushed, they always left something damning behind.

But right then all he was thinking about was the text from Tessa that read R. J. was in her backyard with a gun, followed by a call from his sister about Kat needing his help at the house. He only hoped that he arrived in time.

He had six cruisers with him, each one going in sirens off, hoping to get the jump on R. J. The last thing he needed was to spook the kid and have a gun accidentally go off. But when he pulled up, he spotted a familiar car already in the drive.

Eli's.

Fuck!

With Eli there this thing just went from dangerous to potentially deadly.

Silently, Nolan led Team One around the side of the house, hopping the fence, while Team Two scaled the fence on the opposite side of the property. When he got to the corner of the house, he held up his fist in signal for everyone to hold position. He peeked around the side and *fuck* indeed. Tessa and Kat stood with their hands in the air, Eli's weapon pointed directly at them.

"You couldn't just let it go," Eli said to Kat. "It was bad enough when this idiot shot me during the raid on our stash that I gave him a heads-up about. I managed to turn that into a cushy spot within the Carmichaels' company, but you were a problem. I tried to get you to quit. I tried to get you fired, but you're like a damn cockroach, you kept coming back. And you have Nolan totally conned."

"I don't have Nolan conned. But I had you figured as bad news from the start. Game recognizes game. Only my game doesn't hurt people. Yours does."

Nolan knew the moment Kat spotted him out of the corner of her eye. He watched the relief overtake her as her body sagged from some of the tension easing. Not enough for anyone else to notice, but he did. He knew her expressions and body movements so well by now he could read her like a book. Which was how he knew she was about to do something stupid.

Instead of standing still, she correctly assumed that if there was a team on one side of the house, there would be a team on the other side, so she pulled Tessa behind her back, and the sudden motion had Eli tightening his hand on his weapon. "I told you to stand still."

"And have you point that thing at my sister? Not going to happen."

"Stop or I will shoot you," he said.

Kat took a step backward, using her body like a shield to protect her sister. “You’re going to shoot anyway. This way my sister isn’t caught up in this mess.”

“She’s already caught up in it,” Eli said. “And I said stop moving!”

But Kat kept walking at a slow pace as if backing away from a hostile bear. Body big, arms making an X, chest puffed out as full as it could get. Slowly she approached the corner of the house, and Eli, unused to people not following orders when he held a gun, just kept it aimed on Kat.

“If you want to shoot me, fine. But I am going to let my sister go around the side of the house. I promise you can still have me. I won’t bolt. Just let Tess go.” When Eli didn’t answer, Kat, smart thing that she was, said, “She’s just a kid, Eli. Just like yours. You know she has nothing to do with this.”

Eli paused, but wasn’t moved enough to let a witness walk away. “Sorry, no deal.”

“Tessa, go,” Kat said.

“I won’t leave you,” Tessa said.

“This is one of those moments where you trust me and I trust you,” she whispered to her sister.

“No one is going anywhere,” Eli said.

“Go now, Tess,” Kat said, waving her arms and moving to the right, then the left, like a shield. Tessa listened and raced behind the side of the house where Nolan knew she would be pulled into the arms of one of the female agents on the other side.

“Why the hell did you do that?” R. J. asked. “She’s going to go straight to the cops.”

“Go get her,” Eli said to R. J.

“On it.”

“Good luck with that,” Kat said, and Nolan could tell she was working really hard not to look his way for confirmation

that her suspicions were correct, and Tessa was going to be safe.

“You,” Eli pointed to Kat with the gun. “You’re coming with me.”

“No.” She folded her arms. “Oprah taught me to never go to the second location. Sorry. If you’re going to kill me, kill me here, where your DNA is everywhere.”

Eli considered this and Nolan knew his ex-partner didn’t like to be pushed into a corner. He was a wild card, so Kat’s tactic could go either way, which was why Nolan and his team stepped out and, with his weapon drawn, Nolan said, “I wouldn’t do that, Eli.”

Eli charged Kat and grabbed her, using her like a human shield, pointing the gun at her temple.

“Put it down,” Nolan said, but Eli didn’t move. “There is no way out and you know it. Your house is being searched as we speak, you know we’re going to find evidence. No one is that clean. Don’t make this worse on yourself.”

Eli hesitated.

“What, are you going to do shoot your way out?” Kat said. “Everyone knows the truth. You won’t get away even if you do shoot me. All you’ll get is a single shot, but you’ll end up on the ground. Read the room, man.”

“She’s right,” Nolan said, his eyes meeting hers, silently asking her if she was okay.

She nodded slightly.

“Let me help you,” Nolan said gently.

“It’s too late. I’m dead either way. I got in too deep and I can’t get out.” Eli’s voice broke.

“Then put the gun down and I’ll do what I can, but if you don’t let her go, there are a dozen barrels aimed at your head right now, all of them ready to take you out.”

Realizing the severity of the situation, Eli looked around at just how many officers and agents were present. All armed and

all with one common target—him. But instead of backing off, it increased his determination to go out with a bang.

Kat seemed to sense this as well, because she looked Nolan dead in the eye and mouthed the three sweetest words—*I love you*. Then she went completely limp in Eli's arms.

Nolan's heart fell to his toes as he watched the woman he loved fall to the ground in a heap. He waited for the ear-piercing shot, but it never came. Then he realized she'd dropped on purpose.

Unprepared for the shift in weight, Eli stumbled forward, losing his balance as Kat went crashing to the ground. A single bullet cracked through the spring day, hitting Eli square in the shoulder. An immobilizing shot but not a deadly one.

Nolan wanted to take him out of play but make sure he lived out his life behind bars.

Nolan didn't wait for his fellow agents to respond. He moved on instinct and was at Kat's side within seconds. He dropped to his knees and cupped her face. "Jesus, when you fell, I thought I'd lost you," he whispered against her forehead.

His hands immediately began a skilled examination of her body, seeking out injury. He quickly came to a halt when he touched her hand and she grimaced.

"I think it's broken," she said, as he cradled it with his hands. "R. J. might hit like a girl, but his nose it built from granite."

"We need a medic," Nolan shouted to no one in particular. "Call a bus."

"Or you can just drive me to the hospital."

"Or that," he whispered, his heart in his throat.

"You showed up," she said, sounding marveled by the idea.

"I'll always show up for you. Always." He kissed her forehead, then rested his against hers, closing his eyes. He needed a moment to breathe her in, feel her beneath his hands, take in the fact that she was alive and his. "No matter what."

“I meant what I said,” she said shyly, and his gaze met hers. It rocked his foundation how open and raw her fathomless green eyes were. “It wasn’t a deathbed confession. It’s the truth.”

“What’s the truth?” he asked, desperately needing to hear her say it aloud.

“That I love you. And I think I have since that night I fixed your leaky pipe.”

“Who knew having a leaky pipe could land a man the most amazing woman in the world.” He gave her the gentlest of kisses. “And in case you’re wondering, I’ve loved you since the kiss in the bar.”

“It was an awful kiss.”

“I know. But it was perfectly awful,” he said. “How about a do-over? Unless...” He looked around at the scene, with a dozen responders buzzing about. “I don’t want to blow our cover.”

“Screw our cover.” She slid her arms around his neck. “If a judge has a problem with healthy love, then that’s on them. If anything, you are a safe, stable force for me and Tessa, and anyone in their right mind will see that.” Then she leaned in, and they had a PG-rated do-over.

“Gross. Can you stop making out for like one second?” Tessa asked. She had tears in her eyes and was shaking.

Nolan helped Kat stand, but when it came time for a hug, it was Nolan’s arms that the teen flung herself into. “You okay, kiddo?” he asked, his shocked eyes meeting Kat’s over Tessa’s head.

“You were right, R. J. is a jerk,” Tessa said. “I can’t believe it took seeing him with a gun to realize it. Even then I had to be sure, which is why I went in the back.”

“Wait,” Kat said. “You knew he had a gun and still went outside?”

“I had to be sure. I didn’t want to look like an idiot if it turned out to be nothing.”

“You should have stayed in the house and locked the door,” Kat lectured. “And who would you have looked like an idiot to?”

“I wanted to see if what Nolan said about R. J. was true and it was. I saw what I thought might be a gun in his back and texted Nolan like I promised I would, but R. J. saw me, so I had to play it cool.”

Kat’s eyes narrowed in on Nolan’s and he could see the betrayal start to build within. “What do you mean, ‘You promised Nolan?’”

His gut tightened as Tessa’s confused expression hit his. “He told me to call him if I saw R. J. do anything sketchy.”

Kat turned to look at Nolan, betrayal so thick in her beautiful eyes he couldn’t breathe. “You used her as one of your CIs?”

“It wasn’t as official as that,” he said, but now that he looked at it through Kat’s eyes it was exactly like that. He’d been so damn set on catching R. J. that he’d done what it took to get his man without thought of the repercussions. Of how it would affect Kat and Tessa.

He’d once again put his job first.

“You promised you’d never put my court case in jeopardy, but you pulled my sister into this anyway. By asking her to keep an eye out for sketchy behavior you were essentially encouraging her to hang out with him, which was in direct opposition of what I was trying to do.”

“I told her he was trouble and to stay away.”

“She’s a teen, all you did was give her an excuse to go behind my back and see him, and because of that she could have been killed. *You* put her in danger.” She jabbed a finger at his chest. “This is on you.”

“Kitten,” he whispered, reaching out to take her hand.

She pulled away and his heart shattered.

“Don’t fucking ‘kitten’ me,” she said, but instead of yelling, her voice shook with emotion closer to devastation.

“You’re just like everyone else.”

“I am so damn sorry. I didn’t even look at it like that.”

“And that’s the worst part.” And just when his heart couldn’t take anymore, a tear formed on her lash. “You promised me you’d never jeopardize my court case and now you pretty much guaranteed that I’ll lose Tessa.”

“I’ll talk to the judge.”

“And say what? That my sister was involved in a high stakes operation where she nearly got shot by her drug-dealing, twenty-one-year-old boyfriend, and was involved in a takedown at gunpoint? What judge in their right mind would award me custody?”

“I can fix this.”

“No, you can’t. You clearly don’t care for me because when people care, they protect each other. Not put them in harm’s way. That’s something you taught me and it’s advice I’m going to follow for once.”

“I love you, Kat. Don’t do this.”

“You did this. You, not me. With one decision you unraveled every promise you made.”

“People make mistakes, and I made a huge one, but our love is stronger than one mistake.” It had to be because he couldn’t stomach losing her. Not like this. Not now after they were finally on the same page.

“Love shouldn’t feel like this.” She tapped her chest and that tear streamed down her cheek and spilled to the ground. “I don’t want a love that hurts like this.”

Kat turned to leave, and he reached out to stop her by placing his hand on her left elbow. She paused, then looked over her shoulder with the saddest fucking eyes he’d ever seen. And he knew he’d done that to her.

“Is that why you wanted to stay with us?” she whispered. “So you could get closer to my sister?”

“No,” he said hoarsely. “Never. All I wanted to do was protect you. I still want to protect you.”

“I wasn’t looking for a knight, I was looking for a partner. But it doesn’t matter, because when it mattered, you failed.” She gently tugged her arm free. “Goodbye, Nolan.”

Before he could answer, Kat had her arm around Tessa’s shoulders, and they were walking toward the ambulance that had arrived moments earlier. She didn’t look back, didn’t even hesitate, she walked right out of his life, just like Nina.

Only this time it was all his fault.

This was a loss Kat was never going to get over. Her heart was shredded in two and her eyes felt like sandpaper from all the crying she'd done over the past couple of days. And now she was sitting in front of another man who had the power to rip away the only family Kat had left. Even worse, news of the events had spread like a stomach flu at a kid's birthday party, with Kat's and Tessa's names in just about everyone's mouth. Including the judge's.

What had surprised Kat was the overflowing amount of support the people of Sierra Vista had bestowed on Kat and her sister. People had shown up in droves with flowers, warm wishes, homemade pies, and enough casseroles to feed a small nation. It was a side of her hometown Kat hadn't experienced before. And she began to wonder if it was because people hadn't cared before or if Kat just hadn't been open to that kind of love and support.

Well, she was open and willing to accept their help now. With guardianship on the line, it was more important than ever to have people in her corner. Even though the one person she had hoped to have in her corner had broken her heart and she didn't think it could ever be fully repaired.

She'd believed him when he'd told her that he'd never hurt her and that he'd put her and her sister first. Just like she'd believed him when he'd said he'd loved her and would never hurt her. Then he'd gone and hurt her in the worst way possible.

"Since it looks as though all the important persons are accounted for and those who didn't show up today will no doubt be caught up by lunch with the way this town's gossip vine works," Judge Cramer said, peering over his glasses at the empty courthouse, "let's get started."

This was a civil case, so there wasn't a defense and prosecution, but it sure felt like it. Ms. Woods, Principal Beekman, and Tessa's PE teacher sat at the table next to Kat, silently judging her. With just she and Tessa, she felt outnumbered and outgunned.

Then there was the courtroom itself. There wasn't a single person in the gallery. Not a one. Kat hadn't expected a large turnout, but her friends had promised to show as character witnesses.

She looked at her watch and back to the judge. "Can we wait just a few more minutes? They're just running a tad behind. Traffic and all?"

"In Sierra Vista? On a Wednesday morning?" Ms. Woods challenged.

Judge Cramer looked at his watch and scowled. "I've got an urgent appointment in thirty minutes."

Based on the custom-embroidered golf bag leaning against the wall behind the judge's bench, Kat assumed his "appointment" was at the Sierra Vista Country Club, the town's premier members-only golf club.

"The welfare of my sister is at stake, surely a few more minutes can't hurt," Kat said.

Today she had eschewed her usual shredded jeans and black tank for a skirt and blouse she'd borrowed from Milly. Her hair was pulled back into a low ponytail and her makeup

was natural and flawless. She looked like Holly Homemaker and felt like a fraud.

“I’m sorry,” Judge Cramer said, not sorry at all. “But between talking to Tessa’s social worker, principal, and a few of her teachers, I have some concerns. Not to mention this is also the third time I have had this family in my courtroom, so you understand that I am anxious to hear the evidence, make a ruling, and stop wasting more taxpayer dollars on something that should have been taken care of a decade ago.”

“I’m as frustrated as you are coming here today,” Kat said with as much professionalism as she could muster. “However, I thought the goal of the hearing was to present the evidence, not make judgments based on an old vendetta Ms. Woods has against my mother. Because I promise you, I am nothing like my mother. I am a respectable, hardworking member of this community who is seeking custody of a sister whom she loves very much.”

“She’s also loved and valued in this town.” Gemma’s voice rang through the courtroom as the big wooden doors swung open, and in walked her friends. Each and every one of them. From the ladies at the county clerk’s office to her coworkers at the lodge—minus the one Carmichael she’d started to imagine would be by her side holding her hand. There were even some of the regulars from the bar who must have heard of the hearing and had come to show their support.

Mumbles and rustling filled the once-silent courtroom as people took their seats—all behind Kat. In her wildest dreams, Kat had never imagined this many people having her back. And it felt good.

Ms. Woods’s face went pale, and Kat could have sworn the woman choked at the show of support that filled the courtroom just for Kat and her sister.

“Order in the court.” The judge slammed down his gavel. “Order in the court. What is going on?”

“These are my character witnesses,” Kat said with so much emotion she nearly let a tear slip out. But she retracted it before anyone saw.

“While I am impressed by the overflow of support, I am still concerned with the fact that your sister was a part of a federal investigation that nearly got her shot, of which you had zero knowledge. Is this true?”

Kat looked down to see that Tessa had taken her hand and was standing next to her in solidarity. Kat was afraid it might be too little, too late. “Yes.”

“And is it true you were unaware of the events until the day of the arrests, when your sister was held at gunpoint?”

“That is true, but—”

“Sometimes love isn’t enough in these situations,” the judge said. “And while Principal Beekman and Tessa’s teachers have seen an improvement in Tessa’s grades and behavior, I’m not sure if I can justify enough change in yours.” The judge looked around the courthouse. “I was told your father might come. In California we really try to keep the child with the parents. This would be much easier if he were to relinquish his rights to you.”

“I’m sorry to say he couldn’t make it, but please don’t take my dad’s inability to be a good parent out on my sister. We are all we have left. Tessa and I are family and that should count for something.”

“It should count for everything,” a familiar and masculine voice came from behind and slid around her shoulders like a blanket warming her soul. “Not only is Kat a phenomenal sister, Your Honor, she is an outstanding guardian. I stake my reputation as a federal agent on it.”

Kat turned slowly to see Nolan standing at the back of the courthouse, looking like a hero-for-hire in his uniform, work boots, and an official expression that would have most men wetting themselves.

“That’s a big statement,” the judge said.

“One I stand by,” Nolan said, walking down the aisle toward the two wooden swinging doors, where he stopped. Hands resting on his gun belt, he stood with his legs apart in a stance to intimidate and said, “Do you mind?”

The judge waved his hand as if annoyed. “Go on, son, you’ve already taken to grandstanding.”

“I’d like to speak to the situation of Tessa Rhodes acting as a CI for my department. She was never an official CI as I never turned in the paperwork or went through official channels,” he said.

Judge Cramer straightened. “Slow down, son. Are you sure you want to go on? You could lose your job.”

Nolan turned his head toward Kat and the look he gave her was one of pure love. The kind of love that would make him sacrifice everything to protect her.

“Jobs come and go, love doesn’t. And it took me a long time to grasp that. But now that I do, I’m not willing to lose it. And I hope you see that too. Because even though Miss Rhodes has made some mistakes, what parent hasn’t. Tessa is nearly an adult. Shouldn’t it be up to her where she lives?”

Judge Cramer seemed to contemplate this, so long that Ms. Woods spoke out of turn. “For all we know Miss Rhodes is pressuring her younger sister to pick her.”

Kat snorted. “What teen can be pressured into doing something they don’t want to do?”

“I’ll have to side with Miss Rhodes on this one,” the judge said. “I have teenaged grandsons and they won’t do anything they are told. So let’s leave this up to the person who this affects the most.” He looked at Tessa. “Young lady, who do you wish to live with?”

“My sister.” She hugged Kat’s side and burst into tears. “In all this time no one has ever asked me what *I* wanted, and all I want is to live with my sister in my family’s home.”

“Then that is what you shall do.” The judge slammed the gavel and made it official.

Kat and Tessa hugged for a long moment and then Tessa said, “He’s leaving. Go get him before it’s too late.”

“It is too late.”

“You told me that when it comes to family you’d never walk away. He’s family, Kat. Look what he did for us. Don’t let him walk away.”

Kat thought about that and the longer she stood there, the warmer and larger her heart became until she couldn’t contain it anymore.

“Nolan,” she cried out.

He was at the threshold of the courtroom when he stopped and slowly turned around. Kat didn’t waste a second, she took off in a sprint and raced toward him, launching herself into his arms. He caught her and spun her around.

“Don’t go,” she whispered. “Don’t ever go.”

“I wasn’t planning on it.”

“Then where were you going?”

“I was getting the new laptop I bought you out of my car. I figured if a guy were to make a grand gesture, he had to go big, and with you, flowers wouldn’t work.”

“You bought me a laptop? Let me guess, it is hack proof so I can’t get into trouble.”

“Kitten, you are always going to get into trouble, and I am always going to love that about you.”

“Even if it means we don’t always agree.”

“Even then.” He cupped her face. “And I need you to know that I will never, ever put my job above you or Tessa again. You are it for me. No more secrets or moral superiority.”

“Hey now, don’t go changing on me.” She laughed. “You have to keep some of that good guy.”

“You just want to finish first,” he whispered against her lips.

“No. I want to finish everything together. With you by my side.”

“Thank God for second chances.”

“Thank God for drunken barroom dares. Without that awful kiss we never would have made it here.”

“And here is exactly where we’re supposed to be.”

EPILOGUE

Six weeks later...

“And the badge for the quickest finish is, Tommy Kincaid and his mentor Nolan Carmichael!” the Junior Search and Rescue leader announced as he pinned the badge on Tommy’s uniform.

The kid might be beaming, but his mentor was glowing. Kat had never seen him so proud in his life. This, *this*, was what he’d be like when he was a father, she thought. Not that they were anywhere near ready for kids, but he was proving to her every day that there was a different way to love than what she’d been taught.

As the last of the badges were handed out Nolan and Tommy high-fived and then Tommy raced off the stage to show his mom his new badge.

Nolan searched the crowd and when he met her gaze he didn’t hesitate, he didn’t look away. He just made his way down the steps, the sea of people parting as he moved through, and headed straight for her, not stopping until she was in his arms and his lips were on hers. They kept it PG and family-

friendly, but her body reacted as if he'd just stripped her naked and rained kisses down her body.

When they pulled back, she said, "Not bad for a guy who just won a badge for the quickest finish."

"You want to go test that theory?" he asked, giving her a hard smooch.

"I think we have an ice cream party to go to first," she reminded him.

"Then you and I are going on that ride along."

"Let me guess—it starts and finishes at Sunrise Falls." Which, when it wasn't party central, was known as make-out spot numero uno. "I bet you take all your ride alongs there," she teased, snuggling into him, tucking her arms beneath his jacket and soaking in all that warm, yummy skin.

"Just the ones who tell me I kiss like a corpse."

"Lucky me," she whispered with a big grin.

He pulled her into him and zipped them both up in his jacket.

"You and your jacket."

"I like to know you're warm and taken care of."

"Liar. You like to know I'm yours," she said and, would you look at that, he blushed.

He was silent for a long moment as if nervous about what he was going to say. It was strange to see such a confident giant nervous. "I know Tessa is your number one and I think that is the best thing I the world. But I was wondering if you'd be my number one?"

Kat's heart melted like a knife through butter on a hot summer's day, and a warm sensation of love and acceptance moved throughout her body. A sensation that was so foreign just a few months ago but had now become familiar.

"I've been thinking about this a lot lately. And I've realized that my heart is big enough for there to be two number ones in my world. So I'll only be your number one if

you'll be one of my number ones in return. I love you, Nolan Carmichael, and I can't imagine my life without you in it every day. We can't move in together until Tessa goes off to college, but know I am counting down the days."

"What about MIT?"

"It can wait." Even as she said it a bone-deep sadness filled her chest. But then she thought about spending that time with Nolan and that lightness returned.

"Like hell it can. Which is why I put in for a transfer. As soon as you find out about when you start, I'm right behind you."

"You'd come with me?"

"Kitten, I'd follow you anywhere."

She swallowed hard and felt tears line her lashes. "What about the lodge?"

"I can fly back once a month. Especially now that the new system is up and running, I can delegate."

"What about your family?"

"What's a year when it means I get to spend it with the woman I love." He slid his arms around her until they were sandwiched in his jacket. "And I love you with everything I am, Kitten. That dare was the best thing that ever happened to me. Now what do you say we get out of here and see if you can get my belt off in under *fifteen* seconds."

"Bet you a 'lady's first' I can do it in ten."