



AN *Oak Springs*  
NOVEL

**DARE**  
**YOU TO**  
*Lie*

MINA COLE

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**YOU TO**  
*Lie*

OAK SPRINGS BOOK FOUR

MINA COLE

Dare You To Lie

Oak Springs Book 4

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## ABOUT THE BOOK

*A harmless white lie; that's all it's supposed to be. Until a slip of my tongue spirals things out of control...*

The people of Oak Springs nicknamed me Grumpy Sheriff thanks to my permanent scowl. Which has only grown with my mom hounding me to settle down and my best friend hoping I'll find love on a dating app. When an opportunity presents itself to get them off my back, I leap without thinking.

Katerina Cooper needs a date to a charity gala. Accompanying her will solve both of our problems. One night. That's it. Then I can return to my quiet life and be free of the pressures to find a wife. Or so I thought.

Now the town is buzzing about us, we're lying to our parents and friends, and Kat has moved into my space. No matter how much I grump and grumble, she doesn't seem bothered. She's sunshine on a rainy day, and makes me feel things I'm not ready for.

Falling for her would be a disaster. But with each touch, I forget we're pretending. I have to remind myself this is temporary. No matter how much I want her, Kat can never be mine.

# Prologue

KAT

*Two Years Ago*

THE FLOWERS IN MY bouquet were beautiful, and on any other occasion, they would have made me smile. But my nerves were at an all-time high, and I was worried we'd get caught. With shaking fingers, I smoothed down the white fabric of my dress. I would have fallen in love with the dress under different circumstances. It hugged my curves and was covered in tiny rhinestones.

"Katerina, you look radiant," Fae said.

"Thanks," I replied sullenly. I stared at my white tennis shoes and moved one foot from side to side so the rhinestones I'd added to them flashed. It was the best I could do to dress them up. Normally, I was a heels kind of girl, but I needed the shoes in case this situation went belly-up.

"She's ready," Fae said into her earpiece. She nodded and turned back to me. "We're on in two minutes."

My stomach dropped, and I grabbed a flute of champagne off a tray that had been set up in my dressing room, if you could even call it that. It was a tiny space with thin walls. The whole time I was getting ready, I worried that someone would walk in or the walls would fall, and I'd be standing there naked for all to see.

"It's time," Fae said, nodding at me.

Her smile was wide, but not because she was happy for me. She didn't even know me. She came with the package Alessandro had chosen. If only I would have put my foot down and demanded something more elegant. As a struggling artist, this was about all Alessandro could afford, plus no one here would question our intentions. At least, I hoped not.



My family wasn't here, and I was grateful for that. I followed Fae out of the room and across the hall. The double doors were closed, and I waited for my cue, taking a deep breath for courage. Fae nodded at me and opened the doors. I took one step onto the white runner and froze.

"What the hell?" I shouted.

Alessandro's head snapped in my direction, and his face morphed into one of his charming smiles. "Katerina, great news. You're off the hook."

I stomped down the aisle toward Alessandro, who had his hands intertwined with a petite brunette's. Who the hell was she? When her eyes met mine, she yanked her hands free and took a step back. The Elvis impersonator—which I distinctly said I didn't want—jumped back and turned from us.

When I stood in front of Alessandro with my hands on my hips, I yelled, "What's going on? This is our wedding day."

He winced but covered it by smiling wider. Then he stepped forward slowly and reached for me. He rubbed tiny circles on the back of my hand with his thumb to calm me. It was a movement he'd done a hundred times over. Only now I realized it was always when he was buttering me up for something or when he needed money.

"Katerina, my love," he said in his thick Italian accent. "Things between us were good, but I've met someone. And she will marry me for love. Not just so I can stay here. You don't need to worry about helping me anymore."

I yanked my hand free and hit him with my bouquet. "I wasn't doing this to help you. We've been in a relationship for two years, Alessandro. That meant something to me. I lo—" I paused. Had I loved him? I felt something for him, but it wasn't really love. "I cared deeply for you."

His brows pulled together. "I'm sorry, Katerina. I, too, cared deeply, but then I met Bridgette, and I realized that what I felt for you was not real."

“So, you had me fly you to Vegas under the pretense of getting married so you could marry her? Where did you meet her anyway?” I asked. I had paid for our airfare and the hotel expenses.

He winced and took a step forward, but I stopped him with my hand. “We met a few months ago at an art show.”

“You’ve been cheating on me?” I screeched.

“When you say it like that, it sounds not so good.”

“Of course it doesn’t, you idiot.” I slammed my bouquet against his arm. “It’s horrible! I bought a dress. I snuck away to marry you here.” I waved my arm around at the piece of shit chapel. “Not only so you could stay here and pursue your dreams of being an artist, but also so we could start a life together, and the entire time, you were cheating on me.”

Alessandro frowned, and then his mouth twisted in what might have been remorse. He shoved his hands in his pockets and stared at the ground. “I’m very sorry, Katerina. I cared for you, yes, and all you have done for me.”

“But?” I asked, crossing my arms over my chest.

“But I do not love you, and I cannot marry you.”

I let out a strangled scream and lunged for him. We fell to the ground. I landed on top and started hitting him repeatedly with my bouquet. Anger and embarrassment coursed through me. What had I done to deserve this? This was the lowest point in my life, and I’d brought it on myself.

Alessandro covered his face but didn’t push me away. Coward. That’s what he was. He was never good at standing up for himself. He was also a con artist, and I planned to report him as soon as I got out of this nightmare.

A set of hands emerged from sequined sleeves, gripping my arms and pulling me off Alessandro, who was cowering in a ball. I yanked my arms free of the Elvis impersonator and kicked Alessandro lightly in the side before turning my attention toward the brunette.

“Word of advice? He doesn’t love you. He’s just telling you he does so he can bleed you dry of all the money you have. Let me guess, your parents are rich, and you ran off to get married to spite them?”

Her wide eyes darted away, and I knew I’d hit the nail on the head. “He’ll say all the right words, and the sex will blow your mind, which I’m sure you already know. But once he’s gotten everything he can from you, he’ll leave you for something better. For someone with more money to fund his precious art.”

Alessandro glanced up at me, and I bent down to look deep into his eyes. “You’re a starving artist because you suck. Your art is horrible, and no amount of money will change that. All the galleries that denied you should have been a sign. You just aren’t good enough.”

I patted his arm and stood, feeling better. Fae had a wide smile on her face as she led me out of the chapel. When I got to the doors, I spun around to face them. Alessandro was standing and brushing his clothes off.

“Oh, and one more thing. As soon as I walk out these doors, I’m calling the cops. Marrying someone for a green card is illegal, Alessandro. They’re going to send you and your shitty art back to Italy.”

An hour later, I sipped my vodka tonic and breathed a heavy sigh, looking out the window at the clouds below.

“Another drink, miss?” the flight attendant asked.

I looked down at my nearly empty cup and tossed back the rest of my drink. Then I held the cup out to her and nodded. It was my third drink, but the embarrassment was still fresh, and every time I replayed the day’s events, it was like opening the wound all over again.

After I left the chapel, I walked back to the hotel. But not before making a very important phone call to immigration. In my hotel suite, I packed as quickly as possible and hightailed it out of there. I needed to check out before Alessandro

returned. I'd packed up his clothes, too, and tossed them into a dumpster I saw on the way to the airport. The cab driver was irritated when I asked him to pull over, but once he saw what I was doing, his anger quickly changed to amusement.

Throwing away Alessandro's clothes only made me feel marginally better. The thought of returning to New York made me sick. Eventually, I would have to return to deal with the mess, but I couldn't face it right then. So I made a snap decision at the airport and bought a ticket to North Carolina. I was headed to the little town of Oak Springs, where my sister Rebecca was living.

Before she moved, Rebecca and I had shared a New York apartment with two roommates, Riley and Anna, but I'd had another secret apartment where Alessandro lived. While I waited for my flight, I called the landlord and canceled my lease. I told him not to let anyone into the apartment and that I would clean it out when I returned from vacation. Once I agreed to pay him next month's rent and forfeit the security deposit for breaking the lease early, he assured me he'd leave everything as it was until I returned.

When the flight landed, I hurried through baggage claim, then went to the bathroom to change. I'd worn leggings and a loose T-shirt on the flight, but that wasn't how I wanted to greet my sister. Even though we had lived together in New York, she didn't know about Alessandro and the mess I had gotten myself into, and I needed to keep it that way. I put on my "armor," which consisted of a tight pencil skirt, a flowing blouse that showed my cleavage, and a full face of makeup, before walking out to find the Uber I'd ordered.

Thankfully, the driver knew where Oak Springs was. I rested my head back against the seat and closed my eyes, mentally preparing to see Rebecca. I couldn't tell her what I'd been through because she would only lecture me on my life choices. We didn't exactly see eye to eye.

I'd met Alessandro on a gap year trip to Italy with a friend, and we'd quickly fallen in love. Only it wasn't love. It was

just the excitement and adventure of it all. He dazzled me and pulled the wool over my eyes. Things progressed quickly, and after six months of dating, we were on a flight to New York, and I'd rented a small loft apartment in Brooklyn.

My parents paid for college and an apartment for my sister and me as long as we attended all of our classes and kept our grades up. We had trust funds that helped as well, but with the extra apartment, I needed a job. But when my grades started to slip, and I started missing more classes than I was attending, my parents cut me off.

I picked up a second job in order to pay for my part of the apartment and also Alessandro's, but it still wasn't enough. He helped occasionally when he'd sell a piece of art or his parents were feeling generous and sent money. But it put a strain on my relationship with Rebecca, which was already difficult.

The lies kept stacking until everything fell apart in Vegas. Looking back, I realized how many mistakes I'd made. It was past time to get my life together, but not before a little detour to figure things out.

The car twisted and turned down tree-lined country roads, bringing me back to the present. The scenery was beautiful but a little off-putting since I was used to the glitz and glamor of city life. We pulled to a stop, and I peered out the front window. The road ahead was blocked off.

"Looks like this is as far as I go," the driver said.

I frowned. "What do you mean?"

"They've got some event going on," he said, nodding toward the park that was crowded with people. "The road is blocked. You'll have to get out here."

I sighed and dug around in my purse for my credit card. After paying the sixty-five-dollar fare, I climbed out. The driver retrieved my luggage from the trunk, then reversed and left the way he came. I stood on the pavement, looking around. The street sign above me read Main Street. Cute stores lined

both sides of the street, and I couldn't wait to see them when they were open.

"Can I help you?" a deep voice asked. I turned and saw a man dressed in a police uniform. Long hair peeked out from under a god-awful hat. He looked like he'd just stepped out of an old-time movie or something.

"I'm looking for my sister."

He tilted his head, studied me for a moment, then tipped his chin toward the park. "Could be in there."

The guy had little personality, and his scowl wasn't giving off a very welcoming vibe. I hoped he wasn't the welcoming committee. I peeked around him. A giant movie screen was playing *Peter Pan*, and the park was filled with mostly kids.

"What's her name?" he asked.

"Rebecca. Rebecca Cooper."

He nodded. "At the bar."

"Excuse me?" I asked, confused by his short answers.

"She's at Frosty Mug Tavern," he said, turning and pointing over his shoulder. "It's on the other side of the park."

"Okay. How do I get there?" I asked. I was still standing on the other side of the road barricade.

One brow lifted as he looked at me. Then he sighed. "This way."

"Gee, how nice of you to escort me," I muttered as I pulled my suitcase behind me.

He frowned, and I nearly laughed. I followed him up Parkway and onto Grand Street. Cute street names, but the names on the storefronts were even better. Finally, we stopped in front of the bar and he stepped to the side.

"Thank you," I said. "Is there somewhere I can store my luggage?"

He scowled at me as if I was grating on his last nerve. I had barely said a word.

“I have no idea.”

I huffed. “If I leave it here, will someone take it?”

He shrugged. “Not sure.”

“Okay, thanks.” I pulled my suitcase behind me and walked through the door. The restaurant was quiet, and it wasn’t hard to spot my sister talking to a brunette at the bar. They laughed, and Rebecca looked happy, which made me smile but also sent a pang of guilt through me. Would she be angry that I had showed up?

I stashed my luggage at the hostess stand—people would do anything for a little cash—and walked the long way around the bar so Rebecca wouldn’t see me. She was just about to order a drink, so I stepped up and ordered for her.

“She’ll have a margarita on the rocks, no salt, and I’ll have a dirty martini with extra olives.”

Rebecca whirled around and yanked me into a hug, surprising the hell out of me. “Kat!”

“Whoa, I need a little room to breathe,” I said, tapping her arm.

“I can’t believe you’re here!” Rebecca squealed.

*You and me both, baby sister.* I wasn’t sure this was the right thing to do, but now that I was here, there was no going back.

# Chapter 1



KAT

## *Present Day*

“I REALLY LIKE IT HERE,” Riley said as she plopped down on my bright red couch. “It’s so peaceful.”

She stretched out her legs and propped her feet up on my coffee table. Her auburn hair was piled on top of her head in the sort of fancy topknot I could never achieve. She was the picture of relaxation in her leggings and off-the-shoulder sweater with a cup of coffee from Grateful Cup.

Riley and Anna were visiting from New York. I had loved living with them and missed them terribly. Riley was a petite, spunky redhead, and Anna was slender, with long blond hair and tattoos. They were total opposites but best friends. So close that they were like sisters.

They’d met in New York at the Culinary Institute of America. After graduating, they interned together under a renowned cake designer and eventually landed at a prestigious bakery in the city. Riley and Anna were talented enough to run their own bakery, but they didn’t have the startup funds. Especially in New York, where rent was astronomical.

Riley took a sip of her coffee and moaned. “I know why they call it Grateful Cup. I’m feeling pretty damn grateful right now for this cup of coffee.”

I laughed and tossed a throw pillow at her.



“You’re ridiculous,” Anna said. She plopped down beside Riley and blew on her tea. “But I have to agree with you. This town is pretty awesome. I loved shopping at the store below us.”

I rented the studio apartment above Limbitless Expressions from Laney Walters, now Wilson. It had been vacant for the last year and a half. I loved the location, right off Main Street, and it was a short walk to work.

“How’s it going with Becca?” Riley asked.

I huffed and sat back. “Not great. You know how she is with me. I’m like a thorn in her heel.”

Anna snorted. “Yeah. When you’re around, she’s more uptight.”

“It’s always been like that. She’s too close to Mom and Dad. She always sides with them.”

It made me sick. Rebecca did whatever our parents wanted. I was the only one brave enough to stand up to them. To tell them to take their rules and their social status and their stupid money and shove it up their asses. I wanted nothing to do with them. But Rebecca needed them.

Our dad had promised to invest in Rebecca’s dream of owning a restaurant. She’d recently found a building and would be opening soon. I would *never* take their money. I’d be indebted to them forever. Not that my dad would offer it to me since I was such a disappointment to them.

“It’s still tense between you two?” Anna asked.

“Sometimes. She’s skeptical of why I’m still living here and always on my case about how I’m living. After things crashed and burned, I needed a change, which is why I came here. I’d hit rock bottom, and I was terrified. I thought Rebecca might be happy to have me here, but it’s been an uphill battle with her for the last two years.”

“Why have you stayed? We would be more than happy to have you back,” Riley said, and Anna nodded in agreement.

“I fell in love with the town, the people, and the different lifestyle. After a few months here, I felt like I could finally breathe again. It hit me soul deep, and I wanted to start over.”

“I can understand that. This town is lovely, and the people in it are awesome. Your friends and the Sunday night dinner might be my favorite thing of all,” Riley said.

Sunday night dinner was my favorite too. When Mindy married Frank, she started the weekly dinners. Our growing group of friends formed a family by choice since some of us didn't have parents, and others (like me) didn't speak with theirs. It took a while for everyone to open up to me, but I finally felt like part of the group.

“They are pretty amazing.”

“What about the grumpy sheriff?” Anna asked with a smirk.

“What about him?”

“How's he been?”

“Ornery.” I laughed. “But keeps to himself. We don't really interact that much aside from Sunday dinners.”

“So no love connection?” Riley joked.

I threw another throw pillow at her. “Definitely not.”

“What's the plan for today, ladies?” Anna asked. “I want to go to Frosty Mug Tavern for our last night here.”

“You'll be hungover on the plane.”

She stuck her tongue out at me. “We have a three o'clock flight. Besides, you know I don't get hangovers.”

That was true. I'd always been jealous that she could let loose without feeling the effects the next day.

“We could go shopping, or we could ask the girls to get together and maybe go into the city. There are some great shops and good food.”

“Yes, that!” Riley shouted. She jumped up and headed for her suitcase.

“Okay then. Sounds like a plan. Will one of you call Rebecca? She’ll be more likely to come if it’s not me calling.”

Anna picked up her phone and started dialing while Riley and I fought over who would get to use the bathroom first. I missed these girls and wished I’d hung out with them more when we lived together instead of always sneaking out with Alessandro. You live and you learn, and I always had to learn the hard way.

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“WHERE ARE YOU GOING?” Rebecca asked. Even though her tone was light, her question grated on me. Our parents had asked me that same question so many times that it triggered my anger immediately.

“Work,” I said. I tugged on my black yoga pants, then bent down to dig through my closet for my tennis shoes. I’d kicked them off after we went to the city yesterday and put on a pair of heels to go to the bar.

“Mom called again while you were gone,” she said.

I’d taken Anna and Riley to the airport early since I had to work and Rebecca was too hungover. My old roommates partied hard, celebrating their last night here and Rebecca’s new restaurant. Shots were involved, and the drinks flowed freely. I quit drinking early. Someone had to be responsible.

Mindy and Kate were there, but they had families and had left at a decent time. The bar had been empty since it was a Thursday night, but the owner was so happy to have us there that he let us play whatever music we wanted. At one point, Riley and Anna ended up on the bar doing their own rendition of *Coyote Ugly*. It was highly entertaining.

After finding my shoes, I stood and carried them to the door. I scooted around Rebecca and walked to the bathroom to finish getting ready.

“Kat, did you hear me?”

“Yeah, I heard you.”

She let out a strangled scream, and I bit back a smile. It was so easy to piss her off.

“Don’t you care?”

“No,” I said, combing my long hair back into a ponytail.

“You annoy the shit out of me sometimes,” she said.

“Why? Because I won’t follow their rules and bend to their ways? I don’t see you getting hounded.”

She threw up her arms. “I’m not the one who’s defied them all these years.”

I laughed, and she screamed.

“Why can’t you just be civil with them?”

I poked my head out of the bathroom and glared at her. “Civil? When have they ever been civil to me?”

“Maybe if you were nicer and stopped fighting them on everything, you’d have a better relationship.”

“That won’t matter. They hate me. It’s not the same for you. They don’t force men on you to date or take to charity events. They didn’t yank your school fund away at the first C. They’ve approved all of your choices, even when it wasn’t what they wanted.” I wiped a tear from my eye and took a deep breath before applying my eyeliner.

“Have you ever tried to talk to them?” she asked from beside me. Her voice was soft and caring.

“I have. Mom told me to stop being so flaky and move home. Dad told me to get my head out of my ass and pick a career path. They don’t give a shit about what I want. They want to marry me off to save their status with the rich and ridiculous. Who cares if I marry an asshole who won’t love me and will cheat on me our entire marriage as long as he has the right last name?” I pushed past her and headed for the door.

“It’s not like that, Kat, and you know it.”

I whirled around and pointed my finger in her face. “That’s exactly what it’s like. You choose not to believe it. They’ve treated you different your entire life, baby sister, and that has made you blind.”

“Screw you, Katerina. I thought we were making progress, but I guess I was wrong. You’re the same old Kat.”

I gritted my teeth and turned around, tugging on my black tennis shoes. I was not the same old Kat. The old me would have run off to the bar and gotten drunk, hit on some guy who was alone, and taken him home so I could screw his brains out and forget how shitty my life was. The old me would have walked away from this town and everyone in it, not caring who I screwed over.

“Lock up when you leave.”

“Kat, wait,” Rebecca said as I reached for the door handle. At this rate, I would be late to work.

“What?”

“I don’t want to leave things like this. We’ve been doing so well.”

“I agree, but when you side with Mom and Dad and push me to talk to them, it hurts. I’ll never be what they want, and it will always be a fight. But it doesn’t have to be that way between us.”

“I know. I’m just tired of being in the middle.”

“Then don’t be,” I said.

She huffed and sat on my couch.

“I really have to go. I’m going to be late now. Lock up when you leave,” I repeated.

The door opened to a metal staircase that took me down to the back of the stores off Main Street. The park was peaceful and empty as I walked up Parkway. If I wasn’t late for work,

I'd take a detour to grab a coffee and enjoy the beautiful weather.

My stomach growled. I didn't have time to grab lunch between dropping the girls at the airport and the argument with my sister. I wondered if Sarah would hate me too much if I stopped at Lettuce Eat before I went in. Sarah Jones was the owner of the massage parlor where I worked, Knead to Relax. Thankfully, she was really laid back.

I pulled my phone out and texted to ask whether she wanted me to grab her something. Her reply was an instant yes. Apparently, she'd missed lunch too. My shift normally started at noon, but I had talked to Sarah about coming in later today, knowing I had to see my friends off.

I changed direction and walked into the adorable little wrap and salad shop, Lettuce Eat. It was empty except for Faith, who worked behind the counter.

"Hey, Kat, what can I get you today?"

"I'll take my usual, and can you add Sarah's on there too?"

We came here often since it was only a few doors down. Faith worked from open to close most days, except when she had school. Her uncle, Tommy Davis, owned the place.

It was one of the most popular stops for lunch in town and one of the first places Mindy and Rebecca had showed me. They loved the artsy vibe of the store, with the chalkboard menu and cozy seating in the back.

I liked the food. Tommy and his two brothers owned a large farm next to our friend Frank's. Everything on the menu at Lettuce Eat was organic and grown right on Tommy's farm. The meals were delicious and filling.

"All set," Faith said, handing me two paper bags with their logo on them. I handed her my card.

While she rang me up, I grabbed two bags of chips and tossed them in the bag, then walked over and grabbed water for myself and a pop for Sarah from the cooler at the end of

the counter. This place reminded me of the sub places in New York, and that may have been why I liked it so much.

After paying and thanking Faith, I walked the short distance to work. The chime over the door at Knead to Relax sounded so quietly I could hardly hear it when I entered. Sarah wasn't at the front desk, so I walked down the dark hallway toward the break room. I set our food on the table and went to my locker to get ready. I grabbed my shirt and apron and laid them on the nearby table.

"You're late," Sarah said, coming into the break room. She was smiling, though. I tossed my apron at her and stuck out my tongue.

I turned back to my locker and stripped off my shirt, pulling the hunter green polo I'd left here by mistake over my head. "Yours is on the left. I got you jalapeño chips." I smiled to myself as I waited for her reaction. She hated spicy food.

"Jerk," she said, tossing my apron back at me.

I'd just turned around, so I caught it easily. After tying the apron around my waist, I pinned my nametag on my shirt opposite the logo, then took a seat at the table. Sarah was only a few years older than me and an awesome boss. She didn't get angry with me when I was late or if I messed up. She was quickly becoming a close friend.

"Thanks for grabbing this," she said around a mouthful of lettuce wrap. Her eyes slid closed while she chewed.

"You're welcome. Thanks for letting me come in late. I got into a fight with Rebecca after I dropped my friends off at the airport, and I forgot to make something for lunch."

She swallowed a bite and looked at me. "Uh-oh. What was it this time?"

"Same old garbage. My mom called, and I didn't care, so she got mad. It escalated from there."

"One of these days, you're going to tell me more about your life so I understand why the two of you argue so much,"

she said, wiping her mouth. She wrapped up her food and stood. “Your first client is in ten minutes. Tom Tracy called and asked for you, but I told him you weren’t in today. You’re welcome.”

I rolled my eyes. “That man, I swear.”

She laughed. “He’s something, that’s for sure. If he wasn’t a longtime resident here, I’d think he was some creepy old guy.”

“You mean he’s not?”

She tossed a napkin at me. “Stop. He’s harmless.”

“I know, but he still creeps me out.”

“Yeah, he can be a bit much. I’m going to finish my lunch at my desk. I have some things I have to finish up before I go. Call me if you need anything.”

“Thanks,” I said. I inhaled my lunch and went to the room I always used, getting it ready for my first client.

Shortly after I leased the apartment for Alessandro, I realized I needed more money, so I switched gears in school and got my massage therapy license. During the day, I worked as a nanny for an adorable family that lived just outside the city. In the evening and on the weekends, I worked as a massage therapist, and I occasionally picked up a few bartending shifts at a club if I had a spare minute.

I liked the hard work, and making money felt good. I’d been blessed with the ability to run on very little sleep, and that worked to my advantage.

When I first arrived in Oak Springs, I felt lost. But after a week here, I felt relaxed and knew this was where I wanted to rest and rebuild.

I wanted to do some soul searching, to find the true me and shed the façade I’d created all those years ago. The town called to me on such a deep level, and I knew it would change me for the better. Even if it was only for a short time.



I found out Sarah needed help, and I jumped at the opportunity because I'd really enjoyed working as a massage therapist. I had to verify my license since it was issued in New York and take a few qualifying classes and tests, but after a few months, I had a license in the state of North Carolina and started picking up shifts.

Sarah knocked on my door twice, letting me know someone was here. I took one last look around the room, then cracked my neck and headed to the front to retrieve my client. It was time to get my mind on work.

# Chapter 2



## SID

“THIS IS THE DRESS, and this is what my hair will look like. What do you think?” Joy, my third online date for the month, asked.

I threw back the old fashioned I’d been nursing and looked for the waiter. He appeared just in time, and I tipped my glass toward him to indicate I wanted a refill. He nodded and disappeared again.

“I think it will look great.” I tugged at the collar of my button-up shirt.

Joy’s face lit up like a kid on Christmas morning, and my stomach headed for the floor. *Oh no.*

She squealed, drawing attention from the patrons near us. “I’m so glad you like it. Let me show you the groom’s attire.” She dug around her oversized bag and pulled out a thin black binder. The huge bag on her shoulder when she arrived should have been my first clue that I needed to get the hell out of Dodge.

This was my nightmare. To add insult to injury, my mom had been pressuring me about finding someone I could settle down with. I had been fielding her calls all morning. I wasn’t ever getting married, and I thought she’d understand that, given what had happened to me. She said enough time had passed and I deserved love and happiness, but that wasn’t true. I didn’t deserve any of that.

The waiter dropped off my drink, and I grabbed his wrist to keep him there while I drained the glass. “One more,” I croaked out around the burn in my throat and chest.

But that burn quickly turned to ice when I noticed that the groom in her binder had my face. I tilted my head to make sure I was seeing it correctly. It was me, all right, except my beard was shorter, and my long hair was pulled back in a bun. I never wore my hair in a bun because it wasn’t quite long enough. Plus, my friends would make fun of me.

“Where did you get this picture?” I asked.

“Oh, this? It’s your face from your profile, but I used Photoshop to trim your beard and fix the hair. Speaking of, would you be willing to cut it?”

My eyes widened, and my blood ran cold. This had gone too far. My hair had been long since I was a kid. My mom didn’t want to cut it, especially after my older brother Will threw a massive tantrum about his hair.

When I got older and my dad begged me to cut it off, I kept it long just to screw with him. Now it was part of who I was, and no one would ever change that.

The waiter returned, and I handed him my card. “I’d like to pay the bill.”

“We haven’t had dinner yet,” Joy whined.

The waiter looked down at the table, and his eyes widened. When he looked back up at me, they were filled with sympathy, but they also said, “Better you than me, buddy.”

“You’re right. What would you like?” I asked her.

“I’m not sure. I haven’t looked over the menu yet. We’ve only ordered drinks.”

Another reminder that this had to end.

“Tell you what. You order whatever you’d like. On me. I’m heading to the bar.”

“Are you seriously walking out on our date?” she screeched.

I stood. “Don’t you mean wedding planning?”

She looked affronted, and a few gasps rang out from the tables near us. I rolled my eyes.

“It’s our first date. No need to be judgmental,” I said to the crowd. “Joy, it was a pleasure meeting you, and I’m sure someone will be very happy to marry you, but it’s not me.”

I turned and headed to the bar, done with online dating. They’d all gone the same way. Disastrously.

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“SHE TRIED TO PLAN your wedding?” Frank asked. He barked out a laugh and slapped a hand on the bar.

“Yesh,” I slurred.

I’d called Frank to come get me after my third—or maybe it was my fourth—drink. I hadn’t eaten dinner since my date turned out to be crazy. The scariest thing was seeing my face on the groom. I wasn’t ever getting married. I shivered and tossed back the rest of the water Frank was making me drink and frowned. Why wasn’t it alcohol? If I could still remember what happened, then I wasn’t drunk enough.

Instead of ordering food when I got to the bar, I drank my dinner. Joy made sure on her way out that I wore some of her drink. That was after she ordered an appetizer, the most expensive meal on the menu, and a dessert. All of which I paid for.

I realized too late that I was going to be stranded in the city because I was too drunk to drive home. Frank was my first call, and he was a little too eager to make the forty-five-minute drive to come pick me up. My dating life was a joke, and I was tired of it. Frank was having the time of his life listening to me recount all the awful dates.

It was his fault I was in this mess. He said I was grumpy and needed someone to cheer me up, so he opened an account for me on a dating website called Kindred Matches. At first, I was furious, but then I warmed to the idea since all of my friends were falling in love. Except almost all the dates had gone horribly wrong.

I had only continued to go on them because I needed to get my mom off my back. She'd been wanting to set me up with the daughters of her socialite friends to find me a wife, and that was the last thing I wanted. I figured I'd endure the bad dates until I found someone I could tolerate, then I'd date them for a while so my mom would leave me alone.

It wasn't going well. In fact, Joy was Frank's pick. My bad date curse was following me, even when someone else was picking my dates. I was screwed.

"Didn't the last girl try to eat you after dinner?" Frank asked, bringing me back to the present. He took a small sip of the beer he'd been nursing for the last hour.

I groaned. "I thought we'd hit it off at dinner. She seemed sweet and asked me back for a coffee. I assumed we'd make out and talk about date number two, but the minute her door closed, she was like a wild animal. Growling and everything. I was scared for my life, man." I shivered and took a gulp of my drink. *Damn it.* I had forgotten I was drinking water again.

Frank laughed so hard he had tears coming from his eyes. "That's hilarious."

"Ha ha," I said dryly.

"Remind me again what happened with the first one this month?"

I honestly couldn't remember. The whiskey was clouding my mind, and things were getting fuzzier the more we sat here. I rolled my eyes at him. "I think you just want to laugh some more."

"Damn right I do. This is great. The most entertainment I've had in a while. You should write a book." He snapped his

fingers. “Or better yet, you should write it in the next ‘Daily Happenings’ column.”

The “Daily Happenings” was the town’s online gossip column. It was supposed to go out daily, hence the name, but no one had wanted to write it. Posts popped up periodically on no set schedule, but no one could figure out who was actually writing them.

There was a post recently about Rebecca’s sister Kat—who blew into town two years ago like a storm—and me spending time together. But it wasn’t true. We’d hung out a few times at events and Sunday night dinners, but that was it.

“Can we get out of here?” I asked.

Frank looked at me and laughed. “Yeah. You look like shit.”

“Thanks. Love you too.”

He reached back and dug around in his pocket for his wallet. Normally, I’d stop him—I didn’t like people paying for me—but since I had paid Joy’s massive tab tonight, I let him pay. Frank tossed some bills on the bar top and tapped it with his fingers.

“Let’s go.”

I stood from my chair and wobbled a little.

“Don’t hurt yourself.”

Frank led me outside with a hand on my arm since I couldn’t walk straight to save my damn life. A rush of warm air hit me when we passed through the door. It was an unusually warm day for September, and the heat made my stomach roll. I needed a bed fast or else I was going to need a bathroom.

We walked in silence to Frank’s truck, and I nearly face planted. Frank caught me and pulled me against him.

“Shit, man. You’re worse than I thought.”

He folded me into the passenger seat and then jogged around to the driver's side. Once he was inside, he turned toward me as he started the truck. "How do you plan on getting your truck tomorrow?"

Shit. I hadn't thought about that. The only thing I'd thought about was getting drunk and forgetting the night had ever happened. I shrugged and let out a burp that was a little wet.

"If you throw up in here, you're cleaning it."

I grumbled out an okay and then rested my head against the cool glass of the window. My life was spiraling downhill. I could see it happening, but I didn't know what to do about it. Ever since Frank married Mindy, things had changed. They were expecting twins now, and I was happy for them, but being alone caused the nightmares to return. The more I tried to shut them down, the angrier I became.

"So, how are you getting your truck?" Frank asked again.

"I don't know. I hadn't thought that far."

He rolled his eyes.

"Can you bring me back here tomorrow?" Tomorrow was Sunday, and it wasn't like he had anything going on besides family dinner.

Frank looked pissed. "No. I can't. We have a class tomorrow, and you're supposed to be there for jumping."

Shit. Another thing I'd forgotten about. Guess tomorrow was Saturday, not Sunday.

"I'll figure something out," I mumbled.

He sighed. "I'll send someone to get your ass in the morning, and we'll figure out a way to get it."

"Thanks."

His phone rang, and it echoed in my skull. Great, a headache was already coming on. Frank fumbled to dig it out

of his pocket, then answered in a rush. “Are they on their way?”

I couldn’t hear who was on the phone, but at this hour, I could guess. It was a little too early for Mindy to be having the twins, but it was common to go early with multiples. Frank was always on alert.

“Okay. Where do you want me to get that?” Frank asked.

My eyes slid closed.

“They’re closed,” he shouted.

My eyes opened, and I peered over at him. One hand held the phone tight against his head, and the other was in his hair.

“Okay. I’ll see what I can do. Love you.”

He hung up the phone and sighed. “Mindy wants me to get pickles and ice cream.”

I scrunched up my nose as my stomach rolled. The thought of those two items going together made me sick.

Frank put the truck in reverse and backed out of the parking space. “These pregnancy cravings will be the death of me.”

I chuckled.

“Last week she wanted steak and onions. I took a steak out of the freezer and thawed it, then got all the seasonings out and took it out to grill. She came down and yelled at me and told me I needed to go to Sandy’s Diner instead because she wanted it from there. It was six at night, and Sandy’s was about to close. What the hell did she want from me?”

“Did you go?” I asked. My eyes slid closed. Sleep was nearing.

“Yeah, I went. Sandy met me at the door with the damn steak wrapped up and a banana shake. I guess Mindy called ahead but forgot to tell me. Pregnancy brain is a real thing. There’s so much shit she has forgotten since we found out we were expecting.”



“Mm-hmm.”

He chuckled. “Go to sleep, sunshine. We’ll be home soon.”

I flipped him off, or at least I thought I did. Sleep was pulling me under, and the more he talked, the deeper into the dark I slipped. His voice had a calming effect. I’d never tell him that when I was sober, though. He started on a tangent about something else going on with Mindy and her pregnancy. Once we hit the highway, I was out.

# Chapter 3



SID

POUNING ON MY FRONT DOOR woke me up, and I was ready to throttle whoever was on the other side. My black lab, Shiloh, barked as she bounded down the stairs ahead of me, and the sound reverberated through my skull. I growled and continued toward the door with heavy steps. I had the hangover from hell, and the pounding and barking were making it worse.

Fucking Frank. I ripped open the door, ready to strangle him, but stopped short. It wasn't Frank on my porch after all. Instead, Katerina Cooper's crystal blue eyes sparkled back at me. Then they widened and roamed over my naked chest and down to my hips. I glanced down and was relieved to see I'd had the sense to tug on a pair of gray sweatpants before coming down.

"What are you doing here?" I asked. My voice was husky from sleep.

She cleared her throat and smiled. "I'm here to get you."

I raised an eyebrow. "What?"

"Frank sent me to pick you up. He said you needed a ride to your truck, and I'm the only one available."

Shiloh picked that moment to push past me. She sniffed at Kat and then jumped on her, causing her to stumble backward. I reached out and grabbed her arm.

“Shiloh, down!” I said sternly. She wasn’t listening, so I grabbed her collar and tugged her down. Letting go of Kat, I led Shiloh back inside.

Kat followed me in and looked around. It made me slightly nervous. I didn’t have people over to visit, and her being here in my space felt like an invasion of my privacy. I scanned the room for anything that might be embarrassing and came up empty.

“What time is it?” I asked.

“It’s eight,” she said, wandering over to look at the photographs on the mantel above the fireplace.

Kat was beautiful, with long honey blond hair and sparkling blue eyes. Her amazing curves were on display in a pair of shorts that showcased her thicker thighs and luscious ass. It was hard not to stare, and those curves had me thinking a lot of things I shouldn’t have been. Especially now with only a pair of sweats on. I turned away and took a deep breath.

I grunted and walked into the kitchen to turn on the coffee maker. I needed to distract myself from the effect she had on me. Kat may have been gorgeous, but she was also unpredictable and caught up in her appearance. I’d never pursue her. Her bubbly personality drove me nuts, and we were complete opposites.

She loved attention and going out, while I liked to be invisible and enjoyed staying in. I’d tossed around the idea of asking Kat to help me dodge my mom but then thought better of it. I didn’t think I’d be able to stand being around Kat all the time. And it would probably have the opposite of the intended effect on my mom. She’d be so happy that she’d start planning a wedding.

Kat walked into the kitchen, and Shiloh went for her again. I grabbed her collar before she could jump and let her outside, tossing out a ball that she’d had at the back door.

“Sorry about that. She loves people.”

“That’s okay.”

“Would you like some coffee?” I asked.

She nodded and took a seat at the small table positioned in front of a window overlooking the backyard.

“Your house is really nice. I love how close it is to town.”

“Thanks,” I muttered and poured our coffee. I set out cream and sugar on the table, not sure how she took hers. She reached for the sugar and dumped two spoonsful in and then stirred slowly while watching Shiloh play in the backyard. A look of contentment settled over her face, and she let out a sigh.

“Why did Frank send you?” I asked as I took a seat across from her.

When she looked at me and her eyes drifted to my chest again, I wished I had a shirt on. I didn’t even want to think about what my hair looked like. I’d rolled out of bed, thrown on pants, and answered the door.

She cleared her throat and took a sip of the coffee, then looked outside again. I ran my hands through my hair, brushing it back from my face. I hoped I’d smoothed it out.

“Like I said, I was the only one available. He called Rebecca to ask if she could grab you, but she was already on her way to the restaurant.”

“So he called you?” I asked with a raised brow.

She shrugged. “Yeah. He asked if I could take you to the city to grab your truck. Something about a date gone wrong and you left it there.”

I cursed under my breath, and she giggled. The sound surprised me. I glanced at her. She was still staring out the window, but she was smiling.

“Don’t worry. I won’t hound you about it,” she said.

My shoulders relaxed.

“Much.”

I tensed again and frowned. Her giggle again surprised me, and I stood, needing to put some distance between us. I didn't like what this conversation was doing to me.

"I'll go get ready then, so I don't keep you."

"Oh, yeah. That's probably a good idea. I have to work at noon."

I filled Shiloh's food bowl, then let her in. She walked toward Kat, then lifted her nose in the air and turned for her full dish.

"She shouldn't bother you. If she does, tell her 'down' or let her back outside."

Kat smiled. "I'll be fine, Sid."

I nodded and hurried for the stairs, taking them two at a time. Once I was safely in my room, I ran my hands through my hair and let out a deep breath. I didn't have time to shower, which made me feel worse about the situation. I grabbed a clean T-shirt from my closet and a pair of shorts from my dresser and pulled them on.

I groaned when I caught sight of my reflection in the bathroom mirror. My hair was a disaster and beyond saving with the time I had, so I pulled it into a small bun with the bottom half down. I hated wearing it this way, especially because it wasn't long enough to stay in the bun all day. I knew it would be in my face again within the hour. Plus, Frank would razz me all day.

My phone buzzed in my room while I was brushing my teeth. I grabbed it from the nightstand and pulled the charger free. There was a text from Frank.

**Frank:** *I sent Kat to come get you. Come to the farm after you get your truck.*

I rolled my eyes. Now he warned me.

**Sid:** *A little late. She showed up here twenty minutes ago. We're getting ready to leave now*

Without waiting for a response, I tossed my phone on the bed and walked back into the bathroom to finish getting ready. I spritzed on some cologne and applied deodorant. My hair looked fucking stupid, so I tugged the tie out and pulled on a baseball cap instead. Feeling marginally better, I made my way back downstairs.

My boots were by the front door, and I tugged them on before walking back into the kitchen to retrieve Kat. She was sitting in the same spot, staring out the window, but her hand was absently rubbing Shiloh's head. My dog was sitting beside her, pressing her body weight into Kat.

I cleared my throat, and Kat jumped, placing a hand over her heart. "You scared me."

"Sorry. I'm ready when you are."

Her phone buzzed as she stood. She frowned as she looked down at it but then shook her head and shoved it into her pocket. I scratched behind Shiloh's ears and told her to be good before opening the front door and stepping aside so Kat could walk through. The weather was nice, and I took a minute to breathe it in before I locked up and followed Kat to her car.

"I'm sorry about this," I said over the top of the car.

She shrugged and slid into the driver's seat. I folded myself into the passenger side and buckled up.

"It's okay. We've all been there. And I like to stay busy."

I liked to be busy, too, but only with a purpose. Her morning sounded hectic for no good reason. Okay, so maybe I was being an asshole, since it was kind of my fault her morning was hectic. And Frank's. He could have driven his ass over to bring me to the farm, and I could have gotten my truck later. It was my fault it was there.

"You're really quiet," she said as we headed out of town.

I grunted, and she laughed. We made small talk for a little while. She asked about my disaster date, and I was as vague as possible, which seemed to satisfy her enough that she moved

on. She started asking the usual get-to-know-you questions, and I tamped down my irritation and gave her short, clipped answers.

After ten minutes of that, she got frustrated and turned on the radio. It was loud, and I liked it playing softly in the background. It struck me that this was the most time Kat and I had ever spent together one on one, even though she had lived in Oak Springs for over two years now. Luckily, we were only twenty minutes from the city now, and soon enough, I'd be on my way to the farm alone.

# Chapter 4



## KAT

MY PHONE BUZZED, SIGNALING more texts rolling in, and I sighed. I didn't want to look while we were driving. Dread filled my stomach. I knew what was waiting for me. A slew of texts from my mother. Why couldn't she take a hint?

"Why the long face?" Sid asked.

I glanced at him. He glanced at me from under the rim of his hat. His expression was grim, but that was how he always looked, so I wasn't sure how to take it.

My phone chimed again, and I held my breath. We exited the freeway and slowed to a stop at a light. I grabbed my phone and instantly regretted it. Tears pricked my eyes as I stared at the photo my mom had sent.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing. It's just my mom."

"Is she okay?"

I scoffed and quickly covered it with a cough. Or tried to. "She's fine."

He frowned but didn't say anything else. My phone pinged again, and I let out a strangled scream at the onslaught of photos. Sid looked out the window and cringed. Silence filled the car before he directed me to the parking structure where he'd left his truck.



I pulled up a few spots away and parked. He hesitated, as if weighing his options: continue to attempt the awkward small talk with me or run. I hoped for the latter. I didn't want to discuss this with him.

He sighed. "Do you want to grab a cup of coffee? Do you have time?"

I stared at him, wondering if he was serious. When his frown deepened and he lifted a brow, I nodded and got out of the car.

"So what's going on?" Sid asked as we walked down the street.

I sighed. "My parents attend a charity gala every year—actually, they attend a lot, but this one is big. It's for the hospital, and they expect Rebecca and me to attend so we can go as a family. It doesn't make sense since we don't donate and we're not important people, but my mom doesn't care. Every year she sends me a list of potential dates. Men with money and important last names. The ones that she says would elevate our family name. This year I told her I didn't want to go at all, let alone go with someone, but she won't take no for an answer."

"Can you go with someone who will fake it?" he asked.

I snorted loudly. "I've told the men in the past that it's only for show and I'm not actually interested, and every year they parade me around like eye candy. They introduce me as their girlfriend, all while drinking too much and trying to stick their hands up my dress."

Sid scowled, and I could have sworn I heard him growl. My phone went off again, and when Phillip Wentworth III's face popped up, I nearly threw my phone. My mom and dad had continually tried to set me up with Phillip for the last five years.

"Unbelievable!"

"Everything all right?" Sid asked, taking off his hat and running a hand through his long hair. The delicious scent of his

cologne hit my nose, and I closed my eyes. It was fresh and spicy, with a hint of musk, which helped calm my nerves. I needed that.

“Not really. My parents can’t take a hint. They’re trying to set me up with a disgusting scumbag.”

Sid frowned. “What do you mean?”

Shit, now I had to explain. I could sugarcoat it and pretend I was just being dramatic, or I could tell him the truth because someone needed to know.

“Philip Wentworth III is an awful man. One year after my date drank too much, passed out in his soup, and had to be carried out, Phillip cornered me. He tried to kiss me, and his hand kept sliding up my leg through the slit in my dress. When he grabbed my boob, I kneed him in the crotch.”

Air puffed out of my nose at the memory. I wanted to hit the bastard now. The next part really made me angry.

“My parents blamed *me*. They said my dress was too provocative and sent Phillip and every other man in the gala the wrong message. My mom is convinced that he and I are a good match. She says I need to give him a second chance. That he probably had too much to drink. That’s why she continues to send me his information for every event. She’s even contacted him a few times.”

This time, Sid did growl. I glanced over at him. His jaw was tight, like he was clenching his teeth together, and his fingers were curled into fists.

“I’ll go with you,” he blurted.

I stopped walking. “What?”

He expelled a large breath and ran a hand through his hair before looking at me. “I’ll take you.”

“Sid, you don’t have to. That wasn’t why I told you all of this. It was a lot to keep in, and I’ve held it in for a long time.”

He placed his hand on my arm. “You didn’t ask me, Kat. I offered. You shouldn’t have to go through that alone. I know what it’s like.”

I looked up at him. “You do?”

He nodded. “My mom has been pressuring me to settle down. I’ve been ignoring her calls recently. I know she has a list of women for me to take to that same gala, hoping that I’ll find ‘the one.’”

“At least your mom doesn’t text you a hundred times when you don’t answer her calls.”

“I ignore those too. There’s a way to put your phone on silent.”

Was he making fun of me? Light danced in his eyes, but he was still frowning. He was a hard man to read.

“Look, it wouldn’t be that farfetched for us to go together since both of our families attend. You’d be helping me out too. We could pretend we’re seeing each other, and that will take care of our parents hounding us,” Sid said.

“You want me to pretend to be your girlfriend?”

He scratched his beard and looked away. “Yeah. We’ll go as friends but tell them we’re dating. It will get both our moms off our backs.”

He was right. If I showed up with a man, then my mom wouldn’t be able to force anyone else on me. But it was Sid, and we didn’t exactly scream in love. He barely seemed to tolerate me. Would anyone buy it? Then there was Rebecca. She knew we weren’t dating. Could we pull the wool over her eyes too?

“You don’t have to decide now. Just know the offer stands,” Sid said.

He turned and started walking toward the small coffee shop on the corner. I stared at him while I mulled over his offer. I couldn’t decide if it was a good idea or not. I’d declined my parents’ requests multiple times in the past few

months, and now they were pressing hard. Threatening things they couldn't follow through with. They knew I'd eventually cave to their harassment, but claiming Sid was my date would put an end to that.

If Sid went with me, at least I'd have someone who was equally miserable being there. We'd be able to hide out on the sidelines, and he wouldn't be dragging me around to schmooze the big wigs.

"Are you coming?" Sid asked. He was holding open the door to the coffee shop. I nodded and hurried to the door.

"Thanks."

He nodded.

We ordered coffee and pastries. Thankfully, Sid didn't want to stay. He muttered something about needing to be on the road, and I had to get to work. Once we got back to our vehicles, he paused at my door.

"Send me a text if you want me to go. I need a few days' notice so I can get a suit. I don't keep those things lying around."

Was that a joke? It was hard to tell. I laughed anyway. "No, I don't see you as having a closet full of suits. I'll give you enough time."

He nodded again and then walked to his truck. Every interaction I'd had with Sid over the last two years had been awkward. We didn't fit. It felt like he had his guard up around me, and my bubbly personality seemed to grate on him. But he was willing to help me out, and that meant a lot. He was a good friend, that I knew.

I breathed a sigh, turned my phone to silent, and headed back to Oak Springs.

# Chapter 5



## SID

THE SUN HUNG LOW in the sky, and the wind whipped through my hair as Orion and I chased down a faux cow that Frank's cousin Charlie was pulling with the tractor. We raced toward it with vigor, and when we got close enough, I lifted my arm and swung the rope around a few times before letting it fly. It hooked the cow perfectly around the neck. I pulled the rope tight and then let go so it wouldn't pull us forward.

Charlie slowed down, and I let out a victorious shout. It was turning out to be a good day, despite how it had started. I still couldn't believe I'd asked Kat to act as my girlfriend and be my date to a gala I didn't even want to attend. What the hell had I been thinking?

Orion pulled to the side toward the fence. Kids and parents clapped and cheered as my demonstration came to a close. Frank had started a camp for inexperienced riders two years ago, and it had really grown.

He now provided training for competitions; beginner, intermediate, and advanced riding lessons; and jumping and roping classes. He offered private lessons as well. Charlie and I led the jumping and roping classes, while Frank handled the rest. Jacob, Frank's brother, helped out with private lessons and the day camp when he could.

Peter, Charlie, Jacob, Frank, and I had finished building cabins on the property a few weeks ago so Frank could add a full-time riding camp. They would offer a week at a time to

start and then eventually open it to a full-time summer camp. Frank opened enrollment for the first full week of riding camp last week, and it filled up quickly.

Frank and Mindy approached the fence, and I led Orion in that direction. The roping arena was new and sat toward the back of the property, near the line that divided Frank's farm from Jacob's.

"Orion's jumping like a champ," I said, reaching forward and patting his thick neck. Orion was the perfect horse. He was a new gelding that had arrived at Wilson Farms a month ago. We bonded, and he'd become mine, despite Frank's protests.

"You look good on the back of him," Mindy said.

Frank scowled at her. "Quit hitting on him."

"Oh, stop. You have nothing to worry about. I married you, remember?" Mindy pulled him in for a kiss. "I have to say, though, it looked like Sid was faster than you. Did you time that, Sid?"

I chuckled at the look of jealousy on Frank's face. "No, not this time."

"Oh, hell no!" Frank shouted. "Let's go. Roping contest. You and me."

"I don't think that's a good idea," I muttered, knowing full well there was no way to stop him.

"What's the matter? Afraid I'll whoop your ass?" Frank asked. "Let's do a jumping contest, then. I know I'll beat you there."

Frank hopped into the golf cart and called for Mindy to get in. They raced off toward the barn before I could argue. I led Orion out of the roping arena and across the farm toward the barn and a smaller arena that was set up for jumping. Frank opened the gate to let me in. It looked like we were really doing this.

“Please be careful. I don’t want anything to happen to you before they come out, which could be any minute now,” Mindy said, rubbing her swollen belly. It looked extremely heavy, and I was curious about how she could stay upright.

“I’ll be fine, babe,” Frank said, leaning over and giving her a chaste kiss before he took off for the barn.

A few minutes later, Frank shot out of the barn on Dinah’s back. Mindy held the gate open, and they blew past her, nearly knocking her over. This would not end well. Frank was hotheaded and wouldn’t back down from a challenge, and Dinah was unpredictable. The horse had already thrown him multiple times in the past, not to mention the major accident they’d had at a jumping contest years ago. Frank had almost lost his arm, and Dinah had broken her leg.

Instead of coming to the center to go over the rules of the little contest we were having, Frank went right into the first jump. I kicked my heels into Orion’s side and took off after him. Frank cleared the second jump, and I was close behind him. I watched as he turned toward the third jump and swung out a little wider since it was a tight turn.

As Frank approached the jump, Dinah stopped abruptly, throwing Frank. He flew over her head and broke through the wood on his way down, landing flat on his back. He wasn’t moving, and the air left my lungs. *Shit. Not again.*

Mindy let out a bloodcurdling scream and ran for the gate. “Frank!”

“No. Don’t come in here with Dinah loose. Go get Charlie,” I shouted, coming to a stop next to a lifeless Frank. Panic ripped through me as I hopped off Orion and kneeled beside Frank.

“He left to get gas for the tractor for the next demonstration,” she shouted in a panic.

“Then go get Jacob. He’s home.”

She nodded, waddled over to the golf cart, and drove off toward the back of the property, where Jacob’s house was.

“Frank, can you hear me?” I asked, placing a hand gently on his shoulder.

His eyes opened and then slid closed again.

“Don’t move, man. Stay still.” At least he was alive.

Frank reached for me, and I gripped his hand. “Don’t move. Jacob’s coming, and we’re going to get you out of here.”

A few minutes later, Jacob arrived in his truck. He jumped out and hopped the fence, running full speed toward us.

“How is he?” he asked, sliding to a stop next to us. His eyes were wide with worry.

“He’s okay. In and out a few times, but he’s alive. He can answer basic questions.”

Turning my head so only Jacob could hear, I said, “His head is bleeding, and I’m not sure if he broke anything. We need to call an ambulance, and I left my phone in my truck.”

Jacob nodded and pulled out his. He stood and walked away from us with his phone to his ear. After a few seconds, he hung up and kneeled beside me. His phone chimed. He looked at it and swore.

“What?”

Jacob leaned over and whispered in my ear. “Mindy’s water broke.”

“Shit.”

“I’m going to put the horses away and then go check in with Laney,” Jacob said. “I’ll see if Gracie can help her, and I’ll take Mindy to the hospital.” Laney had given birth to a little boy, Isaac, a few weeks ago and was still recovering. Gracie was ten and a big help.

Jacob grabbed the horses’ reins and walked them toward the barn. Another truck pulled between the house and the small path that led to the arena. It stopped, and Peter jumped out. He hopped the fence and ran toward us.



“Frank,” he called out. “Is he okay?”

“I’m okay, man. Sid won’t let me up, though,” Frank mumbled.

“He’s been going in and out, but he seems to be more alert now, and he hasn’t closed his eyes for a few minutes. He’s answered basic questions, and he seems to be aware of what happened.” I could tell he was scared by the death grip he had on my hand.

“Does he know—”

“No,” I blurted. “Wait, how do you know?”

He leaned in and talked in a hushed tone. “Laney called Kate in a panic. I dropped Kate there to help.”

Laney’s SUV flew past on the small dirt road with Kate in the driver’s seat.

“There they go,” Peter said.

“The ambulance should be here soon. Hope they end up in the same place.”

“They should. Can we move him?” Peter asked.

I shook my head. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. His head is bleeding, and I’m not sure if anything is broken.”

“What’s going on?” Frank asked. “Let me up. Nothing is broken. I can tell.” He tried to sit up, and I pushed him back down.

“Stay down!” Peter and I yelled. Frank lay back down and then passed out again.

Jacob came out of the barn. “Is he okay?”

“Yeah, but how much longer?” I asked.

“I think I hear them.”

The sound of sirens pierced the air as an ambulance came to a halt near the fence. Two paramedics jumped out. I recognized the guys since we worked together. There was little time for chitchat as they assessed Frank’s injuries. They

loaded him up and were off, headed to Oak Crest General, which was where Kate had taken Mindy.

“I’m going home to see how Laney is,” Jacob said. “Keep me posted.”

“I will,” I promised

“Ready?” Peter asked.

“Yeah. I’ll follow you there.”

Peter took off, and I went to check on the animals. I wanted to wait and check in with Charlie to make sure he was good since there was one more group of day campers coming for a roping demonstration today. Charlie and his best friend, Skip, could handle it, but I wanted to make sure before I left.

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AN ANNOYING CHIMING SOUND pulled me from my sleep. I rubbed at my eyes and got out of bed to find where it was coming from. I bent down and dug through my discarded pants from the night before. My phone was in the pocket, almost dead.

The morning sun streamed in through my window like a laser beam. I groaned and walked over to yank the shades closed.

What the hell time was it? The phone read seven when I plugged it in. I needed to be at the station in an hour. I looked at my phone again. I had a missed call from Peter and a text message.

**Peter:** *Mindy had the babies. They’re all doing well and resting. Come by whenever you want. Kate and I are going home to sleep for a few days.*

I chuckled at the last part and sent Peter a text thanking him for letting me know and telling him I’d be up there in the afternoon. I’d spent two hours at the hospital with Frank last night. I knew I had to work this morning, so when Peter said he and Kate were staying, I took off.

Frank had a concussion and a few bruised ribs, but other than that, he would be okay. I, on the other hand, was not okay. It tore me up to see him lying on the ground like that. Brought on nightmares about another accident years before.

My anger was at an all-time high, and I wanted to hide away from the world. But that wasn't an option since I was the sheriff. I got up and stretched. Shiloh danced around my feet while I got dressed in my uniform.

We made our way downstairs, and I let her out while I filled her bowl. Then I started on breakfast. I tried to eat a healthy breakfast every morning and not live on the clichéd donuts and coffee. Once in a while, a good donut or muffin from Grateful Cup was necessary. Elouise had the best baked goods and coffee.

I made a mean omelet, though, and thankfully I'd gone to the grocery store the other day, so the fridge was stocked. I took out all the ingredients I needed for a farm omelet and got to work. Time was dwindling, and I needed to leave. I'd set the coffeepot timer the night before, so at least I had fresh, hot coffee.

Once I'd finished breakfast and let Shiloh out again, I filled my travel mug and stepped outside. The sun was bright, the sky was clear, and it felt warmer than it had the last few days. I stood on my front porch and closed my eyes.

Birds chirped, and I could faintly hear a mower in the distance. I loved this house. The location was perfect—on the same street as the police station and only one block away from Main Street. I'd been looking for a while, but most of the houses either needed a lot of work or were too much space for a single guy. This house had a nice backyard and enough space to start a family.

Laney and Jacob had originally planned to buy it before Jacob's past got in the way and they had to turn it down. When my realtor told me it was back on the market, I put an offer in right away. Laney and Jacob didn't know, but I had been looking at it around the same time they were. After I heard

they wanted to buy it, I backed off. They had a daughter, and Jacob wanted the house for his family.

Mr. Thompson, my neighbor, lifted his hand in greeting. He was an older man who lived alone. He was newer to town and kept to himself. I liked him. We got along well since we were a lot alike. I'd often see him cutting his grass at the same time I was, and we'd nod to one another. Occasionally, we'd sit on one of our porches and enjoy a beer.

He'd let Shiloh out and feed her when I had to work long hours. I was thankful for Mr. Thompson. We were friendly, but he wasn't the sort of neighbor who would bug me every time he saw me. I shivered at the thought of someone invading my privacy like that.

Which made me think of Kat and how she had done just that the day before. Thankfully, it was a one-off. I didn't make a habit of leaving my truck in the city, and there was no other reason I'd need to see Kat or have her come to my house.

I hopped in my truck and rolled down the window. The station wasn't far away, and I could have walked, but I liked to listen to the radio on my way in.

"Good morning, Sheriff," Connie, our station's receptionist, sang out as I walked in.

"Morning, Con. How's it going today?"

"Slow and easy, as always on Sunday."

I smiled. "You didn't have to come in today."

"Yeah. I did. I heard Frank and Mindy had their babies and wanted to be here in case you wanted to step out to visit."

"News travels fast. That was nice of you. Thanks. I was going to go this afternoon," I said.

"Well, I'm here until you don't need me."

I leaned forward over her desk. "Con, I don't need you."

She laughed and swatted my arm. "Then I'll stay until you get back from your visit."

Smiling, I walked into my office and shut the door. The corner office had been Frank's before he handed the title of sheriff over to me three years ago. Now the office was mine. It was small, but I liked it.

Being the sheriff in a small town was an easy gig. Not much went on. The most excitement we'd had was when Jacob's old boss came to town and kidnapped Laney. Since then, things had been awfully quiet. Most days, I took a nap in my office or caught up on a mystery novel.

I'd always enjoyed reading, and lately, between the downtime at work and alone time at home, I'd been reading a lot more. I was thinking of ordering an e-reader. Then I could get more books without having to go to the library in town where I risked running into someone.

The clock on the computer showed it had only been an hour since I sat down at my desk, and I was going crazy. I stood and put on my hat. The station was quiet, and I wondered where everyone was. I checked the small break room and finally found Connie in our old filing room.

"Hey, what are you doing in here?"

She jumped and held a hand to her chest. "Jesus, don't scare me like that."

"Sorry. I couldn't find anyone out there," I said, jerking a thumb over my shoulder toward the squad room.

"Nelson went to Lettuce Eat to pick up lunch."

"And he didn't ask if I wanted anything?"

"We thought you were going to the hospital," Connie said, pulling a box down from the shelf. She winced under the weight of it. I walked over and took it out of her hands, carrying it to an empty table along the wall where we looked at old case files.

"What's this for?"

She shrugged. "Not sure. Sheriff Gentry called and asked me to pull it. He said he'd be in later this week to have a

look.”

I frowned. Nash Gentry was the Ridge Point sheriff. What did he want with one of our cold cases? “Shouldn’t he have called me?”

She shrugged and headed for the door. I snapped a picture of the case information before following her. “What is it with everyone ignoring me?”

“No one’s ignoring you, honey.”

“First Nelson with lunch and now Nash. I’d say they are.”

Connie sat behind her desk and started typing on her computer. She completely ignored my comment, which further pissed me off.

“I’m headed to the hospital. If anyone needs anything, call me.”

“We will.”

“Connie?”

“Yeah?” She finally looked up at me.

“Go home.”

She laughed. “I will when it’s time. I have some work to finish up, and then I’ll be on my way. I’ll let Nelson know you’ve gone.”

“Thanks.”

## Chapter 6



### KAT

THE WIND WHISTLED THROUGH the open window of my car, blowing my hair around my face as I drove to the hospital to meet the twins. I had just enough time before work to stop. Rebecca had texted me that she and her boyfriend Luke were the only ones there at the moment, so it was a perfect time for a quick visit. I was so excited I could hardly contain it.

I found a decent parking spot close to the front and hightailed it inside, stopping briefly to press the button for the elevator. Thankfully, the doors slid open a second later, and the car was empty. The climb to the labor and delivery floor was quick, and I hurried to the room. I stopped outside the door and took a deep breath, then pasted on my best smile and pushed open the door.

“Thankfully, Sid took him along when he went to get me food,” Mindy was saying as I walked into the room. “Kat, hi. Thanks for coming.”

Rebecca turned and smiled while Luke tipped his head in greeting. I smiled at them and walked around the bed to give Mindy a hug. Both twins were sleeping in a plastic bassinet beside the bed. I peeked in and nearly cried.

“Mindy, they’re perfect.”

She beamed. “Thank you.”

“What’s going on with Frank?” I asked.

She rolled her eyes and shifted on the bed, patting the spot beside her. “He’s just being obnoxious. Nothing new, but it’s harder for me to handle right now.”

I took a seat beside her. “I can understand that. Have you guys gotten any sleep?”

“Not really, but I’m handling it better than he is. Although I am pretty stressed about what life will be like once we get home.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Rebecca walked over, interrupting us. “I think we’re going to get out of your hair so you can get some sleep.”

“No, don’t go. It’s okay,” Mindy said. She covered an enormous yawn with her hand.

“I should let you get some sleep too,” I said, pushing to stand.

Mindy grabbed my wrist. “Don’t you leave me too.”

I sat back down and patted her hand. “Okay. I’ll stay, but only for a bit. I need to get to work.”

She nodded and yawned again.

“So what are you worried about?” I asked after Rebecca and Luke left the room.

“Frank is extremely busy, which I already knew, and I was helping run the riding camp, but now that the girls are here, I’m kind of freaking out. I won’t be able to keep up with everything for the riding camp and my store. I know Rebecca is handling it as best she can, but she’s about to open her restaurant, and she’s already told me how stressed out she is doing both.”

I frowned, a little pissed that my sister would put that kind of pressure on Mindy. “I think she can handle it for a little while longer. If not, maybe we could all pitch in a little.”

Mindy sighed. “I have to hire someone new at the store. I can’t keep doing all of this. The problem is, I don’t want to



give up my store, and I don't want to quit helping Frank run the camp. But I don't know how I can do both and take care of two newborns."

"I can help you look for someone at your store. We could put an ad in the online paper. Maybe someone in town knows someone who would be a good fit."

"That's a good idea, actually. I'll send Laney a text and have her work on it for me. She said she'd help any way that she could, but I haven't bothered her since she just had Isaac. She's also running her store and helping Jacob with the tree farm."

"What else can I help with?" I asked.

"Do you know anyone who would nanny part time?" She chuckled. Even though she meant it as a joke, I knew she really needed the help.

I bit my lip and debated whether I should open my mouth. I could help; I'd worked as a nanny for an adorable little boy and girl back in New York. But even though I could, I wasn't sure I had time with work. I'd been picking up more hours at the spa and helping Sarah with advertising.

"I guess it's wishful thinking," Mindy said. "We could all use a nanny, but somehow Kate and Laney are managing fine. I think I have to get home and find my groove."

The guilt of not speaking up was killing me because I had experience and could help her.

"You're awfully quiet," Mindy said, knocking her shoulder into mine. "What time do you need to leave again? The girls need to eat soon if you want to hold them before you go."

I smiled. "I'd love to."

Mindy reached in and grabbed one baby wrapped tight in a blanket patterned with pink and gray stars. She had reddish hair and grimaced in her sleep while her mom moved her around.

“This is Ava,” Mindy said, placing the baby in my arms. She squirmed and fussed, but I quickly bounced her, and she settled down.

“This little one is Adaline,” Mindy said as she picked up the other bundle. “She’s a bit more vocal than Ava. Makes sense, since she looks more like her dad.”

I laughed, but the look Mindy shot me meant she was serious.

Mindy peeled her gown down and held Adaline to her chest. The baby latched on and started eating like a champ. Ava fussed a little and woke up. I slid off the bed and stood beside it, rocking back and forth while bouncing her in my arms.

“You’re a natural,” Mindy said.

I pinched my lips together. It was now or never. If I told her the truth, I’d have to offer to help, but if I kept it to myself, the guilt of knowing they were struggling and I could ease some of the stress would eat away at me.

“I used to nanny.”

Mindy’s head snapped up. “You did?”

“Well, don’t look so shocked. I’m more than a pretty face.”

“I didn’t mean...what I meant was...”

“I’m kidding. It’s fine.”

Mindy chewed on her lip, then sighed. “I’ll be honest, you don’t come off as someone who likes kids.”

Anger flared in my gut, and I quickly pushed it away. It wasn’t Mindy’s fault; it was the vibe I gave off, and I wore that persona like a cloak. At home, it had been easier to fake being a dumb blond socialite than to be my true self. Unfortunately, at some point, it had stopped being fake, but since being here, I’d shed some of that skin, and it felt good. Really good. I hoped other people would notice it too.

“I know, but when I moved to New York, things sort of didn’t go according to plan. I had to find work, and one of my jobs was working for this amazing family that had a little boy and a girl. They were toddlers when I started and in school when I left.”

“Huh. I never would have guessed.”

“I can help. You said you needed someone part time, right?”

Mindy looked up at me with wide eyes and nodded.

“With the extra hours I picked up at Knead to Relax, I don’t have much time, but I’m willing to give you whatever extra I have.”

“I can’t ask you to do that. I’m asking for help because I’m busy. I wouldn’t want to run you ragged too,” Mindy said.

“You wouldn’t be. I offered, remember? How many hours were you thinking?”

Mindy sat up straighter. She buttoned her gown and handed me Adaline while she took Ava. “I’m not sure, exactly. I didn’t really think it was possible. Probably a few days a week, or nights, whatever you’re willing to swing. I’ll take whatever help I can get.”

I nodded and stared down into the most beautiful blue eyes I’d ever seen. Adaline squirmed, and then her face pinched like she was in pain. There was a white burp cloth hanging off the side of the bassinet. I grabbed it and slung it over my shoulder, then lifted her upright and patted her back while I swayed from side to side.

Mindy stared at me with a funny expression on her face. “Wow, you really are something.”

I laughed. “How so?”

“There’s more to you than meets the eye, and I intend to find out what you’re hiding.”

“I’m not hiding anything.”

“No?” she asked with a raised brow. “Seems to me you’re hiding a lot behind that party façade.”

A wave of panic crested over me. I wasn’t used to being so transparent or having people like the real me. Normally, they wanted something the rich girl could give them. Friends, guys, family, they were all after money from me. I’d never had a loyal friend or boyfriend who liked the real me, and I’d built a wall around myself because of it. The party façade, as Mindy put it, kept me from getting hurt.

I had finally let my guard down when I met Alessandro, allowing him to see the real me, and that crashed and burned. I was terrified to allow someone in again. Which was why going with Sid to the gala was a terrible idea. Even if he was grumpy and someone I’d likely not fall for.

“Does Rebecca know you used to nanny? Because she’s never mentioned it before.”

Another wave of anxiety washed over me. As I opened my mouth to explain the situation with my sister, the door to the room opened, and Sid and Frank walked in. Relief rushed through me. I wasn’t ready to explain myself, and I didn’t want anyone judging how ridiculous it sounded. It was hard for people to understand why the rich girl hated her life unless they had lived it.

It was also really hard to explain my relationship with Rebecca. Especially to friends who were hers before they were mine. Loyalty ran deep with this group. A pang of sadness ran through me at the thought of losing them. They’d become family, and I couldn’t imagine not having them in my life.

“Hey,” Sid said, startling me. I was too deep in my head.

He walked to a small table on wheels beside the bed and set down a takeout bag and coffee. Sid was frowning, and the room thickened with tension. I felt nervous. Sid and I hadn’t talked since he’d offered to be my date two days ago. I still wasn’t sure what I was going to do.

“You went all the way to Grateful Cup?” Mindy asked.

“Frank said you’d be mad if we didn’t,” Sid muttered.

“I never said that,” Frank said. He frowned when he saw me burping Adaline. He walked over and put his hands out. “I’ll take her.”

Mindy rolled her eyes. “He’s a little weird about people holding the girls.”

“They’re so small. What if something happened to them?” Frank asked.

“Nothing is going to happen. We’re in a hospital, for God’s sake.”

I glanced at the clock and panicked. “I have to go. I’m going to be late for work. I’m so sorry.”

“No. Go. I understand. Thanks for staying.”

“Anytime.” I bent down and gave her a hug. “Call me about the other thing,” I whispered into her ear.

She nodded and smiled. “Thanks.”

After waving goodbye to the guys, I bolted from the room, almost running to the elevator. Luckily, it arrived as quickly as it had the first time, and I slid inside and hit the button for the lobby. I shot a quick text to Sarah to let her know I was going to be late. As soon as I was outside of the hospital, I ran for my car.

# Chapter 7



## SID

ONLY FOUR OFFICERS, INCLUDING me, worked at the station since Oak Springs was such a small town. We had to take turns with our shifts, and because I was the sheriff, I took a lot of the crap shifts. I was also always on call. Thankfully, nothing big ever happened.

Occasionally, I was called to handle a drunk roaming around town naked or an animal that had escaped someone's farm and gone for a stroll down Main Street. Nothing more than that, though, and it made work boring.

The nights were the worst. Back when Frank was my partner, we usually messed around to pass the time. Or pulled pranks on each other. Tod Nelson, a younger guy who was now my partner, was usually the target of our boredom. But now that Frank was gone, things had changed, which soured my mood further.

As I took a seat behind my desk with a fresh cup of coffee, Nelson walked in. He strode forward and plopped down in the chair across from me.

"What are you still doing here?" I asked.

"My shift ended, so I came to see if you needed anything before I left. It's the polite thing to do."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm fine."

"Johnson just got here, and he brought chili again for dinner, so I'd steer clear of the squad room."

“Thanks for the heads-up,” I mumbled.

“Sure. Well, I guess I’ll take off then.”

“Was there something else?” I winced after the words left my mouth because, even though I could sense he wanted to tell me something, I really didn’t want to hear it.

He picked some imaginary lint off his pants as an uncomfortable silence filled the room.

“Spit it out,” I barked.

“Okay. Jeez. I wanted to know if everything was okay with you.”

“Why wouldn’t it be?”

He shrugged. “You seem...grumpier than usual.”

I raised a brow in question. “Grumpier?”

“Yeah. I mean, you’re normally serious, but lately you’ve been *really* serious.”

I grunted, which made him crack a smile. “I’m fine, Nelson. There is a lot on my mind.”

“Okay. I wanted to check and make sure it wasn’t anything serious.”

“Serious? Like what?” I asked.

He shrugged again. “I don’t know, like hemorrhoids or something. That would make me have a pinched face all the time.”

“*Out!*” I bellowed. He was fucking with me, and I wasn’t in the mood.

Nelson scrambled to his feet, laughing. The door closed, and I huffed, grabbing the back of my neck and swiveling from side to side in my chair. I had been in a crappy mood lately, and more people were taking notice. I knew what was causing it, but I also wasn’t ready to face it. So I kept stuffing it down, but it was getting harder to do.

I didn't want to think about any of it, especially not on this shift. Night shifts were the worst. It was quiet, and all I wanted to do was sleep. There was a couch in my office, so I didn't have to leave unless it was to use the bathroom or grab a coffee or something to eat.

But being holed up alone in my office with only my thoughts to keep me company through the night was my own personal hell. My past haunted me, and it only grew worse when the sun went down. It had been especially hard to deal with now that all my friends were getting married, leaving me the only single one in the group. It wasn't like I wanted a girlfriend, though. I missed my friends.

I groaned. If Nelson was right and Johnson had brought chili, I needed to steer clear of the squad room. That man could set the place on fire with the gas he leaked from eating that shit. It was his favorite meal, and his wife made it extremely spicy for him every time, but the spice caused him to have the worst case of gas known to man. Unfortunately, we were on the receiving end of it a lot.

There was a knock at my door, and Connie poked her head in.

"What the hell are you still doing here? Do I need to fire you?" I asked.

She waved me off. "I came back to grab a folder I need for tomorrow and wanted to say goodnight."

"Goodnight, Connie."

"Also, steer clear of the squad room. Johnson's wife made it extra spicy this time."

I rolled my eyes. "I guess I'd better grab a coffee and some snacks now. It looks like I'll be holed up here all night."

She nodded. "That's a good idea. Have a good night, Sheriff."

I grumped at her formalities, and she chuckled.

"You too, Con."



After saying hello to Paul Johnson and grabbing another large coffee and some snacks, I stopped off in the bathroom before I made my way back to my office. I shut the door and took my mystery novel to the couch with me. Grabbing the blanket off the back, I settled in for a long, boring night.

My cell phone rang, and I frowned. All of my friends were busy with their spouses and kids, so it likely wasn't them. The only other person who would call this late was my mom, and I had no interest in speaking with her.

I grabbed the phone as it was about to go to voice mail and stared at the screen. It was a number I didn't recognize, and I decided to answer it.

"Hello."

"Sid?" It sounded like Kat.

"Kat?"

"Yes. Sorry. I should have led with that since you probably don't have my number." She giggled, and I rolled my eyes.

"How did you get mine?" I asked.

"Oh, um, Sarah gave it to me."

I grunted.

"So, I was calling to say that I thought about your offer."

My stomach tensed. Why had I offered to go to the gala with her? Neither of us wanted to go, and unlike Kat, I could tell my mom no. There was no reason for me to go anyway. I never donated money, and the only reason my mom wanted me to go was to find a wife.

When I didn't say anything, Kat continued. "I think it's a good idea if we go together. I'm just not sure how we'd pull it off. My sister will be there, and she knows we're not together. In fact, everyone in town knows it. How believable will it be that we're suddenly dating?"

My head spun. She talked so fast and about shit I hadn't even thought about since it was only for one night and not

anywhere near town. What did it matter what the people in town thought? It wasn't like we were going to continue this charade past the night of the gala.

"It will be fine. If you want to tell your sister it's fake, that's fine. We only need to convince our parents."

She snorted. "If I tell my sister it's fake, she'll tell my parents. I need to her to believe that we've been seeing each other."

"We'll figure something out. I gotta go, though. I'm at work."

"Oh, okay. Sorry I bothered you," she said.

"No bother. I'll talk to you soon, and we can work out the details."

"Okay. Thanks."

I nodded and then realized Kat couldn't see me. "Sure."

We hung up, and I put my head in my hands. What the hell was I doing?

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ORION GRACEFULLY CLEARED THE last jump, and I steered him around the arena, slowly bringing him to a stop near the fence. I hopped off and led us out of the jumping arena and into the small roping arena beside it. I taught the roping classes and thought it would be easiest to have the kids practice swinging the rope around and trying to rope a post.

Frank and I had set up a course that the kids would do on foot first and eventually work their way up to roping while on a horse. If things went well, I'd eventually teach advanced roping.

I practiced with the rope a few times while Orion grazed, then I grabbed his reins and turned toward the barn. The sound of feet shuffling through the grass had me freezing in my tracks. I looked over my shoulder and saw Kat approaching.

She was wearing a pair of tight-fitting jeans and a sweater that hung off one shoulder, exposing her creamy skin to the cool air. Her blond hair was down around her shoulders in curls. She looked stunning.

I frowned. Where had that come from? I'd never thought of her that way before. When she stopped near the fence, I averted my gaze and stared at the ground. Her boots were a little too nice for the farm but complemented her outfit.

"Hey, fancy meeting you here," she said.

I looked up and instantly regretted it. The light from the sun hit her just right, creating a halo effect around her head. Her beauty struck me like a punch to the chest, and I twisted away. What the hell was wrong with me?

"What are you doing here?" My voice was gruff, and I came off sounding more irritated than I meant to.

Kat ignored my tone. "I'm watching the twins. Mindy needs the help, and I have the experience. Frank needs to get back to work with the campers coming in a week, and Mindy is trying to get settled in. She can't do much since she's still recovering."

I peered over at her. "That's nice of you to help."

She smiled and looked behind me. "What classes do you teach?"

Orion shifted, and I took that as my cue to walk him back to the barn. I led him to the other side to the gate. Kat walked along the fence line and followed me to the barn.

"Jumping and roping. I used to compete." I mentally kicked myself for blurting that out.

"Really? Were you any good?" she asked as she came up beside me.

I glanced at her. She seemed genuinely interested.

"Yeah. I was pretty good. I won some ribbons and medals. Frank, Jacob, my brothers, and I competed together. That's

how we all met and became friends.”

“That’s cool. I’ve never done anything cool like that before. Rebecca and I wanted to be in beauty pageants when we were little, but it was too much work, and my mom said if we didn’t want to commit, then we’d have to give it up. I enjoyed being outside and getting dirty more than practicing a talent or speech,” Kat said with a laugh.

I snorted. “You don’t seem like you’d enjoy getting dirty.”

Orion went back into his stall without a fuss, and I fed him some carrots before walking over to get fresh hay.

“I can get dirty, but I prefer to look nice,” Kat defended. “There’s more to me than what’s on the outside.”

“I’m seeing that,” I said. My eyes quickly roamed over her body before resting on her face. A blush crept up her neck and into her cheeks. She glanced away. “How come you aren’t inside with the twins?”

“They’re sleeping, and so are Mindy and Frank. She told me to go since they were all settled in. I offered to cook dinner for them, but I guess Laney is bringing them a meal. Kate set up a meal train for them. I’ll have to get the information from her so I know when they’ll need me to cook.”

“You cook?”

She lightly punched my arm. “Yes, I can cook. Pretty well, I might add.”

I shook my head. One corner of my mouth pulled up in a lopsided smile. “I’ll believe it when I see it.”

She put her hands on her hips and huffed. “Is that a challenge, Sidney Lewis?”

“Maybe.”

She smiled, and it lit up her eyes, making them an even more vibrant shade of blue. What was happening to me? I didn’t normally notice things about her like that. It was the opposite, actually. She kind of annoyed me. But that wasn’t

the case now. She was fun and flirty, and I was enjoying the back and forth with her.

I rubbed at my beard as I stared at her.

“Challenge accepted. You name the place and time, and I’ll be there,” she said.

“Tonight. At Simply Cook It.” I wasn’t sure why I blurted that out.

Her eyes widened. “Tonight?”

I nodded slowly, committing to it even though I wanted to take it back.

She bit her thumbnail as she thought it over. “Are they holding any classes, and if so, is there room for us?”

“That’s a good question. Hold that thought.”

I walked away from her and took my phone out from my pocket, pulling up the place’s website. Simply Cook It was a hands-on cooking class. It was the perfect date night spot, and I had yet to have a date there. Which made me a little nervous to take Kat.

A few years back, when Kate came to town, I’d asked her out. We’d planned to go to Simply Cook It, but the class got canceled because the class before ours started a fire in one of the kitchens. After that, I decided I’d only take someone I was serious with since it was in town and it seemed like an intimate setting. Which was all the more reason not to go with Kat.

They did have a class this evening, but it was booked. Not surprising since the town was overrun with tourists. Tourist season for Oak Springs started toward the end of summer and continued through the holidays.

“Booked tonight,” I said, pocketing my phone.

“Darn.” She snapped her fingers together. “Guess you’ll have to take a rain check.”

I got the feeling she was relieved that we weren't going out. Part of me was as well, but another part was disappointed. I liked our conversation and had a strange desire to know more about the woman behind the fancy clothes and makeup.

"We could still grab a bite to eat if you're free." I wanted to kick myself. Why couldn't I control my mouth?

Kat stared at me for a beat, then a smile spread across her face. "Actually, that's a great idea with the gala coming up. Getting to know each other would make faking it easier. I have the perfect place for us to go tonight so we can look like a couple."

"What?" That wasn't what I had in mind.

"It'll be fine. I'm going to grab my things."

"If you wait a minute, I can drive you up there. I just have to wash up."

She nodded, and I handed her my keys. I wanted to kick my own ass for suggesting dinner, and her idea of pretending to be a couple now scared the hell out of me. I had been on plenty of dates lately, but this felt different, and my stomach churned, causing me to feel a little sick. This wasn't a date. We were friends pretending to date. I was helping her out. That's what I told myself the entire time I washed up until I finally believed it.

## Chapter 8



### KAT

NEVER IN A MILLION YEARS did I think I would go on a date with Sidney Lewis, and I never expected to be nervous. Sid was grumpy and quiet, the complete opposite of the guys I normally dated. I was used to musicians and men I'd meet at clubs. Sid was nothing like them, and honestly, we weren't a match.

Sid climbed into the driver's side of his truck and started it. He turned the wheel and drove up the gravel path toward the house. I glanced over at him. He was focused on driving, so I took the time to admire him. He was a gorgeous man with long, thick, wavy hair. The hair was apparently my kryptonite since that was what had first attracted me to Alessandro too.

His fingers drummed on his pants in time with the country music that softly filled the cab of the truck. His jeans had a hole in the knee, which surprised me. Sid seemed like the type of guy who would prefer to be clean cut instead of rugged, but the dirty boots paired with a gray Henley that stretched tight across his chest were really working for him and doing all sorts of crazy things to my insides. I'd never been a fan of the cowboy look, but Sid wore it well.

Before I could look away, he glanced at me and smiled. I felt like I was melting into the seat. He had never smiled around me before. And damn, he should really do it more often. His teeth were perfectly straight and bright white against his brown beard. He kept the beard a little long, but it

was well manicured. I'd never really been a beard kind of girl, but I liked it on Sid.

His eyes were the most beautiful shade of brown I'd ever seen, like a rich caramel. But it was what I saw behind them that drew me in. They were soulful and honest, which made him appear extremely down to earth and trustworthy. I was usually excited by a hint of mischief or trouble in a man's eyes, but Sid's calmed me in a way I'd never experienced before.

He parked the truck and turned to face me, pushing up his long sleeves to expose his forearms. My eyes were glued to them as they flexed. The corded muscle coupled with the leather bracelet around his wrist made my insides clench. Holy hotness.

"Where did you want to eat?" he asked.

"Let me grab my things and make a phone call. I'll be right back."

He looked confused and rubbed a hand over the hair on his jaw. That move turned me on, and I immediately leaped from the truck like it was on fire, running for the house. I came to a stop at the front door and slowly crept inside to grab my things in case everyone was still asleep.

The house was quiet, so I dug my cell phone out of my purse and walked into the screened-in porch to call my sister. She answered on the second ring.

"Hey."

"Hi. Do you have room for two? Sid and I are looking for somewhere to eat," I blurted.

"You and Sid?"

I knew it was coming, yet I still couldn't hold back my eye roll. "Yes. We both finished up here at the same time, and he asked if I wanted to grab a bite to eat. Do you have anything, or should we go somewhere else?"



“We actually finished three dishes today for the menu, and I was going to call and ask if you wanted to stop by and eat with me. I’ll set the table for you guys.”

“Thanks.”

“Kat?”

I sighed, wishing for this conversation to be over. “Yes?”

“Sid’s a great guy. Don’t hurt him, okay?”

I scowled and gripped the phone a little tighter.

“I won’t. Jeez, have a little faith in me.”

“Sorry. It’s just that I know how you are. You either want to sleep with a man, or you want something from him, and I know Sid isn’t rich. I also know he’s not the type to sleep around.”

“I’m done with this conversation. We’ll be there soon. Bye.”

My skin felt hot, and I wanted to scream, but I didn’t want to wake the family. Instead, I shoved all my things into my bag and slung it over my shoulder.

Why did my sister assume I was so damn superficial? Sure, I’d dated a lot of rock stars or wannabe rock stars, also some men in suits, but it had never been about what they offered *me*. My sister would be shocked to know that they were the ones who left when I couldn’t take care of them financially.

All of my nervousness about going out with Sid disappeared. Now I wanted to turn up the heat on our fake relationship. I hoped Sid would go along with it.

“Head to Rebecca’s new restaurant,” I said when I hopped up into the cab of Sid’s truck. He was scrolling through something on his phone and jumped a little.

“It’s open?” he asked as he put the truck in reverse and backed out of the driveway.

“Not to the public. Right now, she’s serving samples that the kitchen is trying for the new menu. She’s also using this as a chance to try out some different chefs to find the right fit.”

Rebecca’s restaurant, Harvest House, was a farm-to-table style restaurant. I was really excited for her, despite the shit she gave me. This had been a dream of hers for so long, and it made me happy to see it finally coming to fruition.

Her grand opening wasn’t for a while. She was still hiring staff and trying to find the right chef for the kitchen. She’d hired a lot of cooks, but she wanted one chef to oversee it all and bring the place to life with signature dishes.

The building was a piece of shit when she bought it, but, as he always did for his darling girl, Daddy came through and invested. Rebecca had really turned the place around. Renovations were almost complete, and Kate had helped with the décor.

They had to knock a lot of walls down and replace boards that were rotting, so Laney took the wood and made signs to hang on the walls and from the ceiling that would direct customers to the restroom, bar, and kitchen.

Harvest House was twenty minutes north of Oak Springs, so it didn’t take long to get there. We parked, and before I could open my door, Sid was there opening it for me. He held out his hand as he looked toward the front of the restaurant.

I was momentarily stunned. It had been a while since a man had opened a car door for me, and usually it was just for show at a charity event or some other event where the press was taking pictures. I considered this practice for the gala, and maybe Sid felt that way too.

Slowly, I placed my hand in Sid’s, and an electric current ran from my fingers up my arm. Sid must have felt it, too, because he glanced back at me with a curious look on his face. As soon as my feet were on the ground, I pulled my hand free and rubbed it on my jeans to shake off the strange feeling.

We walked inside, and Sid let out a whistle. The place looked amazing. It had been a week since I'd visited, and a lot had been done. Rebecca greeted us at the front with a big smile. Sid pulled her into a hug, and irritation crept up my spine.

"This place looks amazing, Becks," Sid said. He looked around in awe.

"Thanks. It's almost done. We're in the final stages and should be ready to open soon."

"Really? You found a chef?" I asked.

"Yes. Elijah Mitchell. He came highly recommended by Will."

"I know Eli. Since when are you talking to my brother?" Sid asked.

Rebecca shrugged. "He's helping me with a few things."

"When are you planning on opening?" I asked.

"Soon. Kate is planning the grand opening. I expect you both to be there. Your brothers are invited too, Sid." Rebecca said.

"I'm sure they would love to come. Is there anything I can help with?"

"No. Thank you, though." She looped her arm through Sid's. "Come on in. Let me show you around."

We walked around a hostess stand that wasn't there the last time I visited and past a small coat room. A grand archway led into the main dining area. The booths were positioned on a platform around the perimeter of the room, and tables filled the center. Rebecca had picked out some fantastic tables and chairs that went perfectly with the feel of the space.

A magnificent mahogany bar, courtesy of Peter, lined the entire wall to our left. Black barstools stood in a row in front of it. The stools had been a little pricey, but they matched the

rustic yet elegant feel Rebecca was going for throughout the entire restaurant.

“You can cook it, or you can leave. Your choice,” a deep voice yelled.

I turned and saw a tall man in a white chef’s coat standing in front of the large open window in the kitchen. His arms were crossed, and he was scowling at whoever he’d just yelled at. The window was meant to give the guests a glimpse of what the cooks were doing in there, but today, it was a window to the chaos and the new chef’s obvious temper.

“Excuse me for a moment,” Rebecca said. She scurried to the back.

“This place is amazing,” Sid said.

“Yeah. My favorite part of the whole place is the giant stone oven.” I pointed to the magnificent piece in the corner of the room. “I can’t wait to taste the fresh pizza.”

“You’ve had Pizza Pan, right?” he asked with a chuckle. “They cook all their pizzas in a brick oven. It’s kind of their thing.”

“I’ve been here for two years, Sid. Yes, I’ve had Pizza Pan, but there’s just something about sitting in front of the oven and watching your food cook instead of picking it up.”

Sid smiled. “All right, I’ll give that one to you. Next time we eat here, we’ll have to sit in front of the oven.”

God, his smile was gorgeous, and it threw me off-kilter every time since he didn’t smile often. I turned away so he wouldn’t see the blush on my cheeks. I didn’t know what was happening to me. I loved dating, but I felt completely out of my element with Sid, and I wasn’t sure how to act. Normally, I felt excited at the prospect of meeting someone new. I loved the getting-to-know-you phase, but this felt different.

Maybe because it was fake. How was I supposed to act on a fake date? If I flirted with him like I would a normal date, would he get upset? He didn’t seem like he would be into

PDA, so my go-to moves to show interest were out. Why was this so confusing?

“Are those rooms for parties?” Sid asked, pointing to the large rooms to the left of us.

“Yeah. They can be two rooms, or the wall can be opened to create one big room. She could have a small wedding reception here.”

“That’s really cool.”

I agreed. My sister had outdone herself, and I was really proud of her. Rebecca had talked about opening a restaurant since college, and our dad told her he’d invest as long as she found the right space and he approved. He’d visited a year ago when she found this space and told her he could see the potential and would give her the money.

Rebecca emerged from the kitchen and joined us. “I’m so sorry about that. Follow me, and I’ll get you guys seated and started on dinner.”

“Sounds great,” Sid said.

He placed his hand on the small of my back, which caused my pulse to race. My nerves grew as we followed Rebecca to a booth near the kitchen. I slid in, and Sid sat across from me. The lighting was dim, and the only noise in the restaurant came from the kitchen.

Rebecca disappeared and returned with a bottle of wine. She opened it and poured us each a glass. “Tonight, we have a few dishes that we’re trying out for the chef’s specials. I’d describe them for you, but because it’s the first time he’s put them together, I’m not even sure what’s in them. So I’ll tell you the names, and you can tell me what you think.”

She handed us two large index cards. “You can rate the dishes on these and give me some feedback. Next week, he’s going to cook dishes from our menu, and we’ll have focus groups come in and rate the dishes like this. If you guys want to be part of that, let me know. Kat, we’re doing stone-oven

dishes on Wednesday. If you make sure you're available, you can split the first pizza that comes out of there with me."

I did a little happy dance in my seat, and Rebecca smiled at me. It was the first genuine smile I'd seen from her in over a week. Rebecca had closed off after our fight, and it was hard for us to be around each other. It hurt. I missed her.

"Thanks," Sid said. He reached across and pulled my hand to the middle of the table. Rebecca's eyes widened, and she stared at our hands.

"Are you guys together?" she asked, tilting her head.

Sid smiled and rubbed small circles on the back of my hand. Each pass of his thumb over my skin sent a current through me, causing me to break out in goosebumps. "Yeah. It's new."

"How new? Because Mindy mentioned the other day that Frank had to come get you from a terrible date."

Sid froze and then cleared his throat. "Yeah. That's kind of a long story."

Rebecca's hip jutted out to the side, and she stared at him. "Go on."

I pulled my hand from Sid's and sat back in the booth. He ran his hand through his long hair, a gesture he'd done a lot around me recently. He seemed to do it when he was nervous.

"Kat and I didn't want to make a big thing out of it until we knew it was serious. You know how the gossip blog is. But since I'm taking your sister to the charity gala, I decided now was a good time to go public."

Damn, he was good at lying. The thought made my stomach turn sour. If he could lie this easily to his friend, how much easier would it be to lie to me? We weren't even really friends.

"You're taking Kat to the gala?"

“Yes, but please don’t say anything to anyone. We wanted to surprise my parents.”

She frowned but nodded. “Okay. As long as you’re happy.”

“We are,” he said with a smile. He grabbed my hand again, and this time, it felt like I had angry bees instead of butterflies flitting in my stomach.

Rebecca walked away, and I pulled my hand free and placed it in my lap.

“This is pretty cool,” Sid said, looking around. He grabbed his card and looked it over. “I’ve never felt so important before.”

“What the hell was that?” I blurted out.

“What?”

“Why did you tell my sister we were dating?”

“Isn’t that what you suggested when you said you had the perfect place for us to go? You said we could look like a couple.”

Shit. I had said that. “I meant to be seen together so when it came out at the gala in front of my sister, she could connect the dots. I didn’t want to draw the lines for her.”

He sighed. “How was I supposed to know that?”

“What if someone else heard?” I asked.

Sid looked around and shrugged. “No one else is here.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I don’t think I do.”

“Never mind,” I huffed. I took a sip of my wine and stared out into the restaurant. It was quiet. There wasn’t even music playing in the background, which made the tension between us swell.

“Have you brought Shiloh to the farm yet?” I asked, trying to change the subject. He looked surprised.

“Rebecca mentioned that you were going to see how she did around the animals so you could bring her with you when you taught classes.”

“Oh. No, I haven’t had a chance yet. I really want to, but I’m not sure how she would do with the horses, and I haven’t had the time to acclimate her.”

I nodded in understanding. “I could help. I’ll be with the twins most days anyway. Maybe you could bring her, and we could work together on it. If it doesn’t work, she could always keep me company. I’m sure Frank and Mindy wouldn’t mind.”

“Really? You’d do that?” he asked.

I shrugged. “Sure, why not?”

“I don’t know. It just doesn’t seem like your thing,” he said.

“What does that mean?” I asked defensively.

He stroked his beard. “I don’t know.”

I leaned forward. “I think you do. What do you think is ‘my thing’?”

He lifted a brow and stared at me. I returned his stare and willed him to tell me. It wouldn’t surprise me if he thought the same things about me as everyone else. I had hoped I’d be able to break free of the shackles of my past by living here, but two years later, people still judged me.

“Shopping, taking trips, dating rich dudes, going to parties, drinking, and dancing...those kinds of things.” He grabbed his glass and took a heady sip.

My mouth hung open and my cheeks flamed as heat rushed through my body. I didn’t have a right to be angry since he wasn’t wrong. I enjoyed those things, or at least I used to before I moved here. But I enjoyed other things too. Like yoga, spending time with family and friends, and relaxing with a good book and a glass of wine. I also loved watching movies while eating the delicious caramel popcorn from my popcorn of the month subscription.



Over the last year, I'd discovered I enjoyed hiking and even jogging. I'd always been open and willing to try new things, and I didn't like to feel tied down to anything. The way I dressed and being loud and bubbly painted me in a certain light, but there was a lot more to me than that.

I took a sip of my wine and sat back, aware that my nose was stuck in the air, but I couldn't help it. He had offended me.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Don't be sorry. It's how you feel."

He sighed.

"But I'd like to know where you got that impression since I haven't been to a club in over two years, haven't dated anyone since I moved here, and honestly couldn't tell you the last time I even went to Frosty Mug Tavern for a drink. I've been focused on work."

Sid said nothing. He stared at me with a blank expression. The silence stretched out between us, engulfing our table. It was making it hard to breathe. I twisted the stem of the wineglass between my palms and stared at the wall, wishing for this "date" to end.

"You're right. I'm sorry again. That wasn't fair of me. Especially after I asked you to be my fake girlfriend for an event and then spilled it to Rebecca."

I nodded. Thankfully, Rebecca came out with the first dish for us to try before the silence could choke me again. I finished my wine and asked her for a refill before I started eating. I wanted something stronger, but that would strengthen Sid's belief that I liked to drink and let loose.

Rebecca brought me another glass of wine, and I dug into the food. It was amazing and totally made up for the awkward date. I took a bite of stuffed mushrooms and moaned. The sauce was so delicious that I wanted to drink it by the tub full. Not wanting to waste a drop, I swirled my mushroom around the plate to soak up as much as possible.

Sid clammed up for the rest of dinner. It was probably for the best. I focused on my wine and food, and by dessert, I'd slipped into a food trance and didn't even remember he was at the table until he cleared his throat. I looked up and stilled with my fork midway to my mouth. His eyes were dark and intense as he stared at my mouth. I closed it and set the fork down.

"I'm sorry. Did you want some?"

Half his mouth ticked up in a smirk. "Please."

I pushed the plate to the center of the table, sad to see the decadent chocolate cake so far away from me. It was so dense that it practically melted in my mouth but not overly rich, and the ganache was a perfect texture that complemented the cake in the best way, making for the perfect bite.

Sid chuckled. "You'd think I asked you to hand over your first-born child the way you're staring at this cake. Would you like me to order my own?"

I laughed. "No. Please have some. I love dessert, and that is by far the best chocolate cake I've ever tasted. It's sinful."

Sid took a bite, keeping his eyes locked on mine the entire time. The fork slid slowly out of his mouth, and a low rumble came from his throat. I quit breathing. Not only was the cake better than sex, but Sid also made watching him eat it the most erotic thing I'd ever experienced. I wanted to be that piece of cake.

My body heated, and my core pulsed. This man was so confusing. One minute he was insulting me, and the next he was staring at me like he wanted his mouth on me instead of the cake. I couldn't decide whether I liked him or hated him. One thing was for certain, though. I wanted to sleep with him, and that could not happen.

When I found my footing last year after hitting rock bottom, I decided I would change the way I looked at men. I wanted a relationship. I wanted something real. That meant I needed to quit sleeping around and get serious about dating.

Sid didn't seem to have the same feelings, and I'd heard rumors that all of his dates ended badly. I could understand why since our pretend date wasn't something I'd want to repeat.

Everyone said Sid was closed off and not interested in something serious. That was the opposite of what I wanted. I'd messed around most of my life, and I was ready to find my person and settle down. So no matter how badly I wanted to sleep with Sid, it would not happen.

Rebecca cleared her throat, and my head snapped in her direction. She looked angry.

"Thank you so much for having us," Sid said. "The food was amazing."

She narrowed her eyes at me, then turned to Sid and pasted on a smile. I knew I'd hear about this later.

"You're welcome. Thank you for coming. I'll give you two a few minutes to fill out the cards, and then I'll be back to collect them."

She turned and walked away.

Sid put his head down and started filling out his card. I did the same. I finished first and sipped my wine, eyeing up the last a bite of cake. Sid pushed the plate toward me.

"Thank you," I said.

We turned our cards in to Rebecca and slid out of the booth. I swayed a little, all the wine going to my head. Sid grabbed my arm to steady me.

"Whoa. Are you all right?"

"Yes. The wine just went to my head for a minute."

He chuckled and moved his hand to the small of my back, steering me toward the exit. My car was at Mindy's, but with all the wine I'd consumed, it wasn't a good idea for me to drive.

“I think I should get my car in the morning,” I said. I was embarrassed I’d drunk so much since that was one thing Sid had judged me for.

“No problem. I can run you over to the farm in the morning,” Sid said.

“You don’t have to do that. I can find a ride.”

He frowned but let it go. Music played softly in the background, and I leaned back against the headrest. We were opposite in so many ways, including how we listened to music. I liked to crank it up and sing along, and Sid enjoyed it on low.

I reflected on our dinner as we drove. It wasn’t horrible, but it wasn’t good enough to make me want to spend more time with him alone either. Luckily, we wouldn’t be alone at the gala. We’d have to put on a show, and I was good at that.

Sid was a nice guy, and he’d be perfect for someone who was quiet and enjoyed staying in. Someone who wouldn’t mind long stretches of silence and stilted conversation. But that wasn’t me. I enjoyed talking and getting to know people.

After our dinner, I’d learned nothing new about Sid except that he liked to sit in quiet while he ate. And he ate dessert like he was making love. I flushed at the memory and shoved it down. That was not reason enough to date someone. In fact, that was the reason I was ready to run the other way.

He dropped me off and walked me to the bottom of the stairs that led to my apartment. After an extremely awkward goodbye, I climbed the stairs and went inside. I took off my boots and stripped out of my clothes on my way to my bedroom. After washing my face free of makeup and tying my hair in a ponytail, I climbed into bed. We needed to fake it one more time, and then we could go our separate ways and remain distant friends who only saw each other once a week at dinner.

# Chapter 9



## SID

MY HOUSE WAS TOO quiet, and it was driving me mad, adding to my sour mood. Dinner with Kat could not have gone more wrong. First, I insulted her, then I went full grump and quit talking because I was angry with myself, and then I eye-fucked her while eating dessert. What the hell was wrong with me?

Tonight, I'd gotten a glimpse of what was behind her flashy appearance, and it was captivating, but as was the case with most of my dates, we didn't match up. She liked adventure and trying new things. I liked quiet and knowing what was coming next. The conversation felt forced, not easy like it had been earlier in the barn. I was disappointed but also slightly relieved.

Faking feelings for Kat would be easy. The gala was a large event, so pressing a hand to the small of her back, pulling out her chair, and whispering in her ear would be more than enough to convince anyone looking on that we were together. I could pull that off, and from what I knew about Kat, she'd have no problem either.

My phone rang, and I cringed when I saw the name on the screen. I let it ring three more times before I finally gave in and answered.

"Hi, Mom."

"Hi, sweetie. How are you?"

"Fine."

“That’s good. Listen, I won’t keep you long since it’s late, but I wanted to talk to you about the charity gala for the hospital in two weeks.”

I rolled my eyes and sighed. “I already told you I’m not going.” I was going with Kat, but I wanted to keep that to myself for now.

“I know you did, but my friend’s daughter needs a date. I was hoping you were free.”

I gritted my teeth and stood. My fingers gripped the phone as I made my way into the kitchen for a glass of water. This was the shit I couldn’t handle anymore, but no matter how many times I told her I wasn’t interested, she kept pushing.

“Mom, I already told you no.”

“I know, but you’re single, and so is she.”

“Mom, stop. I have a girlfriend.”

She squealed in delight. “Why didn’t you say that in the first place?”

*Probably because it was a lie.*

“You should bring her to the gala so we can meet her.”

And by that, she meant to show her off. I didn’t want her talking before the event, so I decided to lie some more. “I’m not going to the gala.”

She huffed. “Sidney Lewis, I raised you better. After all these years, you finally let someone in, and you won’t introduce her to me? What have I done wrong?”

Her voice cracked like she was going to cry.

I sighed. “Nothing. It’s a new relationship.”

She was silent, but I could hear her trying to get herself under control, so I knew she hadn’t hung up. After another thirty seconds, she sighed. “Okay. I understand.”

I could hear the disappointment in her voice, but she didn’t push further and instead turned the conversation to how the

family was doing. I spent ten minutes listening to how great my brothers were before we hung up. Exhaustion set in, which was normal after a conversation with my mom.

It was early, and I couldn't stand to be in the house any longer. The only problem was that all my friends were with their families and wouldn't be available to meet for a beer. I debated calling my brother Will to see if he'd want to grab a drink, but then thought better of it. Even though he'd be open to it, I didn't have the energy or patience to deal with him.

My mood only darkened the longer I sat and thought about how alone I was. The loneliness settled in like a blanket. I needed a hobby, something to take my mind off shit. I grabbed a beer from the fridge and the mystery novel I'd been reading and carried both to the front porch. Shiloh lay at my feet when I settled into the porch swing.

There was a slight nip in the air, but it was quiet, and the sky was clear enough that I could see the thousands of stars dotting it. It was beautiful. I let out a loud sigh and cracked open my beer. As I lifted it to my mouth, I heard banging. I stilled and listened again. The banging started up again. It sounded like metal on metal, and it was coming from Mr. Thompson's house next door.

Shiloh followed me around the house toward his backyard. The banging grew louder as I neared the garage. I found Mr. Thompson under a classic car, banging on the undercarriage.

"Mr. Thompson?"

He stopped and then slowly wheeled himself out from under the car. He wiped his hands off as he sat up. "What can I do for you, son?"

"I heard some banging and thought I'd check it out. This yours?"

He smiled and pushed to stand. The man had to be over seventy, but he was in great shape. "Yeah. Isn't she a beaut?"

I chuckled. "I never really got into cars. My dad was more a tractor guy."

Mr. Thompson walked over to the car and wiped at the back bumper. “This here isn’t just a car. She’s a classic. A 1968 Cadillac Deville convertible.”

“I didn’t know you were hiding this back here,” I said, walking slowly around the car. It was pristine, with bright red paint that gleamed and shiny chrome bumpers. “It looks brand new.”

He stroked the fender with obvious pride. “I only take her out when the weather is nice and we’re headed to a classic car show. She only sees pavement if it’s dry.”

I frowned. “What if it’s nice and then the weather turns?”

“Then I pull off and find cover. If it doesn’t pass, I call my friend who’s got a trailer to come and pick us up.”

“It seems like a lot of work for a car.”

He laughed. “It is. But it’s a hobby, and I’ve been doing it since I was young. My dad had a 1958 Pontiac Bonneville, and he treated it like his baby. I learned all about cars and keeping them nice from him. It was relatively new when he bought it, and unfortunately it met the rear end of a truck when my dad got behind the wheel intoxicated. What I wouldn’t give to have it here in my collection.”

“Do you have more than this one?” I asked.

He nodded and walked toward the back of his garage. He pulled open a door, and I followed him, Shiloh at my heels. The back of our houses butted up to a field, but off to the left in the distance was a barn. I’d always wondered who it had belonged to and what was inside. Mr. Thompson headed straight for it.

“This field belongs to a gentleman about a mile down the road. He never used the barn. It belonged to the previous owners. I asked if I could use it to store some things, and he said I could. I’ve been working on restoring it. My cars are in a storage unit that’s costing me a fortune.”



I walked in and looked around. The structure was okay, but some of the wood was dry rotted and there were holes in the roof. “I could help.”

“Oh no. I wouldn’t want to put you out.”

“You wouldn’t be. I was just thinking that I needed to find a hobby. This seems like the perfect thing. I’ve been around animals and barns my whole life. I know a thing or two, and what I don’t, I can learn. My friends have building experience too. We can fix this up in no time.”

He clapped his hands together. “That would be fantastic. Thank you.”

I nodded and looked around again. This was exactly what I needed to keep busy. I followed Mr. Thompson back to his garage, and he grabbed us each a drink. He told me stories about his cars and talked about what he was doing to fix the Deville. He had a lift in his garage so he could easily move beneath the car. His knowledge seemed endless, and I was glad I’d investigated the noise earlier.

After I returned home, I sat at the kitchen table with a pen and paper and made a list of things we needed to do in order to restore the barn. A sense of excitement raced through me for the first time in a while, and I couldn’t wait to get started.

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“THE BEAMS CAN GO over on the right side near the doors,” I said, pointing in that direction.

Peter drove the tractor to where I’d indicated, and I moved out of the way so the long beams wouldn’t hit me. We were a week into the barn repairs, and things were going well. I was excited to get started each morning, and instead of going into the office, I remained on call and worked on the barn.

Two days ago, Peter and Charlie had asked if I needed help, and the three of us had been hard at work ever since. We didn’t talk much, just did what had to be done. It made the work go faster, and it was peaceful. The three of us were

similar in that regard. We didn't need to fill the silence with words. We were men of action, and that action spoke louder than our words anyway.

"When are you going to get a girlfriend?" I asked Charlie.

He shrugged. "I can't seem to find one I like, and the pickings are slim since Frank made his way through here before he settled down with Min."

I chuckled. "Don't I know it. Why don't you join Kindred Matches?"

"Hell no! I'm not going on blind dates."

"You aren't totally blind. You message the women beforehand until you're comfortable enough to meet them."

He leaned on his shovel and frowned at me. "Didn't one of them catfish you?"

"Yes, but she was a nice girl. If she hadn't had an allergic reaction to shellfish, we may have hit it off."

He laughed. "And the one recently that tried to plan your wedding?"

"I see Frank has been running his big mouth again."

Charlie laughed. "Yeah. Nothing is quiet in that house."

"Nothing is quiet anywhere when he's around," I grumbled.

"What are you ladies doing standing around?" Frank said, appearing out of nowhere, as if we'd conjured him.

"Speak of the devil," I muttered. "We're taking a quick break. What are you doing here?"

Frank stopped near us and looked around. "It looks good in here."

"I asked why you're here."

He put his hands on his hips. "I thought you guys might like some help."

Frank and help didn't go together in a sentence. He worked hard, but his mouth moved more than his hands, and not much got accomplished. If he was going to help us, we would need to plan a few extra days of work to make up for it.

"What's going on?" Peter asked. He hopped off the tractor and grabbed a bottle of water out of the small cooler we'd brought.

"Frank wanted to lend a hand," I said.

Peter nodded in understanding. "You can drive the tractor. I have something else I need to work on."

Frank shrugged and climbed into the seat of the green tractor. He started it up, and the sound echoed in the barn. He was good at driving heavy equipment, and Peter had given him that job so he'd work and not flap his jaws. It was smart. I also knew Frank would listen to Peter, and he wouldn't listen to me.

"Did you talk to Laney yet about running your ad?" Peter asked Charlie.

"What ad?" I asked.

"I'm looking for a roommate."

I lifted a brow in surprise. "What about Skip?"

Skip was Charlie's best friend, and they worked at Wilson Farms together. The two were inseparable. When Jacob and Frank bought Charlie a house down the road from the farm, Skip had moved in. Frank and Jacob paid the mortgage for the first year, but that year was nearly over.

"Skip has to move home. His grandpa isn't doing well, and his dad needs help since he's working. I can't make the mortgage payments by myself. Despite what everyone thinks, we don't make that much at Frank's."

Peter and I laughed. Frank only recently had the funds to pay Charlie and Skip. Before the riding camp opened, they took care of Frank's farm for free.

“I hope you’re able to find someone. Have you thought about picking up other work?” I asked as I hammered a nail into the board Charlie was holding up for me.

“No. I’m pretty busy at Frank’s, so I don’t have much time for another job.”

I nodded. “Let me know if you’re ever interested in becoming a deputy. I’d take you in a heartbeat.”

He laughed, but our conversation was cut short when Frank pulled in with another load of boards. Peter worked on cutting the boards to size, and I moved on to demolition. There were spots that were full of rot and needed to be cleaned out. From the looks of it, we’d have to replace an entire wall.

It didn’t matter, though, because it was easy work, and I enjoyed doing something different each day. But I wasn’t enjoying the thoughts of Kat that ran through my head while I worked.

Despite the way dinner had gone last week, I wanted to see her again. I wanted to listen to her laugh and watch her bright eyes gleam when she was excited about something. There were a million reasons why taking Kat to the gala was a bad idea, yet I couldn’t make the call to cancel. I’d promised to be there for her as a friend, and I never left my friends high and dry.

That’s what I told myself, even though I knew there was more to it. But I reminded myself it was only for one night, and after that, things would go back to the way they were before.

# Chapter 10



## SID

THE COLLAR OF THIS penguin suit felt like it was choking me. I put my finger in it and pulled, but it didn't help. A man with a tray of champagne passed, and my fingers twitched to grab a flute, but we'd only just arrived.

Kat was talking with her mom, Gwen, who had spotted us the minute we walked in. Instead of being happy—which was how my mom would be—she looked disgusted. Her eyes roamed over Kat, and then they zeroed in on my hair, and her nose scrunched up.

“Katerina, I really wish you would dress more appropriately,” Gwen said, giving Kat's dress a once-over.

I kept my face neutral to disguise my irritation. Kat's dress looked phenomenal on her. It dipped in at her waist and clung to her curves. She had twisted her honey blond hair into a knot at the base of her head, exposing the long column of her neck. I couldn't stop staring at it and wanting to nip where her neck met her collarbone.

“Mom, can we not do this here?” Kat begged.

Gwen looked around the room and sipped her champagne. “Look at your sister,” she said, pointing toward the dance floor where Rebecca was wrapped up in Luke's arms. “Her dress is classic and modest. Her breasts aren't spilling out of it.” She turned back toward Kat and eyed her with disdain.

The high neckline of Kat's dress actually hid her large breasts, and I liked that it teased me instead of showing me

what was there. There was a slit up her left leg, but it ended just above her knee. Again, hinting at what was underneath without being too revealing. Overall, it was a very elegant look, and I had no clue what the hell her mom was talking about.

“You’ll never get a real man if you continue to dress like that,” Gwen continued.

“Mom, please,” Kat begged again.

Gwen’s eyes slid to me. She took in my classic black suit and long hair. “Who’s he?” she asked, her voice dripping with disapproval.

“This is Sid—”

I slipped my arm around Kat’s waist and tugged her against me. “Her fiancé.”

Kat let out a squeak.

Gwen’s eyebrows shot up. “Your *what?* Since when?”

Kat seemed shocked to silence by my admission, and frankly, so was I. We’d agreed to fake a relationship in front of our parents, but that was it. And I sure as hell hadn’t planned on faking an engagement, but I couldn’t let Kat sit there and take the abuse from her mother. I could tell that there was more to her than she let on, and I understood why she didn’t feel comfortable being herself.

I opened my mouth to answer, but the words dried up when I spotted a couple in the doorway. “Shit, my parents are here,” I muttered.

Gwen turned her attention to the door and smiled. The fake smile she’d used on most of the guests throughout the night. “Steven and Elizabeth Lewis have attended the past few years and have made sizable donations to the foundation.”

Of course they had. A few years back, Will had invested in my parents’ tiny farm and helped turn it into the thriving vineyard and winery it was today. My parents had always

carried chips on their shoulders, as if they were better than everyone in town, and his investment had made it worse.

I hadn't seen them in person for a few years and only kept in touch over the phone with my mom. My dad didn't exactly approve of my job. He wanted all of his sons to find careers that would afford them wealth and status. So far, both of my brothers had done just that.

My older brother, Will, was a lawyer and investor. He poured money into struggling small businesses with potential and turned them into thriving ones. My younger brother, Duke, was in his last year of medical school.

My parents saw me, and their eyes widened. My mom's face lit up and tears sprang to her eyes. I resisted the urge to roll mine. My dad's face was a mask of arrogance, but I could see the disappointment behind it. Kat's fingers dug into my arm, and I winced.

"Stephen. Elizabeth," Gwen called. She waved her hand in the air. I wasn't surprised that my mom and dad went by their full names here. Steve and Beth didn't sound as important.

"What the hell are you doing?" Kat whisper-yelled.

"We'll talk about it later. Just keep up the act," I whispered back.

Gwen gave my mom air kisses and then hugged my dad, placing a peck on his cheek. "Elizabeth, that dress looks exceptional on you. Tell me where you got it."

Kat rolled her eyes and reached for a champagne flute from a passing tray. I quickly turned and snagged one for myself before the waiter passed. We took heady sips before turning to face the firing squad.

"Son," my dad said, sticking his hand out. I reached out and shook it. His grip tightened on mine before he let go.

"Sidney," my mom said. "I can't believe you're here." She grabbed my face in her hands and looked into my eyes. Tears swam in hers, and a pang of guilt hit me.

“This must be the woman you were telling me about,” my mom said, looking at Kat.

“Mom, I’d like you to meet Kat.”

“You’ve never met his fiancée? I’m glad we weren’t the only ones finding out they’re getting married,” Gwen said, rolling her eyes. She lifted her flute to her mouth and took a sip with her nose stuck in the air.

“What? You’re *engaged*?” my mom shrieked. “I thought you said it was new.” A tear rolled down her face. My dad looked bored and, if possible, even more disappointed with me.

“I’m sorry I made you think that. It all happened so fast.”

“Is she pregnant?” Gwen asked in disgust. Her eyes flew to Kat’s stomach.

A shocked squeak escaped Kat’s lips, and I hugged her closer. My dad scoffed and walked away.

“No,” I snapped.

“Where is the ring?” my mom asked. It didn’t surprise me that she’d looked for that right away.

“The ring is at home. We weren’t planning on spilling the surprise here.”

“Home? Are you two living together?” Gwen asked.

Kat looked like she was about to faint. I quickly helped her into a chair at the table behind us.

“Gwen, can you get Kat some water, and Mom, can you see if you can find something for her to eat? It’s been a few hours since she’s had anything.”

“That’s not good for the baby,” my mom muttered as she followed Gwen.

“What the hell, Sid?” Kat hissed out.

“I’m sorry. I panicked. Your mom is like a vulture picking off our flesh before we’re even dead.”



Kat chuckled and grabbed a napkin off the table. She dumped out the silverware and started blotting her chest. “This is a disaster. How are we going to pull this off?”

“I don’t know,” I said, running my hands through my thick hair. “I haven’t figured that out yet.”

“Well, now would be a really good time,” Kat said between her teeth.

I looked up and saw a furious-looking Rebecca stomping toward us. You’d think she would have been a little happier for us.

“You’re engaged? I only just found out the two of you were dating,” Rebecca said, putting her hands on her hips.

This was a mess, and I didn’t know how to backpedal out of it, so I pushed further ahead.

“You’ve been busy with your restaurant. Kat and I have spent a lot of time together, and things progressed quickly.”

“Really? When?” Rebecca questioned.

“When what?” I asked.

“When did you start dating?”

Kat opened her mouth, but I cut her off. “Six months ago.”

Rebecca’s eyes narrowed. “Six months ago?”

“Yes. One night after family dinner, I found Kat in the barn with the horses. We talked for a long time, and I asked her out. Things progressed from there.”

That story wasn’t a total lie. We talked that night, but not for a long time, and I never asked her on a date until recently. That had gone horribly wrong. God, what was I doing?

Kat stared at me for a minute. Her blue eyes looked translucent from the lighting in the room. They were beautiful and mesmerizing. The noise and people around us slowly drifted away the longer I stared into them. She shook her head

and broke eye contact, turning to face her sister. I cleared my throat and looked at the ground.

“You’ve been dating Sid behind my back for six months?” Rebecca asked.

“I wouldn’t say it was behind your back. We just weren’t doing it out in the open,” Kat said.

Rebecca scoffed and sat down. “I don’t understand. The other night at my restaurant, you weren’t acting like you were engaged. It looked strained and like something was wrong.”

Kat glared at me, and I winced. Rebecca was right. Something had been wrong. The entire situation. And now this one was worse.

“We were in a fight,” Kat said quickly.

“About what?” Rebecca asked. She was being awfully nosy.

Kat glanced at me and worried her bottom lip. I jumped in to save us again. Or make things worse. It was undetermined whether I was helping.

“I’ve been asking Kat to move in with me for a while, and she’s not ready.”

Rebecca stared at the table for a few minutes before her eyes met ours. She looked like she was coming around to the idea of her sister and me.

“When did you get engaged, and why didn’t you tell me?” She almost looked hurt.

“It happened really fast. A whirlwind romance. Sid swept me off my feet, and one day he proposed. I wasn’t ready to tell people. It felt better to keep it between us for a while,” Kat said.

“But I’m your sister.”

Kat’s shoulders slumped. “I know. And like Mom, sometimes you can be a little judgmental of my life choices. You’re so close with Sid, and I didn’t want you to come down

on me or talk badly to him about me. Some of the things you say hurt.”

I didn’t know Rebecca was so hard on Kat. It hurt to think that Kat didn’t have anyone in her corner, and I wanted to jump in and protect her. It was in my nature to be there for my friends, but this was something deeper that I didn’t want to explore.

Rebecca’s shoulders slumped and unshed tears glistened in her eyes. Kat looked away, uncomfortable. I rubbed a hand over the back of my neck. The conversation was getting deep, especially for a lie I had created on the spot. This was all my fault, and I wasn’t sure how to fix it.

“Congratulations, man,” Luke said, clapping me on the back. He set a drink down in front of Rebecca and took a seat beside her.

“Yeah. Thanks,” I said dryly. “When are you guys tying the knot?”

He blanched and looked away, scratching his arm.

“Not any time soon,” Rebecca answered. She shot him a look.

Luke pulled at the collar of his dress shirt and took a sip of his drink. It seemed odd. The two had been dating for a while and seemed pretty serious. At least Rebecca did. Was it one-sided? The thought of Rebecca getting hurt made me angry.

My brother Will walked into the room like he owned the place. His fitted suit probably cost more than my entire closet. Panic unfurled in my gut. Luke’s eyes followed mine and widened when they landed on Will. He mumbled an excuse about needing to find a bathroom and bolted.

Will joined us at the table with a wide, vaguely predatory smile. “Well, well, well, baby brother. I hear congratulations are in order.”

“How the hell did you hear about that?” I asked.

“News seems to travel like a wildfire around here,” Kat muttered.

“Mom texted me. I’m just glad I was on my way here so I could congratulate you in person.”

I rolled my eyes. “Thanks.”

“So this is my sister-in-law-to-be?” Will bent forward and took Kat’s hand in his. He brought it up to his mouth and placed a gentle kiss on it. “Beautiful.” Kat blushed, and anger swirled inside of me.

My mom chose that moment to reappear. She sat a plate full of food in front of Kat and smiled. “I’m sorry that took so long. Rose Warren stopped me to talk about the new children’s wing at the hospital.”

“I’m so happy you guys are getting married,” she continued. “I need to get to know you better, though, if you’re going to be my daughter-in-law. You’ll have to come by for dinner. Stephen just finished a new wine that he’s been dying to try. Does next Saturday work for you guys?”

Kat looked to me, but I wasn’t sure what to say. My mouth felt like it was stuffed with cotton. This charade wasn’t supposed to go past tonight.

My mom looked at me expectantly.

“Sure,” I said.

She wrapped me in a hug. “Great. Make sure you wear your ring, Kat. I can’t wait to see it.”

Turning toward my brother, she said, “Willard, you’re next. No more of this bachelor stuff. I want all of my boys married and happy.”

Rebecca snorted. “Willard.”

Will narrowed his eyes. “I’m perfectly happy with my life the way it is.”

She patted his cheek hard. “You keep telling yourself that, dear. Nothing compares to the love of a woman. Just ask your

brother.”

I choked on my champagne. My mom waved goodbye and tugged Will along with her. They were off to schmooze their way through the room. I let out a sigh of relief, but it was short-lived. A man approached us, and he didn't look happy.

“What's this I hear about you getting engaged to my daughter without asking my permission?”

Kat stood and placed her hand on his arm. “Dad, please. Let's not do this here.”

He looked at his daughter. “You're right. I'm just angry that your fiancé didn't ask for permission. What kind of man does that?”

“I know, Dad. I'm sorry. Our romance has been a whirlwind,” Kat said.

“You can say that again,” Rebecca muttered. Kat kicked her in the shin. “Ouch.”

“Can we talk about this later?” Kat asked.

“You're always making terrible choices, Katerina. When will you ever learn?”

Her face fell, and her shoulders slumped. It was only for a second and then, like she'd put on armor, she stood up straight, lifted her head, and stared back at her dad.

“I've been making excellent choices since I moved to Oak Springs, and Sid”—she yanked me against her—“has been the best choice. He's an amazing man, and you'd be lucky to know him.”

“Great. Bring him by next Sunday for a proper introduction.” It was an order, not a question.

I swallowed hard. What had I gotten us into?

# Chapter 11



KAT

## *Daily Happenings*

*It seems, folks, that Katerina Cooper doesn't mind our grumpy sheriff and, in fact, has agreed to marry him. Although we haven't seen them out and about together, they've apparently been getting cozy behind closed doors. We don't have a date yet, but as soon as we do, you'll all be the first to know. If you see them, make sure to congratulate them.*

“IT SEEMS CONGRATULATIONS ARE in order,” Mindy said. She set her phone down on the table and picked up her coffee mug.

I'd been on edge since the gala two days ago. I wanted to keep our fake engagement a secret, but I'd forgotten that nothing was a secret in a small town. Even though the gala had been in another city over an hour away.

I would have thought that the Harvest Festival, which was held the same weekend, would have kept everyone busy and distracted. Who had outed us anyway? Only members of our families had been at the gala. No one else from town. Peter was supposed to attend, but Jack had been sick, and Kate wanted to stay with him. Which meant Peter had stayed too.

I set Ava in her bouncy seat and picked up Adaline for her feeding. “I don't know what you're talking about.”

Mindy lifted a brow and took a sip of her coffee, then set it back on the table. “Tell me right now.”

“Tell you what?” I asked. Again, playing dumb.

“Either you’ve been dating Sid behind my back or you’re lying. Which is it?”

I took my time getting a bib and burp cloth so I could gather my thoughts. When I turned back around to hand Addy to Mindy, she stared me down.

“I’ve been dating him behind everyone’s back,” I blurted, surprised that the lie flew out instead of the truth. I crumpled into the seat across from Mindy. Her eyes widened in surprise. “It happened so fast. He asked me out one night after family dinner, and things progressed from there.”

“When did he ask you to marry him?” Mindy asked. “I didn’t know Sid was in a serious relationship. In fact, when did you start dating? Because he went on a date in the city right before the girls were born. Frank had to pick him up because it went bad. Sid’s on a dating app.”

Her eyes widened.

“Didn’t you have to drive him there the next day to retrieve his truck?” Her eyes narrowed into slits. It felt like they were slicing into my skin and trying to peer beneath to get to the truth. Damn, she was ferocious.

Shit. I didn’t know how to explain that one. Sid and I should have thought this through better since it wasn’t a secret that Sid had been going on dates from a dating app. Frank had set it up, and the guys had a field day with Sid’s bad dating luck.

“It’s a cover. It never goes past a first date.”

Mindy didn’t seem convinced. “Why?”

That was an excellent question, and I would have had an answer if I were telling the truth. I was beginning to feel stuck in the tangled web I was weaving, and I didn’t have Sid here

to help me. Under the table, I pulled my phone out and typed an SOS to him. I needed help and fast.

Before I could answer, the back door opened, and Frank stormed in. “I swear, if one more kid asks me why they can’t ride on day one, I’m going to lose it.”

I snickered, and Mindy rolled her eyes. A few seconds later, a grin spread across her face and my stomach sank. “Please don’t,” I mouthed, but I should have known better.

“Frank, did you know Sid and Kat are engaged?”

He spit out his water, spraying the kitchen. “*What?*” he shouted.

Mindy’s grin widened. “Yeah. I read it in the ‘Daily Happenings’ today.”

“What the hell? Why didn’t he tell me?” Frank asked. “I didn’t think he was serious with anyone. Especially after what happened before.”

“What happened before?” I asked.

Frank’s eyes popped open. “Nothing.”

I frowned. “Then why did you say that?”

“It’s nothing,” Mindy said.

“What do you guys know?” I asked, leaning forward on the table.

“Not our story to tell,” Frank said. “What I want to know is why the hell is he still going on dates?”

“It’s a cover, apparently,” Mindy said. I frowned at her, and she smirked.

“Why?” he asked.

Great, we had circled back to the question I’d dodged earlier. I was about to open my mouth to tell another lie when Sid came into the kitchen. He looked at us all, clearly read the tension in the room, then walked over and gave me a peck on my forehead.



“Sorry I’m late,” he said.

“It’s okay. I was about to tell them why you’re still going on dates from the dating app,” I said.

Sid froze.

“Yeah, what the heck, man? I picked you up from the bar because of a horrible date, and you’ve been on a lot in the past few months. If you’re with Kat, why are you going on dates?” Frank asked.

“And why keep it a secret from everyone?” Mindy added.

God, they were worse than our parents. I did *not* know how to answer any of that. Sid and I hadn’t spent any time together since the gala. We had plans to go to our parents’ houses this weekend, but hadn’t gotten together to get our stories straight. Since the gossip blog had outed us, we really needed to get on the same page.

Sid cleared his throat. “I understand it seems weird, but Kat’s family—including Rebecca—isn’t the most supportive. Also, I’ve seen the drama you’ve all gone through when the town hears about your personal lives. I didn’t want all the attention. I also didn’t want them to judge Kat’s dating reputation or mine. It wasn’t something I wanted brought into the light.”

That was extremely believable, and I almost forgot we were pretending. It scared me how good Sid was at lying. It wasn’t an attractive trait, yet I couldn’t be more attracted to him at this moment for saving me. My head was scrambled. This lie would be the death of us.

“Look, things escalated quickly with us, and it took us both by surprise. I never would have pictured myself with Kat, but it works. She’s outgoing, and I’m levelheaded. She makes me happy, so I don’t want to hear any judgment from you guys.”

Mindy lifted her hands, and Frank scoffed.

“I wish you would have told me, man.”

“Like you told me when you were dating Mindy behind everyone’s back?” Sid fired back.

“That wasn’t the same thing.”

“How was it not? You guys kept it a secret from everyone, and then it blew up in your faces.”

“Then you should have learned from my mistake and told me,” Frank shouted. “I’m your best friend. Or at least I thought I was. We could have gone out for beers instead of you going on dates. No one would have been the wiser.”

I didn’t know how much this lie of ours was going to hurt everyone. It wasn’t supposed to get this big. The lie was supposed to be just for the night of the gala to get our parents off our backs, but now it was so out of control that it was hurting the people we loved. I wanted to come clean.

As if sensing my panic, Sid reached over and squeezed my denim-clad leg under the table. The feel of his hand on my thigh was calming, and I relaxed beside him. As long as we were in this together, it would work.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “My parents and Rebecca have judged me my whole life. I wanted something of my own that everyone’s negative opinion of me didn’t taint. Sid was kind enough to respect that, and he agreed to keep up the charade of being single until I was ready to share with everyone.”

Sid squeezed my leg again, and I felt reassured that everything would be fine.

“Why did we have to hear about it from the damn gossip rag and not you?” Frank asked.

Mindy pointed at Frank in agreement. “Yeah. I thought we were better friends.”

“It wasn’t our plan, but it slipped out at the charity gala we went to last weekend with our parents, and someone must have overheard,” I said.

“We’re sorry, but you’re the first of our friends to find out,” Sid said.

“Fine. When’s the wedding, and where is your ring?” Mindy asked.

Jeez, she was like a damn shark, and it was intimidating as hell. I felt like I was in the ocean bleeding out.

“It’s getting sized, and we haven’t set a date yet,” Sid said. He didn’t miss a beat, and the lie rolled out like truth. He was scary good at it.

“Well then, tell me the engagement story. How did he do it?”

Sid stood. “That’s my cue to leave. I’ll see you later.” He bent down and kissed me on the forehead again, then followed Frank out the back door.

“So tell me,” Mindy said.

I had to think up a story quickly, and then I needed to make sure Sid knew so we could keep up our charade. This fake relationship was quickly becoming the most stressful thing in my life. It was worse than all the other shit I had gotten myself into because now I was lying to my close friends that I considered family.

## Chapter 12



KAT

“THANKS FOR MAKING DINNER. It was delicious,” Sid said. He brought his plate over to the sink. “And for doing the dishes. I feel like I should help. Especially since this is my house.”

Before Sid left the farm earlier, he asked if we could have dinner to get our stories straight. I offered to cook, and Sid met me at Wicker’s Market to get groceries before we headed back to his house.

We had to come up with a backstory of how we’d started dating. The timing of everything needed to be flawless. There were so many lies, I felt like I needed a notepad.

“That’s okay. I don’t mind helping.”

“Is there anything I can do?” he asked.

“You can start the coffee.”

“Consider it done. Shiloh, outside.”

After the dishes were done, we took our coffee to the back porch. Sid had a beautiful view. There was a field behind his house that stretched as far as I could see, and behind it were the rolling hills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The sun was setting, and it painted the sky with beautiful purples and pinks. Sid had an amazing view of the sunset from his back porch. I wanted to watch the sunrise from his front porch swing. Maybe one day.

“I could get used to this.” I sighed as I took a seat in one of the Adirondack chairs. They were a gorgeous red wood that went nicely with his finished back deck.

Sid grunted as he sat, and I bit my lip to hold back a laugh. He was hard to read since most of his expressions were frowns and his responses were grunts and growls, but it never bothered me. I found it funny.

“Okay, let’s talk timeline,” Sid said.

“All right. We already agreed on when we started dating. I told Mindy the same story.”

He nodded. “What about our engagement story? What did you tell her?”

I curled my lip in and held my coffee close. I hoped he wouldn’t be angry with me.

“I told her we were taking a walk in the park early in the morning, so no one was around. We got to the river near Frosty Mug Tavern, and you surprised me by getting down on one knee. You said a bunch of wonderful things, which I kept private, and then asked me to marry you. I was surprised and wasn’t sure if you were serious, but I could tell by your eyes that you were.”

I locked eyes with him, held captive by the gorgeous pools of chocolate. After a minute, he cleared his throat and frowned again.

“That sounds good. Did she ask any other questions?”

“She asked how we fell in love when you seemed so closed off and I’m so...me.”

He glanced at me. “What is that supposed to mean?”

I shrugged. “I think everyone thinks you’re unhappy all the time, and I’m more outgoing and...” I paused, trying to find the word, and then shrugged, “flirty.”

He grunted, and I chuckled. “That’s exactly what I mean.”

Sid sighed and sat back in his chair. “Maybe I am unhappy, but it has nothing to do with anyone else. It’s something I have to work through.”

“Anything I can help with?” I asked, tucking my leg beneath me. There was a chill in the air, and any time the wind blew, it made me shiver, but it was so peaceful that I didn’t want to move.

“No.”

His tone was clipped, and I knew not to push him. Silence fell between us. Shiloh trotted up with a dirty ball and dropped it in Sid’s lap. I sputtered out a laugh when he pulled his hand away, disgusted. He chuckled and tossed it out into the yard. She took off after it in a blur.

“I think that’s all we needed to get straight,” he said.

“What do we do...what about...” I wasn’t sure how to ask Sid about intimacy. Not behind closed doors, but in front of people. We were supposed to look like we were in love.

“What?” he asked.

I rubbed my thumb on the rim of my mug and peered into the dark liquid as if the answer might surface from its depths.

“What do we do about kissing or touching in public?”

Sid sat back and ran a hand through his hair. “Good question. I guess we can’t get away with not touching since we’re supposed to be in love.”

I nodded.

“Holding hands would be fine. Kisses on the cheek and forehead like I did at Frank’s would be okay.”

“But no kissing on the lips?” I asked, making sure I understood him.

He scratched his beard. This subject really rattled him, which I found amusing. I was totally fine with PDA, even if I didn’t know the guy well. It was just another way to get to know someone. If they were a terrible kisser, then there would

be no point in going further. Callous, I knew, but I never claimed to be a saint.

“I don’t think we need to,” he said. His phone rang, and he fished it out of his pocket. “I need to take this.”

As soon as he went inside, I let out a sigh. I had so many other questions. Were we supposed to go on dates so people saw us together in public? Did we really have to plan a wedding? How far were we going to take this? What were we doing about a ring?

Sid walked back outside and ran a hand over the back of his head. He frowned at his phone. “There’s a work emergency, and I need to go.”

“Oh, okay. I can get my things.”

“Actually, I’m not sure how long this is going to take. Would you be willing to take Shiloh to your sister’s?”

“I can stay with her or take her to my house. How long will you be gone?” I asked.

“I don’t know.”

“No problem. Does she have enough food, and if not, what kind does she eat? I can always pick her up some more.”

One of his brows lifted. “Really?”

I huffed. “Yes, really. I’m perfectly capable of caring for your dog.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

I stood. “Then what did you mean? Because this isn’t the first time something I’ve said has surprised you.”

He kicked the ground. “It’s not that I don’t think you’re capable. It’s that...” He huffed. “You don’t seem like you’d like getting dog hair on your clothes or in your house.”

I put my hands on my hips. “Well, Sidney Lewis, it seems there’s a lot you need to learn about your fiancée.”

The sound of crickets grew louder as silence fell between us. My chest rose and fell with irritation as I stared him down.

He tilted his head, studying me.

My irritation dimmed as I gazed into his eyes. The air whipped around, blowing our hair in different directions, but I didn't feel the chill. Instead, I felt warmth spreading deep in my belly.

Sid's tongue slipped out between his lips, slowly wetting them. His eyes were dark, and another shiver ran through me, going straight to my core. I wasn't sure who moved first, but suddenly we were standing toe to toe. My head fell back as I gazed up at him. His warm hand slid up my back slowly, stopping at the nape of my neck.

My heart raced, and I wet my lips in anticipation. I'd never wanted a kiss so badly in my life. There was a part of me that was intrigued by this man. What was he really like behind the frowns and grunts?

He slowly lowered his head, and his lips were inches from mine when the back door to his house flew open and voices filled the air. I jumped back with a squeal, and Sid quickly turned away.

"Did we interrupt something?" Frank asked, smirking.

Mindy was grinning. Kate and Peter, standing beside her, looked gobsmacked. I rubbed my mouth, trying to stop the tingling of my lips. The intensity of the almost kiss rattled me more than the rude interruption.

"Hey, guys. What are you doing here?" I asked.

"We came to see if Sid wanted to have a fire." Peter pointed toward the small pit in the back of Sid's yard. "Also, Kate was baking today and wanted to share the goodies with him."

"It seems we've stumbled onto something else," Laney said, appearing from behind everyone. She was pulling Jacob behind her. "Care to explain?"



“Does no one read the gossip blog?” Mindy asked.

Kate patted her arm. “Not like you, Min.”

“Well, you should, because they were in it. More than once.” She took out her phone and started scrolling. Once she found what she wanted, she whooped before reading aloud.

### *Daily Happenings*

*It appears our lovely Kat is moving into Sid's home. The two were spotted shopping together at Wicker's Market before returning to Sid's for an evening in.*

“Oh, for Pete's sake. Do they have nothing better to do?” I asked. Mindy held up her hand and continued reading.

*Will we see a moving truck in Sid's drive soon? Stay tuned to find out.*

“What the hell?” Sid asked. “Who is writing this shit?”

“Oh, now you're concerned, since you're the topic,” Frank joked, lightly punching his arm.

“This is ridiculous,” I said.

“Is it?” Mindy asked. “Or is it true?”

“What's going on?” Kate asked.

“Sid and Kat are engaged, and now the town wants to know if they're moving in together,” Mindy said. “So are you?”

“You're engaged?” Laney shouted. She ran over, lifted my left hand, and frowned. “Where's the ring?”

“That's what we all want to know,” Rebecca said from behind the pack of women surrounding me. “Do you have an answer, Kat?”

There was fire in my gut. I opened my mouth to tell them all to mind their own business, but Sid cleared his throat and stepped forward. He dropped to one knee, and my heart stopped.

“What are you doing?” I hissed.

“Kat, I was going to give this back to you in private, but since our nosy, opinionated friends don’t seem to believe our love is real, I thought this was a better idea.” He took my left hand and slid a ring onto it. “Will you marry me?”

I sucked in a breath and stared at the gorgeous ring on my finger. It was a white gold band covered with tiny diamonds. The square center stone sat high and was surrounded by a halo of smaller diamonds. Tears swam in my eyes, but not because of the ring. It was the hopeful expression on Sid’s face and the speck of light I saw in his eyes.

“Yes. Of course.”

He smiled and then stood and wrapped me in a hug.

“Are we missing something? I thought you were already engaged,” Frank said.

“Congratulations!” Laney cried. Kate hugged me and grabbed my hand. Both of them inspected the ring.

“We are, but her ring was being resized, and I got it back today. Since you guys are such big pains in my ass, I decided this was the best way to show you how serious we are,” Sid said.

“Why don’t you kiss her, then?” Rebecca asked. I shot her a nasty look. What the hell was her problem?

Sid looked down at me, and the heat from earlier returned tenfold. He wet his lips and dipped his head, but this time, the sound of his cell phone ringing interrupted us.

“Shit. I forgot. I gotta go. Hey, girls, can you keep Kat company? I have to go away for work, and she’s going to be watching Shiloh until I come back.”

“At your house?” Rebecca asked.

“Here or hers. It doesn’t matter.” He turned and ran for the door, leaving me with the mob of busybodies.

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“I CAN’T BELIEVE SID is engaged,” Laney said. “No offense.”

“None taken. I’m a little surprised myself,” I said. “I mean about the whole thing, not Sid being engaged.”

“I knew what you meant. It is surprising,” Laney said. She took five wineglasses out of a bag.

Rebecca pulled a bottle of wine out of her bag, along with bread and cheese. “This is from Sid’s parents’ winery. I’m sampling it for the restaurant.”

“I didn’t know that. Did you talk to them at the gala?” I asked.

Her cheeks pinked. “No. Will actually helped connect us.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Will? As in Sid’s brother?”

She nodded.

“When did you spend time with him?” I asked.

“We haven’t spent time together. He’s just been helping me with a few things.”

“Interesting,” I said. “Does Luke know?”

Rebecca opened the bottle and poured the ruby liquid into the glasses. Her hand shook a little as she poured. Something was going on, but I’d have to wait until we were alone to get to the bottom of it.

“Ladies, can we get this show on the road?” Mindy shouted from the living room.

Sid had left for his work trip, quickly followed by the guys. They went to get their kids from Kate’s mom and dad while the ladies stayed behind to grill me about the wedding.

Rebecca promised Sid that she'd give me instructions for Shiloh's care after offering many times to take the dog instead of letting me watch her.

Sid assured Rebecca that I could handle it and then left. His confidence in me and the way he stood up to my sister were hot, and I wanted to grab his face and kiss him, but I didn't want an audience for our first kiss. I had a feeling it would be magical.

Laney, Rebecca, and I carried the wineglasses into the living room. I plopped down into a large gray chair that was as comfy as it looked and took a sip of my wine. The flavors burst on my tongue, and I let out a small moan. Mindy, Laney, and Kate did the same. I knew little about wine since I gravitated more toward liquor, but I got the distinct flavor of cherry and plum mixed with spice.

"Wow, this is delicious," Laney said, smacking her lips together. I laughed.

"It is amazing. Will said they haven't released this one, and if I want it for my restaurant as a signature wine, they could make that happen," Rebecca said.

"I would do it. I love the way the spices mix with—what is that—plum?" Mindy asked.

"Yeah, I tasted plum," I said.

"Interesting, yet good," Mindy commented and took another sip.

"There's an earthy undertone to this. Is it a Pinot Noir?" Kate asked. We all looked at her, and she shrugged. "What? I know my wines."

"She's just trying to show off. She and Peter have been going wine tasting, and they started a class at Simply Cook It on Tuesday nights. You can learn about which wine pairs with which food," Mindy explained.

"Really? How do you find time for that?" I asked.

She shrugged again. “My parents help a lot. They take the kids on Tuesdays so Peter and I can go out. It’s our weekly date night.”

“Peter enjoys that?” I asked.

She nodded and smiled.

“He enjoys anything that makes Kate happy,” Mindy added. We all *awwed*, and Kate turned beet red.

“Moving on. Let’s talk about Kat and Sid and the upcoming wedding. We have an event coordinator here.” Mindy pointed to Kate. She owned her own event-planning business called Moments Worth Celebrating. She was also the town event coordinator. “I figured we could start the planning.”

My eyes bulged, and I spit my wine back into my glass. “What?” I sputtered.

Mindy’s smile was borderline evil, and I was afraid of what the rest of the evening would hold. My sister looked put out, and Laney was enjoying her wine too much to care about anything else going on.

“I promise it will be painless. Kate is the best,” Mindy said.

“I’m not doubting that, but we just got engaged after a whirlwind romance and dating in secret. I’m not ready to plan the wedding.”

“How long will Sid be gone?” Rebecca asked, swirling her wine around.

I shrugged. “He wasn’t sure. Why?”

Her aloof attitude was hiding something more sinister, and I was afraid of what was going on inside her head.

“I think you should surprise him and move in.”

The wine nearly fell from my hand. “What? Move in?”

“Yeah. You guys were fighting that night at my restaurant because you wouldn’t move in. Why don’t you surprise him while he’s gone? I’m sure he would be happy since that’s what he has been pushing for.”

“That’s a great idea,” Mindy said, hopping off the couch. “We can get the guys to help.”

“We made up. He’s respecting my decision to wait,” I argued.

“That’s because he’s a good guy,” Rebecca said, shooting me a death look. “He won’t ever push you, so you have to make the first move.”

“She has a point,” Laney said. “Sid’s too quiet and reserved to push for what he wants. I think you should do it.”

I glared at Laney. She shrugged and went back to her wine.

“I think I should call and ask Sid,” I said, trying to stall.

“Why would you need to call? He already said he’s been asking you,” Rebecca said.

The girls huddled together to make a moving plan while I escaped to the kitchen for some air.

*Shit. Shit. Shit.*

This was blowing up in our faces, and I had no idea how to fix it. I couldn’t even talk to Sid to find out what he wanted me to do. I couldn’t move into his room while he was away and think he’d be okay with it. Then there was the issue with my apartment.

Laney was my landlord, and she’d expect me to break the lease if I moved in here. I’d lose the home I loved, and when this went belly up—let’s be honest, it would—I’d have nowhere to go.

“Kat? Get in here,” Mindy shouted.

I took a deep breath and then headed out to face the firing squad. Sid had abandoned me in the trenches, and I wanted to strangle him.

“We have a plan,” Mindy said.

“Oh, that fast?” I asked.

“Yeah. The sooner the better, right?” she said cheerfully.

“Why wouldn’t you want to move in now? He’s not here, and you can get settled,” Rebecca said.

I rolled my eyes. She was being a pain in my ass. I knew she was prodding to catch me in a lie. Well, baby sister, the joke is on you. I was riding this lie until it died a fiery death.

“Yeah, that’s a good idea. Tell me the plan,” I said. What was that saying? Fake it till you make it?

“First, we finish our wine and enjoy a movie and some of your delicious popcorn, then tomorrow morning, we all meet at Grateful Cup for coffee and breakfast and then go to your place. The guys can help most of the day,” Mindy said.

“That sounds good.” It meant I would have one more night before my life turned upside down.

# Chapter 13



SID

“WHAT A MESS.” NASH kicked the rubble with his black boot. “I can’t believe it burned down.”

“What the hell happened?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Not sure. I got a call that the place was on fire, and when I got here, it was completely engulfed.”

I stared at the ashes of the old grain mill that used to stand between Ridge Point and Oak Springs. A lot of people were now out of work. The neighboring towns and cities that this mill provided grain to would be hurting too. Thankfully, no one was injured during the fire. It started during a shift change, and everyone was able to get out.

“I think it had something to do with that cold case I asked Connie to send over the file for.”

“Why didn’t you talk to me about it?” I asked.

He shrugged. “It didn’t seem important at the time.”

“Want to fill me in now?” It was more of a demand than a question. If this was a crime, I needed to know about it. I also needed to know how one of *my* cold cases tied in.

Nash kicked at the ground with his boot again and crossed his thick arms over his chest. His biceps tested the material of his uniform shirt. He had about four inches on me, which wasn’t hard since I was only five foot eleven.

“How long you in town for?” Nash asked.



“As long as this takes.”

“You’d better call Will, then, because this is just the beginning, I reckon.”

“Sheriff Gentry. Sheriff Lewis.” Chief Hanson, the fire chief of Ridge Point, appeared with Oak Springs’ new fire chief, Griffin Maxwell, behind him.

“What have you found?” Nash asked.

“It’s too early to tell. I was coming to let y’all know the blaze is out and we’ll be starting our investigation into the cause soon.”

Nash nodded. “Thanks.”

“Sure, son,” Hanson said. He patted Nash on the back and walked away.

“I’ll send a few men to help,” Chief Maxwell said. “I’d offer my services, but Betty Lou is due any minute, so it’s not wise for me to be away.”

“It’s fine, Griff. I’ll be here too,” I said. “I’ll call Will and let him know I’m bunking with him for a few days, but I need to get back home by the weekend.”

“Why, do you have a hot date?” Nash asked, wiggling his eyebrows at me.

“My fiancée and I...” The word felt weird coming out of my mouth. “We have dinner plans with our parents this weekend, and I don’t want to cancel.”

“Whoa-ho-ho. When did that shit happen?” he asked.

“Cut it out, Gentry. It’s not a big deal.”

“The hell it isn’t. Especially after what’s-her-name.”

“Enough,” I growled.

He put his hands up. “Does your brother know?”

I rolled my eyes. “Yes. Will was there when we announced our engagement. I’m sure he told Duke.”

“Funny. Neither one mentioned it.”

“It doesn’t matter. Let’s go to the station so you can fill me in on what you know.” I walked away without waiting for him to reply.

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MY NECK HAD A kink in it, and I stretched it from side to side to try to work it out. It was late, and I wanted to get some sleep. Before I went to the station to meet Nash, I dropped my things off at Will’s. He graciously offered me the guest room, and I gladly accepted. It was either his place or my parents’. I chose the less terrible option.

“Tell me again how you think these are related to the fire,” I said.

He looked at the floor sheepishly. “I’m not really sure.”

I sighed. “Why were you digging around in my cold cases anyway?”

Nash tipped back in his chair and folded his big hands over his stomach. “The sheriff before me was combing over cold cases in his spare time, and I picked up his hobby. I figured it was a good way to pass the time since not a damn thing happens in a small town. Especially here. This fire is the most action I’ve seen the entire time I’ve worked here.”

I winced. “That’s sad.”

“How much action have you seen?” he asked.

I lifted my brow.

“On the job, asshole.”

“Not much more than you.”

“Exactly. It’s boring as hell. So to pass the time, I started looking at cold cases, and I stumbled across one that involved Oak Springs.”

He paused, and I held back a groan. Nash was dramatic like Will, and it drove me nuts. I didn’t have time for his shit.

“Get to the point.”

“Grumpy Sheriff suits you.”

I rolled my eyes. Damn small towns.

“Okay. The case involves a man in his thirties who was killed in his home.”

“Doesn’t seem strange.”

“Right, but he worked at the mill that just burned to the ground.”

I sat up. “That’s interesting.”

Nash stood and went to the whiteboard. He drew a line and marked it with some hash marks. Then he started filling in information. I sat back and took a sip of my cold coffee. The coffee at this station was horrible.

“The cold case I had Connie dig up for me involved the death of a woman in a park near your town. She was in her thirties, and surprise, surprise, she was married to the man killed here.”

“When?”

“Same time. A few days after her husband.”

“Was she killed the same way?”

He shook his head. “No. The man was killed by a gunshot wound to his abdomen. Whoever did it wanted him to suffer. He was shot at point blank range with his own gun and left to bleed out. Coroner at the time said it took about three hours for him to die.”

“How did the woman die?”

“That’s the interesting part. The coroner in Oak Springs said she was likely killed by someone she knew because it was a more intimate murder.”

I cringed. “Never knew there was such a thing.”

“Me neither. She was strangled, but there were signs she’d had intercourse before her death.”

“Raped?”

He shook his head. “Nope. Which is why the coroner thought she was killed by someone she knew.”

I folded my arms across my chest. “Okay, so what’s your theory?”

“Glad you asked. I think that the wife was having an affair, and her lover shot the husband. I haven’t worked out how she ended up dead or how it all ties into the fire. A few of the suspects worked with the husband at the mill, but all were cleared at the time of the murders.”

“When did these deaths happen?”

“About ten years ago.”

I stood and looked at the timeline on the board. It didn’t add up. Why start a fire now? Unless someone was hiding something. But what?

“Ten years is a long time, and if your theory holds true, then he would have gotten away with it. Why the fire? Maybe it’s not related at all.”

“That could be. I said it was a theory.”

I turned around. “Yeah. There are a lot of holes in it. Let’s table it for the night and revisit things in the morning when the fire department has more information for us.”

“Want to grab a beer?” Nash asked.

“No. I’m going to head over to Will’s. I’m exhausted, and it’s going to be a long few days.”

After making copies of Nash’s files, I left the station and walked the half block to my brother’s house. The house was quiet and dark. It was only ten, so I doubted Will was asleep. He was likely either still at work or at the bar. I pulled my phone out and dialed his number.

“Will Lewis.”

“Where are you?”

“Relax, honey. I’ll be home soon.”

I rolled my eyes. “Dick.”

He barked out a laugh. “I’m at work. Caught a case. I’ll be home soon.”

“You got one too? Any chance they’re related?”

“I’m a lawyer, Sid. Not law enforcement. That’s your job.”

“Never mind. Good night.”

“Night, sweetheart. I’ll come in and kiss you good night when I get home,” he said.

“You come through that door, and I’ll unload my service revolver into your chest.”

His booming laugh annoyed me. “Damn. You’re an ornery bastard.”

“Bye, Will.”

His laugh echoed through the phone as I hung up on him. After grabbing a beer from the fridge, I made my way to the guest bathroom, stripped, and stood under the showerhead. It was one of those high-end ones that gave you a massage while you showered. I closed my eyes and let the warm water soak into my tense muscles. The gentle kneading lulled me into a relaxed state. For one night, I didn’t want to think. I just wanted to forget.

# Chapter 14



## SID

THE DRIVE TO MY parents' house was painful. I was tired as hell and in a terrible mood. After spending three days digging through case files, we were no closer to finding a connection to the fire. On top of that, Chief Hanson and his men found a body inside the mill. The victim had been killed before the fire, so the fire appeared to be a cover-up.

I was convinced the cold cases and the fire weren't related, but Nash insisted they were, so we were chasing our tails, hoping for something to click. Nash wanted me to stay and continue to work the cases, but Ridge Point and Oak Springs were only twenty minutes apart, so I told him I'd continue to work on it from the comfort of my station and home.

Instead of having Kat meet me at my parents', I went home to shower and pick her up. Imagine my surprise when I found she had moved in. It wasn't her fault; the women in our group of friends had pressured her based on our lies. But now my once-quiet oasis was exploding with her shit.

To make matters worse, she had moved into *my* room.

"I'm really sorry about moving into your room. As soon as I get my bed set up in the spare room, I'll move everything into there," Kat said.

I grunted.

"Are you sure you don't want me to drive?" she asked.

"I'm fine," I gritted out.

It was the third time she'd asked me, and it was starting to really piss me off.

"I'm nervous," she murmured.

I was being a dick. Here we were on our way to meet my parents, and I'd been silent and brooding. Treating her like shit because I was angry about our situation. The situation I'd put us in.

"You? Nervous?" I joked, trying to change the mood.

She lightly punched my arm. "I get nervous. Especially meeting parents."

"Have you met a lot?" I asked.

"For your information, no. I've only ever met a friend's parents before, and that was just as scary."

"Was the friend a guy?" I asked, wiggling my eyebrows.

"If you must know, yes."

I laughed, and so did she, easing the tension for the last few miles. We pulled into Ridge Point, and I drove past Main Street and my brother's law office. As we continued down the adjacent road, we drove past his farmhouse.

"Is that your brother getting in the car?" Kat asked.

"Probably," I said without looking. "That's his house."

Kat nodded, but I could tell she was still nervous as hell. We drove for a few more miles and then pulled off onto a dirt road. An iron archway engraved with the words MOUNTAIN VIEW VINYARD AND WINERY stretched above the road, the large iron gate beneath it open.

"Wow, this place is incredible," Kat said, leaning forward.

We drove down a large path through the vineyard. My parents' house sat on the back part of the property. We veered to the left at the tasting house and followed the small dirt drive to the now oversized farmhouse.

They'd obviously renovated and added on. It was beautiful but enormous and unnecessary for two people. It screamed money, which was odd, given the dilapidated look of the rest of the town.

"Here we are," I said as I put the truck in park.

"When was the last time you were here?" Kat asked. She sat back in her seat and turned toward me.

I took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. "I'm not sure. It was back when this was a farm and not a vineyard. So it's been a long time."

"Are you nervous?"

I shrugged. "Not really."

"Okay," she said, looking out the window. She was fidgeting and chewing on her bottom lip.

I leaned over and rested my hand on top of hers. She jumped.

"Hey, it's okay. They will love you. You've already impressed my mom, and who cares about my dad? You know Will, sort of, and Duke is like a big, adorable puppy. You'll like him right away."

She smiled. "Thanks."

"You're welcome."

"Ready?"

Kat nodded. "Let's go."

Before we could get out, a loud smack on my window caused me to jump and Kat to scream. Will laughed and bent forward, holding his gut. Kat's hand was over her chest, and her eyes were wide.

"Holy shit," she said.

I busted out laughing. Kat sneered at me before joining in. Will was close enough to my door that I knocked him back when I threw it open.



“Asshole,” I muttered as I walked by.

He held his gut where the door had hit him but chuckled as he followed behind us. I reached down and grabbed Kat’s hand, winding my fingers between hers. It felt natural and eased the tightness in my chest that I hadn’t realized was there.

I’d stayed away from here for good reason. My dad and I did not see eye to eye and hadn’t since I was a teen. I’d never done things the way he wanted me to, and he picked on me a lot more than my brothers.

Plus, Ridge Point brought back painful memories that I’d tried like hell to forget about. It was hard to be back, especially with Kat. Introducing her to my family was a huge step, and even though it was fake, it felt wrong. I was lying to my family, but also to Kat. This wouldn’t ever be real, and it felt like I was giving her false hope.

We needed to have a talk. I had to make sure that we were on the same page with our arrangement and that I was doing this as a friend and nothing more. She wasn’t pushing me for more, so maybe she already understood.

The back door opened, and my youngest brother, Duke, stepped out. He smiled wide and opened his arms for me to step into. “The prodigal son returns.”

“Shut up.” I gave him a quick hug and stepped back. I loved my baby brother. He was the easiest person to get along with. He gave me shit, but it was all in fun.

“Damn, that was a good one,” Will said. “I should have used that, but I scared the shit out of them instead.”

Duke laughed and then turned to Kat. “This must be my future sister-in-law.” He pulled her into an embrace that had my hackles rising.

“Better let her go before you unleash the beast,” Will said. He slapped Duke on his back as he passed by and went inside.

Duke winked at me before letting Kat go. Even though Kat and I were pretending, it still caused my gut to burn with

jealousy. Duke was a good-looking man. Both of my brothers were, but Duke looked like he could be an Italian model with his darker skin, like our mom, and brown hair and eyes.

He was tall and lean, the tallest of us three at six foot two. Will was in the middle, at six feet even. I'd always wanted to be taller than my brothers, but it wasn't in the cards for me. Something they knew pissed me off, and they teased me often.

Duke turned and went inside, and I glanced at Kat. She wasn't watching him with a smile and dreamy eyes as I'd expected. Instead, she looked almost pained.

"Hey, are you okay?" I asked.

She nodded and smiled. "Yeah."

We walked into my parents' house, and Kat inhaled sharply. The place looked ridiculous. Like my parents were trying to fit in, but they couldn't decide how to do that, so they went with one of everything.

There were stone sculptures, busy artwork on the walls, and crystal bowls and vases on tables. White carpet with off-white walls. A gaudy red rug in front of a stone fireplace and two brown leather sofas angled toward it.

"Jeez. It's like the rich and ridiculous threw up in here," I mumbled.

Kat gasped.

I frowned. "What?"

"I say that too."

"Say what?" I asked, confused.

"Rich and ridiculous. That's what I've always called my parents and their friends."

I chuckled. "It seems we agree on something."

"Is that hard to believe?" she asked.

Her hand was still in mine, and I squeezed it. "No."

As we stared at one another, something intense flared to life. The heat in her eyes fanned the flame rising inside me. Her tongue slid across her bottom lip, slowly wetting it. My heart thundered in my chest, and I could see the beat of her pulse speed up at the base of her slender throat.

The same intensity that had been present when we almost kissed on my back porch was there now. The prolonged anticipation was almost unbearable. Why did I have this strong urge to kiss her? It grew each time we were together, and I was almost powerless to resist it.

We were standing mere inches apart. When I inhaled, I could smell something sweet that reminded me of when I was younger, but I couldn't put my finger on it. Whatever it was, I wanted more of it.

Kat was watching me intently. I tipped my head to the side and licked my lips. Just as my lips were descending to meet hers, a breath apart, someone walked into the room.

"Sorry to interrupt, but Mom is asking where you are," Duke said.

I stepped back and cleared my throat. Kat's eyes darted to the floor, and she turned away from me. I reached down to grab her hand, but she pulled it into herself, so I placed my hand lightly on the small of her back to guide her to the dining room. She flinched and then relaxed. The almost kiss had obviously affected her too.

"Y'all come sit down," Mom said when we entered the large room.

"Uh-oh. Mom's throwing her y'alls around," Will said.

"Hush," Mom said, swatting him with a potholder.

Kat's eyes ping-ponged between my two brothers as they went back and forth, ribbing on Mom and each other. Her eyes lit with amusement as she took her napkin off her plate and laid it over her lap.

Will's wide grin fell suddenly, and he cleared his throat and tipped his head toward the door behind Duke. Duke sat up straighter, and unease settled in my gut. Kat glanced over at me, questions in her eyes. I squeezed her hand in reassurance. I wasn't sure if it was for me or for her.

The air in the room chilled. Not physically, but emotionally. We were all wound tight. My dad entered the room and took his place at the head of the table, opening his napkin and laying it over his lap as Kat had. He placed a folded newspaper beside his plate and then looked around the room.

When his eyes landed on me, disgust washed over his face. He glanced at Kat and then moved on to Will. His expression changed, and a faint smile lifted his lips.

"The numbers are good this quarter," he said.

Will nodded. "Yes. Very."

"Let's not discuss business while we have a guest," my mom said, entering the room with a small casserole dish.

When she placed it down, my mouth watered. Sweet potato casserole had always been a comfort food for me, and it had been a long time since I'd had my mom's. Kat smiled at me. She looked as excited as I was.

"I'll discuss whatever I'd like, Beth," my dad said. His tone was clipped, and my mom winced.

I hated how he talked to her and us. He'd always been a dick. Even when we had nothing and the farm was going under, he still treated people in town like he was better than them. My grandparents were old money but had cut him off young for choosing my mom over their choice. He had run away and settled here in Ridge Point.

He'd done well for himself until he started gambling. Luckily, we were older, and Will was dabbling in investing. Since the farm was going under, he and my dad decided on a winery start-up. Will knew a guy—he always seemed to know

someone who had something he needed—who had a few grape vines he wanted to offload.

My mom had always wanted a vineyard, and together, she and my dad learned the ins and outs of owning and taking care of one. My mom was in charge of the actual vineyard itself, and Will handled the money since my dad couldn't be trusted. Dad was in charge of the employees and making wine. The vineyard was thriving, despite my dad's addiction. When he didn't have money to spend, things went well.

"I'd love a tour of the vineyard sometime," Kat said.

My dad's face lit up. "I'd love to show you around. We have excellent wines to taste. Perhaps after dinner we could visit the tasting room."

"I'd like that," she said.

A rumble came from my throat that only Kat heard. She smiled at me and squeezed my leg under the table, causing me to flinch. Her smile turned into a sly grin before she pulled her hand away.

"I'd love to show you the new arbor arch we set up for weddings," Mom said.

"You hold weddings here?" I asked.

She nodded. Her face was lit with pure joy. "We started this summer, and we're already booked a year out. But we'll make an exception for you. As soon as you get me your date, I'll move some things around."

Kat choked on her water, and I lightly patted her back. She covered it with a smile.

"Duke, how is school going?" I asked, changing the subject.

He finished chewing and then smiled. "Good. Busy."

"What are you going to school for?" Kat asked.

"I recently changed directions."

“You did?” I asked.

He nodded. “I was going into pediatric cardiology, but there’s a need right here in Ridge Point for a doctor. I’m thinking of opening a family practice. A friend of mine would be willing to move to town to partner with me.”

“I didn’t know you were thinking of that,” Mom said.

His cheeks pinked. “It’s a new thing. I wouldn’t have to go to school for as long, and I could live here after I finished. I figured it was the right thing to do.”

“But you love kids, and you want to help them,” Mom argued.

“I know, and I’d still be helping. Where would the kids here in town go when they got hurt? I can make a difference here, and there’s a need.”

“Wow,” Kat said. A look of admiration crossed her face, and I rolled my eyes. Not that I wasn’t proud of my brother. He was smart as shit and going to do amazing things, but the doe-eyed look Kat was giving him irritated me.

Duke was the most generous of the three of us and was always looking for ways to give back to his community. Will did the same, but with his wallet and time, not his heart. That didn’t matter to my dad. He now had two sons investing in the future of their town, and one who was investing his time and resources in another. I was always the black sheep.

I cleared my throat, and Kat shook her head and looked away from Duke. He had a shit-eating grin on his face, and I had the urge to punch it off.

“That’s very noble of you,” Kat said.

I snorted. Her head whipped in my direction and fire blazed in her eyes. “It is. I’m sure it takes a lot of dedication to do something like that. And changing your profession because there’s a need somewhere else is honorable.”

I rolled my eyes, and I swore I saw flames rise in Kat’s. I tugged on the collar of my button-up, and Will barked out a

laugh. My dad shot him a look, and he quieted down, but the smirk was still on his lips. I opened my mouth but was saved by my mom bringing out the main dish.

There was a tense undercurrent between Kat and me for the rest of dinner that I wanted to erase. I was always putting my damn foot in my mouth and offending her. There was so much about her that surprised me, and I needed to make more of an effort since we were stuck in this situation together.

## Chapter 15



### KAT

“KAT MENTIONED SHE WANTED to see the trees in the mountains during fall. You should take her on a hike soon before it gets too cold,” Will told Sid when he returned from the bathroom.

We were gathered in the tasting room with glasses of wine. Well, the men had a single glass each, while I had a row of small tasting glasses filled with different wines. It was glorious.

Sid scoffed. “She doesn’t hike.”

My head nearly spun off my neck with how fast I whipped it in his direction. I glared at him. He had the audacity to look surprised.

“What?”

“I do hike. And I jog, do yoga, read, and watch movies.”

I put my hands on my hips and stared him down, daring him to say another stupid thing.

“I’m going to let you guys have this out,” Will said. He picked up his glass of wine and joined Duke and his mom at the table across the room.

“Do you have anything to say?” I asked Sid.

His eyes roamed over me slowly before he took a sip of his wine. Fire burned through my veins. Anger and arousal were at war inside me. Sid’s judgment hurt, but there was still this



burning sexual undercurrent between us that had me clenching my legs together. Especially when he looked at me the way he was now.

The hunger in his eyes was sexy as hell. He'd tried to mask it more than once since we started this fake engagement, but I saw it, and it lit a flame inside me.

The hunger disappeared, and he shrugged. "I didn't know."

He turned it off so quickly that I almost thought I'd imagined it. But by the way my body burned, I knew it was true.

"Well, now you do," I bit out.

He sighed and turned his attention to the room, taking in the décor. It was a rustic-looking room with round high-top tables paired with tall stools. A long bar top ran along two walls, making an L shape. It was tall enough for people to stand at, but there were more tall stools tucked underneath in case someone wanted to sit.

Two walls were made of large stones, one was brick, and the last wall was all windows overlooking the vineyard and mountains behind. It was all a little brown since it was early November, but still breathtaking.

The ceiling of the tasting room had the same exposed dark beams I'd noticed in the living room. My favorite part of the whole space, though, was the set of french doors that opened to a small room made of glass and filled full with bottles of wine. A short table with chairs sat in the center of the room.

"This is really nice," I commented.

Sid grunted in response, and I rolled my eyes. I could never be married to him for real with all of his grunting and negativity. It was like a disease, and I could feel it darkening my soul.

I sighed. That wasn't very nice. He wasn't that bad. I was just mad at him.

"I'm sorry."

My head snapped up. “Excuse me?”

He looked upward before his brown eyes settled on me. “I’m sorry for what I said. I misjudged you, and it wasn’t fair.”

“Thank you,” I whispered.

“I’d love to take you hiking. Fall in the mountains is my favorite time of year.”

“That’s obvious.”

He frowned. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You seem like a mountain type of guy with your grunting and frowning.” I reached forward and rubbed his brows until they relaxed.

He stared into my eyes with surprise, but that hunger was back. My fingers froze on his face, and I swallowed hard. The urge to kiss him was overwhelming. His gaze dropped to my lips, and he leaned forward an inch. Sid’s breath fanned across my face, and my eyes slid closed. A second later, his lips brushed against mine. It was the faintest kiss I’d ever felt, but it sent a fire blazing through me, warming my body more than the wine had. His lips were soft, and his beard tickled my face.

I waited with bated breath to see if he’d deepen the kiss. God, I wanted that more than oxygen. His fingers wound through my hair until his big hand found the back of my neck, and he pulled me into him. His fingers were rough against my skin.

When his lips pressed harder against mine, I could no longer think of anything but how soft and plump and perfect they felt. His tongue slowly ran along the seam of my lips, and it was the most sensual thing I’d ever felt. I opened my mouth and sighed. His tongue slowly slid inside like he had all the time in the world to explore.

It was like torture but in the best way. His fingers tightened against my neck when my tongue rolled around his. A growl rumbled from his throat, and it reverberated through me, sending small pulses to my core. He picked up the pace with

his tongue, and I felt it deep inside, like he was stroking my center.

We got lost in each other. His fingers dug into my scalp, holding my head in place so he could ravage my mouth and take every bit of pleasure he could. Time had ceased to exist. It was just Sid and me in this moment.

I vaguely registered someone clearing their throat, but I was too lost in this kiss to care. I'd never been kissed this way in my life, and I never wanted it to end. Sid bit my bottom lip and then ran his tongue over the spot to ease the sting. My panties were soaked, and a moan escaped me.

Someone coughed loudly, and my eyes popped open. Sid lifted his head, looked around, and then sighed against my mouth. He placed another peck on my lips before stepping back.

I wiped my mouth and looked around the room. Will and Duke had matching smirks on their faces. Beth's eyes were wide, but she had a shy smile on her face. Thankfully, Sid's dad wasn't in the room.

"Sorry to interrupt, but we wanted to know if Kat was finished with her wine and would like a tour of the vineyard," Will said. He had a devilish smile on his face, and his eyes were full of mischief. That man was trouble, but I was thankful he wasn't making a big deal out of what just happened.

I looked at my tasting sample. I had one glass left. Sid lifted it out of the wooden tray and nodded toward the door. "Let's go."

He placed his hand on the small of my back, and it burned through the layers of my short jean jacket and sundress. That kiss had shifted something. Even though Sid and I were so different, I couldn't deny my attraction to him.

We walked the grounds, and his mom told me about each section of grapes and which wines they would be used for. She was extremely knowledgeable, and the smile on her face was

contagious. She obviously loved being out here and caring for the grapes from the start.

Partway through our tour, she looped her arm through mine, and I felt this ache deep inside. My mom had never done this with me. Even when I was young. I had been raised by nannies, and my mom only came around to scold us or tell us how we were expected to behave. Like we were some royal family.

Tears burned my eyes, and I looked at where she was pointing, willing them to go away. She squeezed my arm as she excitedly told me about the vines beside us. These were her favorites, and she planned on experimenting with another kind to make a new wine in the spring. Her joy radiated off her, and I smiled.

Even though I had met Beth at the same gala my parents had attended, she was nothing like my mom and dad. She was more down-to-earth and friendly. Her warmth and kindness were what I thought a mother should be like, and I longed for that.

“Will, these were the vines I was telling you about,” Beth said. She slid her hand out of my arm and walked toward another section, with Will following.

“Hey, are you okay?” Sid asked, surprising me.

“Yeah. I’m okay,” I said, even though I felt the wetness gathering in my eyes.

He turned me toward him, and his eyes widened when they landed on mine. “Kat, is everything all right? Was it what happened earlier?”

“No,” I blurted. “That was perfect. It’s just...”

“What?” he asked.

“Nothing.” I smiled. “Everything is perfect.”

Sid’s eyebrow raised, and he searched my face and then nodded. “Okay. Let’s go.”

“Where?”

“I want to show you where they make the wine before we go.”

I smiled and followed behind him. It really was perfect in spite of his father’s surly, hoity-toity attitude, and it pained me because this was only temporary.

# Chapter 16



SID

KAT AND I STOOD facing each other on a hill overlooking the vineyard. With the mountains as a backdrop, it was a perfect location for a wedding. Looking into Kat's eyes while standing under the newly constructed wooden arbor arch was too much to take.

I breathed deep through my nose and tried to keep my face neutral. My mom chattered on, telling us that the best time for a wedding would be late spring or early summer when the vines were in bloom. She explained where everyone would stand, how the seating would look, and how some couples chose to erect some sort of temporary structure over the seating, and how we could do the same.

Will snickered beside me, and I wanted to kick him in the nuts. If this wedding was real, I'd choose Duke as my best man. Since it wasn't happening, I didn't have to worry about that. This was all spiraling out of control. When I'd blurted out that Kat and I were engaged, I hadn't expected it to go beyond that night. I never imagined we'd actually have to plan a wedding. What was I going to do when the day came?

Fuck, what a mess.

"Then they'll say you may kiss the bride, and you'll exit down the middle," Mom said.

"I think they know what to do. Everyone knows that part," Will said.

My mom marched over to him and grabbed his ear, pulling him down to her face like she did when we were kids. Duke and I snickered.

“Do you?”

“What?” he asked. “Ouch. You’re hurting me.”

“Do you know what to do?”

“From movies and shit...ouch. Sorry, I mean stuff.”

“Then hush. When your time comes, you’ll be able to add your two cents, but until then, keep your mouth closed.”

“Yes ma’am.”

She straightened and faced Kat and me. We had turned to face the front where the seating would be, but our hands remained linked. I knew Kat could feel how clammy my hand was, and I felt a slight tremor in hers.

“What do you think?” Mom asked.

Words failed me as the panic grew. Luckily, either Kat wasn’t filled with the same panic, or she was handling hers better because she spoke up. “It’s beautiful. I’d be honored to have my wedding here.”

Her response seemed honest. I glanced at her and was struck with an intense possessiveness. My entire body screamed *mine*. I dropped her hand and ran mine through my hair.

“I’m so glad you love it,” Mom said, clapping her hands together. She looped her arm through Kat’s and pulled her away. “Do you have a date in mind?”

“No.”

“Not a problem. We’ll look at the calendar and see what dates are available. That might help narrow it down.”

“Oh...okay.” Kat glanced over her shoulder, and like a coward, I turned away.

“You okay?” Will asked. “You look a little pale.”

“I’m fine,” I said, loosening the collar of my button-up. “It’s hot as hell out here.”

Will raised a brow. “It’s the end of October in the mountains, and a cold front just moved through.” He had on a sweater and chinos. I shot him a death glare and rolled up my sleeves.

“He’s freaking out,” Duke said.

“Thanks, Captain Obvious.”

He put a hand on my shoulder to slow my movements. “You good?”

I nodded, but then my knees buckled, and I fell to the grass.

“Okay. Easy does it,” Will said. “Duke, go get some water.”

When he was gone, Will took a seat beside me. “Anything you want to talk about?”

I plucked at the grass and took a deep breath. “No.”

“This doesn’t have to do with—”

“No!” I shouted.

“You sure?”

“Do you want to fight?”

The bastard chuckled. “No. I want you to talk about your past and let it go.”

I stood. “Who the hell are you to tell me how to deal with it? It’s not something that I can just get over.”

“Clearly not, but you need to if you’re going to marry that woman in there. She deserves your whole heart.”

“Fuck off.”

I stomped away, feeling like shit. He was right. Kat didn’t deserve a broken man. My heart wasn’t whole. It hadn’t been for years. I couldn’t give her what she deserved. Kat would get



hurt, and our family and friends would get hurt. We were no longer pretending. The feeling that had settled inside my chest when I looked into her eyes was something I never thought I'd feel again. That was why I needed to end this before it destroyed us both.

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WE DIDN'T TALK ABOUT the mock wedding or the extremely hot kiss we'd shared in front of my family in the tasting room. In fact, we hardly talked at all. We drove home in silence, and then Kat went right to the guest room, mumbling something about seeing me tomorrow, and closed the door.

After five minutes, she came back out, and I bit back a laugh. Her bed wasn't set up yet, and she had no choice but to join me in my bed or take the couch. Since I'd left her high and dry thanks to my panic attack, I let her take the bed.

My traitor of a dog slept with Kat. Loneliness settled over me, and it pissed me off. I got little sleep and was in another shit mood in the morning. I ended up going for a run by myself through the park, which only pissed me off further because I always ran with Shiloh. She was *my* dog.

We had hours before we had to be at the dinner with her parents, so I went to work in Mr. Thompson's barn to blow off some steam. When I got home, Kat had set up her bed in the guest room and moved all of her things out of mine. We didn't talk about it. In fact, we didn't talk about anything, and it was driving me mad.

I normally loved the quiet, but Kat wasn't her usual cheerful self, and it needled at me because I didn't know how to make it better. My past had ruined me, and I was shit at relationships now. Which was why I never made it past the first or second date with someone. That, and I didn't allow myself to open up and give anything back. The dates were mostly to pass the time and ease the loneliness. In truth, they usually ended up making it worse.

With Kat, I felt like someone had tossed me into the middle of the ocean without a life raft. Emotions I'd buried a lifetime ago were floating to the surface, and when I tried to grab them to stay afloat, they pulled me under. I didn't want to face them. I didn't want to face the past. But the more time I spent with Kat, the more the memories haunted me.

"I'm sorry in advance for my family," Kat said, breaking the silence. We still had thirty minutes to go since her family lived in Charlotte, which was a little over an hour away from Oak Springs.

"It's okay," I said.

She nodded and looked out the window. A suffocating silence filled the car.

"I'm sorry about yesterday. About my mom forcing us to stand up there and then for leaving you to deal with her. Did you set a wedding date?" My stomach rolled. I hoped to hell she hadn't.

"No. I wrote a few down and said I'd talk to you. She was really pushing for a month from now, and I sort of panicked. She said she was sorry and promised to back off."

"Shit. Kat, I'm sorry. You shouldn't have had to deal with that."

She shrugged and then a glint of humor lit her eyes. "It's okay. You were dealing with your own panic attack."

"You saw that?" I asked.

"Yep."

I groaned, and she laughed. The tension broke, and I breathed a sigh of relief. We pulled up in front of Kat's parents' house shortly after, and my mouth dropped open. I thought my parents' house was oversized and ridiculous, but it was nothing compared to this. A woman dressed in a crisp black button-down, black dress pants, and black shoes walked out and waited for us to get out. Her hair was slicked back into a tight bun, not a stray hair dared to escape. As I got out of the

car, the lines of disapproval around her mouth tightened, and I swallowed hard.

“Hello, Louise,” Kat said with an eye roll.

The woman nodded to acknowledge the greeting but remained poised with her hands behind her back and her chin up, nose in the air. “Welcome. I’ll show you inside,” she said. Her attention was on me.

“Thank you,” I replied

This wasn’t a house; it was an estate. It was enormous, with huge white pillars twice the size of the ones at my parents’ house flanking the front door. Louise led us inside, and I froze. Three of my parents’ houses could fit inside. My parents appeared to be trying too hard, but the Coopers’ house dripped with money. It looked like a museum, and I was afraid to touch anything.

We followed the woman to the dining room, which looked like it had been made for a king. A chair that looked like an actual throne sat at the head of the table. Floor-to-ceiling windows behind the chair overlooked the immaculate backyard.

“Are those peach trees?” I asked.

“Oh, yes. Mr. Cooper prides himself on his peaches.”

Kat rolled her eyes, but my mouth watered. Peaches were my favorite fruit. Would I be able to sneak some out of here without getting caught?

“Have a seat,” the woman said. “The Coopers will be along shortly.”

Kat sighed and took a seat. “This is ridiculous. I’m so sorry.”

“For what?” I asked, taking my seat beside her.

There was a plate of cheese and crackers on the table and two glasses of water.

“This,” she said, gesturing around the room. “My parents are over the top. They act like they’re the royal family. I’m surprised we didn’t have to go through a security check when we arrived.”

I chuckled. “It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not. Your parents were so welcoming and mine are so cold.”

I leveled her with a look. “My dad is *not* welcoming.”

She waved her hand in the air. “But the rest of them are awesome.”

“I guess. Is your sister coming?”

Her head whipped my way, and she scowled. “Why? Would you rather her be here?”

My brows shot up. “What? Why would you ask that?”

Her shoulders deflated, and she grabbed her water glass. “I don’t know. I’m stressed.”

I squeezed her shoulder. “Relax. Even if dinner is horrible, it doesn’t change how I feel about you.”

“How do you feel about me?” she whispered.

I looked away, shocked I’d let that slip out of my mouth. We had been acting like an actual couple recently, and I didn’t hate it. I saw Kat differently, and I was developing feelings for her, but this was fake, and I wasn’t supposed to fall for her. I couldn’t fall for her.

I cleared my throat. “You’re my friend, Kat, and you’re nothing like your parents.”

Her face fell slightly, but she covered it with a smile. “Thanks.”

“Thank you for coming,” Kat’s mom, Gwen, said when she entered the room behind us. “It’s nice to see you both again.”

She was smiling, but it looked plastered on her face like a mask. Kat tensed beside me, and I grabbed her leg, giving it a gentle squeeze. Even though we weren't really together, it didn't mean I couldn't be there to support her. As a friend.

Her dad, Charles, entered the room, and the temperature chilled a degree. He was colder than my dad had been, and it made me slightly uncomfortable. The scowl on his face didn't help, and I shifted in my chair. This time, it was Kat's hand on my leg for comfort.

Charles took a seat in the throne chair at the head of the table and placed his napkin on his lap. A woman wearing an apron ran over and poured him a glass of water.

"Brandy tonight," he said.

The woman nodded and walked to the corner bar.

"Sid, what would you like?"

I looked at him in surprise. "I'll take a whiskey neat, sir."

Charles nodded, and the woman turned with a small smile to confirm she'd heard. Gwen sat at the other end of the table across from her husband. Her chair wasn't a throne, but it was still bigger than ours. It was odd.

"I'll take a glass of wine," she said. "Kat, would you like a glass?"

Kat looked at Gwen in surprise. "You're offering me a glass of wine?"

"Yes. Why wouldn't I? You're old enough to drink."

"She'd love one," I said. It didn't need to turn into an argument.

"Only one. We don't want to deal with you getting sloppy," Charles said.

Kat's shoulders fell, and I held back a growl.

"She doesn't get sloppy, and if she wants more than one, that's fine. I'm driving home," I said.

Charles opened his mouth, but Gwen cut him off. “Katerina, I heard you two moved in together. Is that correct?”

I rolled my eyes and took a sip of my drink. The whiskey was smooth, and if her parents weren’t pissing me off, I would have commented on it.

“Yes,” Kat said. Her voice sounded small, and it only caused the anger inside me to rise.

Gwen frowned and took a sip of her wine. Charles looked irritated. Luckily, the conversation died when the staff brought our meals in. The tension during dinner was thick.

“I wish you would have thought about things first,” Gwen said.

We had finished our meal and were waiting for dessert.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Kat asked.

“You know what I’m talking about,” Gwen said.

Kat crossed her arms over her chest. “I’m not sure that I do.”

Gwen huffed. “Getting engaged, moving in with the man...it’s all in very poor taste.”

I stiffened but remained silent.

“Are you shitting me?” Kat yelled.

Gwen’s eyes opened wide.

“That’s enough, Katerina,” Charles scolded.

“No, I don’t think it is. Sid and I came to dinner because you ordered us to. We deserve your respect. I’m going to marry him, whether you like it or not.”

“People are talking,” Gwen hissed.

“Let them talk,” Kat volleyed back. I was so damn proud of her for sticking up to them.

Charles stood and slammed his hand down on the table. “That’s enough, Katerina.”

His nostrils flared, and anger burned in his eyes.

“I requested you join us for dinner so I could get to know your fiancé better. Your sister never mentioned you were with anyone, and he never asked for your hand.”

Kat stood. “We’re done. If you want more information about us, talk to Rebecca. It’s obvious that’s where you heard about me moving in with Sid. Did she also mention that it was her idea? That she pushed me to do it?”

Gwen looked shocked, and I paled. I knew the girls pushed her to move in with me, but I never would have guessed it was Rebecca leading them all. She knew me better than the others. I had directed my anger at Kat when I should have been angry with Rebecca. I ground my molars together in irritation. How could she do that to me?

“Let’s go, Sid,” Kat said. She turned and left the room.

Charles sat down and took a sip of his drink. I was about to stand when Charles spoke.

“Sid, I’d like to get to know you better.”

I was torn between following Kat and getting to know her father. Kat and I weren’t really getting married, yet I felt compelled to play the part here.

“What do you want to know?” I asked.

Gwen left the room, and I hoped she was going to make amends with her daughter. I was beginning to understand why Kat acted the way she did. She was nothing like her parents, and if tonight was any sign of how it was for her growing up, then I understood why she did the things she did.

But there was more to her than all of that, and it was almost like she wore her persona like armor. She was protecting herself against her parents and their judgment, and it only made me want to get to know her more.

“What do you do for work?” he asked.

I took a sip of my whiskey and dove into my life. Charles had a lot of questions, and I answered them as best I could. By the end of the conversation, it seemed like he respected me. He wasn't as closed off, and I almost felt like he approved of me marrying Kat. Too bad it was fake.

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"I'M SORRY I PUT you through that," Kat said when we were in the car and pulling out of her parents' driveway.

I stopped the car and put it in park, turning to face her. "You didn't put me through anything. I agreed to come. We're in this together."

She smiled, but I could tell it was fake. This night had done a number on her, and I didn't know how to make it better. Kat was normally bubbly and outspoken, so this quiet, timid woman next to me felt like a stranger. I'd never seen her act this way before.

I reached over and caressed her cheek with my thumb. A lone tear slid down her cheek, and I wiped it away. She took a deep breath and then turned on the radio, making it clear the conversation was over. I took the hint and put the car in drive.

"At least I got peaches," I said.

Kat giggled. "Enough to last a year."

It was true. The trunk was full of peaches. Once Charles found out they were my favorite, he led me out to his yard, where he had an actual peach grove. I was in heaven. I might have heard a chorus of angels sing while I walked the rows. Charles had two staff members follow us with baskets, and we picked peaches and talked. I almost liked the man by the time we were done.

"Your dad really is proud of them."

"Yeah," she whispered. Damn it, why had I said that? Kat turned up the music and rested her head against the seat.



Normally, I hated listening to music this loud, but I knew Kat needed to empty her mind.

It was late when we pulled back into Oak Springs. Kat was asleep with her head resting against the window. I had turned the music down to play in the background the way I enjoyed. The heat was on, and the window was cracked. It was comfortable. Kat smelled amazing, like vanilla and honey. I breathed deeply and felt relaxed for the first time in a long time.

I pulled into the driveway and killed the engine. Kat was still asleep. She looked so pretty and at peace for the first time this evening. I wanted to let her sleep, so I quietly got out and ran around the front of the car. As gently as possible, I opened her door and put my hand under her head to steady it while I maneuvered her into my arms.

She mumbled something, but I couldn't understand it. Her head fell against my chest, and warmth spread through me. It felt good to hold her in my arms.

Shiloh barked and danced around my feet when I finally got the door open. Kat stirred but still didn't wake up. The night had worn her down emotionally.

"Shh," I whispered to Shiloh while I carried Kat to her room.

I pulled off her ankle boots after I laid her down. Her hair fanned out on her pillow, and a faint smile pulled at her lips before they settled into a straight line. Blood pumped south at the memory of those lips on mine. The kiss at my parents' house had been one of the hottest kisses of my life.

I knew we had chemistry—I could feel it whenever we were together—but I hadn't expected it to be explosive when we acted on it. Which was why we could never do anything more than kiss. It would further complicate our situation, and it was a mess already. Also, I knew I'd eventually break her heart, and I wouldn't allow that to happen.

Backing out of the room, I left the memory behind and closed the door. Shiloh danced around me again, and I nearly tripped. I fed her and then put her outside while I drank a glass of water, thinking about the night.

Ultimately, we were doing all of this because of Kat's parents. I wanted to please my mom, too, but I didn't need to be engaged for her to be happy. Just committed to someone. No, this was because of the way Gwen had treated Kat at the gala. Tonight confirmed it was the right thing to do. But what would happen when it ended?

As long as we ended things amicably and I made Kat look good, it wouldn't be a problem. I'd even be willing to look like an ass if it made Kat's relationship with her parents better. I couldn't fix it for her. That was something she had to do, but I could help. Maybe. I hoped I was helping; otherwise, what the hell were we doing?

## Chapter 17



KAT

THE BUZZING OF MY phone on the nightstand added to the headache that was starting at the base of my skull. Normally, I slept well, but last night I'd tossed and turned. I kept replaying the dinner with my parents, and I was embarrassed that Sid had to see the way they treated me. I was angry that I still gave a shit what they thought of me.

When I left the room last night, my mom came to find me. Instead of apologizing like I had hoped, she told me how much I embarrassed her and how disappointed in me she was. It tore me down more because, for once, I didn't have my armor up around them. I had hoped that with Sid there, they wouldn't be their normal selves, but I was wrong.

The buzzing stopped and started again. I rolled over and grabbed my phone to check the time and to see who was calling. I was still in my clothes from the day before, and my shoes were on the floor beside my bed. Sid must have carried me in last night. That was incredibly sweet and out of character for him. Or was it? He was a complicated man.

My phone lit up. It was seven in the morning, and Mindy had called a few times, which sent me into a panic. I wasn't supposed to be at her house for another hour.

It rang again, and I answered on the first ring. "Is everything all right?"

“Yes. Well, actually, no. I’m sorry I woke you up, but can you come over early? The twins and I had a terrible night. I’m trying to feed them and the men before day camp. I’m failing miserably at all of it.” Her voice sounded strained, and I could hear at least one of the twins wailing in the background.

“Calm down and take a deep breath, Min. You’re doing a great job. How about I stop and get donuts and coffee today? That way, you can just focus on the girls.”

“That would be great. You’re a lifesaver.”

“I’ll leave in a few minutes.”

I jumped out of bed and rummaged through my closet for something to wear. A pair of black leggings and a long light-pink tunic would have to do. After hanging up with Mindy, I went to the bathroom beside my room and took out the curling iron.

The house was quiet since Shiloh wasn’t around, which meant Sid was asleep. After brushing my teeth, I looked in the mirror. My hair was in a messy bun and didn’t look half bad, so I pulled a few strands loose around my face and put the curling iron back. I slicked some mascara on and applied some light-brown eye shadow to make my eyes pop.

The tennis shoes that I normally wore to the farm were by the back door. I was bent over putting them on when a flash of black came at me. I didn’t have time to brace myself. Shiloh jumped on me, nearly knocking me down the stairs. Strong hands gripped my upper arms and pulled me upright.

“Shiloh, down!” Sid shouted.

He let me go and yanked the back door open. Shiloh bolted outside, and I escaped into the kitchen. When I turned around, I froze. Sid had on gray sweatpants again with no shirt, and his long hair was a mess around his face. The beard that he normally kept groomed was a little long, and I wanted it scraping my legs and marking my skin. Who knew the unkempt mountain man look could be so hot? My lady bits could not take it.

Sid turned toward the door, waiting for Shiloh. He raised his arms above his head and leaned to one side. The muscles in his back rippled, and I drooled. He turned toward me, and my eyes roamed down his chest to his toned abs. A trail of dark hair disappeared into the waistband of his sweats, and a noticeable bulge was getting larger the longer I stared.

He cleared his throat, and I jumped, letting out a yelp. He smirked and took a step toward me.

“Isn’t it a little early to be going somewhere?” he asked. His voice was husky from sleep, and it rolled over me like a wave settling between my thighs. I sighed, and his smirk grew.

I cleared my throat. “Mindy called. She needs food for the guys before the kids get there. Which reminds me, I need to go.”

“Where are you going?”

I tilted my head.

“To get food,” he added.

“Oh. Right. Grateful Cup. I told her I’d bring coffee and donuts.”

He nodded and then let Shiloh in. She darted toward me, but I turned to the side and lifted my leg to block her from jumping.

“Shiloh, food,” Sid commanded. I didn’t know why that tone of voice was so hot, but it was doing things to me I’d never admit out loud. Especially not to Sid.

“Give me a minute to get ready, and I’ll go with you.”

“You don’t have to do that,” I said. My fingers played with the hem of my shirt.

“I’d like to.”

“Okay. I’ll wait for you.”

He nodded and then left the room. While he ran up the stairs, I shot a text to Mindy letting her know I’d be a little

longer and then went to the front window to watch the sunrise. If I wasn't going anywhere, I would have grabbed a cup of coffee and sat on the porch swing.

A few minutes later, Sid came down the stairs dressed in jogging clothes. A black hairband held his hair back from his face. I didn't hate the look. It highlighted his sharp facial features. He tugged on some running shoes, leashed up Shiloh, and opened the door.

"Mind if we walk?" he asked.

"Not at all. If I wasn't heading to the farm, I'd join you."

He looked at me funny.

"What?"

He shook his head. "Nothing. I didn't expect you to be a runner."

"Jogger. I'm a newbie jogger. But the park is beautiful, and it's peaceful early in the morning."

He grunted, and I couldn't tell if he was agreeing with me or if my talking irritated him. I was a morning person, always had been, but I would bet money that Mr. Grumpy Pants wasn't.

The town was quiet. It was so early that almost everyone was still asleep. All the shops, except for the Grateful Cup, opened at eight. Elouise always opened early so shop owners could fill up on coffee and pastries before work.

Sid and I were quiet on the way to the coffee shop. The only sounds were our shoes slapping on the pavement and Shiloh's tags jingling. I wasn't sure what to say, but the silence didn't feel awkward. It felt comfortable. Like we did this all the time.

"How are you feeling today?" Sid asked.

"Good. You?"

He shrugged. "Okay. I wanted to make sure you were doing all right after the weekend with our parents."

It was really sweet of him to check on me. “I’m good. Even though the night was shitty, I think we sold it.”

He nodded.

There was a slight nip in the air that had me wishing I’d grabbed a coat. The sun was coming up through the trees and casting a warm glow on Main Street and the park. I loved sunny days no matter what the temperature was outside.

Sid opened the door to the coffee shop, and I smiled. The smell of baked goods and coffee filled my nose. Grateful Cup lived up to its name. It was sunshine and warmth in a cup. I loved it so much. The sight of baked goods made my stomach growl, and I put a hand over it. Sid chuckled as he followed me farther inside. Shiloh was at his side.

“She’s allowed in here?” I asked, pointing at the dog.

He smiled and put a finger to his lips. “Shh. Maybe they won’t notice.”

“Sid, you can’t bring a dog into a coffee shop.”

“Why not?” he asked.

“There’s my girl,” Elouise said. “I was wondering when you were going to bring her to me. I have lots of treats for her to try.”

“You spoil her,” Sid said. He let go of the leash, and Shiloh ran around the counter and into Elouise’s waiting arms. She laughed and hugged the black lab.

“Elouise and her husband used to breed their black lab, Bella. She had four litters, and Shiloh was from the last one. Bella passed a few years ago, so I make it a point to bring Shiloh here often so Elouise can love on her.”

A tear trickled out of my eye at the beautiful story and man. Sid had a good heart. The more time we spent together, the more I could see that, but for some reason, he hid it from everyone. My stomach growled again. Sid and I both laughed.

“Sounds like you could use a muffin,” he said. The lazy smile on his face, coupled with the warmth in his brown eyes, had me swooning. He was handsome, but when I got to see the playful, relaxed side to him, he was downright gorgeous. Not to mention when he showed how big his heart was. Oh, man. I was in trouble.

“What are you having?” Elouise asked me.

“I’ll have a cranberry-orange muffin, a box of donuts, and coffee. Lots of coffee.”

She gave me a knowing smile. “Frank?”

I chuckled. “Yes, and Charlie, Mindy, and Skip.”

“Laney and Jacob too?”

I shrugged. “Not sure. They can get their own coffee, though.”

She laughed. “Have a seat and I’ll get it ready. Assortment of donuts okay?”

“As long as there are at least two chocolate glazed.”

I took a seat near the counter so I could hop up when she called my name.

“What’ll you have, Sheriff?”

“A chocolate muffin, an everything bagel with cream cheese on the side, and a large dark roast. Black, please.”

“You got it. Have a seat.”

Sid sat across from me at the small table. Shiloh walked over and lay down at his feet. I looked around the coffee shop and froze. Four pairs of eyes were staring at Sid and me from the corner of the room.

“Shit.”

“What?” Sid asked.

“The gossip hens are here.”



Sid chuckled. “They always are. This is where they hang out every morning.”

“You knew, and you still suggested we come here together?”

“Kat, it’s not a secret that we’re engaged or that you moved in.”

“I haven’t read anything about me moving in. How do you know it’s not still a secret?” I was being ridiculous, and I knew it, but I couldn’t help myself.

Sid pulled out his phone and scrolled around. Meanwhile, I was trying my best to avoid the hens’ stares. He laid his phone on the table facing me and pushed it forward. I looked down and groaned. Another “Daily Happenings” entry.

### *Daily Happenings*

*It’s official, folks. Kat was seen moving into Sid’s house last week. They were also spotted together this weekend in Ridge Point visiting Sid’s parents. Will they set a wedding date soon? As soon as we find out, we’ll let you know.*

*In other news, Mindy is looking for help at her store since Rebecca has opened her new restaurant, Harvest House. If anyone is interested or knows someone who might be interested in working there, please contact Mindy or Laney.*

*Also, if anyone has the scoop for Tom Tracy’s popcorn machine, please return it. It’s been missing for two weeks, and he needs it for the next movie night in the park.*

*Well, that’s all for news in Oak Springs. Stay tuned for more.*

I snorted. “News? This shit is not *news*. Well, except for Mindy looking for help.”

“Yeah, that’s the first time I’ve actually seen news in there,” Sid said.

“Who the hell is writing this? Is it the hens?”

Sid shrugged. “No clue. I wanted to show you that people already know what’s going on with us.”

“Great. So now what?”

He shrugged again.

“Stop doing that.”

He huffed. “I don’t know. I think we go on with our lives like we always have.”

“Easier said than done.”

“Kat, you’re up,” Elouise called.

I hurried to the counter and grabbed everything, happy to move on from the awkward conversation and the prying eyes of the townsfolk.

“I was going to talk to Frank today about bringing Shiloh to the farm, so if the offer still stands, I’d love your help,” Sid said from behind me.

“Sure. I’d love to help.” I reached into my pocket to grab my card to pay, but Sid slid his across the counter.

“Put all of this together, Elouise,” he said.

She swiped his card and handed it back.

“Thanks for paying. You didn’t have to.”

“It’s no problem. Let’s take this back to the house and grab the cars.”

“That’s okay. I can go by myself if you wanted to go for a run before work.” I shifted the box of donuts in my arms. He took the drink carrier off the top of the box and held his coffee and muffins in the hand that held Shiloh’s leash.

“I guess we should have thought about this before we left,” he grumbled.

I laughed. “I don’t always think before I do things.”

He groaned, and I bit my lip to keep from laughing again. Sid held the door open for me. The sun was bright, and it warmed my insides despite the cold. I wanted to sip my seasonal latte and read a book on a bench in the park, but that would have to wait.

“We should probably go out on a date,” Sid said, surprising me.

The way he said it made it sound like an obligation. It hurt that he was doing this to keep up the charade and not because he wanted to. I’d caught feelings, and it was clear he didn’t feel the same.

“Kat?”

“Yes. Sorry. That’s a good idea.”

“Great. Simply Cook It has a class tonight. I’ll book a spot.”

Sid helped me get everything in my car before seeing me off. He waved as I pulled out of the driveway, and for a second, it felt like the most natural thing in the world. Like we did it all the time. Warmth spread through my chest, and I quickly tamped it down, reminding myself that this was fake.

We weren’t going on an actual date. It was to sell our relationship to the town. To make sure that the damn gossip hens and whoever was writing the gossip blog didn’t find out we were faking. An overwhelming sadness washed over me, and I had to tamp down the tears.

I was getting too wrapped up in this relationship already, and if I wasn’t careful, I was going to end up hurt. Was it too late? My head and my heart were confused.

There was a lot of commotion in front of the house when I pulled up, and I looked at the time and realized it had been an hour and a half since Mindy had called. I unloaded the car quickly and walked to the door. The screen opened, and Mindy pulled me inside.

“Where the hell have you been?” she asked.

“I’m sorry. I lost track of time.”

“Mm-hmm. I remember those days.”

“What?” I asked and saw the glint in her eye. She wiggled a brow at me, and I cringed. “No. Sid and I walked to Grateful Cup and then realized we had to walk all the way back with our arms full. It took longer than expected.”

“Boo. I thought you guys finally got it on.”

“What do you mean, finally? He’s my fiancé. Don’t you think that’s already happened?”

Mindy narrowed her eyes at me, and I stared right back at her.

“What are you guys doing?” Frank asked. “Give me these. We have to get to the barn.” He took the coffee and donuts from my arms and walked into the kitchen.

Mindy crossed her arms over her chest. I put my hands on my hips. I would not break first. Mindy was feisty and stubborn, and she had yet to meet her match. But that was before I arrived in town.

“Okay. You win,” she said, standing up straight. “You’re either telling the truth, or you’re a damn good liar.”

Mindy walked away toward the stairs. I sighed. That was close.

I walked into the kitchen and laughed. Frank was standing at the island scarfing down a donut while feeding Ava as she sat in her bouncy seat.

“That better not be the chocolate glazed one,” I joked. His wife would kill him.

He looked at it and then lifted it up. “Nope. Glazed.”

I laughed. “How’s it going here?”

“Crazy,” he said.

“Well, I’m here to help, and if you guys need me for some overnights, I can do that too.”

“Sid won’t mind if we steal you away?” Frank asked.

“No.”

“That would be great, but you’ll have to talk to the boss. She might want to keep trying to play super mom.”

“I heard that!” Mindy yelled from around the corner. Frank jumped and shoved the bottle at me. He grabbed his coffee and ran out the back door. I laughed. That man was always getting himself into trouble.

“Thank you for bringing breakfast. I was all set to cook this morning, but after being up all night with the girls and stressing about camp, I gave up.”

“I understand.”

“I read the new ‘Daily Happenings’ post.” Mindy took Ava out of the bouncy seat on the island, shaking her head as she did so and grabbed her coffee and a chocolate glazed donut before she joined me at the breakfast nook. Adaline was asleep in her bouncy seat on the floor.

“What was Frank thinking? These are not places for babies,” I said.

Mindy rolled her eyes. “Don’t get me started. And quit deflecting. Give me the good stuff before I have to read about it in the damn blog.”

“Nothing new is happening. Except...”

“Yes?” She was like a dog with a bone.

“We’re going to Simply Cook It tonight.”

“That sounds like fun. Although you guys should go tomorrow instead and do Kate and Peter’s class. It’s so much fun.”

“That’s actually a great idea. I’ll text Sid.”

Mindy bit into her chocolate glazed donut, and her eyes nearly rolled back in her head. “This is so good. I don’t know

what Elouise does to these. I've had plenty of donuts from other places, and none compare."

I laughed. "That's how I feel about her cranberry-orange muffins."

She finished chewing and took a sip of her coffee, which elicited another eye roll of pleasure.

"How did the two of you end up together anyway? I'm not talking about how you started dating, I'm talking like personality wise. You're so different."

"I know. But it works," I said with a shrug. "He makes me feel comfortable being myself. Sure, he's quieter and more reserved than I'm used to, but he's also funny and kind. His heart is good and he's loyal, which is admirable."

Mindy smiled. "He is a really good friend. Loyal to a fault."

I nodded.

"But how do you deal with his grumpy attitude all the time?"

"It honestly doesn't bother me. He's gentle inside, but I have a feeling he's been hurt in the past, and that's why he won't let that softer side show."

"It sounds like you have him figured out. I know something happened in his past, but he's never talked about it with me, and Frank won't tell me. It's the one thing he's tight-lipped about, no matter how hard I dig. I also feel bad trying to get it out of him because I know it would hurt Sid. It's his story to tell, and if he doesn't want any of us to know, then we should respect that."

I nodded and looked out the window. The sun was now shining over the pond. It looked peaceful. What had happened to Sid in the past? I wished he would open up about it, but then I'd have to open up about my past, and that wasn't something I was ready to share. Even though I trusted Sid not to share it, I was still afraid of it getting back to my sister.

“How’s the sex?” Mindy asked.

I choked on the sip of coffee I had taken, and Mindy laughed.

“That bad?”

“Shut up,” I said, tossing a wadded-up napkin at her. “Our chemistry is off the charts, and he’s sexy as hell. Also, his beard is amazing, and I have the burn marks to prove it.” Okay, so the part about his beard causing burn marks was a lie, but the rest had been true. I wanted his beard to rub against my skin, specifically between my thighs, but that would never happen.

“Hell yeah,” Mindy said.

“To answer your earlier question, we got together because we were the only singles in our group. He felt like the odd one out, and I shared that feeling. We forged a friendship that grew.” If I could rewrite our story, that would be how it would start.

Mindy’s hand covered mine. “That’s really sweet, and I’m glad you saw past the cold exterior and gave him a chance.”

Too bad it wasn’t real.

# Chapter 18



SID

SIMPLY COOK IT WAS A cool, modern space that was a hot spot for tourists. Tonight, the class was buzzing with energy as Kat and I walked in. Kat's little black dress and high heels were a little over the top for a cooking class, but she looked gorgeous, and my dick had been hard ever since she came out of her room.

The dress hugged her mouth-watering curves perfectly. I wanted to peel it off her and explore those curves with my hands and tongue. I'd had to adjust myself multiple times on the way here, which wasn't easy when we were walking in the center of town.

Kat walked toward one of the kitchen stations, and I forced myself not to look at her delectable ass. She had a bubble butt, and I wanted to take a bite out of it or mark it with my hand. I needed to get laid. It had been far too long, which had to explain the wayward thoughts I'd been having about her.

Kat set her small purse down on the table and then perched on the stool to wait. I rummaged around in the kitchen until I found two wineglasses. There was a bottle of wine on the counter with a welcome card beside it. I uncorked the bottle and poured us each a glass of wine, then joined Kat at the small table. She picked up the welcome card and read it out loud.

"It says, 'Welcome to Simply Cook It. This evening, you will make roasted chicken with root vegetables and a dessert.



Please have a glass of wine and make yourself comfortable before we get started.”

Kat sipped her wine and looked around the room. “It’s really nice in here. I can’t believe I’ve lived in Oak Springs for two years and haven’t been.”

“I’ve only been once.”

She looked at me in surprise. “How long has this place been open?”

“Only a couple of years. In fact, it opened when Kate and Mindy first came to town.”

Kat giggled. “And this is only your second time here?”

I shrugged. “I never really had a reason to come here before.”

She nodded and took a sip of her wine.

“Good evening, class. And welcome to Simply Cook It. My name is Evelyn Tate, and I will be your instructor this evening. In your stations, you’ll find everything you need for the dinners. I’ll be walking you through everything and cooking along with you in my kitchen.” She pointed to the larger kitchen against the back wall. “You’ll be able to see up close what I’m doing on the screen there.”

I looked to where she indicated at the large screen that hung from the ceiling in front of the stations. There were three stations on each side of the room. Each had an oven, fridge, microwave, and sink. There were some cabinets and drawers underneath, and a small two-seater table sat in the middle of each tiny station.

“Let’s begin, shall we?” Evelyn said. “Tonight, we’ll cook roasted chicken with root vegetables and apple pie for dessert.”

Kat did a little dance on her chair. The smile on her face was infectious. After a few more instructions, Evelyn set us loose in our kitchens. The vegetables were fresh, no doubt

from Davis Farms, and the chicken looked good. I was excited to make this meal and glad it wasn't lamb or something.

The night moved slowly since we had to make everything step by step with Evelyn instructing us. Kat surprised me with her skills. We worked well together, like we were in sync with each other. I was enjoying myself.

"This is fun," Kat said with a giggle. The dry rub covered her hands as she slathered it on the chicken.

I agreed and chopped a few more carrots, then tossed them inside the roasting pan, where the chicken was already nestled.

"All right, class, it's time to get those meals in the oven so they'll be done before class is over. They need to cook for forty-five minutes, and you'll need to baste them every twenty minutes," Evelyn said. She was walking around the room now, making sure we were all on the same step.

I carefully placed the roasting pan in the oven and closed the door. Kat and I sat back on our stools to await further instructions for the dessert. I poured us each another glass of wine and picked up a small index card on the table, examining it on both sides.

"This looks like some icebreaker questions. Do you want to try them out?" I asked.

Kat shrugged. "Sure."

"Okay. First one is where are you from?"

She chuckled. "That's an easy one. I grew up in Charlotte, as you know, and then spent six months in Italy before moving to New York with my sister."

"That sounds like it was fun. Did you enjoy Italy?"

She nodded, but her far-off stare seemed a little sad. "Yes and no. I wish I would have been in a better headspace to enjoy it to the fullest. But I was young, and it was my first taste of freedom away from my parents, which resulted in me partying a lot."

A few weeks ago, I would have judged her for that and also made a comment about how she was still like that, but after getting to know her, I knew that was far from the truth.

“My turn,” she said, taking the card from me. “Oh, this is a good one. Where would you go on your dream vacation?”

“Easy. Vegas.”

Her eyes widened. “Really?”

“Yeah. I’ve always wanted to go. Have you ever been?”

“Once.” She looked down at the card, and that same sad expression from earlier returned. She was holding something back.

“My turn,” I said. She handed me the card. “What’s your dream job?”

She sucked her bottom lip into her mouth while she thought, and I couldn’t take my eyes off her. I wanted to pull that bottom lip from her mouth with my teeth. She had the plumpest lips, and they begged to be sucked on. My dick twitched at the memory of her lips against mine. I could have kissed her for hours.

“It’s time for dessert,” Evelyn said.

I was thankful for the interruption since my thoughts were in the gutter and had been the entire time. Our little game had been fun, but I wanted to know why Kat had that sad look on her face when she spoke of Italy and Vegas. Something happened, and I wanted to know about it. Was that fair, since I wasn’t ready to talk about my past? Every day with Kat brought new feelings that I didn’t want to deal with.

Tonight had proven that there was something between us that was deeper than friendship. Every date I’d been on had been horrible, except for this one. No matter how badly I wanted to deny it, I knew it had everything to do with the beautiful blonde sitting across from me. She lit up the dark spaces in my life that had been there for years. It felt good, yet terrifying.

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“I’M STUFFED.” KAT SAID. One of her wedged heels hit the floor with a thud as she pulled them off at the door.

“Me too.” I walked into the kitchen and opened the back door to let Shiloh out. “Would you like anything to drink?”

“I’ll take a water,” she called back.

I took two bottles of water out of the fridge and carried them to the living room. Kat was reclined on the sofa, and her eyes were closed. She looked content. I cleared my throat, and her eyes slid open. Her lips lifted in a half smile, and she took the water I held out for her.

“What was your favorite part of the meal?” I asked. I took a seat at the opposite end of the couch, lifting her feet and setting them on my lap.

She sighed. “Probably dessert. I love sweets.”

“It was delicious.”

“What was yours?” she asked.

“The apple pie too. I haven’t made one before.”

She smiled. “We did good.”

“*You* did good.” I gave her foot a squeeze. “The lattice top looked professional.”

“Stop,” she said, shoving my hand with her foot.

“I’m serious. You could be a baker.”

“Now I know you’re shitting me.”

I chuckled. Shiloh barked, and I lifted Kat’s feet so I could get up and let the dog in. When I came back, I was sad to see Kat had pulled her feet up and tucked them underneath her.

“Do you want to watch a movie?” I wasn’t sure where the night was going. All I knew was that I didn’t want it to end.

“Sure. What movie?”

“I have a lot. You can choose.” The living room had built-in wall units for books and knickknacks. I used them to display my extensive collection of movies.

“You have so many,” Kat said, looking at the wall.

“I have more on my streaming account.”

Her eyes widened. “This makes me want to have a movie day. No, a weekend—curled up in a blanket for three days bingeing movies.”

I chuckled. “Sounds perfect.”

She smiled. “You can pick. I’m too full to think straight.”

Choosing a movie for someone else was a lot of pressure. I had a little of everything, even rom-coms, but I wasn’t sure what Kat would enjoy. I walked to the wall and browsed. It was easy to find what I wanted because my organization was a little over the top.

“How about a thriller?” I asked.

She shrugged, but I could tell she wasn’t really into that idea, so I kept looking. “What about a comedy?”

“That sounds good. What do you have?”

“This is comedy.” I pointed to the largest section on my wall.

“You have it organized by sections?”

“Genre, yeah. Then alphabetized in each section.”

Her mouth formed a perfect *O*, and it made me laugh.

“That’s...handy.”

I laughed hard, clutching my stomach and bending forward. Kat was so cute and trying to be kind, even though she clearly thought I was nuts. My sides hurt from laughing, and I had to wipe the wetness from my eyes. When was the last time I’d laughed that hard? It felt good.

“All right, pick a movie and let’s get this show on the road,” she said.

“Do you want popcorn?”

She bit her lip. “Don’t laugh.”

“Okay...”

“I sort of have this subscription.”

I opened my eyes wide. “A subscription?”

She put her head in her hands. “Oh God, not like that.”

I put my hands up. “I honestly have no clue what you’re talking about.”

She laughed and swatted me with a throw pillow. “I have a popcorn of the month subscription.”

“A what now?”

She giggled. “Popcorn of the month.”

I waited for her to explain.

“They send me baskets of different flavors of popcorn. It’s sort of become an obsession because I love their caramel flavor. But they also have cheese, butter, toffee...the list goes on. Each month is a new flavor plus your favorites. At least that’s how my basket is set up. I’ve had it for...” She looked at the ceiling, thinking. “Four years now? Ever since I moved to New York.”

“Wow. It sounds good, but how can you eat all that?”

“I can’t, but that’s where friends come in. I give a lot of it away and only keep the kinds I like.”

“What aren’t you telling me?” I asked. I could tell she was holding something back.

“I have two subscriptions, so the caramel comes twice a month,” she blurted out.

“What? Why not change the order to strictly caramel?”

“Because sometimes I’m in the mood for another flavor.”

I barked out a laugh because it was so ridiculous, but adorable. “I guess it’s a good thing I have so many movies

then.”

“Yeah.” She smiled and darted off the couch toward her room. A few seconds later, she came out with a wicker basket filled with popcorn. “Take your pick.”

I leaned forward and looked through the flavors, putting my hand on a bag of caramel to mess with her. She inhaled sharply, and I chuckled.

“Just kidding.” I snatched the parmesan ranch flavor instead and settled back against the cushions. “What was this month’s special flavor?”

“Cinnamon roll, and it was divine.”

“How many bags do they send you of the month’s flavor?”

“Three. There are eight bags in total. I usually get a cheddar and then two bags of caramel, leaving two flavors open for them to give me whatever. One time, they sent me two of the pickle flavor. Yuck.” She stuck out her tongue.

“Do you throw out the ones you don’t like?”

“Not usually. Someone’s always willing to try them. Mindy took the pickle ones when she was pregnant with the twins.”

I chuckled and started the movie. I’d had enough popcorn talk. Kat settled back against the cushions. She had pulled a blanket out of the storage ottoman and draped it over her legs.

“Want some?” she asked.

I looked over, expecting to see her offering me popcorn, but was surprised to find her holding the corner of the blanket up. I nodded and slid over until I was under the blanket. Our legs brushed, and I held my breath, feeling like a teenager watching a movie with my crush.

I had an overwhelming urge to pull Kat close and feel her head on my chest, but I didn’t want to lead her on. I blamed that fucking dress. All I’d been able to think about since I saw

it was getting my lips on hers again. This situation we'd gotten ourselves into had scrambled my brain.

I'd never been this indecisive before, but then again, I'd never had such strong feelings for someone. It scared the hell out of me, and I worried about the future. But I still couldn't let go of the pain of the past to allow myself to fall for her. God, did I want to, though.



## Chapter 19



KAT

“YOU’RE DOING GREAT,” Sid said from behind me. “It’s just a little farther.”

I let out a huff as I trudged up the path. Sid woke me up this morning and told me to dress warm and wear something I wouldn’t mind getting dirty. I dressed in gym clothes and a hoodie and met him in the living room. He was putting bottles of water into a backpack, along with a map, a small lunch cooler, sunscreen, and bug spray.

“What are we doing?” I asked.

“You wanted to see the trees in the fall, and today is a great day for it. A warm front came through, so it’s not too cold.”

Sid was right. The weather was nice, but hiking first thing in the morning wasn’t really what I had in mind. Shiloh hiked with us. Sid carried her leash but didn’t attach it to her. My boot slipped in mud, and I slid a little. Sid’s hands landed on my waist to stop me from sliding farther.

“You good?”

I nodded. “How much farther?”

He chuckled. “Not far. The trees open up ahead to a clearing, and you can look out over the treetops. We’ll take a rest there.”

It sounded lovely.

Tiny strands of hair stuck to my face from the sweat. I was glad I'd had the sense to pull it back in twin french braids. I was also thankful Sid had stopped at Tom's store, Best Foot Forward, and made me pick out some better boots since the ones I had were more dressy than outdoorsy.

The hike itself wasn't difficult. I just wasn't used to all the exertion. When I worked out, which wasn't often, it was yoga or light jogging, not climbing up an elevated slope. My heart was beating hard, and I felt more winded than normal.

"Do you need a break?" Sid asked.

"No. I'm good," I panted.

He chuckled, and I wanted to kick him. Sid made it seem so easy when it was anything but. Shiloh had stopped to drink out of a small stream that ran down the mountain as if she was waiting on me. I frowned and continued to watch my steps and take it easy.

Ten minutes later, the forest we were climbing through opened up like Sid had promised, and the view took my breath away. The trees were orange, red, yellow, green, and brown, and the forest seemed endless. The tall mountains far off in the distance were a dark blue in contrast. It was gorgeous and everything I had hoped it would be.

"Wow," I said, walking out into the clearing.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Sid asked, coming to stand beside me.

I nodded.

Sid put Shiloh's leash on and then started pulling things out of his backpack. He spread a large blanket over the ground, then grabbed the small lunch cooler and two bottles of water. He sat on the blanket and patted the spot beside him.

"Come sit. I have lunch for us."

I smiled and took a seat.

Things between Sid and me were easy and stress free. Over the past week, we hadn't really seen each other except

for a few meals here and there. I watched the twins most days and even stayed overnight twice, which Mindy was eternally grateful for. When I wasn't helping Mindy, I was working at Knead to Relax. Sid was busy with the case he'd been working on.

Today was the first day we were both free—or mostly free. I had to work at Knead to Relax this afternoon since it was the weekend.

“This is so beautiful. Thank you for bringing me here.”

“You're welcome. I'll be honest. I've lived here my whole life and have only been on the trails a handful of times. There's not a lot of downtime to go for a hike. It's usually an all-day event, and I haven't had a day off in a long time.”

“How did you get today off?” I asked.

“I don't have it off. I'm on call right now, and I have to take the night shift.”

I nodded, a little disappointed. I'd been hoping that we could watch another movie together when I got off work. I loved sitting with him on the couch and falling asleep on his shoulder. Even though we didn't cuddle, it was nice being with someone without the expectation of something more happening.

Sid opened the lunch box and took out two ham and cheese sandwiches, a bag of chips, and a bag of sliced apples. My heart swelled at his thoughtfulness. The air up in the mountains was a few degrees cooler than in town, and I shivered against the breeze. Sid set the bag of chips down and scooted back off the blanket.

“Come here,” he said, patting the ground in front of him.

I stared at him. He patted the ground again and gave me a serious look. I moved between his legs, and he settled me back against his chest, pulling the blanket over us. I sighed. He was so warm, and the blanket felt amazing against my chilled skin. I should have dressed warmer.

“Better?” His voice was low and gravelly. The vibrations rolled over me, and my eyes slid closed. I let out a small moan of contentment.

“Much.”

We stayed like that for a few more minutes. “Tell me more about growing up here.”

He sighed. “It was fun. I rode horses, played on the farm, went canoeing, hiking, and fishing. Anything I could do outdoors, I did.”

“Did you do those things with Frank?”

“Eventually, yeah. We met at horse competitions when we were both a little older. But I had my brothers, and he had Jacob. That meant we were always getting into trouble.”

“Of course. You were boys.”

He tickled my side, and I squealed.

“Watch it,” he joked.

“Did you always want to go into law enforcement?”

He blew out a breath. “No. I was interested in the rodeo growing up. My dad had a gambling problem, and he’d bet on races. He also placed bets on bull riders. That was when I first fell in love. Watching the guys go ten seconds on a bull—or try to. It was thrilling.”

“You wanted to be a bull rider?” I asked, surprised.

“No. I could never do that. I wanted to compete in roping events.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“My dad. He didn’t mind betting on all those events, but he didn’t want us working the rodeo circuit. His sons had to do something that made him proud. At least that’s what he told us, but really, he wanted us to do something that made him look good in the community. Most people in Ridge Point knew about my dad’s problem, but he was too proud to get help or

admit it. So he wanted each of us to do something extraordinary to make up for his wrongdoing.”

“That’s horrible.”

“I guess. He’s not much different from your parents.”

“So Will is a lawyer, Duke’s going to be a doctor, and you chose law enforcement,” I summarized.

“Yeah, except after I started at the academy, my dad told me law enforcement wasn’t good enough. ‘Cops get bad raps,’ he said. He wanted me to find a career where I could make more money.”

“Wow. It sounds to me like he wasn’t happy with whatever you did.”

“Exactly.”

I twisted in his arms so I could see him. “Sid, I’m so sorry.”

He shrugged but wouldn’t meet my eyes. I turned all the way around and cupped his face in my hands.

“You are not defined by what you do or how much money you make. Your character and heart define you, and the moment I met you, I could tell you have a big heart. You’re loyal and honest. That’s something I admire.”

He swallowed hard, and his eyes bounced between mine. I held his gaze. It was too easy to get lost in the way he looked at me. His gaze held hunger and lust, but admiration too. My heart hammered in my chest. Would he kiss me again? God, I wanted him to.

My hands were still cupping his face. His beard was rough against my palms, and I wanted it rubbing against my skin.

I dropped my hands from his face and almost sat back, but he pulled me roughly against him. Our lips crashed together, and it felt like a dam burst inside me, flooding me with desire. His tongue stroked into my mouth and sent shivers racing

through me. His kiss was demanding and harsh and yet not enough.

His lips left mine and traced my jawline. His beard set my skin on fire. He stopped to nibble on my earlobe, and I half moaned-half whimpered.

“Shh. This is a public area.”

I pulled back and looked around. Thankfully, there was no one else here. Sid chuckled and pulled me back in, his lips reclaiming mine. The kiss turned frenzied. His hands explored my curves while mine tangled in his long hair. It was soft in contrast to the hair on his face that was currently rubbing against my chest.

It felt amazing, and yet I still needed more. I straddled him. His hard length rested against my center, and I moaned, rubbing myself against him.

Sid groaned and recaptured my lips, and his hand cupped my breast through my shirt. His touch was electric, and his kisses were all-consuming. This Sid was totally different from the grumpy, growly man I knew, and I loved it. Still, it seemed like he was holding back a little. I wasn't sure if it was because we were in a public place or for some other reason, but I wanted to find out what it would be like for him to let go.

He was so locked up and guarded. I could understand why, but I wanted him to get out of his head and be in the moment with me. Even though this relationship wasn't real, the moments we shared were.

“More,” I moaned.

He pulled his lips from mine and looked past me, his hands doing something behind me. Then he gently eased me down onto my back. He had spread the blanket out, and the kind gesture made my heart flutter. Sid's eyes raked over me like a caress while his tongue slicked over his bottom lip.

“Gorgeous,” he said. His voice was rough. “Take off your shirt.”

I pulled my T-shirt over my head, revealing my pink sports bra. My boobs were stuffed in it, which Sid seemed to like since his gaze went right there, and his eyes blazed. Sid took the zipper on the front between his thumb and forefinger and slowly lowered it.

My breath caught and my heart pounded.

Sid groaned when my breasts bounced free. I'd always been busty, and I'd never been shy about my body, but something about being exposed to him here on the mountaintop when I didn't even think he liked me until recently made me extremely self-conscious. I didn't really have time to think about it because Sid's large hand was cupping one breast, rubbing small circles around my nipple until it was a hard peak.

I writhed beneath him. It felt amazing to have his rough, calloused hands on my sensitive skin. He leaned down and sucked the nipple into his mouth. When he swirled his tongue around it, I nearly came.

My hips lifted off the blanket, and I cried out in pleasure. Sid's other hand cupped my other breast, and he repeated the same slow motions with his hands and then with his mouth. The gentle massage of his hand mixed with the warmth of his mouth sent currents of desire through me. I was mush.

After he spent what felt like hours lavishing my breasts with attention, he kissed his way up my chest, along the column of my neck, and over my jaw, finally finding my lips. Sid was passionate and gentle, but I wanted him to be rough and dominant. There was a hunger deep inside him I wanted to draw out.

I gripped the hem of his T-shirt and pushed it up his body, revealing his tanned torso. I'd seen his abs and chest a few times, but now I got to touch and taste them. He sat back on his heels and pulled the rest of his shirt up over his head. His chest was beautiful. There was a tattoo of a cross on his side with the words *Act Humbly, Love Mercy, Walk Justly* around it. It was extremely fitting for him.

His chest rose and fell with each hurried breath, and his eyes searched mine. I nodded slightly, letting him know this was more than okay, and then I got exactly what I'd been hoping for. Sid growled and crashed down on top of me. His hands gripped my hips, and his fingers dug into my skin. He buried his face in my neck and sucked hard. I knew there would be a mark, and I loved it. I wanted him to mark me everywhere.

No longer caring about where we were or who could see, I reached between us for Sid's pants. My fingers fumbled with the button and then the zipper, but eventually I got them open. Together, we pulled them down. Sid pulled my leggings down, stopping briefly to tug my boots off. He pulled my pants the rest of the way off and tossed them to the side.

"I've been staring at your perfect ass in those all day and couldn't wait to get them off," he said.

His lips closed over my nipple again, and he raked his teeth over it. Pleasure exploded through me, and I cried out. I reached down and gripped his cock in my hand, squeezing gently. His tormented groan was a heady invitation to do it again. He bit down on my nipple a little harder this time.

"Yes," I screamed.

"You like that?"

I moaned in reply, and he did it again while pinching the other one between his fingers. It was dirty and rough, and we were loud, but it was perfect. Just the two of us, out in nature. His hard body was on top of mine, his dick rubbing against my hand and skimming my clit through my panties. It was too much but not enough all at the same time.

"I need to feel you," he murmured against my lips. "But first I need to taste you."

Before I could reply, Sid began kissing his way down my body while pulling my thong off. Normally, I was confident in my skin, but being completely bare in front of him made my cheeks flush pink and my body burn with embarrassment. That



all flew from my mind when his mouth covered my pussy. His tongue flicked my clit, and I buried my hands in his long hair, tugging on it.

He slid two fingers inside me, curving them upward, and then went back to eating me like I was the dessert to this little picnic. I opened my eyes and felt nothing but euphoria. The clouds were wisps above me; the birds were singing, and the trees were beautiful colors.

Passion rippled through my body, making me dizzy. My orgasm was coming on like a freight train. My insides clenched around his fingers, and he picked up the pace with his tongue. He alternated between flicking and sucking on my clit while thrumming his fingers inside me like he was playing a guitar.

I slammed my eyes closed as my orgasm exploded through me. Waves of ecstasy throbbed through me. Sid didn't let up until my orgasm subsided. He placed a few rough kisses on my inner thighs, then sat back and wiped his mouth.

His lips curled up in a smug, satisfied smile that he'd rightfully earned. No one had ever gone down on me like that before. He'd given me one of the strongest orgasms I'd ever had. The man knew what the hell he was doing, and I would gladly let him do it repeatedly.

"Damn. You are so fucking gorgeous," he said.

Shyness washed over me, and I dipped my head into my arm to hide. He cupped my cheeks and turned my head back toward him.

"Don't shy away from me."

"I feel so exposed out here," I said, looking around. Shiloh was asleep in the grass, and no one else was around.

Sid stood up and pulled off his boots and then his jeans. He tossed them to the side. Then, with his eyes on me, he yanked his boxer briefs down his legs. When he stood up, my mouth watered at the sight of his erect cock. It was thick and long,

with a perfect mushroom-shaped head. A thick vein pulsed on the underside.

“Better? Now you’re not the only one exposed.”

I giggled and gripped his thighs, pulling him to me and lining his dick up with my mouth. Looking up at him, I traced the vein with my tongue and then swirled it around the head.

“Fuck, that feels good.” His voice was like sandpaper.

Keeping my eyes locked on his, I repeated the motions a few more times. Sid’s hips bucked forward, and I opened my mouth, allowing him to slide between my lips. He groaned and tipped his head back. His fingers tangled in my hair, and his hips slowly rocked back and forth. I opened wide for him, allowing him to use my mouth for his pleasure.

His breathing quickened, and he grunted with each thrust. My eyes watered, but I kept my mouth still and open. I gripped his hips, my fingers digging into his ass.

“Shit. It feels so fucking good,” he said between grunts.

His dick swelled, and just when I thought he was going to come, he pulled out.

“As much as I enjoy seeing my cock disappear between those plump lips, that’s not where I want to come. I need to be inside you, feeling your pussy squeezing me.”

“Please,” I whimpered.

# Chapter 20



SID

KATERINA WAS PERFECT. Her body, her mouth, and those plump fucking lips that were wrapped around my dick. But it was more than her gorgeous body and the sounds she made while I was making her come. It was her trust in me and the fact that she could see past my grumpy exterior.

She was shy when I expected her to be bold and kind when I expected sass. We fit together in a way that I never would have expected. But it scared the hell out of me. The past haunted me, gripping me so tightly that I couldn't breathe. It grew worse when I allowed my feelings for Kat to rise to the surface. I wasn't allowed happiness, no matter how badly I wanted it.

I wasn't an idiot, though. Kat was giving herself over freely to me, and I would take whatever I could get. But I would never allow myself to fall for her because she could never truly be mine, and I'd only break her heart.

"Get on your knees," I demanded while stroking my aching cock. I couldn't look at her face anymore. Her big blue doe eyes stared up at me with longing and something I didn't want to name. It was too much.

I dug around in my wallet for a condom, thankful I'd stuck one in there recently, and lined myself up with her perfectly pink pussy. It was glistening in the sunlight, and I couldn't wait to sink in. She looked over her shoulder and bit her lip. I

wished I could take a picture because it was so fucking perfect. I wanted to remember this moment forever.

“Are you ready for me?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Have you been a good girl?”

Her eyes flared, and she bit her lip a little harder. When she shook her head, it undid something inside me. I growled and smacked her ass. She moaned and pushed back against me. I groaned when her pussy slid against the tip of my dick.

Kat’s ass was bright pink from my hand, and I rubbed away the sting, worried that I had hurt her. But when she wiggled her ass against me, I slapped it again. She moaned louder this time, and I delivered another smack, this one a little harder. She yelled out and pushed her hips back hard.

My sheathed cock easily slid a few inches inside her, and we both moaned. I gripped her hips and held her steady, thrusting the rest of the way inside. I stilled, feeling her flutter around me, and I thought I’d found heaven on this mountaintop. Her whimpers and the way her pussy squeezed my dick were the best things I’d ever experienced.

The warmth of her soft flesh was intoxicating, and I wanted to stay there forever. Kat wiggled her hips, begging for me to move. Not one to disappoint, I pulled out and then slammed back in.

She cried out, and I wrapped one hand in her hair and the other around the curve of her hip, anchoring myself to her. I picked up speed, grunting with every thrust. Her walls fluttered around me, bringing waves of intense pleasure.

I let go of her hair and slapped her ass again. Her pussy squeezed my dick, and I roared. I gripped her other hip and tugged her against me with each thrust. It was animalistic, and I completely let go, getting lost in her. The way she felt, the sounds she made, and the way my toes curled every time I bottomed out inside her.

She was everything and so much more.

After a few more thrusts, Kat came undone around me. Her orgasm seemed to go on forever, and the intensity of it nearly cut off circulation to my dick. Once she came back down, I thrust into her wildly, my grunts and groans turning into shouts and bellows.

Uncontrolled pleasure rocked through me. I slammed my eyes closed and gritted my teeth together, holding Kat tightly against me while I spilled inside her.

I collapsed, pushing her against the blanket while I tried to catch my breath. Kat giggled and wiggled out from under me. I rolled onto my back and looked up at the blue sky overhead. Total bliss. I couldn't remember the last time I felt like this.

“Sid, I think I hear someone coming,” Kat whispered.

With a groan, I sat up and listened. Sure enough, I could hear leaves rustling and people talking.

“Shit.”

I tugged on my pants and stuffed my boxers into my pocket while Kat scrambled for her clothes. She pulled her T-shirt over her bare chest, and I was sad to see those magnificent breasts covered again. I chuckled when she stuffed her bra and underwear in my backpack. She scowled at me, and it only made me laugh harder.

“Party's over,” I said.

She laughed and swatted my arm. “Really?”

I shrugged, not really sure what else to say. I wanted to lie with her for the rest of the day, cuddling and kissing and burying myself inside her repeatedly, but this wasn't the place for that, and we both had to work. It was time to get back to reality and back to pretending. It was time to forget whatever that was that just happened on this mountain because it could never happen again.

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KAT WAS ASLEEP ON my arm, and it was losing feeling. I'd been awake for the last half hour because I needed to pee. Last night, Kat and I had gotten home from work at the same time. We watched a movie and ate some of her popcorn, and then one thing led to another, and we ended up in my bed. I'd been determined that we wouldn't repeat what had happened earlier, but I couldn't resist her.

It was strange but comforting waking up with her wrapped around me. I couldn't remember the last time I'd had a woman in my bed. Kat stirred and cuddled closer to me. A small moan escaped her. I smiled. She looked so peaceful.

I studied her face. Her lips were pursed slightly, making them look plumper than they normally were. I wanted to bend down and take one into my mouth. To suck on it and bite it the way she liked. I knew she wouldn't stop me if I did, but I had to use the bathroom before my bladder exploded. I also needed to stop sleeping with her. It was sending her the wrong message.

Slowly, I shifted out from under her, replacing my body with my pillow so she didn't fall against the mattress. She sighed and cuddled into it. I grabbed my boxer briefs from the floor and tugged them on. As I rounded the bed, I stopped in my tracks. Shiloh was curled up against Kat's back.

It was odd to see Shiloh cuddling with someone other than me, but it also made me happy to see them getting along. I hoped Shiloh wouldn't miss Kat too much when this ended. I rubbed at my chest, feeling an ache there at the thought of Kat leaving. But I also felt a heavy dose of guilt. That was normal, though. Guilt had become like an old friend that never left. It burrowed deep beneath my skin and choked me.

After I relieved myself, I tugged on a pair of sweats and headed downstairs to start the day. Kat was sleeping peacefully, and I was thankful for the alone time. Shiloh hopped off the bed and followed me down. I fed her and let her out.

My gut churned with conflicting emotions. I wanted to run from the entire situation with Kat, but I also wanted to climb back into bed and get lost in her. To forget everything. I drummed my fingers on the counter while I waited for the coffee to brew.

Kat had mentioned a few weeks ago that Laney and Jacob were going to take her to the city to get a tattoo. But I'd rather it be me who took her to get her first tattoo. I'd been wanting more ink anyway. It was a good way to get my mind off shit.

It was Sunday, and technically, I was supposed to work, but I could drop my uniform off at the station and tell them to call me if anything happened. That was unlikely since it was our slowest day. I pulled my phone out and called Will. He was always an asshole on the weekends, but I needed to ask him something.

"Why the hell are you calling me this early on a Sunday?" he growled into the phone.

"Good morning to you too. Rough night?" I asked.

"Long night. I was at the office until midnight working on a case, and then I picked up a girl from the Old Brew House and didn't get to bed until a few hours ago. What do you want?"

"Is she still there?" I asked in surprise. Will didn't do sleepovers. Ever.

"Yes," he muttered through gritted teeth. He must have had a hard time getting her to leave.

"Do I need to come over with breakfast and claim we had plans? I wouldn't be able to stay, but I would make the drive for you," I joked.

"Why are you in such a good mood? I can't remember the last time you sounded happy."

That made me freeze.

"Did you finally get laid?" Will asked.

“Fuck off.”

Will chuckled. “She’s your fiancée. I sure hope you’re getting some.”

“I’m not talking about this with you.”

“So she’s not holding out on you?”

“Will,” I gritted out.

He laughed. “Okay. What do you want?”

“I wanted to ask you what you thought of Beau at Inked Expressions.”

“He does good work,” Will said, sounding more awake. “Are you looking to get more ink? I thought after that side piece you were done.”

I rubbed at the cross on my side. It was my first tattoo and so far, my only. It had hurt like a son of a bitch.

“Possibly, but Kat wants something. She doesn’t have any ink, and I was thinking of taking her there.”

“Beau does a good job, but if you want the best, then you need to see my buddy Jackson.”

“I know who Jackson is, but I didn’t know he was a tattoo artist.” I poured myself a cup of coffee and went to the kitchen table.

“He’s done almost all of my tattoos except the two that Beau did. Jackson works at Beau’s shop part time.”

“Seriously? I didn’t know they worked together.”

“Yeah. Jax does a lot of stuff out of his house, though. He’s got a small room that he uses.”

I scratched at my beard. “Maybe I’ll take her there.”

“Whatever you want. He only lives thirty minutes from you. I’m telling you, he’s the best there is. I wouldn’t trust just anyone to ink my gorgeous skin. Jax has shit in magazines.”

I rolled my eyes. “Why is he working for Beau, then?”



I heard rustling and then a whiney female voice in the background. Will said something, but it was muffled.

“Fine. Asshole,” the voice said.

There was more rustling and a lot more name calling, then Will’s deep baritone laugh rolled through the phone. He sounded so much like our dad, but I’d never tell him that.

“You could be nicer, you know, since you had sex with her.”

“Hell, no. She knew I didn’t do sleepovers when she came home with me last night. She stayed, so she should have expected me to be an ass in the morning.” Will yelled the last part, and I heard more yelling, and then a door slammed. Will laughed again.

“You’re such a dick. I’m going to go now. Text me Jackson’s info,” I said.

“Wait. I’ll go with you guys. I need a touch-up. Plus, Kat loves me.”

“No,” I growled.

“Easy, brother. She’s marrying you. I’d never touch her.”

“Nice to know you have some sort of limit,” I said.

“Hey! When I’m ready to settle down, I’ll find someone nice, but until then, I’m going to have fun.”

“Goodbye, Will.” I hung up the phone before he could say anything else. Talking to him was exhausting.

My phone chimed with a text. Will had sent Jackson’s address and phone number. Five minutes later, my phone chimed again, and I growled when I read the message.

**Will:** *I called Jackson. We’re all set for two o’clock today. See you two there.*

“Bad morning?” Kat asked.

I looked up and smiled. She’d piled her hair in a messy bun on top of her head, and her face was free of makeup. She

looked adorable, and I wanted to bury myself inside her and forget about how angry my brother made me. I also forgot why I was keeping my distance and opened my arms.

“I’m fine. Come here.”

She walked over and stood in front of me. I wrapped my arms around her middle and hugged her close, resting my chin on the top of her head.

“What are your plans for the day?”

“I don’t have any. Normally, I work, but Sarah closed for the day so she could go to a family event.”

“What do you say we go get your tattoo?” I asked.

She pulled back to look at me. “Seriously?”

“Yeah. My brother knows someone who works with Beau. He does some tattooing out of his house, and Will said he’s available this afternoon if you want to go.”

“Yes!” she shouted. She hugged me and then did a happy dance. “Thank you.”

I nodded. “I’m going to get ready for a run.”

“If you give me ten minutes to drink a cup of coffee and wake up, I’ll go with you.”

“Sure. I’ll get Shiloh ready.”

Ten minutes later, we were on our way to the park. The sun was shining, and it was nice and cool. A perfect day for a run. The company was great too. If I wasn’t careful, people were going to notice that my usual frown had turned into a smile.

## Chapter 21



### KAT

THE SCENERY PASSED IN a blur as we sped down the highway. Nervous energy zipped through me, matching the speed of the truck. Sid was tapping his thumb on the steering wheel in tempo to a country song. The music was turned up louder than usual, and he was smiling.

I loved seeing him loose and free and hoped it had something to do with the amazing day and night we'd spent together. My skin tingled at the memory of what we had done on the mountain top.

It was the best sex of my life. I had no idea Sid was a dirty talker or that he enjoyed spanking. Who knew spanking could be so hot? I'd done plenty of kinky things, but I'd never been with a man bold enough to spank me. Or a man who took control the way Sid did. It was unexpected and sexy as hell.

I'd always been the dominant one in bed, but once Sid let go, I was happy to submit. He made me feel special and beautiful, like I was a treasure he'd just discovered. It was intoxicating. And like a drug, I needed another hit of it.

"Here we are," Sid said.

We parked in front of a gorgeous log home with an expansive front porch. The mountains peaked over the roof, and I was dying to see the view from the back of the house.

"Wow," I breathed.

“Yeah. It’s impressive. Jackson, his brothers, and his dad built this place. It’s Jackson’s house, but they all congregate here.”

“You’ve known them for a while?” I asked.

He nodded. “Yeah. Our whole life, it seems like.”

“How come you don’t hang out here more?” I asked.

He shrugged. “There’s Will. Take a deep breath because you’ll need it.” He jumped out of the truck, leaving me there, clueless as to what that even meant.

He opened the rear door to let Shiloh out of the back seat, then jogged around the front of the truck and opened my door. He held out his hand the same way he had when we first went to eat at Harvest House. I smiled and slipped my hand in his, allowing him to help me down.

Shiloh ran over and jumped on Will. Will growled and pushed her off. Then he wiped his hands down the front of his jeans.

“Asshole. You knew she would do that,” he shouted at Sid.

Sid let out a deep belly laugh and bent over at the waist. I smiled big. It was great to see him loosen up, even if it was because he thought Will was being ridiculous.

“How’s my future sister-in-law?” Will asked. He opened his arms for a hug, but Sid grabbed my arm and tugged me to his side. Will chuckled.

“I’m good. How are you?”

“Can’t complain.”

Will wiped his hands on his expensive jeans again. He was dressed more casually than he had been when I’d seen him at his parents’ house, but he still looked gorgeous. The man was hot as hell. His jeans were fitted, showcasing the thickness of his thighs. He was taller than Sid, not by much, but his shoulders were broader, like he worked out. The leather jacket he was wearing was a surprise since I’d seen him in dress

shirts and suits the few times I'd been around him. But he wore it well.

A woman would have to be dead not to notice him. Especially since he was in magazines. Will had made the *30 Under 30* list for a few years running, and he likely would have made the list again this year if he hadn't turned thirty. I only knew because Riley and Anna stalked the list like it was a dating website.

I could understand why women threw themselves at him. His smile would melt the panties off any woman, but I knew better. I'd met many men like Will. Most of the men I'd dated had been like him. They were cocky jerks who slept around a lot and took what they wanted from a woman before tossing her away.

A few years ago, I would have thrown myself at Will too, but not now. He was trouble, and I was staying far away from that sort of trouble. Sid was kind and honest, and I gravitated to him even though I didn't think I was good enough for him. His growls and grunts made me laugh, and I had gotten used to them. One day, I hoped to hear less of them, but until then, I'd continue to ignore them.

"Can I show you around?" Will asked, holding out his arm for me to slip mine through.

Sid growled beside me, and his hand tightened around my waist. I turned to him, placed my hand on his chest, and shook my head. I loved the possessiveness Sid was displaying. It made me tingle and warmed my insides.

The side door to the house opened, and a man wearing a short-sleeve shirt that showed off impressive muscles covered in ink stepped out. His short blond hair was messy and only added to the bad boy vibe he was giving off. This was another type of guy I typically went for. Especially with that blond hair and beard. Yum.

I watched him intently. His eyes were sharp and penetrating, even from a distance. His gaze started at my toes

and slowly traveled up my body, stopping at my face. I felt exposed. His lip curled up on the side ever so slightly. I swallowed hard. Will and him together equaled trouble with a capital T.

“Kat, this is my buddy, Jackson Mitchell,” Will said.

Jackson walked over and stuck out his hand. He was even more impressive up close. Tall and muscular. I stuck my hand in his and felt...nothing. Hmm, that was weird. Normally, when a man who looked like Jackson touched me, I felt tingly. He was hot, but that was about it.

“Pleasure to meet you, Kat.” His deep voice sounded raspy, like a rock star’s. His eyebrows danced slightly, and the sexy smirk on his face would have worked on me in the past.

“Same,” I said.

“This is Elijah’s brother. The chef at your sister’s restaurant,” Sid said.

I looked up at him in surprise. “The angry guy who yells in the kitchen?”

Jackson barked out a laugh. “He is pretty bossy in the kitchen.”

Will laughed and clapped Jackson on the back. “Let’s get this party started. We don’t have all day.”

Jackson showed us around his house, which was even more impressive inside. I stopped to look at a wall of photos. One in particular caught my eye. It had been taken here and had a lot of people in it.

“That’s the Mitchell clan,” Jackson said, making me jump. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“That’s okay. How many siblings do you have?”

“Seven.”

My eyes widened. “Wow. That’s a lot.”

He chuckled. “Four boys and four girls. Two sets of twins. Mom came from a big family, and it seemed natural for her to have the same.”

“Are you guys ready?” Sid asked from the doorway at the end of the hall.

“Yes,” I said, scooting around Jackson and heading toward Sid.

“What were you guys talking about?” he asked.

“He was just showing me photos of his family.”

“Come this way,” Jackson said.

He led us to a small room in the back of the house with a window that overlooked the property and the mountains. I sighed. I would love to have this view every day.

“Who’s getting tattooed today?” Jackson asked. He sat down on a stool and put on a pair of black rubber gloves.

There was a black chair in the middle of the room and a table that ran the length of one wall. It was covered in drawings. Jackson pulled a small cart on wheels toward him and started filling small containers with ink. His tattoo gun sat next to the ink.

My stomach flipped as my nerves came back. I was really doing this. Looking around the room, I realized I was in excellent hands. The framed artwork was amazing, and I was glad he was doing my tattoo.

“I am,” I answered, taking a step into the room.

“Excellent. Hop up here,” he said, nodding to the chair. “What are we doing?”

“Honestly? I’m not sure. I have a few ideas, but I haven’t settled on anything.”

Sid leaned against the doorjamb, watching closely. Will was nowhere to be found. We’d sort of lost him when we came inside.

“Do you want Will to go first? He only needs a few lines pulled for a touch up. It should only take about ten minutes. You can browse my art book over there while you wait,” Jackson said, motioning to the table. I picked up a black binder and held it up. He nodded, and I took a seat in the lone plastic chair in the corner.

“Will!” Jackson shouted.

“Coming.”

Will walked into the room with a beer in his hand. He ditched his jacket and was in a black T-shirt that clung to his frame. Jackson nodded toward the chair. Without hesitation, Will stripped his shirt off. His chest was magnificent. The hard lines of muscle were covered in ink, most of it black and gray. He had more tattoos than I would have expected, but they worked for him. The only things not tattooed on his upper torso were his neck and hands.

“You getting something too?” Jackson asked. I peeled my eyes from Will’s chest and realized he was talking to Sid.

“I think so. I only have the one, and my brothers have been hounding me for a while to get more. Do you have time?”

“I’ve got all the time in the world to do what I love,” Jackson said. “Especially when it’s in my home. I won’t be able to finish both of you in one sitting, so you’ll have to come back. It’ll take me a few hours to get the outlines down for each, and then you can come back for the rest.”

Sid nodded. “Let’s do that.”

I forced myself to look through the sketches and not to think of Sid in the chair, half naked and getting a tattoo. It was hot as hell, and I felt flushed.

“Could I have some water?” I asked.

Sid came over and kneeled in front of me. “Are you nervous? We don’t have to do this.”

“No. It’s not nerves,” I whispered. “I’d like some water.”



Sid nodded and then leaned forward to kiss my forehead and left the room.

“Are you guys a couple?” Jackson asked. His head was down, eyes on the lines he was drawing into Will’s skin.

“Yes.”

“Kat is my future sister-in-law,” Will said.

“I think you like saying that,” I teased.

He chuckled, and Jackson yelled at him for moving. I laughed.

Sid came back with a glass of water and handed it to me. He kneeled and looked through the book with me, commenting on what would look good. We talked about placement and about what he wanted to get, and before I knew it, Will was done.

“Sid, I have a drawing for you. Let me know what you think. I drew it a few weeks ago and pictured you immediately. I really think you’ll like it,” Jackson said. “And Kat, how do you feel about cherry blossoms?”

“They’re pretty. Why?”

“Have a seat.”

I hopped into the chair again and clasped my hands together in my lap.

“Relax. If it’s too painful, we’ll stop.”

I nodded. Jackson showed me the design and then where he thought it would look best. I was a little leery because I’d heard ribs were painful, but oddly enough, I trusted him. Once we got started, it wasn’t that bad. The initial few passes of the needle felt like a bee sting, but then the pain was tolerable, and I got used to it. There were a few sensitive spots, but nothing I couldn’t handle.

“Do you know what the cherry blossom represents?” Jackson asked.

“No.”

“It’s the national flower of Japan, and they believe it to be a symbol of the cycle of life. But it’s also been used to symbolize love, beauty, and new beginnings.”

My eyes burned with tears. Oak Springs was like a new beginning for me and my feelings for Sid were growing. I wouldn’t say love, but I could see us getting there one day.

“That’s perfect,” I said.

Jackson looked up and smiled. He winked and got back to work. I put my head back and concentrated on the buzz of the tattoo gun instead of the pounding of my heart.

The hours passed slowly. Will cracked jokes and kept the mood light, which helped. He left and brought in snacks and more beer. Jackson worked without taking a break.

Before I knew it, I was done. I looked in the mirror and inhaled sharply. It was only an outline in black and gray, but I could picture what it was going to look like when it was done. The tree wrapped around my right hip and up my side.

“Jackson, this is going to be gorgeous.”

“Damn right,” he said, cracking his knuckles. He peeled off his gloves and dug around his messy workspace for something. Finally, he picked up a paper and walked it over to Sid. “This is it.”

“This is badass. Thanks,” Sid said.

Sid switched places with me, kissing me on the cheek as he passed. His fingers grazed my bare belly, setting my skin on fire. He winked at me and then pulled his shirt over his head. God, he was hot. His silent, broody attitude was such a turn-on now that I knew what he was like between the sheets. I couldn’t resist him.

There was more to him than that, though. He was kind and generous. His smiles were like gifts, and I was thankful to receive them. My eyes roamed his chest, remembering how

the lines of his abs felt beneath my fingers and what that trail of hair on his stomach led to.

His muscles flexed, and when my eyes met his, they were dark and intense. He'd ruffled his hair when he took off his shirt, so it now fell in wild waves around his jawline, and the grin on his face made my cheeks burn. He winked again and then took a seat facing the wall with his back to me.

Jackson shaved Sid's chest and cleaned the spot where he was going to place the tattoo. Then he laid the stencil and had Sid look at it.

"What do you think?" Sid asked me.

It looked perfect, and Jackson was right. It fit Sid's personality well. It was the head of a bear, but the eyes were what stood out to me. They were soulful and watchful, like Sid's. Jackson said it would be in black and gray with a touch of subtle color, which would make it more realistic. I couldn't wait to see it.

"It looks good," I said.

Sid gave a nod to Jackson, and they got started.

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THE SOUND OF A DOOR shutting startled me. I sat up and rubbed my eyes, realizing I was in Sid's truck in his driveway. He and Shiloh had gone inside. I sighed and leaned back against the seat, thinking of the day we'd had. It was one of the best days I'd had in a long time.

After Jackson finished outlining Sid's tattoo, he invited us to stay for burgers on the back patio. The sun had gone down while we were inside, but the string lights, fire pit, and citronella candles provided enough light for us to see.

We drank beer and talked. The conversation was easy, and the guys were fun to be around. Sid, his brothers, and the Mitchells went way back. They'd gone to the same school. Sid seemed relaxed and happy. I hadn't seen him this way, and it

made me smile. Will gave him shit, but Sid was quick to give it back, which seemed to surprise Will. I felt a pang of sadness when I saw the shimmer in Will's eyes. Had it been a long time since Sid had been happy?

Around midnight, we said our goodbyes. Once we were in the truck, I fell asleep. Hard. Even though the drive wasn't long, it felt as though I'd slept for hours. I was refreshed and not at all ready to go back to bed.

I opened the door and hopped out. My flip-flops sounded loud on the driveway in the stillness of the night. I liked how quiet it was in Oak Springs. I took a minute to breathe it in. Thousands of stars dotted the night sky, and I didn't think I'd ever get used to seeing so many.

With a contented sigh, I walked up the steps and opened the front door. Sid was standing in the middle of the room shirtless, eating potato chips. Damn, what a sight.

"Sorry I left you out there. You were sleeping so soundly I didn't want to wake you."

"No problem. I'm going to get something to drink."

Would Sid watch a movie with me? It was late, but I wasn't ready for the night to end. Sid leaned forward over the couch and grabbed the remote. He turned on the TV, and I got excited. Maybe he felt the same.

He turned and smiled. Butterflies swirled in my stomach. I couldn't believe I'd gone two years without really noticing how attractive he was. The beard, the long hair, his tattoos, it was stoking the fire inside me that had been smoldering all day.

Now that we were alone, it flared to life, and I wanted his lips on mine, his hands roaming my body, and his beard scraping against my skin, making it red. I wondered whether he would ever wear his uniform in the bedroom, because I'd love to play bad cop with him.

Sid's eyes popped open, and his hand froze in front of his mouth. Shit. Had I said that out loud?

My cheeks burned, and I wanted to run away, but instead, I froze, my eyes locked on his. Neither of us moved. I wasn't even sure we breathed. The air in the room crackled.

Sid dropped his chip in the bag and wiped his hands on his pants. He walked slowly toward me, and my breath hitched.

"Is that so?" he asked. He had a devilish grin on his face, and his eyes glinted with mischief. "What else do you want?"

"I'm not sure what you mean," I said. I couldn't believe I'd said that out loud.

His eyebrow rose, and he chuckled. It was a slow rumble that I felt roll over every inch of my body, settling in my core. "Don't go shy on me now. Tell me what you want, Kat."

I swallowed hard.

He took a step closer and ran his fingers up my arms. "Tell me, Katerina."

The way my name rolled off his tongue had me tipping my head back as if he'd touched me. Coming out of his mouth, my name sounded beautiful. Exotic. Sinful.

I'd always thought myself bold, but standing here in front of Sid, I felt shy. His eyes dared me to share all the dirty thoughts in my head, and I had a feeling that he'd fulfill every one of my fantasies. But we couldn't keep doing this. This was all pretend, and sex made things messy.

We had already complicated things on the mountaintop yesterday and last night in bed. My heart was fragile, and I needed to protect it. But this man turned my brain to mush and my body to magma. I burned for him.

Sid's tongue slowly ran along his bottom lip as he stared at me. His hand trailed over my shoulder and up the column of my neck to the back of my head. Goosebumps peppered my skin, and the flame inside ignited. Consequences be damned.

"I want you to wear your uniform, and I want to be handcuffed. I want you to do all the dirty things you can think of to me," I blurted.

His eyes blazed and then his mouth crashed against mine. The kiss sucked the air from my lungs, and I whimpered. Sid ravished my mouth. It was rough, and all I could do was wrap my hands around his forearms and hold on.

Sid tore his lips from mine and growled, then hoisted me up and over his shoulder like I weighed nothing. He took the stairs two at a time, rounded them at the top, and kicked open his bedroom door. He deposited me on the bed and then turned to the door.

“Out, Shiloh,” he commanded before shutting the door.

Damn, that voice. It was deep and rough. Loud and demanding. I’d do anything for him if he talked to me like that. He stood by the bed and rubbed a hand over his beard. His grin was full of dirty promises. “Have you been a bad girl?”

My pulse quickened, and a thrill ran through me. I swallowed hard and nodded.

“Get on the pillows,” he commanded with a nod of his head.

I scrambled backward up the bed and laid my head on his pillows.

“Good girl,” he said. My entire body quivered at his praise.

“Don’t move.” He walked into the bathroom and shut the door.

I panted. The anticipation thrummed through me like waves. When he didn’t come out after a few minutes, I worried. What the hell was he doing? As I was about to move, the door opened, and my mouth dropped. I stared, shocked that he was actually doing it.

Sid stood in the doorway, buttoning the cuffs of his uniform. His long hair hung loosely just below his jaw. When his eyes connected with mine, I knew he was in full character, and I trembled.

“Put your hands above your head.”

I stretched out and slowly lifted my arms. He pulled something from behind his back and walked around the bed. He put one knee on the bed and leaned over me, positioning my wrist against the steel bar of his headboard. Something cold clamped around my wrist, and I realized he was holding handcuffs.

He paused and looked down at me with my other wrist in his hand. I nodded, and he cuffed it. When I tried to put my arms down, I couldn't, but I could move them from side to side. Fire burned through me, and my core pulsed at the sound of the chain sliding against the steel bar. I rubbed my legs together at the sudden rush of desire. Sid's eyes flared as he took me in.

“Spread your legs,” he commanded.

I was used to being in control, but when he used that tone of voice with me, I was powerless. Ready to bend to his will because I knew dirty things were coming. I spread my legs and waited. My body was a live wire. One touch and I'd combust.

Sid leaned forward and unbuttoned my pants, lowering the zipper slowly. My breath hitched as his fingers grazed my skin. He gently pulled my jeans down my legs and over my feet.

The slow approach was such a contrast to his commanding presence and the way he had me bound. It added to the anticipation. I'd never been wound so tight before. Sid kneeled on the bed and slowly kissed up one leg, ghosted over my pussy, then kissed down the other. I squirmed, and he grinned.

“How should I punish you?” he asked. His voice was thick with lust.

My legs shook. “I—I don't know.”

“I think...” He clicked his tongue and ran a hand lazily over his beard. “I should lick your pussy until you're dripping and begging to come.”

I bucked my hips and whimpered. Without a word, Sid dragged my underwear off. He lowered himself down onto his forearms, his long hair brushing over my bare center. His breath fanned across me, and I bit my lip.

When his tongue circled my clit, a strangled scream escaped me. I wanted so badly to touch him, but I couldn't with my hands bound. His tongue stroked inside me and circled around with precision. My body shook, and I squirmed.

“Move again and I stop,” he said with a growl.

I froze and looked down. The sight of him between my legs sent heat roaring through me. His eyes were dark and hooded, and he had a wicked grin on his face.

With his eyes locked on me, he licked me again. I gasped in agony but remained still. His big hands gripped my legs, keeping them open, and then he got to work. Jolts of searing pleasure raked through me. I closed my eyes and threw my head back with a low, guttural moan.

My back bowed off the bed, thrusting my breasts in the air. I shamelessly ground my pussy against his face, seeking the release that was coming on hot and fast. But like he promised, when I got close, he pulled away.

I whimpered, and my eyes flew open just in time to catch the evil grin on his face. He ducked back down and started again. After the third time, I was crying and begging for him to make me come. I said anything I could think of to get relief.

“Do you promise to be good now?” he asked.

“Yes,” I cried.

“Should I make you come?”

“Yes. Please, Sid.”

“Mmm. I like it when you beg,” he said and then licked me with abandon.

His tongue did wicked, dirty things I'd never dreamed of. When he thrust two fingers inside, I went off like a firework.



Screaming and convulsing. My hips and legs shook, and I gasped for breath.

Sid had stripped while I was busy visiting heaven. He was now standing at the foot of the bed naked, stroking his cock. The look in his eyes was sinful. He licked his bottom lip and knelt on the bed between my legs. It looked like he was thinking about something.

“So beautiful,” he said. “So perfect.”

His voice was low and dripped with need. His hand worked his cock while his eyes locked on to on my breasts. When he leaned forward and took one into his mouth, I twisted, which pushed my breast farther into his mouth. His teeth raked over my nipple. Pain and pleasure shot to my core, and I moaned.

“Turn over,” he said.

I did as he directed. Wetness dripped down my inner thigh as I waited for his next command.

“Ass in the air.”

I got on my knees, wrapped my hands around the chain of the handcuffs, and rested my head against my forearms. I stuck my ass out for him and waited. Sid leaned forward and kissed my neck. He moved the hair from my face and looked into my eyes. There was concern in his eyes, and the sudden change of emotion jolted me.

“You good?” he asked.

I smiled at his concern. “So good.”

He smirked and then kissed a path down my neck, over my shoulder, down my back, over my hips and then my ass. I felt his lips everywhere, and it was so tender, despite the vulnerable position I was in. His mouth left me, and then his hand connected with my ass. I cried out. It took me by surprise, but it was so good. I wanted more.

He slapped me again, and I pressed back into him, moaning into my arm. There was the sound of a condom

wrapper, and then Sid was rubbing his cock through my juices while grabbing my hip with his other hand.

I was begging again, saying anything I could think of to get him inside me. Sid positioned the head of his dick at my entrance and thrust inside. I screamed out and pushed back against him. The feeling of him inside me wasn't anything I could describe except perfect.

His grip on my hips tightened, and he pulled me hard against him as he thrust forward. The sound of our bodies slapping together echoed off the walls of his quiet room. It was dirty and rough, hot and exciting, and better than I could have ever imagined.

Sid grunted with every thrust. Our bodies moved together in perfect harmony, like we'd done this a hundred times over. All thoughts drained from me, and all I could do was feel. Feel the ridges on his cock as they dragged against my walls, his big, calloused hands gripping my hips, and the white-hot pleasure racing through my body.

“Shit,” Sid said. “You feel so fucking good.”

He was moving faster now, and I could tell he was letting go, getting as lost in the feeling of us as I was. He bent forward and rested his weight on my back. With his mouth at my ear, he whispered words of affirmation and praise. And as we crested the peak of pleasure, his words turned dirty.

I came again, screaming as blissful waves of pleasure rolled through me. Tears stung my eyes, and one rolled down my cheek. I was thankful I was facing away from him.

He pumped a few more times while filthy words rolled off his tongue, and then he stilled, pulsing inside me. He groaned and bit my shoulder as he came. Then he collapsed on top of me, and I screamed. The angle pulled on the cuffs, and my wrists burned.

“Shit. I'm sorry, Kat.”

Sid hopped off the bed and fumbled with his pants before pulling a set of small keys out of the pocket. He climbed back

up and quickly undid the cuffs. My wrists were red and sore, but it was totally worth it.

He grabbed them in his hands, and the look on his face was one of complete horror. He rubbed at the red marks.

“I hurt you. I’m so sorry. Why didn’t you tell me to stop?”

I lifted my hand and cupped his jaw. “I didn’t want you to. It was perfect. They don’t hurt that bad.”

“You’re going to have marks, Kat.”

I shrugged. “Worth it.”

He chuckled, but it was strained.

“Hey,” I said, crawling into his lap. “That was what I wanted. You asked if I was okay, and I said yes. And I meant it. Please stop ruining the moment.”

I wrapped my arms around his midsection and tucked my face into his neck, kissing him softly. He sighed and wrapped his arms around me.

“I’ve never done that before,” he said after a few minutes.

“Really? Which part?”

He pulled back and looked into my eyes.

“All of it, Kat. I’ve never spanked or handcuffed a woman before. I’ve never demanded things. But it comes out with you, and you seem to love it. I enjoy it too.”

I smiled.

Sid looked tense and worried. I smiled and took his face in my hands. “I’ve never been handcuffed or submissive before. I love that we share some firsts together. I trust you.”

He sighed and rested his forehead against mine. I felt the stress drain out of him, and then he pulled me on top of him as he lay back. I rested my head on his chest. I’d felt on top of the world a few minutes ago, but I now felt a whirlwind of emotions. Ones that scared me.

I had fallen hard for this man. For his grunts and frowns, for his kindness and care, for the dirty words that flowed from his mouth and his praise—never thought I'd love being praised in the bedroom—and I worried he didn't feel the same. What if sex was just a way of passing the time to him? When this fake engagement ended, would he still want to see me, or would it be the end of us, too? There was so much more to him than I had originally thought, and I loved every new thing I discovered.

My heart ached, and I pinched my eyes closed to hold in the tears. This was going to hurt like hell.

## Chapter 22



KAT

“WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED to your wrists?” Sarah asked.

Shit. I’d completely forgotten about them. I meant to wear a long sleeve undershirt beneath my work shirt, but I’d been in a hurry. Sid had to go away again for a few days to work on the case. We spent the morning wrapped around each other, and then I rushed to get to work.

“Nothing.” I couldn’t believe the marks were still there, considering it had been a few days.

Sid and I had had sex since then, but it was slow and sensual. Completely different from the first few times. We didn’t talk about the fact that we kept having sex or that the last time had actually been more like making love. We didn’t talk about what was happening between us, but we enjoyed each other’s company.

Each night when we got home, we had dinner and watched movies or played board games. I had learned that Sid really loved board games, and he was competitive as hell. I was too, which made for some interesting nights.

“That’s not nothing,” Sarah said, grabbing my wrist. She ran her thumb over the marks, and her head snapped up. “Kat —”

“It’s nothing.”

Sarah smirked and rested her shoulder on the locker beside mine. "I knew Sheriff Grumpy was kinky."

I gasped and swatted her with my apron. She laughed.

"It was one time," I protested.

"Mm-hmm. Won't be the last, I'm sure."

"Why does everyone keep calling him that?"

She shrugged. "Because he is."

"He's not always like that."

I hadn't told Sarah anything about our relationship, but I was dying to talk to someone. I needed advice, but the only way I could get that was if I told someone the truth. It couldn't be any of our friends, and Sarah wouldn't tell a soul.

"Can I talk to you about something?"

She sobered when she looked at my face. "Sure."

We sat down at the table in the break room. I took a deep breath and spilled everything. About what happened at the gala, and how Sid stepped in to save me but ended up making up this elaborate lie, and how we had to keep up the ruse since the gossip column had outed us. How we were lying to our friends and family and how we were so far in that I didn't know what to do.

"And you thought complicating it further with sex would help?" she asked.

I chewed on my thumbnail. "No, that sort of just happened."

She sighed. "I'm glad you told me because I wasn't completely convinced. Not because of you, but because of him."

"Why?"

She bit her lip. "What do you know?"

I frowned. "Know about what?"

“His past.”

“Not much. I mean, I know about how he met Frank and how he competed in jumping and roping events.” I looked down and picked at the hem of my shirt. “I know something happened that he doesn’t want to talk about, and it’s the reason he can’t open up. It’s also the reason he’s so guarded and angry.”

She nodded. “I don’t know much, only what I’ve heard through the rumor mill. But it was because of a girl, and there was some kind of accident.”

“An accident?” I asked.

“Yeah, but I don’t know the details.”

Poor Sid. What if the woman died? It would explain a lot of the things I’d heard him mutter about not being good enough and not being able to give me what I deserved. Those last two were a few nights ago when he thought I was asleep.

“I feel horrible about lying to everyone. I don’t know what to do.”

“Why not tell the truth?”

“I don’t even know where to begin.”

“Start with what you told me,” she said.

“I can’t.”

“Yes, you can. The only reason you guys started this was to fool your parents, and you’ve already done that.”

“Yes, but if we stop now and then tell everyone it was a lie, it will defeat the purpose, and we’ll be right back where we started. Worse off, actually. I don’t even want to think about the wrath I’ll face from my mom and dad when they found out.”

“So what are you going to do? Marry him?”

I sighed. “I haven’t figured it out yet.”

She looked away. “You’ve fallen for him, haven’t you?”

When I was silent, she looked at me with pity. “Oh, Kat.”

“I know,” I groaned.

“I wish we could talk about this more, but your first client will be here any minute, and you still have to set up the room.”

“I know. Thank you for being there for me.” I stood.

Sarah came around the table and pulled me into her arms. “Any time. And I mean that. If you need someone to talk to about this, you can come to me. No judgment.”

“Thanks.”

She left me to finish getting ready. I was about to put my phone in my locker when it vibrated. I quickly checked it, and my stomach dropped.

**Mindy:** *My house tonight after you finish work. We're going to plan your wedding.*

I chewed on my thumbnail and contemplated what to say back.

**Mindy:** *You can't hide forever.*

**Me:** *I'm not hiding, but I'm not ready.*

**Mindy:** *That's why you have us.*

**Me:** *Fine.*

I tossed my phone into my locker.

“Kat, your client is here,” Sarah said.

“Thank you,” I said and closed my locker. I'd have to worry about everything later.

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“WHAT ARE YOUR WEDDING COLORS?” Kate asked.

She had a giant binder in her lap and a pen poised over the page it was open to. Books with colors, venues, dresses, flowers, and more were strewn all over the large table in Mindy's sunroom. It was overwhelming.



“I haven’t thought about it,” I said.

“We should probably talk about the date first. That will help with colors,” Laney said as she bounced Isaac. She was trying to get him to sleep.

Mindy came into the room and handed me Ava. “I agree. But whatever you do, please stay away from blush or peach.”

Kate slammed her hands down on her binder. “I’m never going to live that down, am I?”

I’d heard all about the infamous blush bridesmaid dresses from Mindy. First when she was planning her wedding and then during Laney’s. It seemed to come up with every wedding. Mindy had been traumatized, and rightfully so. I’d seen pictures. She looked horrible.

“No. You’re not,” Mindy said matter-of-factly and then left the room again.

“I swear to God, she drives me insane. She could have said that she hated them when she was trying them on,” Kate said.

“I heard that,” Mindy yelled.

Laney and I laughed.

“Anyway, when’s the date?” Kate asked. She lifted her pen, ready to jot it down.

I started to sweat. “I… I’m not sure.”

“What?” Kate asked. “Have you and Sid not talked about it?”

“Not really,” I said with a shrug. “When we went to dinner at his parents’ a few weeks ago, his mom showed us a spot in the vineyard they have for weddings.”

“*What?*” Kate shrieked. She sat up straight. “How did I not know about this? I’m going to have to call her and ask her to show me. I need this on my list.”

She wrote something down on a small notepad and muttered to herself. Ava fussed, so I stood and bounced her. It

was late, and the twins were beyond tired. Frank was helping Peter and Charlie repair something in the barn that had broken during classes earlier, and he couldn't help with them.

"I'm going to get her down." I slipped quietly from the room and walked down the hall to the stairs. Mindy was coming down.

"I was coming to get her. Adaline is asleep."

She took Ava from my arms and returned upstairs. I went to the kitchen for a glass of wine and some space before going back to the sunroom. Kate and Laney were looking through the books on the table.

"I think these flowers would look fantastic at the vineyard," Kate said. "I've got a million ideas now that you mentioned it."

The flowers were beautiful, and I could picture them wrapped around the arbor arch, but Sid and I weren't actually getting married. Or were we? I was so confused.

"I like them," I said.

"Perfect." She wrote something down in that huge binder and then picked up another book, flipping it open to the first page. "Now the gown."

"Yes!" Laney said, sitting up straight. "This is the fun part."

I swallowed hard. It didn't feel like fun. Lying to my friends felt horrible, and my heart pinched because I knew this would never be real. Then I thought of Sid and his smile and the things he was doing to not only my body but also my heart, and it felt like the ground had dropped out beneath me.

"Kat?" Kate asked, placing her hand gently on my arm.

"Yeah?"

"Are you okay?"

"I'm exhausted and overwhelmed."

She nodded. “It is a lot to take in all at once. Planning a wedding isn’t easy, but I try to make it as painless as possible.”

Her smile felt like a knife to the heart. I had to get out of there.

“I have to go. I promised Sid I’d take him a coffee tonight, and I have to get home to Shiloh.”

It was another damn lie, but I couldn’t sit there and let them dote on me anymore. It was one thing to lie to my parents, but Sid’s mom was kind and didn’t deserve the pain that would come when she found out this relationship wasn’t real.

When I looked around the table, tears pricked the backs of my eyes, and I took deep breaths. These women were kind and had welcomed me with open arms, past be damned, and I was treating them terribly. I could come clean, spill it all, but then what would happen?

I stood and grabbed my bag. “Thanks for everything, and I promise to stay longer next time.”

Mindy walked in at the same time I was walking out. “What’s going on? Where are you going?”

“I have to take a coffee to Sid, and I have to let Shiloh out. I’m sorry.”

She leaned in and gave me a hug. “You’re running,” she whispered in my ear. How the hell did she know? God, she was so perceptive. It was only a matter of time before she figured it all out.

I pulled back, and she winked at me. “No worries. We’ll schedule another time.”

Numbly, I nodded and then bolted like my ass was on fire.

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“CAN I HELP YOU?” an older woman behind a desk asked.

“Yes. I’m here to see Si...the sheriff.” Maybe I should have called or texted Sid first.

“Is he expecting you?” she asked.

I shook my head. “I should have called first.”

“That’s okay. Are you his fiancée?” her eyes danced, and she leaned forward like she was waiting on some juicy gossip.

“Yes. Kat.” I stuck out my hand.

She smiled and shook it. “Pleased to meet you. I’m Connie.” She stood from her chair and rounded the desk. For a second, I thought she was going to hug me, but instead she looked me up and down, nodded as if she approved, and then turned toward a set of stairs. “Follow me.”

Upstairs, she led me through the main room—which smelled so horrible that I had to plug my nose—to a corner office. The door was closed, and *SHERIFF* was written in bold black letters on the frosted glass. She knocked twice and waited.

“Connie, go away. I told you to go home ten minutes ago,” Sid yelled.

I giggled and covered my mouth.

Connie smirked at me and then opened the door wide. “There’s someone here for you.”

Sid’s eyes met mine, and he smiled. When he stood, I had to suppress a laugh. His hair was disheveled, and his shirt was half untucked. He tucked it in as he rounded his desk, then pulled me into a hug. I settled into it, letting it chase away the fears.

He inhaled deeply, and his arms tightened around me. “I’m happy you’re here.”

I smiled into his chest. “I brought coffee.”

He pulled back and looked down. “Thank you!” He took the cup and tore the lid off. His eyes closed when he took a

sip. I was glad I'd bought the largest one. He looked like he needed it.

“Shit. Did you walk through there?” he asked, pointing to his door. “Of course you did. There's no other way in. I'm so sorry you had to smell that.”

I laughed. “What was that?”

He sighed and rolled his eyes. “One of our deputies. His wife makes him chili almost every shift, and she makes it spicy as hell. It gives him terrible gas. He works most of the night shifts.”

I burst into laughter. “That's so funny.”

“Not if you're the one who has to smell it,” Sid said dryly.

That only made me laugh harder.

His usual frown was back, which sent me into another fit of giggles.

“Real funny. What are you doing here?”

I wiped tears from my eyes and then took a seat. Fear settled in the pit of my stomach.

“Mindy asked me to stop by after work. The girls wanted to plan the wedding.”

I watched his expression carefully. His frown deepened, and he ran a hand through his hair. My anxiety grew. He sighed and then sat down in his chair.

“I'm sorry, Kat. This has really gotten out of hand.”

“That's actually what I wanted to talk to you about. How long are we going to keep this up?”

Sid scrubbed a hand over his face. “I think it's gone on too long already. It wasn't supposed to go past the gala, but your sister and my brother were there. Then the gossip rag caught wind of it and then our friends. It just spread like wildfire. I don't know what to do now.”

I sighed. “I’m glad you said that because I feel the same. The girls pressured me to lock down a date, and I didn’t know whether I was supposed to move forward or tell everyone this is a lie.”

Sid regarded me carefully. “Is that what you want?”

“What?”

“To tell everyone the truth?”

Did I? I wasn’t sure. Like Sid had said, we were in too deep.

“I don’t know anymore. I’m worried about hurting everyone.”

He set his coffee down and walked around his desk. I was sitting on the edge of a small sofa that was up against the wall. Sid sat down beside me and put his hand out. I placed mine in his, and he threaded our fingers together and sat back.

“Part of me is sorry this went this far and we’re lying to our friends and family, but the other part is grateful.”

I looked at him. “Grateful?”

“Yeah. I never would have gotten to know you the way I have if we didn’t do this.” He turned to face me. “I enjoy spending time with you.”

Butterflies flitted through my stomach, and my heart raced. We hadn’t talked about our feelings or what was building between us. I hadn’t slept in the guest room in more than two weeks, and he hadn’t asked me to.

His eyes turned dark and dropped to my mouth. My body hummed as desire flooded me. I loved when he looked at me that way. Like he couldn’t wait to get his mouth and hands on me. The feeling was mutual.

“I really enjoy fucking you,” he said. His voice was husky and my core pulsed at the sound.

“I like that too,” I whispered.

He leaned forward, and then his mouth was on me. Warmth exploded through me. I reached up and gripped his head, my fingers tangling in his thick hair. Despite the strong sexual current flowing between us, the kiss wasn't hurried or rough. It was slow and deep, as if he had all the time in the world to explore my mouth.

His tongue moved languidly, and I melted against him. Goosebumps peppered my skin, and I shivered. Something had changed. This wasn't our normal, hurried kiss. He was telling me how he felt about me with his mouth.

Sid was quiet and guarded. He didn't express himself freely, but this kiss told me everything I needed to know. He had developed feelings just as I had. Our engagement might be pretend, but my feelings for him were very real. Where did we go from here?

# Chapter 23



SID

“I’M SO EXCITED I can hardly stand it,” Kat said, jumping up and down beside me.

I grunted, and she giggled. She was always laughing or giggling at me and didn’t seem to mind when I was quiet or in a foul mood. Most women couldn’t handle my quiet demeanor. They assumed I was unhappy or an asshole. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d made it past three dates.

“Are you excited?” Kat asked.

I shrugged, and she laughed again. The sound was pleasant. After Kat came to the station a week ago and we shared that deep emotional kiss, things changed between us. We hadn’t talked about the kiss or where we stood, which I was thankful for because I didn’t want to think about it. Kat was a big girl, and if she wanted to leave, she could. Deep down, I hoped she never would.

I enjoyed being with her and trying new things. The boring life I led before her was like a blurred memory. She breathed life into me and brought sunshine and happiness to my life. Her laugh was infectious and her joy palpable. I’d never seen her angry or grumpy. She loved to try new things, which forced me out of my comfort zone, much like now. I’d surprised Kat this morning with an adventure.

“Well, I am! Where are they?” She looked around the parking lot.



Over dinner one night, Kat had expressed how much she wanted to go zip lining. Jacob had done a ropes course and zip lines with Gracie at a place not too far from Oak Springs. I'd invited everyone I could think of who might want to go and then booked us an early slot, which I knew Will would hate.

Kate and Peter pulled up first, quickly followed by Laney, Jacob, and Gracie. A few minutes later, Frank and Mindy showed up with Charlie in tow. My brothers were late, but that wasn't surprising.

"Rebecca couldn't get away from work today, but she said if we go out after, she'll meet us," Laney said as she slammed her car door.

"Great," Kat muttered. "She's still acting weird with me."

I pulled her against me. "She'll come around."

"I hope so. I miss her."

My phone vibrated in my pocket. I fished it out, hoping it was Will.

**Will:** *On our way. Prissy boy took forever getting ready.*

**Duke:** *Yeah. You did.*

I snickered and pocketed my phone. "Let's head in. My brothers are on their way."

"Excellent. It's been a while since I've challenged Will to some friendly competition," Jacob said.

That would be interesting to watch. Will never backed down, and he hit the gym daily, but when Jacob returned to Oak Springs, we'd found out he had military training from his previous job. I had a feeling that Will would get his ass handed to him, and I couldn't wait to see it.

We walked inside, and I went to the counter to check us all in. There were twelve people in our group, which meant we could get reduced pricing. I loved saving money. That's why I'd called everyone I could think of to fill the spots.

“Has everyone from your group arrived?” the woman behind the counter asked.

“No. We’re waiting on two.”

“Okay. As soon as they arrive, we’ll begin. In the meantime, an instructor will be out shortly to go over everything with you.”

I nodded and went back to the group to relay the message. We waited for ten minutes, and finally Will and Duke showed up.

“Took you guys long enough,” I said.

“Quiet, Grumpy,” Will said. His smirk irritated me more than the nickname.

After a few minutes, an instructor came out and explained how things would go. We got helmets and harnesses and then headed out to the course. When I called, the woman who booked our tour said they had a few different options. I chose the one that had us suspended the entire time. We’d be climbing through seven tree houses using bridges and five zip lines ending with a mega zip line.

Jacob had assured me Gracie could handle it. I hoped the rest of them could.

“What the hell, Sid?” Mindy yelled. “This looks hard.”

Frank laughed, and Mindy punched him.

He rubbed his arm. “Ow. Relax, babe. I’ll help you.”

Everyone hooked up and then climbed. The couples paired up, Will and Duke were together, and Charlie took Gracie. Kat had an amazing time, and she did awesome. A hell of a lot better than I thought she would. She was always surprising me, and I liked her more and more.

“You’re doing great,” I said from behind her.

I had an excellent view. The straps of the harness accentuated her already luscious ass.

“Thanks,” she said with a smile. Her face had been bright and cheery all day.

“Could you move any faster?” Will shouted.

“I could, but then I’d run over the people in front of me,” Duke said.

“There’s no one in front of you.”

Duke leaned to the side so Will could peer around him. Charlie and Gracie were in front of them. Gracie was following her mom and dad. We were in front of them, with Mindy and Frank ahead of us. Kate and Peter, who were in excellent shape, were following the guide, who was leading us through the course.

Everyone was doing a good job, and the pace was nice. Not too slow and not too fast. We’d been climbing for over an hour and were nearing the end.

“I rented out Simply Cook It tonight,” Will shouted so everyone could hear.

“What?” Mindy shouted back.

“Date night. Tonight,” Will barked out.

“We have kids!” Mindy shouted again.

“Could we talk about this later?” I asked.

Kat giggled, and I tickled her side, making her laugh and squirm, which then rocked the bridge we were on. Mindy grabbed the side for dear life and screamed. Jacob laughed behind us.

“Quit it!” Mindy shrieked.

We climbed up to the next tree house and waited for our turn to zip-line across. Mindy didn’t want to go alone, so she tandem zipped with Frank. He was less than pleased but did it anyway. Mindy screamed when the guide pushed them off, and Frank laughed at her. Kat was next to go, and she screamed almost as loudly as Mindy as she zipped across.

“Are you ready?” the guide asked me. I nodded. He gave me a gentle push, sending me on my way.

The adrenaline rush was like nothing I’d experienced before. I hollered as I zipped across to the next platform. Another guide was there to ease me onto the platform. Kat was standing nearby with a huge smile on her face. I stood and pulled her in for a quick hug, pecking her on the cheek.

“This is incredible,” Kat said. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. It is pretty awesome. We’ll have to do it again.”

She looked surprised for a minute and then smiled. She turned and climbed the enclosed cargo net that would take us to the next platform. We climbed for another half hour and then lined up at the mega zip line that would take us to the end.

Once I got to the bottom and unhooked from the line, I sought Kat out. The adrenaline was still coursing through me, and I grabbed her and pulled her into some nearby woods. I pushed her up against a tree trunk.

I pressed one hand to her waist, pinning her there, the other on her breast over her shirt. She moaned and wrapped her arms around me, her fingers tangling in the hair that stuck out of my helmet.

I wanted to take her right then and there, but anyone could walk up on us, and Gracie was in our group. Kat’s eyes were hooded with lust. I smashed my lips against hers. Her hands trailed down the front of my body to my shorts. She palmed my dick, and I groaned into her mouth, thrusting my hips forward. I took my hand off her hip and braced it against the tree.

Her hips rose to meet mine, and she ground against me. Her tongue danced against mine, and her leg wrapped around my hip. Removing my hand from her breast, I held her leg against me and ground hard against her pussy. She tipped her head back and moaned.

“We shouldn’t do this here,” I said against her lips.

“I know,” she panted. “But it feels so good.”

I couldn’t argue with her there. “Anyone can see, and I don’t like to share.”

Kat pulled back and looked up at me. “I like the possessive side of you.”

I growled and bent my head, nipping where her neck met her shoulder. She moaned, and her fingers dug into my shoulders.

“I want you all to myself.”

She cupped my face and stared into my eyes. “You have me.”

Warmth burst in my chest. Fuck, I’d waited so long to hear those words from someone. I nodded and kissed her again. This time, I slowed the pace to show her how much she meant to me.

“I think they’re in the woods,” Frank said on the other side of the trees.

Kat laughed and pushed me off her. She ducked under my arm, which was still braced on the tree, and walked away. I wrapped my arms around her from behind, placed one last kiss on her neck, and then followed her out of the tree line.

I pulled her against my side and kissed the top of her head. What started out as fake was now very real, and for the first time since the incident years ago, things felt right. I ignored the guilt that threatened to pull me under. I wanted to be happy for once in my life, and I would enjoy this as long as I could.

# Chapter 24



SID

“I CAN’T BELIEVE YOUR brother talked us into this,” Kat said from the spare bathroom.

I grumbled my annoyance under my breath and poured kibble into Shiloh’s bowl. Kat walked into the kitchen in bare feet and a blue dress that ended above her knees. She had a full face of makeup, and her honey blond hair fell in its usual waves down her back and over her shoulders, which were bare.

The dress hugged her body and showcased her curves. Her breasts were on full display, and I wanted to put my hands and mouth on them. I couldn’t peel my eyes off her chest. Kat laughed, and her breasts bounced. I licked my lips, imagining all the dirty things I wanted to do to them.

“If you keep looking at me like that, we won’t make it to dinner,” she said.

I dragged my eyes away from her chest but went weak in the knees when I met her gaze. Her smile was radiant and a little dirty. I walked over and wrapped my arms around her.

“Remind me again why we have to go.” I whined.

She pushed lightly at my chest. “Because everyone agreed to go, and the girls got babysitters. Come on. It’ll be fun.”

I groaned. “My feet hurt, and I’d rather stay in and watch a movie.”

“You sound like an old man. Come on.”

I followed her out the door, grumbling. It was a nice evening, so we walked. Kat was wearing heels but swore she'd be fine. We arrived at Simply Cook It a few minutes before the class started. Duke was at the front station with a date, and Will was alone at the station behind him. The last station on their side was open, and Kat put her jacket and purse on the table.

Peter and Kate, Mindy and Frank, and Laney and Jacob occupied the three stations on the other side of the room.

"Where is your date?" I asked Will.

"What date? You know I don't do dates. I don't like to give the wrong impression. Besides, I'm here to expand my repertoire and cook, not entertain." He laced his hands together and pushed them out in front of him.

I rolled my eyes.

"Rebecca is here by herself," Kat said from behind me.

I turned and smiled, but it quickly faded. Rebecca looked different. Her normal smile and cheer were missing, and I wondered what had happened.

"Where's Luke?" I asked.

She flinched and then tried to cover it with a fake smile. "We broke up."

"What?" I asked. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I'm fine. I'll explain later."

"Will, Rebecca needs a partner, so she's joining you. Be nice or I'll kick you in the dick," Kat said. I laughed, and Will grinned.

He turned toward Rebecca. "Care to join me?"

"Not really, but it seems I don't have a choice."

Will barked out a laugh and moved over so Rebecca could set her things down. "You should feel lucky to join me."

“Please. You’re just a pretty face and possibly a good lay. But your mouth makes the rest unenjoyable.” Rebecca folded her arms over her chest. Her eyes danced with mirth, and a smile pulled at her lips.

Will laughed again. He turned and wiggled his eyebrows at me. “She’s feisty. I like it. Thank you, brother.”

“Be nice to her,” Kat warned.

“Oh, I will.”

Rebecca pushed Will’s shoulder, and he chuckled. She seemed to hold her own against Will, and it impressed me. I had heard that they were friends and working closely together at her restaurant. Will was helping her with some things. So most of the banter between them was all in good fun.

Evelyn clapped her hands, drawing everyone’s attention to the front. “Let’s get going, shall we? Welcome to Simply Cook It. Tonight we’ll be cooking braised beef in a red wine sauce with mushrooms served over noodles. I’ve paired it with a wine that is in your station. You may now uncork it and pour yourselves a glass. I find that drinking wine while cooking makes things better.”

Bottles popped as we all uncorked our wine. I poured myself and Kat a glass.

“For dessert, you’ll make cheesecake with a strawberry topping and fresh whipped cream. If you are all ready, let’s begin. Follow my instructions, and you’ll have a delicious meal.”

She directed that last part at Frank. Mindy snickered beside him, and he scowled at her. Before the twins were born, Mindy and Frank had attended one of Kate and Peter’s wine tasting classes, and Frank started a fire in his kitchen. He had never lived it down.

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ONCE WE GOT STARTED, the night went well. Kat and I moved around each other like we were doing a well-choreographed dance. When Kat wasn't assisting, she was sitting on the counter swinging her feet and sipping wine. Enjoying herself and the evening. I fed her spoonfuls of our meal to taste test. Then I did a little taste testing myself. From her lips.

Rebecca and Will were ribbing each other, and it was every bit as entertaining as I thought it would be. They fought for control of the kitchen and almost burned a few things. There was lots of shoving and cursing and at one point, Rebecca threatened to leave. Will gave up some control once he realized how upset she really was, which helped her to calm down a little.

"I think they finally found some sort of rhythm," Kat said, giggling.

She was on her third glass of wine, and her rosy cheeks looked adorable. I wanted to carry her back to the house and ravage her. I stepped between her legs. She wrapped her arms around my neck and played with my hair. My dick immediately stood at attention whenever she did that. I'd need a few minutes before stepping back to the stove.

Frank coughed from across the room, and I pulled back a little to look around Kat. Frank smirked at me and shook his head like he was disapproving, even though I had seen him doing the same with Mindy earlier.

Kat tried to move, but I stilled her with my hands on her thighs. "Don't. Move."

She looked confused, and I pointed to my crotch. She fell into a fit of giggles, drawing attention to us. I rolled my eyes and shook my head at her, which made her laugh harder.

"Could you guys get a room? Some of us are trying to cook," Will said.

"Cook or burn stuff?" Duke asked. Smoke was coming from his station.

“Looks like you’re the one burning stuff,” I said, nodding to his stove.

“Shit!” he grabbed the pan off the stove and tossed it into the sink. I didn’t recognize my brother’s date, but she didn’t appear to be very bright. She was already three sheets to the wind, swaying and zoning out. She stood there looking confused, and Duke gently pushed her onto a stool.

Evelyn marched over to their station and scolded Duke while taking care of the pan in the sink. She took away their wine when she realized how intoxicated his date was. Duke threw his hands up and shrugged with a big smile on his face. Nothing fazed my youngest brother. He was always in a good mood. The room could be on fire, and he’d remain calm and upbeat while getting everyone to safety. I was jealous of him in that regard.

Kate and Peter had ignored everyone and finished their meal in a timely manner. They were sitting down to eat already, and I was envious since I was starving.

“The sauce is missing something. What did you do?” Mindy yelled at Frank. They’d been arguing and fighting for control the entire night. Frank had almost burned another meal, but his wife saved it.

Laney and Jacob were almost done with their meal. Laney had given up complete control and had taken a seat at the table halfway through with the bottle of wine. She wasn’t the best cook, as we found out at family dinner when she brought a dish that wasn’t edible. Jacob made loving eyes at his wife most of the night, and they joked around.

We sat down to eat, and Kat took a big bite. She seemed more intoxicated than I’d originally thought.

“Oh my gosh, this is so good.” She moaned and closed her eyes. I was a goner.

“At least yours is good. Ours tastes like we missed a few things. Hopefully, the cheesecake will taste better,” Rebecca said.

“It will since I made it,” Will said.

Rebecca gaped at him. “You’re kidding, right?”

“No, sweetheart. I’m not.”

“You were the one who ruined this dinner. You said, and I quote, ‘This will taste better if we add a few things.’” Her Will impersonation was impressive. “It tastes like shit, by the way.”

Kat giggled, and I snickered. Will glared at us.

After dessert, we all filed out happy and full. Well, mostly happy. Will had pushed a few too many of Rebecca’s buttons, and she was ready to go home. Duke sent his date home in an Uber and suggested we all go to Frosty Mug Tavern. Exhaustion pulled at me from the day’s activities, but Kat wanted to go. Everyone else was game, and Rebecca said she’d go for one drink.

“What happened with Luke?” Kat asked quietly.

Rebecca shook her head.

“Please tell me. I’m your sister, and I’m worried.”

“We wanted different things. I wanted to get more serious, and he didn’t.” She shrugged like it wasn’t a big deal, but I could tell that wasn’t true. She looked like she was fighting tears.

“I’m so sorry,” Kat said.

“It’s okay. It’s better to find out now rather than later on down the road.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to talk more about it?” Kat asked.

“I’m sure. I’d really like to forget about it, but we’re about to walk into his place of work, and I don’t think it’s going to go well.”

“Did things end badly?”

Rebecca shook her head. “Opposite, actually. Luke looked relieved. I was the one who was sad. I spent a few days in bed

moping around and then moved on since he obviously wasn't affected."

Kat put a hand on Rebecca's arm, stopping her, and moved off to the side to let the rest of our group pass. I stayed back so they weren't alone.

"What do you mean he wasn't affected? You guys dated for two years."

"Kat, I really don't want to do this."

"Well, I do. We haven't been the same for months, and I miss you. I could have been there for you. We could have hung out and watched movies and eaten popcorn and drunk shitty wine while throwing darts at his picture or something. Isn't that what sisters are for?"

Rebecca put her hands on her hips. "I'm not sure, because you've never been there for me. Like ever."

I winced.

"That's not true."

"Name one time, Kat," Rebecca said.

"I can't think right now because I'm a little tipsy, but I'm sure there is one."

"There's not."

"Okay. Can we start over, then?" Kat asked.

Rebecca scoffed. "Start over?"

"Yes. I think we need to clear the air and move on. I want my sister back, and I want us to be close. Do you not want that?"

I held my breath because this was important for both of them. It was hard to watch my close friend and my girl fight. *My girl*. When had that happened? *Shit*.

"I do," Rebecca finally said.

Kat hugged her, and they talked for a while longer while I meandered toward the pub. Once they had finished, we went

inside and found everyone else at the back of the restaurant where they had pushed a few tables together. The pub had filled up fast while we were outside, and some of us guys had to stand.

“Let’s get drinks,” Laney said.

“Get your wife under control, man,” Frank muttered to his brother.

“I heard that, and she can drink if she wants to. She’s kid-free tonight. Live it up, Lane,” Mindy said. “By the way, I want a drink. You can’t tell me no all night. I was good with the wine.”

Frank rolled his eyes and earned an elbow to the gut. “Fine. But don’t be feeding our girls alcohol.”

Now it was Mindy’s turn to roll her eyes. Frank took everyone’s drink orders and then he and Jacob relayed the message to the waitress. The music was loud, and someone was singing terribly off key. I was pretty sure it was Tom Tracy. Apparently, it was karaoke night. My worst nightmare.

“Kat, you look amazing in that dress,” Kate said, sliding into the seat beside her.

“Thanks. You look great too.”

Kate smiled. “Thanks. Yoga.”

“I do that too sometimes,” Kat said.

Peter nudged me and gave me a nod as he tipped his beer back. I assumed it was the yoga comment and how it worked in the bedroom. I’d already been privy to that. My pants became tight, and I shifted, discreetly adjusting my growing erection. The thought of Kat trying those moves on me was more intoxicating than anything I could get here.

God, I was so far gone for this girl, and I didn’t even know when it happened. All I knew was that I didn’t want this engagement to end. Kat and I fit together perfectly in all areas. She put up with my shit and brought light to my darkness. I

needed her in my life, and I'd do anything to keep her. Even if it meant facing some demons that I'd been keeping locked up.

As the night wound down, I was more than ready to leave. I'd been ready to go for the last hour but couldn't drag Kat away. The more she and Rebecca bonded, the more they drank. I hoped it would last beyond this. I had an early shift in the morning, and I was pretty sure I had to go out of town again, so I didn't drink much.

"I want to go home," Kat said, leaning against me. She was really drunk. Her hair was a mess, and she had on one wedged sandal. The other was under the table.

"Okay. Let me pay our tab." I looked around for the waitress.

"I want to sleep in your bed," she whined.

I glanced around. Thankfully, no one was paying attention. I leaned down and whispered in her ear. "Shh, baby. You will sleep in my bed. Let's go."

"I need to get her home," I announced and threw more than enough cash to cover our tab down onto the table.

Mindy crawled under the table and grabbed Kat's shoe. She also got Laney's. I positioned Kat so her arm was around my waist, then hoisted her against me and carried her out.

Once we were out front, I bent down and lifted her up into my arms. Will was standing out front, hitting on some girl he met inside. He took one look at me and jogged over to help.

"Where are we going?" he asked, attempting to take Kat from me. She was half asleep already. I growled and tightened my grip on her. No way was he carrying my girl.

"To my house," Rebecca said.

"Are you sure?"

"Did you drive here?" she asked.

I shook my head.

“It’s closer.”

We followed Rebecca to her house on Grand Street. Her house backed up to Laney’s store and Kat’s old apartment. I followed her inside and walked down the hall. “Where am I going?”

“First door on the left,” Rebecca said.

I laid Kat down on the bed and then stepped out of the room.

“I can get her changed,” Rebecca said. “I’ll give her some of my clothes.”

I bent down and kissed her on the forehead. She didn’t move. Reluctantly, I backed away. How much had she had to drink?

“She’ll be fine. I’ll take care of her,” Rebecca said.

I nodded. Duke was waiting on the porch when Will and I walked out of the house. The three of us walked to my house. I opened the door, and Shiloh attacked Will, which made him curse. I laughed and then let her outside. Will claimed the guest bed, which was where all of Kat’s things were. He didn’t ask questions, which was good because I wasn’t in the mood to come up with another lie.

Duke took the couch, and I crawled into bed with Shiloh. I saw the time when I set my alarm and groaned. Four hours would have to be enough.

## Chapter 25



### KAT

WHERE THE HELL WAS I? My head felt like it was going to explode, and if I moved at all, I would throw up. I drank way too much last night. I was already tipsy when we got to the pub, but I was so excited to make up with Rebecca that I felt like celebrating. And celebrate I did.

The room spun, and my stomach protested when I sat up. I groaned and lay back down, throwing my hand over my eyes. The door to the room opened, and Rebecca walked in.

“This was left at the door for you,” she said. She set a brown paper sack from Grateful Cup on the bed and handed me a coffee cup. There was a note attached to the bag. I carefully sat up and pulled it off.

*I hope you aren't feeling too bad today. I had to work early, but call me when you get up. -Sid*

I smiled and took a big gulp of coffee. It was exactly how I liked it. Inside the bag was a fresh cranberry-orange muffin. It warmed my heart that Sid remembered. I was falling so hard for him.

My head and stomach were hurting, but I wanted to check in with Sid. I missed him.

I pulled up his number and hit send. He answered on the first ring.

“Hey, you. How are you?”



I groaned, and he chuckled.

“Hungover. Thank you for the coffee and muffin, and for dropping me off here last night. Sorry I got so sloppy.”

“That’s okay. I’m glad you and your sister made up.”

I bit my lip. “Yeah. I haven’t actually talked to her today. I hope we’re still on the same page.”

“I think you will be.”

“How’s work?” I asked.

He sighed. “Shitty. I have to go to Ridge Point for a few days again.”

“When?” I asked.

“Now. I’m actually at the house packing a bag.”

I jumped up out of bed, ignoring my head and willing my stomach to cooperate. “Don’t leave yet. I’ll be right there.”

“Kat, you don’t have to do that.”

“I want to say bye.”

“I’d like that,” he said, and I smiled like a fool.

We hung up, and I gathered my clothes from the night before, thankful my sister let me borrow some of hers to wear, and ran out the door. I promised to call her later. I made it back in record time for running in bare feet. Sid laughed at me when I walked through the door carrying my heels and dress over my arm.

“I could have gotten you,” he said.

I dumped my stuff at the door and huffed. “Too late now.”

He wrapped me in his arms and kissed the side of my head. “I’d love to tell you goodbye properly, but I don’t have time, and you smell like a bar.”

“Ew.” I scrunched up my nose.

“I don’t know how long this will take. There have been some recent developments on the case. Nash and I want to

pool our resources and work from one location.”

“Okay, well, I’m not going anywhere,” I said.

“Good.” He kissed the side of my head again and then bent down to pick up his bag. I opened the door for him, and he kissed me breathless before he walked out. As he walked down the front porch steps, I stared at his ass. I was going to miss him so much.

“Take care of our girl,” he called before jumping into his truck. I stood there dumbfounded for a minute before slowly closing the door. *Our girl*. It was the first time he referred to Shiloh that way, and it sent butterflies dancing through my stomach.

Speaking of which, my stomach was still not great, so I walked into the kitchen to make myself a greasy snack. I had just sat down with a bacon and egg sandwich when the doorbell rang.

Shiloh barked and ran to the door, then came back to me and danced at my feet. “Who could that be?” I asked her.

My stomach rolled again when I opened the door. This time with dread. My mom and Sid’s mom were standing on the porch. My eyes widened in surprise, and I stood there mute.

“Are you going to let us in, or do we have to conduct this on the porch?” my mom asked.

I moved to the side, and they walked in. As I was closing the door, someone pushed against it. I opened it to find Rebecca, Kate, and Mindy.

“What are you guys doing here?”

“Mom wanted us all here. She came to the house first and pulled me out,” Rebecca said.

“What’s going on?” I hissed.

She shrugged. I turned to see my mom moving furniture. Beth was bringing chairs in from the kitchen. Kate left the

house and then returned with boxes.

“This is a perfect spot for us to conduct business. Let’s pull the table in here,” my mom said.

“What the hell is going on?” I yelled.

Everyone froze and stared at me.

“We’re planning your wedding,” my mom said.

“What?”

“Elizabeth called me and told me the good news about you setting a date and holding the wedding at the vineyard. It’s a lovely spot, but we don’t have time to waste if you’re going to get married in the spring. No more dragging your feet.”

“The spring.” I repeated.

“Are you having trouble hearing me?”

“She’s hungover,” Rebecca supplied helpfully.

I sneered at her, and she rolled her lips inward.

“I’m fine. I’m just wondering what gave you the idea that I’d picked a date.”

“When we went over the calendar at my house, I thought you said that date would work,” Beth said.

I quickly went through my memory. I had said that, but it was more to placate her than to lock down a date.

“I...I haven’t talked to Sid about it.”

My mom waved her hand in a circle. “He won’t care. Just tell him when to be there.”

Before I could argue, Mindy grabbed my arm and pulled me to the couch. The doorbell rang again, and I stood, but Mindy pushed me down and answered the door. Peter and Charlie walked in with a box of coffee from Grateful Cup and bags from Lettuce Eat.

“We got wraps, salads, coffee, and soda.”

“Thank you, babe,” Kate said. Her head was down, and she was digging around in the boxes. She took out the books we had looked at before as well as a bunch of other things. “After we eat, we can go over everything. Kat, I have samples of the flowers you picked and a couple of colors that would look great for spring.”

“I picked flowers?” I asked.

“She really is having a rough day,” Kate said. Her laugh was so pure and genuine that it was hard to be mad at her. But I didn’t remember picking anything. In fact, after I told her the flowers were nice, I bolted. Did that mean I agreed again? Shit, I needed to pay more attention.

I took out my phone, ready to send Sid an SOS text, but then thought better of it. He’d seemed stressed when he left earlier, and I didn’t want to make things worse. I would handle this. I just had to dodge everything and not agree to a single thing.

“Tomorrow we’re going to pick out your wedding dress,” Beth said from beside me.

Shit. There went that plan.

“Tomorrow? As in Monday?” I asked. She nodded. She was so sweet it was hard to tell her no.

“Doesn’t everyone have to work? Mindy, don’t you have a lot of work to do for Thanksgiving dinner on Thursday?” Would Sid be back?

“I closed my store for the day, and Faith is going to open Laney’s,” Mindy said. “There’s a Black Friday sale at the dress shop that we can’t miss.”

I frowned. “But tomorrow is Monday.”

She laughed. “It’s for the week.”

“Well, who will watch the twins?” I asked.

Mindy smiled. “Relax, Kat. We’ve got it all figured out. The riding camp is closed for the week for the holiday.”

I opened my mouth to ask another question, but my mom interrupted. “I brought your grandmother’s gown for you to try on. If you don’t like it, maybe we can use parts of the dress that you do like.”

“You would cut up her wedding dress?” I asked, horrified.

My mom shrugged. “It’s old.”

“It’s vintage,” Rebecca said.

“Then parts of Kat’s dress will be vintage,” Mom said. I was appalled.

“Lunch,” Kate called, interrupting us.

“Where’s Laney?” I asked.

“Home. She was really hungover this morning but said she’d be over later.”

I nodded and grabbed a plate. Good to know everyone cared about Laney’s hangover but not mine. At least there was food. Which reminded me, I had a bacon and egg sandwich somewhere.

My mom grabbed my empty plate and set it down. “Go shower first. You smell.”

“I was looking for the sandwich I made before you barged in here.”

Rebecca handed it to me along with a cup of coffee. I thanked her and escaped to the spare bathroom for a much-needed shower.

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“YOU CAN’T STAY IN there forever,” Mindy shouted while pounding on the bathroom door.

“I can try,” I called back.

I’d eaten my meal on the toilet seat while scrolling through my phone. Then I took a thirty-minute shower and dried my

hair. There wasn't much else I could do to delay. I opened the door a crack, and Mindy forced the door open. "Get out here."

I sighed and walked to my bedroom to get dressed. Mindy followed me in and closed the door.

"Want to tell me why you keep dodging wedding planning? I know we've just gotten to know each other, but you seem like you would love this kind of stuff."

What was I going to tell her? That I wasn't marrying Sid because this wasn't real? That I hated wedding planning because it reminded me of the Vegas fiasco with Alessandro? Both were true, but I couldn't say either. I sat on the bed and fidgeted with my hands.

"I don't feel right doing this without Sid. He doesn't know what's been going on, and he hasn't helped at all."

"Frank didn't help one bit either. Peter did, but he's a rare breed."

I laughed.

"What's really going on? Are you having second thoughts?"

"Kind of."

She sat down on the bed beside me. "That's normal."

"I don't want to rush him. Everything between us happened so fast that I kind of want to take my time where we're at."

"You have your whole life to do that. Marriage just means he can't run when things get hard."

I laughed again. She was so blunt. I loved it.

"But in all seriousness, it will be worth it. Things moved fast between you guys because it's right. I've seen the two of you together, and it's like magic. You bring out a goofy side of Sid I've never seen before, and he grounds you."

It was true. On paper we didn't make sense, but together we worked. He was serious, and I was spontaneous, but we found common ground without trying too hard. Sid wasn't someone I would have ever pictured myself with, but he was someone I now couldn't picture myself living without. I couldn't imagine not waking up to him every day or spending time with him. But what if he didn't feel the same?

My heart was heavily invested, and what I felt for him was unlike anything I'd ever felt before, which had to mean it was love. I was in love with Sidney Lewis, and the thought scared the shit out of me.

"Come on. Plan the wedding, and if you put it off for another year, then at least you got the hard part out of the way," Mindy said.

"Okay."

Mindy looked around. "Are you sleeping in here?"

"No. I store my clothes in here."

"Oh, okay. I'll see you out there."

I got dressed and made my way to the living room. I was still shaken by the revelation I'd had in my room. What the hell was I going to do?

The next few hours flew by in a blur. Kate delegated tasks to everyone and printed out lists on a small printer she had brought with her. She made a board with "Katney's wedding" written at the top in a pretty font. We had deliberated for too long on the mash-up of our names before settling on Katney. It was dumb but made things light and fun.

The board was large and had sections for everything. My dress, the bridesmaid dresses, wedding colors, venue, flowers, linens, the DJ, and the cake. There might have been more, but it was overwhelming, and I zoned out.

Kate had pinned up pictures of the flower ideas she had come up with. She took out samples to show me. They would be real the day of.

My mom brought out my grandmother's dress, and I cried. It was gorgeous, and there was no way I was cutting it up. I loved the way the fitted bodice made me look slimmer in my stomach and waist, but the full tiered skirt layered with tulle and lace was a bit much. I didn't mind the sheer overlay of lace that encircled my shoulders and made up the three-quarter length sleeves. Although the dress was beautiful, it wasn't for me.

When I walked into the living room, Rebecca cringed, and Mindy bit her lip to keep from laughing. My mom circled around me, appraising every inch of me like a shark circling its prey.

"No, this won't work," she finally said. "What do you think of the top?"

"I like the bodice," I said, running my hands over it. "I don't mind the lace overlay either."

"Then we change the skirt," she said matter-of-factly.

"You can't cut that up," Rebecca said, standing. "It was Grandma's."

"Yes, and she's not here anymore. We'll alter it, and it will still have some meaning," Mom said. I knew from her tone the dress didn't mean shit to her.

Rebecca's eyes filled with tears, and I jumped in. "Let's see if I can find another one first before we chop this one up."

"Whatever you want," Mom said with a dismissive wave.

I changed out of the dress and rejoined the women in the living room. Laney had shown up with ice cream. My mom left with Beth to return to the vineyard, but only after making us promise we'd all be ready to leave first thing in the morning.

"I'm so glad they're gone," I said as I plopped down on the couch next to Rebecca.

"I didn't know Mom could be so cold."



“You’re kidding, right?”

“No. She’s never been that way with me.”

“Do we have different moms or something? Because she’s always been that way around me.”

Rebecca shrugged.

I huffed and folded my arms over my chest like a child.  
“Figures.”

“Who wants ice cream?” Laney asked with an uncomfortable smile on her face.

## Chapter 26



### KAT

“I CAN’T BELIEVE I ate that much. I’m so tired,” Rebecca said, rubbing a hand over her stomach.

Kate, Mindy, and Laney left hours ago. Rebecca stayed, and we binged a few movies and ate our weight in popcorn and ice cream. I was feeling bloated, which wasn’t good for wedding dress shopping in the morning.

“Me either,” I said, sitting back.

Rebecca rested her head on my shoulder, and I nearly cried with happiness. She had done that when we were growing up, and I’d missed it so much. It was mostly my fault that we weren’t close, but I had the opportunity to change that.

“Stay the night?” I asked.

“I didn’t bring any clothes.”

“Go get them and come back. It’s not like you live far away.”

“But then I have to move.”

“Want to borrow something of mine?” I asked.

She yawned and nodded. “Please.”

I forced myself to get up and went into the guest room, pulling out a T-shirt and sleep shorts for her. She stood in the doorway, taking in the room.

“You don’t sleep here, do you?” She was the second person to ask me that.

“No. I just put all of my things in here.”

“Including your clothes?”

“Yeah. It was easier for the time being.” Since it was only temporary.

“Right,” she said. But I could tell she didn’t really believe me. I hurried and gave her the clothes and then left the room for her to change. Meanwhile, I cleaned up a little and changed into clean pj’s that were upstairs in Sid’s room.

The room smelled like him, and I inhaled deeply. I missed him already. I spied a text from him on my phone as I was about to put it on the charger.

**Sid:** *Just got settled into the guest room at Will’s. How are you?*

**Me:** *Good. Watching movies with my sister. We’re having a sleepover.*

The dots jumped, and so did my heart. Wow, I had it bad. I hadn’t been this giddy while talking to a guy since high school. Maybe even before.

**Sid:** *That’s good. Have a good time. Make sure you change the sheets. Will slept in the guest room.*

He called it the guest room, not my room. I did a happy dance. I chewed on my thumb while trying to decide whether I should tell him I miss him or not. It seemed like something a fiancée would say, but we weren’t really engaged. I wasn’t even sure if we were dating.

We didn’t talk about what we were doing anymore. We’d fallen into a comfortable routine and went on dates and enjoyed the time we spent together. He’d mentioned that he wanted me to himself, but was that only because we were sleeping together, or did that mean as his girlfriend?

It was so confusing, so I decided not to say anything. I put the phone on the charger and then started to walk out of the room. My phone chimed, and I nearly twisted my ankle running to check it.

**Sid:** *I miss you.*

My insides lit up.

**Me:** *I miss you too.*

I waited a few minutes, and when nothing else came through, I set my phone down and walked out. Downstairs, Rebecca had stretched out on the couch with Shiloh. She had her eyes closed and was running her fingers through Shiloh's fur absently.

“Did you want to go to bed?” I asked.

Her eyes fluttered open, and she smiled. “No, not yet.”

“Would you like a glass of wine?” It was midnight, but I wasn't ready to go to bed yet either. I felt giddy from talking with Sid. It was crappy that I couldn't share that with my sister.

“Sure. Only one glass.”

I poured us each a glass, carried them into the living room, and handed one to Rebecca. She took a sip and smiled. It was a bottle from Sid's parents' vineyard. They had given us a few bottles to try when we visited there, and his mom brought two more today. She wanted Sid and me to choose one that we could serve as a signature wine for our wedding.

“This is so good,” Rebecca said, smacking her lips together.

I nodded in agreement. “Do you want to talk any more about what happened with Luke?”

She sighed. “Not really, but I probably should.”

“I won't say anything.”

“Thanks. I think I knew for a while that it wasn’t working out, but I kept trying because we’d invested so much time in the relationship.” She paused, taking a sip of her wine. “But the signs were all there. He never invited me to his apartment. He didn’t want me to meet his parents. I never met any of his friends. I don’t even know if he has any. He wouldn’t tell me anything about his past. I found out from Jacob that he went to law school with Will and had a degree, but when I asked him about it, he got angry and told me it was in the past.”

“He got angry?”

“Yeah. In fact, any time something came up having to do with his past, he’d get angry, and he always said ‘It’s in the past. Forget about it.’” She shook her head. “He really didn’t want to talk about Will or anything having to do with him, and any time Will was around, Luke would make up an excuse and disappear. It was strange.”

“He never told you why?” I asked.

She shook her head. “Things got worse when Will started helping me at the restaurant.”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s helped with a few things, like connecting me with Elijah and then asking Elijah’s brother Jackson to tend the bar. And the wine from his parents’ vineyard.”

“Luke didn’t like that,” I said.

“Not at all. He was furious about it. We got into a huge fight about how much time I was spending with Will and how I was letting him do things to help me when I should ask my boyfriend.”

“Did you ask Luke to help?”

She nodded. “All the time. He made excuses. I even asked him to tend bar for me, and he said no. Then I asked if he’d do it temporarily until I found someone, and he still said no.”

I frowned. “Then how could he be angry?”

She shrugged. “Beats the hell out of me. I think he had a lot of emotional trauma to work through. There was this dark energy around him, and he hardly ever smiled, especially here recently. In the beginning, he smiled a lot, but then it was like the darkness crept in again about six months ago. He went away—to help a family member, he said. He never told me anything more about it, but clearly something happened.”

I pulled her in for a hug. “I’m so sorry, Becks. It has to be hard when you’ve put that much time into a relationship.”

She sniffed. “The worst part was that I kept thinking it was me. That I’d pushed him away.”

“You didn’t do anything. Something was going on with him.”

“I know. I hope he gets the help he needs.”

I smiled. “This is why I love you. Even when someone does something bad to you, you still care about them and wish them the best.”

She chuckled and sniffed again. “I can’t help it.”

“I admire it.”

She sat up. “I’m really proud of you too.”

“Me?”

She nodded. “Yeah. You’ve changed. I didn’t want to believe it. I thought if I got my hopes up and then you left, I’d be heartbroken. But I see now that’s not going to happen.”

Tears sprang to my eyes. “That means a lot.”

She pulled me into a hug. My heart was so full it felt like it could burst.

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BACON SIZZLED IN ONE pan while I stirred eggs in another. The smell of fresh brewed coffee filled the kitchen as it dripped in the large coffee maker. Sid had a regular brew

coffee machine and one of those fast brew pod ones. I liked to brew an entire pot when I had the time, so I chose that one.

“Smells divine in here,” Rebecca said, padding into the room. She took a seat at the small table and looked out the window. “Shiloh is eating something out there.”

“Shit,” I said, running to the window. “Is that an animal?”

“Kat, the bacon.”

“Damn it.” I ran back to the skillet, flipped the bacon, and stirred the eggs. “Slap on the window or something.”

“I’ll let her in,” Rebecca said, going to the back door. She called for Shiloh and then screamed. “She has it in her mouth!”

Shiloh ran around the kitchen with something furry hanging from her jaws. I screamed and lifted my leg as she darted past me. I turned off both burners, not wanting to burn our food, and then ran over to one of the kitchen chairs. Rebecca and I each jumped onto a chair and stood there screaming.

“What do we do?” I asked frantically.

“I don’t know. Maybe let her back out?”

“You do it,” I said.

“No way. I let her in.”

“Yeah, and she brought that thing in here. What is it anyway?”

“I don’t know.”

One of us had to do something. I huffed and then jumped off the chair and ran for the back door. Shiloh followed. I opened the screen door quickly, and she ran out. I slammed the back door shut behind her and sighed in relief, sagging against the door.

“What the hell was that?” Rebecca asked.

“I have no idea, but I’m sure Sid wouldn’t want her eating it.”

“Are you going to take it from her?”

“Hell no. I’ll let her in when I know she’s done with it.”

Rebecca and I laughed.

The coffee was done, and thankfully, the eggs and bacon weren’t burned. I plated our food and poured us each a mug of coffee, then we dug in. The food was delicious, and the coffee was perfect. By the time we finished eating, Shiloh had abandoned her furry prize, and we let her back inside.

An hour later, Rebecca headed home to shower and change. My anxiety intensified as I got ready. I was going to try on wedding dresses today. For a wedding that wasn’t really going to happen.

The last time I’d worn a wedding gown, shit hit the fan. I had almost made the biggest mistake of my life. Yet as I stared at myself in the mirror while I dried my hair, it didn’t feel like I was making a mistake at all. It felt right.

The doorbell rang as I was putting the finishing touches on my makeup, and I ran down the stairs to answer it. A horde of women spilled into the house, chattering loudly. The excitement from my friends and Beth was magnetic, and I smiled.

My smile slipped when my eyes met my mom’s cold ones.

“Are you ready?” Mindy asked. She had one twin strapped to her chest and an enormous coffee in her hand.

“Who do you have there?” I asked.

“Ugh. Ava. She’s needy, just like her daddy.”

“I heard that,” Frank said, walking in with Adeline in his arms. “Here, give her to me.”

“How are you going to hold them both?”

“I can handle it,” Frank said.



Mindy put her hands on her hips. “I don’t think you can. If you could handle it, why did they need to come here?”

He frowned, and his jaw ticked as he stared at her. “You told me you needed to feed them both before we left. I was going to take Ava and hand you Addie.”

“Fine,” she said and pulled Ava from the carrier.

I turned away from them. My anxiety was already high. They were only adding to it. Laney grinned as she watched them, her eyes going back and forth like she was watching a tennis match.

Kate rolled her eyes and gave me a hug. “Are you excited?”

“Yeah?”

“You don’t sound sure.”

“I’m nervous,” I said honestly.

“That’s normal. Have you thought any more about your wedding colors?” she asked. “It would be nice to get the bridesmaid dresses picked out today too.”

That thought made me sick. It was one thing for me or my mom to pay for my dress, but it was another thing to have all of my girlfriends pay for dresses they’d never wear.

I shook my head. “Not yet.”

“No problem. We have time.”

“Let’s go. I don’t have all day,” my mom said, clapping her hands together.

I made sure that I had everything and that the back door was locked. Then we all filed out of the house, poured into a few different cars, and headed for the city.

The dress store we went to was apparently the same one Mindy, Kate, and Laney had gotten their dresses from. A woman brought a tray of champagne over and set it down on a small end table near where we were seated. Directly in front of

us was a raised platform with floor-to-ceiling mirrors on three sides. I grabbed a glass and took a big gulp, earning a chorus of laughter.

“You must be the bride-to-be,” the woman said.

“What gave it away?” I asked.

She chuckled. “My name is Ann Marie, and I’ll be helping you today. Tell me a bit about yourself.”

“Okay. My name is Katerina, but I go by Kat.” My mom scoffed, but I ignored her.

“Nice to meet you, Kat. How long have you been engaged?”

“About a month. Is it too soon? It feels like it’s too soon.”

She smiled. “There isn’t a set amount of time. Some women have short engagements and others have long ones. Let’s try some dresses on and you’ll feel better. Do you have anything in mind that you’d like to look at?”

I shook my head. Rebecca stood. “She looks amazing in things that are tight and accentuate her curves.”

“I want to see her in a mermaid cut since I couldn’t wear one,” Mindy said.

“We’re built the same. What makes you think I can?” I asked.

“I’d like something more classic and elegant. Less skin showing,” my mom said. I resisted the urge to roll my eyes.

“Anyone else?” Ann Marie asked.

No one said anything, and she turned to me. “What about you?”

“All of what they said would be fine, I guess.”

“Tell you what, go over and browse the racks while I pull a few dresses based on what the ladies mentioned. Pull any that you’d like to try on, and we’ll get you a dressing room started.”

That seemed like a good idea since I didn't know what I wanted. Before the disaster with Alessandro, I could have told you the exact dress and shoes I wanted for my wedding, but that felt like a lifetime ago, and I was very different now.

A half hour later, I had stripped down to my underwear and bra to slip on the first dress. I looked at all the white dresses hanging in the room and felt sick to my stomach. What the hell was I doing? Tears formed in my eyes. No matter how much I wanted this to be real, it wasn't.

There was a soft knock on the door. I wiped the tears away and took a deep breath. "Yes?"

"Do you need any help?" Ann Marie asked.

"No. I'll be out in a minute."

I grabbed the first dress I saw, which was the mermaid cut one, and slipped it on. I stepped out and held my hair up, turning so Ann Marie could zip me up. Then I ambled toward the mirrors and platform, holding the train in my hand.

"Holy shit! You look amazing," Mindy said. "I knew it would look good on you."

"That dress is stunning," Rebecca said.

My mom appraised it quietly and tipped her nose in the air, which I knew meant she disapproved. Beth was smiling and had her hands clasped beneath her chin. Wetness gathered in her eyes, and I had to look away.

I took a deep breath and looked in the mirror. The dress was gorgeous. It was strapless, and the rouching across the midsection hid my not so flat stomach, which was nice. However, the sweetheart neckline pushed up my cleavage, giving me extra, which wasn't what I wanted. I turned to the side and laughed. My ass looked amazing.

"Wow, it's something, all right," I said.

"You don't like it?" Mindy asked.

“It’s not...my style?” I said sheepishly. “I’m actually not a huge fan of this design.”

“Fine,” she huffed. She sat back and put her arms over her chest.

“Min, it’s Kat’s choice,” Kate said.

“How about we try the next one?” Ann Marie said. I nodded, and we headed back into the dressing room.

I hated the next gown immediately, but I knew my mom would love it. It was a ballgown with a high neckline, a lace overlay, and long sleeves. The train was so long that I was afraid I’d get it stuck in the door on my way out.

“It’s beautiful. This is the one,” Mom said as soon as I walked out. I rolled my eyes and made my way to the podium.

“It’s not you,” Rebecca said carefully.

Mom’s head snapped in her direction. “What do you mean?”

“It’s not her style, and she’s not smiling.”

“Well, maybe that’s because her style is not appropriate,” Mom said.

Rebecca frowned. “That’s not true. It’s just different from your style, and you don’t like it.”

“Because it’s not appropriate. She shows too much cleavage and wears things that are too tight. She’s too fat to wear things like that.”

My jaw dropped, and tears sprang to my eyes. My mom was cruel, and she’d always been hard on me, but she’d never come right out and called me fat.

Rebecca stood. “I can’t believe you just said that. Kat’s curvy, not fat. She doesn’t have an ounce of fat on her body. We’re built differently, but I bet you we weigh about the same. You need to apologize to her right now.”

“Becca...” I whispered.

“No Kat, she needs to apologize to you. Apologize, Mom. Right now.”

My mom locked eyes with me, and I could see the hate in them. “I’m sorry,” she gritted out.

I nodded and went back into the changing room. Tears leaked from my eyes as I tried to hold it all together. My mother was a monster. I hated her.

There was a small knock on the door, but it opened before I could respond. Rebecca came in and pulled me into her arms. I slumped against her and sobbed.

“Shh, it’s okay. I’m so sorry I never believed you when you told me she acts like that.”

I sniffed.

“Please pick a dress that you love, and I’ll keep her quiet. This day is about you. Not her.”

I stepped back. Rebecca handed me a tissue, and I blotted my eyes and then wiped my nose. “Thanks.”

She held my face in her hands and smiled. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

I put the dress I had picked out on next. As I looked at myself in the small mirror, my heart swelled. It was *the* dress. The one I wanted to get married in. Even if that wasn’t with Sid. But a wave of sadness rolled over me at the thought of not marrying him.

More tears fell, but for good reasons this time. I felt beautiful and special, like this dress had been made especially for me. I dried my eyes on the Kleenex in the dressing room and walked out.

“This dress is perfect on you. If you want more coverage up top, you can add a lace overlay or straps,” Ann Marie said. She pointed to my bare shoulders.

The sweetheart neckline on this dress came up higher than the one on the mermaid dress, so my cleavage didn’t spill out.

My favorite part was the button detail on the back, and I loved the pleated bodice. Unlike the other gowns, this dress had a gathered flounce skirt and a sweep train, so it wasn't hard to walk in, and I didn't have to worry about getting a train caught somewhere. The soft tulle of the skirt reminded me of my grandmother's dress.

"When you get up on the podium, twirl," Ann Marie whispered.

She winked and then followed me out. My smile grew when I saw everyone's reactions. They gushed over the dress and me, and my mom even looked pleased. Beth had tears in her eyes again.

When I got on the podium, I did as Ann Marie said and twirled. The dress flowed in what looked like waves when I moved from side to side, and it was gorgeous. I cried, of course, and so did Rebecca. Then Ann Marie brought out a hand bell and handed it to me.

"Ring that bell," she started chanting, and the girls joined in.

I bit my lip and then rang the bell as hard as I could. Everyone cheered, and Laney snapped a picture. It was so much fun, but it also hurt like hell because I knew I couldn't keep the dress. At least I got to feel this way for one day.

## Chapter 27



### KAT

I WOKE UP WITH A START. The room was dark, so it was either the middle of the night or early morning. Something warm was pressed against my back, but it wasn't Shiloh because she was curled up in front of me. I looked down, saw a hairy arm, and realized it was Sid. I hadn't heard him come home or climb into bed with me.

I'd cried a lot two days ago at the wedding dress shop. The stress overwhelmed me, and when I returned home, I spent the night crying. The next day, I called in sick and spent the day on the couch bingeing romance movies, which opened the floodgates again. I was so exhausted that I passed out hard.

I'd been sleeping in Sid's bed before he went away, so I stayed there while he was gone, and I was glad I had.

Slowly, I turned to look at him. My chest pinched. He was so handsome. His long, thick hair was covering part of his face. His beard was longer than he normally wore it. He had told me he was working hard, and clearly the case was taking a toll on him.

I carefully climbed out of bed and stood beside it. The sheet draped over his hips, exposing his chest and abs. I loved his tattoos because they fit his personality so well. I noticed the new one on his chest looked a little red and made a mental note to rub some ointment on it when he woke up.

Shiloh jumped off the bed, and the tags on her collar jingled. I winced, but Sid didn't move. I threw on a pair of sweats and a long-sleeve shirt and tiptoed out of the room and down the stairs. I fed Shiloh, then started the coffeepot.

It was seven in the morning, and the sun was rising. I took my coffee to the front porch with Shiloh and read on my Kindle, enjoying the warmth of the sun on my face. It was cold out, but the blanket I'd brought with me helped. An hour later, I went back inside to start breakfast.

I rummaged through the fridge and took out what I'd need to make french toast. I wasn't as good a cook as Rebecca, but I could hold my own in the kitchen. Especially with breakfast foods. The batter was ready, and I'd put the first piece in the skillet when Sid walked in shirtless, his abs on display.

His hair was a wild mess around his head, and the damn gray sweats that did crazy things to my libido rode low on his hips. A small trail of hair disappeared into the waistband of those sweats, and I wanted to rip them off. I knew what was underneath. My skin heated, and my mouth watered.

Sid cleared his throat, and I peeled my eyes away from his crotch. He smirked, and my face burned.

"When did you get home?" I asked, turning back to the stove. I flipped the piece of french toast. Sausage sizzled in another pan. Everything was almost ready.

"Early this morning. You don't remember?"

"No. Did I talk to you?" I had carried on conversations in my sleep in the past.

"Yeah. You asked if I'd finished the case, and I told you yes and to go back to sleep. You did."

"I'm sorry. I used to do that a lot with Rebecca. It's awful if I have a secret. There were a few times she got stuff out of me in my sleep."

Sid wrapped his arms around my midsection from behind and rested his chin on my shoulder. "Good to know. Mmm,



this smells good. What are you making?"

"French toast. There's a fresh pot of coffee. The food will be ready in a few minutes."

He kissed my neck and then my cheek before moving away to get some coffee. I flipped off the burners and plated our breakfast. Sid was at the table, scrolling through his phone. I set down our plates, refilled my coffee, and took a seat.

"This looks amazing. Thank you," he said.

"You're welcome. I'm not the greatest cook."

He took a big bite, chewed, and hummed. "It's delicious."

I looked down at my plate and smiled.

"What have you been up to?" he asked.

Should I tell him about the wedding planning and dress shopping? Would he be angry that I was moving forward with the wedding when it wasn't real? The panic that had been simmering for the past two days returned with a flurry, making me sick.

"Kat?" he asked around a bite of sausage.

"Our moms showed up when you left and brought all our friends, and they forced me to plan the wedding, then they took me to the city to pick out a wedding dress," I blurted out in one breath.

His hand froze with the fork in midair. He blinked a few times. His expression was unreadable. My heart hammered in my chest. Was he angry?

The air grew thick with tension, and I thought I was going to throw up. He snapped his mouth shut, set his fork down, and sat back. When he cleared his throat, I jumped.

"Start at the beginning."

I told him about how my mom and his mom showed up, followed by Mindy, Laney, Kate, and Rebecca. About how they took over his living room and asked me a bunch of

questions about the wedding, like colors and flowers. I explained how my mom brought my grandma's dress for me to try on and how she suggested we cut it up and then how both of our moms had set up an appointment in the city at the same bridal shop all our friends used and I tried on dresses.

When I finished, he looked like he was in shock again, and my anxiety took over. Tears filled my eyes. Sid's eyes widened, and then he was out of his chair. He pulled me against him and kissed the top of my head.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean for this to happen."

"No, I'm sorry. I didn't know what to do, so I just went along with it."

He kneeled in front of me. "Kat, this isn't your fault. It's mine."

"You're not mad at me?"

He frowned. "Why would I be mad at you?"

"Because I'm planning our wedding and we aren't really engaged?"

He shook his head and sighed. "I didn't think this far ahead. If I'm being honest, I didn't think about anything past the gala. But once the gossip blog caught wind of the engagement and then our friends, I didn't know what to do. I guess I assumed we'd have a long engagement and then split amicably."

There was a pinch in my chest at hearing him talk about us breaking up, which was stupid since we weren't really together. We'd been acting like a couple, and there were feelings on both sides, but we'd never established what this really was. Yes, we both agreed we wouldn't be with anyone else, but I'd had that agreement in the past with a guy I was casually sleeping with.

This was a lot more than a casual fling. My heart was invested, and now I couldn't imagine life without Sid in it. Making breakfast this morning, watching the sunrise on his

porch, talking with him at the table, it all felt natural, like something we did regularly. How would I go back to living alone after this?

“I’m sorry,” he said again.

I shrugged. “It’s okay.”

He studied my eyes and then leaned in. His lips brushed mine in a featherlight kiss, as if he was testing to see if it was okay. I pressed my lips harder against his, reassuring him that it was more than okay. He reached up and cupped the back of my head, holding me in place. His kiss was tender, and it sang through my veins.

I cupped his face while my tongue stroked inside his mouth. He stood without taking his mouth from mine, kicked out the chair beside him, and sat. Then he pulled me forward. I yelped, and he growled as he settled me on his lap. His mouth was on mine again, but this time, the kiss was deeper.

His hard length pressed against my core, and desire flooded me, causing my body to tingle. Sid’s hand was on the back of my head, holding it in place while his beard scraped my smooth skin like sandpaper.

All my thoughts and fears about what we were doing flew out the window. My mind emptied the way it always did when Sid’s mouth and hands were on me. I loved how he could turn my thoughts off and just make me feel.

One of his big hands cupped my breast through my shirt. He rubbed his thumb in tiny circles until my nipple was a hard bead and I was mewling into his mouth. I rocked my hips and ground against him. The hardness of his dick slid against my clit, and I moaned.

He groaned, and the hand that had been on my breast moved to my hip. With one hand on the back of my head and one on my hip, Sid had total control of my body. He rocked me back and forth against his dick while holding my head in place and devouring my mouth. He consumed me.

Sid moved away from my mouth to kiss over my jaw and down the column of my neck.

“God, I missed you. I want you so fucking bad,” he growled.

His beard scraped against my skin, and I shivered and moaned, writhing against his erection.

“The things I want to do to you.”

“Yes,” I cried.

He lifted me as he stood and carried me out of the kitchen to the stairs. He paused and pressed me back into the wall at the base of the staircase, taking my mouth again. My senses reeled as if they’d short-circuited.

He pulled back, leaving my body burning and my mouth tingling, and then he was moving up the stairs and down the short hall to his bedroom. Gently, he placed me on the bed and came down on top of me, grinding his hips into me. My pussy throbbed at the feel of his dick. His lips smashed against mine again, and his hand kneaded my breast.

I was lost in the thrusting of his hips, his hand on my breast, and his tongue slicking in and out of my mouth. I moaned and dug my fingernails into the skin of his back, arching up so I could feel his body against mine. It wasn’t enough. I needed skin to skin.

Sid moved back when I pushed lightly at his chest, giving me just enough room to pull my shirt over my head. He groaned as his eyes drank me in. I wasn’t wearing a bra, and my nipples were hard points, begging for his mouth.

His hands gently traced around my breasts. The fervent desire in his eyes burned my skin. He rubbed his thumbs in tiny circles over the sensitive tips. The way he took his time made it more erotic.

I cupped his face, and when his eyes met mine, tears pricked my eyes. His expression was a mix of adoration and pain, and I couldn’t understand it, but I felt it deep inside.

Slowly, with his eyes locked on mine, he leaned down and took one breast into his mouth. His tongue swirled around my nipple, and he nipped lightly the way I liked.

After an agonizing few minutes on one breast, he moved to the other, giving it the same lavish attention. I was writhing beneath him, my pussy ached, and I was wetter than I'd ever been. I was ready to beg him for more when his hand moved down my abdomen to the hem of my sweats.

He gripped the edge of my pants and dragged them down my legs, leaving me in my thong and nothing else. I needed to touch him. I trailed my fingers over his chest, running them through the smattering of hair there. Next, I moved on to the ripples of his abs and down to the trail of hair that led into his sweats.

When I slipped my hand under his waistband, I was surprised to find he wasn't wearing underwear. His dick was as hard as steel. I wrapped my hand around him and squeezed. He groaned, and I did it again, then moved my hand up to collect the bead of pre-cum at the tip and spread it down his length. His hand cupped mine through the fabric of his sweats, and I thought he was going to stop me. But instead, he started moving my hand, showing me how he liked it.

I smiled and followed his instructions. He dropped his hand and tipped his head back. God, he was sexy. The vein in his neck pulsed, and his eyes were closed.

Sid pulled back from my grip, and when his eyes met mine, a shiver ran through me. They were dark and burned with lust. It was a heady feeling knowing I put that there. He kissed his way down my body, and when he reached my center, he inhaled deeply and ripped my thong from my body. His big hands shoved my legs apart roughly.

A shocked gasp escaped me, and then his mouth was on me. My toes curled, and I gripped his hair, needing to anchor myself to something while he devoured me. He didn't hold back, and my orgasm came on fast. I shuddered, and my legs quaked as pleasure rippled through me.

He pushed two fingers inside, twisted them, and made a come-hither motion. He was playing my pussy like a guitar. I exploded, screaming out his name, and ground my hips into his face.

I'd never had an orgasm that strong or that quickly before. The waves went on and on, and I thought for a minute that I'd die from pleasure overload.

I panted and struggled to catch my breath, but Sid was right there to catch me. He pressed gentle, loving kisses on my skin as he made his way up my body. When he finally reached my mouth, I could taste the saltiness of myself on his tongue.

Sid was a pleasant surprise. He was so reserved and grumpy on the outside, but in the bedroom, he was confident, controlled, and dirty. I was lucky enough to see the many sides of him. He was more than I ever expected.

# Chapter 28



## SID

AS I STARED DOWN at Kat, my chest expanded, and her warmth and sunshine spilled into the cracks, lighting up the darkness that had surrounded my heart for so long. I didn't feel worthy of her or happiness, and yet I couldn't bring myself to walk away. She was amazing and gorgeous as fuck. Most of all, she put up with me. She made me want to be a better man, someone deserving of her love.

I ran my hands over the mounds of her breasts, down the soft slope of her stomach, and over the curves of her hips. I could have spent hours worshipping her if my dick wasn't aching to be inside of her. I leaned over to the nightstand and grabbed a condom. Her eyes dilated as she watched me roll it down my length.

"Are you ready for me?" I asked.

She nodded. Her eyes were hooded with lust.

I fisted my dick and coated myself in her wetness. Looking deep into her eyes, I pushed inside slowly. Her walls hugged my cock and fluttered around me, and it felt like coming home. Fuck, I was so gone for her, and I wasn't sure when it had happened, but it was the best feeling in the world.

Warmth radiated out of me, and I dropped my forehead to hers, praying she felt the same. It scared the shit out of me, but when I looked into her eyes, a sense of calm washed over me. She was right there with me. I kissed her as I pumped in and out of her, slow and unhurried.

I poured myself into her with every thrust of my hips, with every kiss, and with every touch. She held my face in her hands and looked into my eyes. There was love there, and it blew my heart wide open. I never thought I'd have the chance to feel this way.

The tragedy I'd experienced years ago wrecked me, slowly filling my heart with darkness. As each of my friends fell in love, the darkness took hold more and more until I couldn't find happiness. But I'd found it in the most unlikely person, and I wanted to hold on to her forever, even though the deeper I fell for her, the more the guilt ate away at me.

Kat moaned and circled her hips. I groaned and rocked into her. This wasn't sex; it was so much more. Kat's eyes were glassy, and I was right there with her, filled with a deep emotion I wasn't ready to name. I showed her instead.

I leaned forward and captured her mouth, sliding my tongue lazily in and out of her mouth in time with my hips. We moved like that for a while, connected deeply. My mind went blank, and all I could do was feel.

Kat wrapped her legs around my hips, pulling me in deeper. We moaned together. When her nails dug into my back, I groaned and nearly came. She bit her bottom lip and pressed her heels into the backs of my thighs.

My restraint slipped, and I bucked my hips into her hard.

“Yes. God, yes.”

“You're amazing. You know that?”

She looked up at me in surprise and then kissed me deeply. Her hands gripped my ass, and I knew what she wanted. I picked up the pace and thrust into her hard and fast. Her moans turned to whimpers and mewls.

“You need to come for me, baby. I can't hold on much longer.” I grunted as I thrust in hard, angling my hips up.

She screamed, and her walls clamped down on me. I pumped into her a few more times, the euphoric feeling almost



too much. She was squeezing me so damn hard. Her screams were loud enough to alert the neighbors to our activity but filled my chest with pride.

My orgasm came on fast and hard, pulling a roar from deep in my chest. I thrust forward hard and then stilled, spilling inside her. My forearms shook as I tried to hold myself up. I pulled out and rolled to the side, keeping a hand on her belly.

“That was amazing,” she said as she stared at the ceiling.

“Mmm.”

She giggled and rolled over to face me. There was clearly something she wanted to say, and based on her shy expression, I had a pretty good idea what it was, but I wasn’t ready to talk about it yet.

Thankfully, my phone rang on the nightstand. I picked it up and swore.

“Can you bring more beer and wine? Also, Min said we need more plates,” Frank said when I answered.

Kat’s eyes widened, and she sat up.

“Sure.”

“Are you guys on your way?”

“It’s ten in the morning. No, we’re not on our way,” I said.

“Kat was supposed to come help with the girls, and you said you’d help with food and set up. Quit fucking and get over here.” He hung up before I could respond.

Kat’s face turned bright red. She’d obviously heard the last part.

“Get over here.” I pushed her back down and rolled on top of her. “I’m not done.”

“But Frank said—”

“I don’t give a damn what Frank says. He’s full of hot air.”

“Mindy needs my help. She’ll be calling next.”

Kat's phone rang on cue, and I growled. She giggled and answered on speaker.

"Where are you?" Mindy asked.

"At home."

I smiled at hearing Kat call my house her home. It felt like that with her in it. I moved her hair out of the way and kissed her shoulder.

"Quit banging and get over here."

"I was about to get ready," Kat said.

"Wait, how was it?" Mindy asked. I froze, and my eyes widened. Did they really talk about this stuff?

"You're on speaker, Min."

"Oh shit. Hi, Sid."

"Hi," I said gruffly. "You're interrupting."

"Yeah, sorry, not sorry. There's a shit ton to do, and we're behind."

"Shit, why didn't you say so?" I asked. "We'll be over shortly."

"I thought Frank had," Mindy said. "Should have figured he didn't."

"We'll be there as soon as we can," Kat said.

She hung up and gave me a sweet kiss before climbing out of bed. I jumped off and chased after her. She ran into the bathroom, but I pushed my way in before she could close the door.

"You're not showering without me."

"It'll take twice as long," she complained. I knew she didn't mind by her smile.

I reached behind her and turned on the water, then guided her under the spray. We were going to be late.

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“I CAN’T WAIT TO eat all the good food,” Kat said.

Kat had suggested we both wear comfortable clothes so we could eat as much as we wanted. She’d put on black leggings with a red off-the-shoulder tunic sweater. I had on a pair of fitted jogger pants with a button at the waistband and a blue and white striped button-up.

The air nipped at us when we walked up the gravel walkway to the front porch of Frank and Mindy’s. The sun was out, but it was still cold. Kat shivered and rushed inside, a bottle of wine in each hand. I tucked the beer under my arm so I could carry the two pies she’d baked.

Inside, the house was buzzing. There was so much noise that I had a powerful urge to turn back around. Kat smiled at me over her shoulder, and it calmed my nerves a tad. It didn’t matter that everyone here was like family. Crowds made me nervous, no matter who they were.

We walked into the kitchen, and I regretted not leaving. The place was a disaster. A frazzled-looking Mindy was at the island, stuffing the turkey. Frank had one twin strapped to his chest and was feeding the other in a bouncy seat on top of the breakfast nook table.

“We’re here. Sorry it took so long,” Kat said.

“I’m sure you are,” Mindy muttered with her arm a third of the way up the turkey.

“Why isn’t Frank doing that?” I asked.

He scowled at me. “She won’t let me.”

I shook my head, not understanding the two of them but also not wanting to get into it.

“Here, let me,” Kat said. She set down the bottles of wine and took over feeding Adaline in the bouncy seat.

“What can we do?” I asked.

“Set up the seating and then come back for further instructions,” Mindy said. “Kat, your job is to watch the twins. Frank, don’t you dare take that sleeping baby out of that carrier.”

He held his hands up and backed out of the kitchen. I chuckled and followed him.

Frank and I walked through the sunroom and outside. He had a large horizontal shed that sat up against the house on the other side of his immaculate patio. We pulled out folding chairs and a card table and carried them inside.

I brought in two extra chairs from the outdoor patio since I had invited my brothers to join us, and that made seventeen. Frank’s large oak table with matching chairs and bench seat could fit eleven. More if people squished together on the bench.

Peter had built the table, and when I had a bigger house, I would have him make me one too. He made all kinds of furniture and sold most of it in his store, Double Oak Furnishings, below his office. I had a few pieces, like the coffee table and end table, but I wanted that dining table.

“How’s the case?” Frank asked.

“Over finally. We caught the guy as he tried to board a plane.”

Frank frowned. “Caught him? I thought the people were dead.”

“It’s a long story.”

“I’m all ears. Nothing interesting ever happens around here.”

“This about the case?” Peter asked, joining us.

“Yeah.”

“Crazy. He would have gotten away with it if he hadn’t started the fire,” Peter said.

“I need the details,” Frank whined.

“Nash had been poking around some cold cases to pass the time and stumbled across one that involved both our towns. His boss had done most of the legwork on their end, but Nash pulled the case from our archives and started piecing things together. A man named Herman who worked at the mill was married to a woman named Annabeth. They lived in Ridge Point. Herman was murdered. Gunshot wound to the abdomen.”

“Jesus, that’s a horrible way to go,” Frank said. “Let me guess, it was the wife?”

“Nope. She was found a few days later in a park near here. Strangled.”

Frank’s eyes widened.

“Nash had a theory, and it was pretty good. He guessed that the wife was having an affair with one of the husband’s coworkers or friends, and the lover murdered the husband.”

“Go on,” Frank said. Ava stirred in her carrier, and he started bouncing her. His eyes were fixed on me, waiting for more.

“For weeks, we looked at the cases separately, concentrating on the why and also making a list of suspects. Nash and I got together for lunch and found one common suspect. We paid him a visit, but he wasn’t home. Nothing came of the lead until the investigation of the fire was complete. Chief Hanson told us that they found a body in the rubble, but the person hadn’t been killed in the fire.”

Peter had already heard the story. Since he was the mayor of Oak Springs, we’d filled him in on what was going on while we were putting the case together. Frank, however, was hearing this for the first time and was on the edge of his seat.

“Long story short, the man we suspected was Lloyd Banks. Turns out Lloyd was Annabeth’s lover. Herman found out, and Lloyd killed him and ran off with Annabeth.”

Frank leaned forward, making Ava fuss. “What about the fire and the body and Annabeth? Don’t leave me hanging.”

Peter chuckled, and I rolled my eyes. “Lloyd also killed Annabeth, but we didn’t know why until yesterday. Lloyd had gotten away with the murders for ten years. He continued to work at the mill and live life normally until Walter, one of his coworkers, mentioned that Nash was poking around the murders. Lloyd used Walter for information for a while until Walter started coming up with his own theories about what happened. Apparently one of those theories was a little too close to the truth, so Lloyd killed him too. Lloyd needed to get rid of poor old Walter, so he started the fire to cover up the murder, hoping the authorities would assume Walter had died in the fire.”

“Wow. That’s terrible,” Frank said.

“Yeah. After Lloyd set the fire, he fled and hid out for a while. When Nash and I put the pieces together, we started digging into Lloyd’s life. Hard. We found out he’d purchased an airline ticket with his credit card and got there in time to apprehend him before he boarded the plane. We almost missed him.”

“Damn.”

I nodded. It had been a crazy week, and I was exhausted. The case was over, and although I wanted to relax, I had to deal with the issue at home. The thought of trying to sort that mess out made my stomach twist. Kat and I had just started to get comfortable with each other. But I still couldn’t marry her.

“But what happened with the woman? Why did Lloyd kill her?” Frank asked.

“Ah, that was the million-dollar question. Turns out she never wanted to run off with Lloyd. In fact, she had told a few friends from out of state about him and said he was scaring her. She had tried to end the affair, but Lloyd thought her marriage was the obstacle. He figured taking out Herman would free her to be with him. When she told him that wasn’t what she wanted, he killed her.”

Kate and her kids walked into the room. Jack made a beeline for Frank's legs, nearly taking him and Ava out.

"Whoa, buddy." Frank laughed and tousled Jack's hair once he'd regained his balance.

"He's been dying to see you," Peter said.

Then he turned to me, as if I needed an explanation. "He doesn't get to see Frank and Mindy much since they're busy with the girls and the camp."

Kate kissed Frank's cheek and then mine and circled back to the door. She walked past Kat in the doorway and gave her a peck too. Kat was staring at me with a shell-shocked look in her eyes. I frowned, and she shook her head like she was coming out of a fog.

"Mindy sent me to get you, Frank," she said.

He walked around her and into the kitchen. Kat was still looking at me funny, and I walked over and pulled her against me. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"That face doesn't look like nothing. Are you jealous that Kate kissed me?"

She laughed but wouldn't make eye contact. "Don't be silly."

I quirked one eyebrow. "Am I?"

"Yes. Do you want something to drink?"

"You're deflecting."

"Let it go," she whispered.

"For now."

She huffed and then folded her arms over her chest. "Drink?"

I smirked. "Beer, please."

Without responding, she turned and walked back into the kitchen.

“What was that about?” Peter asked.

“Nosy much?” I joked.

“Making sure everything is good.”

“I think she was a little jealous of your wife’s greeting.”

Peter chuckled. “I am too. I told her to stop putting her lips all over my friends, but she just pats my arm and tells me to shut up.”

I laughed. Kate was the sweetest person I’d ever met. And although I’d asked her out when she first arrived in Oak Springs, she was only a friend now. A fantastic friend.

Kat returned with a beer. She handed it to me and tried to retreat, but I grabbed her wrist and hauled her against me. “We’re not doing this.”

“Excuse me?”

I remembered Jack and Lily were there and decided to take the conversation outside. I led Kat out the door and onto the patio. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

“Sid, I need to get back inside.”

“Not until you tell me what’s wrong,” I said, blocking her way.

She huffed. “Fine. I saw Kate kiss you, and it made me angry. Happy?”

I smiled. “Very.”

“What?”

I wrapped my arms around her and buried my nose in her neck. Her long hair was down in waves and smelled like the new herbal shampoo she had in my bathroom. Her neck smelled sweet like honey, and I snaked my tongue out to get a taste. She moaned low and dug her nails into my forearms.



Slowly, I kissed a path up her neck to her ear, nipping at the lobe. She gasped, then melted against me. My dick swelled, making my joggers tent obscenely, but I didn't care. All I cared about was Kat.

“Sid, we have to stop,” Kat panted.

“Baby, I can't. Not when you taste like sunshine and honey.”

She whimpered and leaned forward. I nipped at her jawline.

“Should you really be doing that where everyone can see?” Laney asked.

I turned Kat around and used her as a shield while I willed the blood to return to my head. Jacob had a hand over Gracie's eyes and a giant grin on his face.

“Really, there are children,” Laney said. “Come on, Gracie.”

She frowned at us as she urged her daughter inside. Isaac, in his baby seat over her arm, was blissfully oblivious.

“Busted,” Jacob said as he passed. He clapped me on the back and then went inside.

“Oh my God.” Kat covered her face with her hands.

I chuckled and buried my face in her shoulder. The off-the-shoulder design exposed it to the air, and I nipped at it. She swatted me and walked inside. I laughed, my chest feeling lighter than it had in a long time. I adored her.

## Chapter 29



### KAT

“I CAN’T BELIEVE YOU told them we’d babysit,” Sid grumbled.

“I didn’t say *we*. I said I would. I can’t help that you live here.”

Last night at dinner, the girls had complained about how they couldn’t go Black Friday shopping with the kids. I’d gone out for many years on Black Friday and was done with it, so I offered to watch the kiddos for them. The guys were going golfing and then spending the day at Frank or Jacob’s playing poker.

I figured it wouldn’t be a hard job with Gracie’s help. She was ten now and good with the kids.

“Go hang out with the guys,” I said, putting more cereal onto Lily’s tray. At two, she was adorable as hell, but she was also mischievous, and Kate said this would contain her.

The twins were down for a morning nap in their Pack ’n Play in the spare room, and Isaac was asleep in Sid’s office. Jack and Gracie were watching cartoons in the living room.

Sid took a sip of his coffee and frowned.

“What?” I asked.

“I can’t leave you here with all of them.”

“Why not? Gracie is here, and she can entertain Jack and keep her brother happy. I can handle the rest.”

He looked conflicted.

“Sid, I’m fine. Go.”

“I’ll stay,” he said, taking a seat at the table. “I’ll help.”

I laughed, and he scowled, which made me laugh harder.

Two hours later, Sid and I had a system down. He played with the older kids, and I fed and diapered the young ones. It was working so far, but the kids were all awake at the same time, and I felt a little frazzled.

Sid was on the floor, letting Lily and Jack climb all over him. Next to me, Gracie was feeding Ava a bottle while the baby rested on a pillow in her lap. I was feeding Adaline while bouncing Isaac in a bouncy seat with my foot. It was quiet, and I hoped it stayed that way.

“She’s done,” Gracie said.

“Thanks. Sid, could you help Gracie?”

“Sure.”

He hopped up and redid his hair. He had it tied back so the kids wouldn’t yank on it. It was half up in the smallest ponytail since it was too short to all go back, but I liked that look on him. A lot. Gracie handed Ava to him, and he put her over his shoulder and bounced her while he burped her. It looked so natural, and my stomach and lady bits all fluttered.

That must have been what those girls on that reality show were talking about when they said they had “fanny flutters.” Every part of me was buzzing for him. He caught me looking at him and winked. Was it possible to die from swooning?

Sid bounced Ava until she fell asleep, then he laid her down in the guest room. Isaac was next to go, falling asleep in the bouncy seat. Addy was still awake, but with two down, we could handle the rest.

“It’s lunchtime, everyone,” I announced. Gracie hopped up and followed Sid into the kitchen.

“Can I help, Uncle Sid?” she asked.

It still surprised me when Jack, Gracie, and Lily called him Uncle. But they called all of our friends Aunt and Uncle, including me, which I didn't always respond to because I still wasn't used to it.

Sid and Gracie put together peanut butter and jelly sandwiches with chips and fruit. After lunch, I put Adaline and Lily to bed. The other two little ones were still sleeping, which left us with Gracie and Jack. I plopped down on the couch and put my feet up on the coffee table. Sid sat beside me with Jack on his lap.

Kate had said Jack was hit or miss with the naps, but he looked tired. Sid rested his head back against the couch, and I knew both he and Jack would be asleep within a few minutes. I had three baby monitors—all three women brought theirs—and the volume on all of them was all the way up. I tipped my head back and closed my eyes.

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“AUNT KAT, WAKE UP.” I felt tiny hands on my arms, but I couldn't seem to pry my eyes open. Sleep felt so good. “Wake up, Aunt Kat.”

I opened one eye, and Gracie giggled. I opened my other eye and saw everyone was awake.

“How did I sleep through all the noise?” I asked.

Sid shrugged. He was changing Isaac's diaper while bouncing a crying Ava in the seat on the floor with his foot. Addie was in the playpen screaming, and Jack was coloring on the floor instead of the piece of paper right beside him.

“Oh my God. What the hell happened?” I screeched.

I jumped up and grabbed Addie first, then snatched the crayons out of Jack's hand while promising Sid that I would clean the marks up with a Magic Eraser. I handed Addie and a bottle to Gracie, who had a pillow waiting, then unstrapped Ava from her seat and picked her up. She stopped crying and grabbed a chunk of my ponytail.

Sid finished changing Isaac and grabbed a bottle. He handed Jack a snack cup and settled in beside me on the couch.

“We were doing okay,” he said.

A laugh bubbled out of me. “No, you weren’t. Chaos was ensuing.”

“Yeah, but I tried to wake you, and you didn’t budge.”

“How did I sleep through all the crying?”

He chuckled. “No clue. They were pretty loud.”

“I’m sorry.”

He leaned over and pecked me on the cheek. I sighed and rested my head back against the couch. Sid mirrored my posture. The only sound was the television.

“Where’s Lily?” I asked.

Sid lifted his head and looked around. “Where’s Shiloh?”

“Crap,” I whispered. I handed him Ava and darted into the kitchen.

“Lily, *no*,” I whined. An empty jar of peanut butter sat beside her, and Shiloh’s black fur was light brown. Lily had peanut butter in her hair and all over her body and clothes.

“Shit,” Sid said from behind me. I groaned and turned around, bracing myself for an angry scowl. To my surprise, Sid wasn’t angry at all. He was laughing. “I guess someone is going to need a bath. Shiloh, tub.”

Shiloh took off toward the guest bath. Sid handed me Isaac and picked up Lily. He curled his lip in disgust and held her well away from his body. Lily giggled the entire way to the bathroom.

I went back to the living room and made sure everyone else was okay while Sid bathed Lily and Shiloh together. An hour later, there was a knock at the door. Sid opened it, and the dads poured in.

“I can’t believe everyone survived,” Frank said.

“Thanks for having faith in me,” I snipped.

“I had faith in you, but not the kids. Or Sid.”

Sid opened his mouth and then glanced at Gracie and closed it. He scowled at Frank.

“I had bath wif doggie,” Lily told Peter.

“You did?” he asked and shot us a look.

I looked at Sid. He shrugged. “She got into the peanut butter and covered herself and the dog. I bathed them together since Shiloh does well in the water.”

Peter burst out laughing. “Kate should have warned you about her. The same thing happened last week at Frank’s. Except with a pig and poop.”

“Ew,” I said, wrinkling up my nose. The peanut butter suddenly didn’t seem so bad.

“Let’s let these guys have some peace,” Jacob said.

Sid helped the guys load all the baby stuff and then the kids into their vehicles. The house was finally quiet, and I collapsed onto the couch. Sid came in and sat beside me.

“Wow. That was a lot harder than I thought,” he said.

“Yeah.”

He turned on the television and reclined on the couch. I snuggled into his side.

“Thanks for helping me today,” I said.

“Any time.”

“You handled them well.”

“That’s not what you said earlier.”

“I was frazzled.”

He chuckled.

“Do you want kids?” I bit my lip while I waited for his answer. The silence stretched out between us, and I wanted to take back what I said.

“I haven’t thought about it.”

He was lying. I wasn’t sure how I knew, but I did, and I feared the answer was truly no. That was a deal breaker for me. I wanted to be a mom, and after seeing Sid in action today, I knew he’d make an excellent dad.

Sadness washed over me. But why should it matter anyway? This wasn’t real, and even though I could see a future with Sid, we had an expiration date. One day, he’d be tired of pretending, and that would be the end. My chest twinged at the thought of not waking up to Sid. What we shared was deep, and I wanted to hold on to it. I wasn’t pretending anymore, and I hoped Sid wasn’t either.

# Chapter 30



SID

## *Daily Happenings*

*Kat was spotted dress shopping and making wedding plans before the holiday, and we found out that she and Sid have set a date. Kate has dubbed the couple Katney, which we thought was adorable. The wedding will take place at Mountain View Vineyard and Winery, which is owned by Sid's parents, Beth and Steve Lewis.*

*When? Late spring/early summer. We don't have the exact date, but when we find out, we'll let you know.*

*Stay tuned for more news in Oak Springs.*

CONNIE PUT HER PHONE down and beamed at me.

"It's not news," I grumped.

"But it's true? You've set a date?"

"Why is that so important?" I asked.

She shrugged. "It just is. It's the next step after getting engaged. The most important step."

"Yes, but isn't getting engaged a promise to be married? Why can't my promise be enough for now?"

"I don't know. So when's the date?"

"Out," I growled.

She laughed and stayed put.



“Connie, get out of my office and let me work.”

“What work? The case is over, and Christmas is coming. It’s time to be jolly.”

I growled, and she laughed again. “Is there a reason you came in here in the first place?”

“Yes, to ask you to help me get the Christmas decorations from the rafters. It’s time to deck these halls.”

I rolled my eyes and pushed out of my chair, walked to my office door, and bellowed for Nelson. He came running.

“Yes, sir?”

“Help Connie.”

Connie stood and walked to the door, stopping in front of me. “Try to find a little cheer?”

“Bah humbug.”

She patted my face and followed Nelson out, explaining everything she needed from the rafters. I closed my door and sat down at my desk. It had been two weeks since Thanksgiving, which meant it was time for holiday cheer to explode all over Oak Springs. It was also my least favorite time of the year.

It was a romantic time, a time for families, a time for reflecting on the last year and giving gifts. I’d lost my cheer years ago when tragedy struck on Christmas Eve, and I hadn’t celebrated the holiday since. This year marked seven years since it happened. And for each of the past seven years, I had spent the season holed up in my house, drinking until the ball dropped on New Year’s Eve.

With Kat at my house, it was hard to escape, especially because she was practically jolly freaking St. Nick. She dragged me to get a tree from Jacob’s farm and decorated it while I was working a night shift last week. The house smelled of gingerbread and pine, and I wanted to throw up. Not because it smelled bad, but because it brought back painful memories.

I hadn't had a tree in years, and I sure as hell hadn't taken part in the Oak Springs Christmas extravaganza Kate had put on over the past few years. Not that she didn't do an amazing job of transforming the town. Last year, the theme was *The Nutcracker*.

Frank and Jacob understood why I didn't want to take part in the holiday, and they didn't push me. The town didn't seem to notice I wasn't there either since they had dubbed me the town grouch. What was it they called me, Grumpy Sheriff?

My cell phone rang, and I groaned.

"Hello?"

"Sid, hi. It's Kate. I was wondering if you and Kat were coming to the tree lighting tonight."

"That's tonight?" I asked, running a hand through my hair. "I...I'll check with Kat."

"Great. I think she mentioned she was, but I forgot, and I wanted to get a count."

"A count?"

She laughed. "Yes. I like to know a roundabout number so we can provide enough hot chocolate and cookies. You guys were on my list to call because you didn't answer the online poll."

I rolled my eyes. "That's because we missed the last town meeting. I didn't know there was a poll."

"I mentioned it to Kat, but maybe she forgot. Anyway, can you let me know as soon as possible?"

"Can't you make a few extras, just in case?" I asked.

"Yeah...I guess we could."

I could hear the disappointment in her voice. "I'll get right back to you," I promised.

"Thanks."

I hung up and went in search of Connie. The squad room was bustling, but not in a good way. Christmas had exploded inside the station. Decorations were strewn everywhere, and Christmas music was playing from somewhere. Connie was singing along. She was also dancing on a ladder, and that didn't sit well with me.

"Connie," I barked. She startled and almost lost her balance. I should have been more careful. "Make Nelson climb the ladder."

"I already offered, and she told me no. That's why I'm holding it," he said.

"I was fine until you brought your grinch attitude out here. Go away," Connie said.

Grumbling, I walked out of the station and to my truck. I stopped at Lettuce Eat before going home. When I walked in the front door of my house, I froze. Kat had a guitar in her lap, and she was playing a song and singing. Her voice was delicate but lilting, reminding me of the folk singers my mom listened to when we were younger.

She noticed me and stopped. "Oh, hi."

"I didn't know you played. That was beautiful," I said, walking in and setting our food on the coffee table.

"Thank you. My grandfather on my mom's side taught us to play instruments when we were younger. Rebecca chose the piano, and I chose the guitar. We were both blessed with singing voices like our mom." She stood and leaned the guitar against the wall.

"Tell me more," I said, taking a seat on the couch.

She shrugged. "Not much to tell. My grandpa died when I was a teen, and I asked for his guitar so I could continue playing. What brings you home for lunch?"

"I wanted to see you," I said. The lie felt bitter on my tongue.

"Is that all?" she pressed.

“No.”

“I figured. Spill.”

“Kate wants to know if we’re going to the tree lighting tonight. I guess there was an online poll, but we didn’t answer.”

“Oh, shoot. I wasn’t sure what you wanted to do, and then I sort of forgot. Do you want to go?”

“I have to work.”

“Oh, okay. I’ll let her know it will only be me. I’ll go with Rebecca.”

I nodded.

“Is that all?”

It was now or never. Would she leave me when she found out I was broken? That I couldn’t give her what she deserved and wanted? Hell, we never talked about what was happening between us. This all had gotten out of hand, and I didn’t know what to do.

She looked at me hopefully, and I decided it could all wait. We still had two weeks before Christmas. There would be plenty of time to tell her.

“Yeah. That was it. I wanted to see you. I missed you.”

She smiled. “How long do you have for lunch?”

The heat in her eyes caused all the blood in my body to rush south. That’s what I needed. To bury myself inside her and forget.

“I have as long as I want,” I growled as I lifted her off the couch. She squealed as I rushed her up the stairs.

I had every intention of taking her hard and fast. Chasing my orgasm to forget. But it all went out the window when I laid her down. Her hair spilled around her head on my pillow. The adoration in her eyes undid me.

I stripped out of my uniform and climbed onto the bed in my undershirt and boxers. Kat pulled her sweater over her head, leaving her in her bra. Together, we stripped off her leggings.

She wrapped her arms around my neck and pulled me down on top of her. Her lips were gentle against mine, and she kissed me like we had all the time in the world. Her tongue ran along mine, and I groaned, grinding my hips against her. She tilted her head back and moaned, lifting her hips to move in time with mine.

I pulled one bra cup down, exposing her beautiful breast. Kat and I continued to move together in harmony. I bent forward, closing my mouth over her breast. She moaned when I started flicking my tongue over her nipple. I kneaded her other breast, feeling the weight of it in my hand. When I rolled her nipple between my fingers, she let out a shuddering sigh.

She was so fucking beautiful it hurt to look at her. I was going to break her, and I didn't know how to stop it from happening. No matter how badly I wanted to love her fully, I couldn't. Happiness wasn't in the cards for me, and neither was a wife or family. It had been decided for me years ago.

Kat cupped my face in her hands and pulled it up to her. She looked deep into my eyes. "Be here with me."

My eyes darted between hers, and like they were windows to her soul, I could see everything. She was opening herself completely to me, and I wanted to tell her to stop. I didn't deserve it. But I shook my head, pushing all my demons away.

"I'm here." And I meant it.

I captured her breast again. Her eyes rolled back, and she dug her fingers into my hair. I ground my hips against her center, feeling the warmth and wetness through the layers of clothing.

"I want you," she said with a moan.

"You have me." Even if it wasn't always physically. She had captured my heart, and she'd always have a piece of me.

Kat's hand trailed down my chest and abs. She gripped me through my boxers, and I groaned, grinding my hips into her hand. She squeezed me and pumped me the way I liked, and my eyes rolled back in my head.

"I need to be inside you," I said.

She stripped out of her underwear and removed her bra, lying bare and beautiful in front of me. My heart cracked open a little more, and her light seeped in. The demons retreated a little, and I focused on nothing but Kat.

I stripped out of my boxers, sheathed myself, and lined my dick up with her entrance. Her lips pursed, and her eyes closed as I slid inside her warmth. Her pussy enveloped my cock, and she was so wet.

"Fuck, you feel so good."

We moved together in tandem. As I thrust forward, she rocked against me. It was magic. I nipped at the spot where her neck met her shoulder and sucked, marking her. I wanted to mark her skin everywhere, so everyone would know she was mine.

My feelings were at war inside me. I wanted to keep her, but I couldn't. I'd only end up hurting her.

As if Kat could sense my mind wandering, she reached up and cupped my face. She captured my lips with hers. The kiss was sensual and burned a seal on my heart. There was no way I'd ever forget her.

My tongue glided in and out of her mouth in time with my hips. She wrapped her legs around my waist, and I slid a little deeper inside her. She totally engulfed me, and it broke something free inside of me.

I wanted to stay this way forever, slowly making love to her, but we didn't have the time. Our kisses grew frantic as I pumped my hips faster, rocking into her hard. Her moans grew into screams of pleasure as her orgasm approached.

I sat back on my knees and put her legs over my arms, changing the angle and spreading her wider. Her screams grew louder as I thrust harder. I loved how vocal she was for me. She never held back.

She was close. I needed her to come. I circled her clit with my thumb, and she screamed my name while her pussy pulsed, squeezing me and sending me hurtling over the edge. As my orgasm tore through me, I growled loudly. It was so powerful and violent, I was shaking.

It felt like it went on forever. Kat wrapped her legs tight around my hips, which pulled me in deeper. The sensation was overwhelming, but I never wanted to leave this spot. I never wanted this moment to end. We were connected on the deepest level, and it split my heart wide open.

She was more than anything I could have ever asked for or hoped for. After a few minutes, I slid out of her and collapsed down beside her, resting my hand on her stomach.

“Holy shit. That was incredible.”

She was breathing as heavily as I was.

“It was amazing,” she whispered.

I rolled to my side and pulled her against me. There were no words to describe how I was feeling, so I closed my eyes and turned my mind off. I just wanted to be in the moment with her. To feel her skin slick with sweat against mine. To hear her heavy breathing and quiet moans. It was so incredibly perfect.

# Chapter 31



KAT

AS I LAY IN the afterglow of the most amazing sex I'd ever had, my past niggled at me. I needed to tell Sid about Alessandro. It wouldn't affect things between us, but I wanted it off my chest.

The deeper I fell for him, the more I wanted to tell him things. I wanted no secrets between us, and that meant telling him my biggest regret. It was embarrassing, and I felt like a failure.

"What's going on in that head of yours?" he asked.

I ran my fingers through his hair and kissed his cheek.

"I don't want any secrets between us. I want to tell you something."

He tensed.

"I was engaged once before. Sort of."

Sid didn't move. He didn't react at all, and I didn't know what to make of it. "You don't seem shocked."

"What do you mean, sort of?"

I sighed. "We weren't really engaged. It was just an agreement. Kind of like ours."

"Okay."

I gathered the covers around my breasts and sat up. Why wasn't he freaking out? Something had changed with him. I'd



sensed him pulling away over the last few weeks. He touched me less. His kisses were quick pecks and only in front of people, and he wasn't home much. He left before I woke up and returned late at night when I was already asleep. I wasn't even sure if he slept in his bed with me.

When we went to pick out a Christmas tree, he acted like I was asking him to scrape roadkill off the side of the road. Jacob made a comment to Sid about being surprised that he was celebrating after all these years. I wanted to ask what he meant, but Sid's expression was murderous, so I didn't. Any time I brought up something fun we could do for the holidays, he retreated emotionally and then distanced himself physically.

He had to work a lot, and I got the feeling that he was hiding there. I was worried he was pulling away from me, from us, but we'd just made love, and he'd poured his feelings out through his movements and the way he touched and kissed me. He wouldn't have done that if he was going to end this, would he?

"Does that...upset you?" I asked.

He sighed and rolled onto his back, staring up at the ceiling. "No. I was almost engaged before too. I never got the chance to ask."

"Really? What happened?"

"You first."

I picked at a stitch that was coming loose on the blanket. "When I was in Italy, I met a man named Alessandro. We dated for a while, and I brought him back to New York with me. He got a work visa and stayed for two years, but then he needed a green card. I thought I loved him, so I flew us to Vegas to get married."

"What happened?"

"The doors opened for me to walk down the aisle, and he was standing at the altar hand in hand with someone else."

"What?" Sid sat up. "Kat, I'm so sorry."

I shrugged. “It embarrassed me more than anything else. He used me to fund his life here while he tried to make it big as an artist. And all the while, he was banging someone else and planning on marrying her.”

“Shit,” he said, running a hand through his hair.

“Joke’s on him, though. I called immigration on his ass and made sure the landlord didn’t let him back into the apartment I was paying for.”

“Damn.”

I laughed. “Yeah. That was when I came to Oak Springs. I got on a flight and flew right here. I’d hit rock bottom and needed a change. It was a wake-up call. I couldn’t continue to live my life for other people.”

Sid wrapped me in a hug and kissed the side of my cheek. “I’m sorry I judged you harshly for so long. You’re nothing like what I originally thought.”

“Thank you. That means a lot.”

I was about to ask him what happened with his almost engagement when his phone rang.

“Shit. I need to take this.” He jumped out of bed and walked into the bathroom. I could hear the low timbre of his voice as he answered the phone.

He came back out a few minutes later with a towel around his waist. “I’m going to hop in the shower, and then I need to get back to work.”

“Oh, okay.” I pulled the blanket up higher, feeling exposed and vulnerable.

He walked over and kissed my forehead. “Thanks for sharing that with me.”

“Sure.”

Something had changed, and Sid was pulling away again. I felt sick. I had just opened up and spilled my heart out, and it

could bite me in the ass. This was worse than the Alessandro situation because Sid had my heart.

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“THIS HOT CHOCOLATE IS to die for,” I said.

Rebecca nodded. “Elouise’s husband, Pierre, is a retired chocolatier from Paris.”

“Shut up! Why did I not know this?”

She shrugged. “Everyone in town knows, but no one really talks about it. He doesn’t like it when people make a huge deal out of it. But at Christmas, he goes all out.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Anything you have that’s chocolate, Pierre made it.”

“This peppermint bark?” I asked, holding up the amazing, crunchy, pepperminty goodness.

“Yep. And the hot chocolate, the fudge, the chocolate Santas, the lumps of coal...Pierre does it all.”

“Riley would die.”

Rebecca laughed and nodded.

“I have to make sure I get my hands on a box or bag or whatever he sells it in. I want it by the pound.”

Rebecca laughed.

“I’m going to gain so much weight this season,” I said.

“Same,” Rebecca said.

We weaved our way around the families in line to see Santa, who was really Ken Marshall. He owned the music store, On a Different Note, and was Tom Tracy’s best friend. I had spotted Tom earlier selling peppermint popcorn. I wasn’t keen on trying it since that was the flavor of the month in my subscription box, and I had four bags at home.

“Is Sid working?” Rebecca asked.

I nodded.

She looked around the park. “I didn’t see him.”

“Why would he be here? He’s at the station.”

She frowned. “Usually they work security here.” She pointed to Sid’s partner, Tod Nelson. He was near all the food and beverage tables in full uniform.

“Hmm, that’s strange.”

“Come on.” She pulled me toward the young deputy. “Hey, Nelson, this is my sister Kat.”

He nodded. “Sid’s fiancée. How do you do?”

“Good. Do you know if Sid is at the station?”

“Probably.” He looked out over the crowd as he spoke. “He doesn’t come to the tree lighting.”

“Why?” I asked.

Nelson shrugged. “He doesn’t share his personal life with me. But I’ve been here four years, and he hasn’t come to one yet.”

“That’s strange.”

Nelson’s eyes widened, and he excused himself.

“I wonder why,” I muttered.

“There has to be a good reason,” Rebecca said.

“I guess. Something has been going on with him. He’s been emotionally distant except for when we made love this morning. After that he shut down. And the closer it gets to Christmas, the more he retreats. I’m going to find Frank. He would know,” I said.

“Okay, I’ll be over with Laney and her family.”

I hugged my sister and then weaved through the crowd. Fear clawed at me. As I searched for Mindy and Frank, people kept stopping me to ask how my engagement was, if I had set

a date, and where my fiancé was. It was overwhelming and a little embarrassing.

“Hey,” Mindy said, waving me over. She gave me a hug, and I nearly broke. I had a terrible feeling settling in the pit of my stomach.

“Where’s Sid?” Frank asked. He took a sip of hot chocolate, and his eyes roamed the park.

“I was going to ask you the same thing. Nelson said he doesn’t come to the tree lighting, and Sid told me he had to work.”

Frank’s eyes widened, and he froze with the cup to his mouth.

“What do you know?” Mindy asked.

He took a big gulp of his drink. “Nothing.”

“No sex, Frank,” Mindy threatened.

He opened his mouth to argue, but Mindy cut him off. “Try me. I’ve been tired as hell and crabby. I can go without it.”

“Dammit, woman. Okay, he doesn’t come to the tree lighting, but I thought he’d come this year because of Kat.”

“Why doesn’t he come?”

Frank shook his head, and Mindy glared at him. He sighed. “He doesn’t celebrate Christmas.”

I was shocked. “Ever?”

“No.”

“Is he Jewish? I feel like he would have told me, or his parents would have said something.”

“No, it’s nothing like that.”

“Then what is it?” I asked.

“No way. It’s Sid’s story to tell. He’d be pissed as hell if I told you. If you want to know, you’ll have to ask him.” He looked down at his wife. “Happy?”

She opened her mouth, probably ready with a snarky remark, but the music suddenly stopped with a scratch, and the park grew quiet. I'd never been to the tree lighting here before. Two years ago, I had to go back to New York to handle things after the Alessandro issue, and last year I'd gone back for the Rockefeller Center tree lighting and to celebrate the holidays with Anna and Riley.

Anna had grown up in foster care, so she didn't have any family to celebrate with. She normally went home with Riley the day before Christmas, and that's when I'd brave my own family. It always ended badly.

I thought this year would be different since I had Sid. I was excited to celebrate with him, especially because this engagement was turning into an actual relationship. At least, I thought it was. Maybe I was the only one who thought so, though. Was I about to get burned again? I wasn't sure how well I'd be able to handle it this time around.

No one had known about Alessandro, so at least I'd endured the embarrassment alone. Also, I didn't love him. This time around, it was worse. The entire town knew about my engagement to Sid, and I could honestly say I loved him. I'd been in love with him for a while now but was too afraid to say it.

I needed to find Sid, but that would have to wait because the crowd was pushing me forward toward the tree in the center of the park. Kate had it brought over from Jacob's farm. The trees on his farm were still on the smaller side, but they'd cut down one of the pines at the back of his property for the park. Kate spent days decorating it and putting all the lights on with Peter's help.

It felt a little like the tree lighting in New York, except on a much smaller scale. My hands were full of treats, and my arms were full of goodies I'd bought in the small stands. Ornaments, candles, Christmas decor—you name it; they had it, and I'd bought a little of everything. Sid didn't have any

Christmas decorations, which I found odd, so I'd picked some up. Maybe it would be the start of our collection.

"Thank you all for coming to this year's annual tree lighting," Kate said into a microphone. "I'm happy to announce that this year's Christmas theme is the North Pole!"

Shouts and claps echoed through the park as everyone in town cheered. I'd seen the town decorated the last two years, and it looked phenomenal.

"Tomorrow, we'll start decorating. If you own a store, make sure you find me after this. We have the boxes for each store in Peter's truck, and we'll be handing them out in front of Double Oak Furnishings. Thank you to everyone who helped with the tree this year. Stay and enjoy the tree, the company, and the lights. Frosty Mug Tavern will open the beer tent now. Make sure you stop in to try their holiday brew. Merry Christmas, everyone!"

She handed off the mic to Case and picked up two ends of an extension cord. The crowd counted down, and then she plugged one end into the other. The tree lit up from the bottom to the top. It was beautiful and magical. A tear slipped from my eye as I stared at it. I wished Sid was here to see it.

"Isn't it beautiful? You've missed the last two," Rebecca said, pulling me to her side. I wasn't sure where she'd come from, but I was happy to have a shoulder to lean on. The pain inside my chest was growing by the minute, and I wasn't sure I could take it. The scary part was that I hadn't even talked to Sid yet to know what was going on.

"Come on, let's go grab a beer. I heard this year's brew is amazing," Rebecca said.

"You know I don't like beer. And you don't either. At least I thought you didn't."

She laughed. "I didn't before I moved here. Archer and his sons have the best beer I've ever tasted. You'll have to have Sid take you to their property sometime. They have a brewery

where their son Adam works. They do tastings all the time. You can get an early peek at the season's brew."

"Wow, when did you become a beer connoisseur?" I joked.

"I'm not, really. Will has taught me a lot about alcohol and where to find the best brands and brews for my bar."

"Will?"

"Yes. He's been helping me."

"Is that all?"

She crossed her arms. "Yes. We're just friends."

"Okay."

"We are. There is nothing going on between Will and me."

"I believe you."

"Ugh. Come on!" She tugged my arm, and I followed her to the beer tent.



## Chapter 32



### KAT

IT WAS THE WEEK before Christmas, and Sid had been hiding out since the tree lighting last week. He said he had to work all the night shifts because someone was on vacation, but I knew he was avoiding me. Tonight was family dinner, and I hoped he would be there. Except I wasn't sure what to say.

"You look good," Rebecca said. She'd stayed the night with me because I was so upset about the situation.

"Thanks. I hope I don't cry my makeup off."

"He might not even be there."

I sniffed. "That would make me cry too."

"Come here." She pulled me into a hug, and I tried hard not to let the tears fall. I sat back and took a deep breath, rubbing my sweaty hands on my jeans.

"Ready?" she asked gently.

I nodded and pulled my oversized blue- and cream-checked scarf tighter around my chin. Rebecca pulled her peacoat tighter around her when she stepped out of the car. It was cold, and there was fresh snow on the ground. She looked adorable in her black leggings and blue sweater. Unlike my impractical heeled boots, hers were appropriate for the weather but still cute.

We hurried into the house, and a blast of warm air hit me in the face. Rebecca toed off her boots while I leaned back

against the wall and unzipped mine.

“Those are adorable, and I want to borrow them when I’m not trucking around in snow,” Mindy said. She was coming down the stairs with Ava in her arms.

“Go ahead. We’re the same size.”

She frowned. “What’s wrong?”

I shook my head, and she nodded.

“I thought you would have come with Sid,” she said.

“He’s here?” I asked, earning another frown. Never mind.

Rebecca grabbed my hand and squeezed it for support as we followed Mindy to the kitchen. Sid was in the sunroom with the guys. His back was to me, and I took a minute to take him in. His long hair was slightly wet and curled at the bottom like it did after he showered. Where did he shower? He wasn’t at the house when I left.

A sick feeling flooded my stomach. Was he cheating on me? I was terrible at seeing the signs. I didn’t know Alessandro was cheating, and he lived in my apartment. God, I was pathetic.

As if he sensed my eyes on him, Sid turned around slowly. The grin slipped from his face, and he looked at the ground. It felt like a knife had pierced my heart. He was going to end things with me. Why hadn’t he done it already? What was he waiting for, and what had happened?

I held my breath, waiting to see what he’d do next. When he turned back around to continue his conversation, the knife that pierced me sliced my heart wide open. I felt the tears falling but couldn’t get them to stop. Frank noticed and nodded his head toward me. Sid turned around.

“Shit.” He jumped toward me and put his hand on my arm. He led me to the small bathroom near the front door and shut us inside. “I’m so sorry, Kat. Please don’t cry.”

“You showered?” I asked.

His brows pulled together. “Yes.”

“Where?”

“Here. Is that why you’re crying?”

I shook my head. He ran a hand through his hair and sat on the toilet.

“You look beautiful,” he said. His voice was like warm cocoa on a snowy day, and I drank it in.

“What’s going on?” I asked. “You’ve been avoiding me and the house. What did I do?”

His head snapped up, and his face looked tortured. “It’s not you.”

“Seriously? That’s the line you’re going with?” I asked.

There was a knock on the door. “I’m not sure what’s going on, but we’re ready to eat,” Mindy said.

“So, are we going to talk about what’s going on, or are you going to continue to freeze me out?” I asked.

“Can we do this later?” he asked.

“Will you talk to me later?” I countered.

“Yes. I promise.”

I nodded and stepped to the side so he could leave. My makeup still looked damn good except for a slight smudge of black beneath one eye. I wiped it away, took another deep breath, and readied myself for battle. He was going to break my heart, but only if I let him. And I was stronger than that.

---

“THE GLAZE ON THIS ham is delicious. What’s in it?” Kate asked.

“Brown sugar, maple syrup, dry mustard, cornstarch, and orange juice,” Mindy said.

“Wow. It’s so good.”

I was sitting at one end of the table with the girls while Sid sat at the other end with the guys. It was hard to concentrate on the conversation when all I could think about was my relationship ending.

“Kat?” Kate asked, placing her hand on mine. I jumped.

“Sorry. I was thinking about something.”

Kate looked concerned. “I asked when you were going to pick up your wedding dress.”

“I don’t know,” I whispered. Rebecca grabbed my hand under the table and squeezed. I smiled at her and stuck another bite of ham in my mouth so I didn’t have to talk about the wedding any longer.

“I put in the order for the flowers. Have you talked to Sid about cake tasting?” Kate asked.

I shook my head and glanced at Sid. He was staring at me, and he looked mad as hell.

“I think dusty blue for bridesmaid dresses would look amazing.”

A chair scraped against the ground. “Enough,” Sid shouted.

All conversation stopped, and everyone looked at Sid. Anger radiated off him, and I prayed he would keep his cool until we could hash things out in private. The last thing I wanted was to be humiliated in front of everyone.

“What’s going on, man?” Frank asked.

“I can’t do this anymore.”

“What are you talking about?”

“There isn’t a wedding,” he said.

My stomach dropped, and my cheeks burned. A few eyes turned toward me, but I kept mine fixed on Sid. I begged him to stop with my eyes, but he ignored me. He walked away from the table and looked out the window.

“Why not?” Mindy asked.

When Sid didn’t answer, she looked at me, but I couldn’t find the words.

“Because this isn’t real,” Sid said. His back was still to the group. “It never was.”

The ground beneath me gave out, and I felt like I was falling down a black pit. I’d never been more humiliated in my entire life. Rebecca let go of my hand and looked disappointed. We’d come so far in our relationship, but Sid exposing our lies had shattered it in a matter of seconds. Most of our friends looked confused.

“It *looked* pretty real,” Mindy said. “I guess I don’t understand.”

Sid took a deep breath and then turned to face everyone. He wouldn’t look me in the eye. “Kat and I faked the entire thing.”

“I knew it!” Frank shouted.

“Shut up,” Mindy said. “I want to know why. Why would you lie to your friends and family about something like that?”

Sid paced. “I offered to be Kat’s date to the gala to get her parents off her back as long as she agreed to be my fake girlfriend to get my mom off mine. It wasn’t supposed to go past that night, but then Kat’s mom was attacking her, making her feel like shit, and I blurted out that we were engaged. Then the damn gossip rag got a hold of it, and it blew up from there.”

“Didn’t you trust us to keep your secret?” Mindy asked. “You lied to us all.”

My chest felt like it was caving in, and I couldn’t breathe. I panted and tried to suck air into my lungs, but it wasn’t working. No one seemed to notice that I was suffocating.

Sid grabbed at his hair. “It wasn’t supposed to be like this.”

“What do you mean?” Frank asked.

He glared at me. “We weren’t supposed to get close. I was helping her out.”

Rebecca frowned. “Helping her out?”

“Yeah, with your parents.”

I shook my head and stood. “It might have started that way, but then things changed between us. At least they did for me. I’m such a fool. Here I thought we had a connection, but I was wrong. So wrong.”

He said nothing, and it sliced the wound in my chest open further. I looked down, expecting to see a gaping hole where my heart used to be.

“Is this because of—” Frank started to ask.

“This has nothing to do with her!” Sid shouted. His face was murderous.

“So there is something going on with your past,” I said. “I told you about mine, but you wouldn’t open up about yours. At least I was brave enough to share my past with you. But even though I told you how embarrassing that whole situation was for me, you went and exposed us to everyone like it all meant nothing.”

He grabbed fistfuls of his hair, looking slightly deranged. “This entire thing has gotten out of hand. You moved into my house and took over. We didn’t even talk about it, Katerina. You just moved all of your stuff there while I was away and then moved into my room.”

“I did not move into your room. To your house, yes. But that was because of *your* lies.”

“I did it to help you,” he yelled. “I didn’t ask you to move in or plan a fucking wedding.”

Anger exploded through me. “I only started planning our wedding because your mom, my mom, and our friends ambushed me.”

He shook his head. “Take some responsibility for this. You jumped at the chance to be with me so you could find your happily ever after. That’s what you were doing in Vegas, right? Getting ready to marry someone even though they didn’t love you? Just for a shot at happiness.”

Embarrassment and rage swirled inside me, making my body vibrate. I wanted to kill him for what he’d just said, but I also loved him. The pain of losing him and the hateful things he was saying overwhelmed me, and I collapsed into my chair.

“Too far, Sid,” Rebecca said.

“What was that before the tree-lighting ceremony? A goodbye fuck?” I asked with tears in my eyes.

His head snapped to the side as if I’d smacked him. “No.”

“Were we not making love?” A whimper escaped me.

He hung his head.

“Look at me,” I said.

He wouldn’t.

“Look. At. Me.”

When he lifted his head, I knew it was over. He’d pulled away completely. We had made love, but he was running from it. Running from us. I didn’t want to be with someone who was going to run. I deserved to be with someone who was proud to be with me, not afraid or ashamed.

“You’re being a coward,” I spat.

“This wasn’t real,” he shouted. “I made a mistake sleeping with you and giving you mixed signals. It wasn’t supposed to go this far. It was supposed to be fake.”

The words lashed across me like a whip, and it felt like my entire world shattered before my eyes. I pushed back my chair and walked out. Rebecca ran after me but didn’t say a word. We put our shoes on in silence and left. Once I got into the car, the tears fell.

*How could I have been so stupid?*

---

“IT WAS ALL FAKE? Why?” Rebecca asked.

“Originally, we agreed to pretend to be in a relationship in front of our parents, but when we were at the gala, Sid blurted out that we were engaged, and the whole thing spiraled from there.”

I took a sip of wine and wiped a tear away. After I moved in with Sid, Laney rented out the studio to Faith. Which meant I was homeless. Rebecca said I could take the guest room again, so we moved everything except the heavy furniture. I was emotionally and physically drained, but I needed to talk with Rebecca. There were things she needed to know.

“I don’t understand why you couldn’t tell me the truth,” she said.

“Mom and Dad brainwashed you. I couldn’t risk you telling them. And it affected Sid too. His mom was trying to marry him off, and he wanted her to back off. If I spilled the beans about us, it would have ruined it for him too.”

“So, you lied to everyone until it wasn’t a lie anymore.”

I nodded.

“You fell for him,” she said.

“Yeah.”

I still didn’t understand where things went wrong, and talking about it again brought a fresh wave of tears.

“I feel like such a fool.”

“No one thinks that, Kat. He looks bad too,” Rebecca said.

“That’s not what I’m talking about. This isn’t the first time this has happened to me.”

“What do you mean?”



This conversation was overdue. She deserved to know the truth about what had brought me to Oak Springs two years ago. I needed to tell her why I hadn't been able to keep up with rent in New York and what I was really doing when she thought I was partying. I would be lucky if she didn't kick me out too.

I took a deep breath and let it all out. When I was done, I collapsed back against the couch, utterly exhausted. The silence was deafening. I glanced at Rebecca. She was sitting stock-still.

"Wow. I don't know what to say. I'm hurt that you didn't tell me when you first got here. I'm shocked that you were living a double life right under my nose, and I'm angry that we had to get roommates because you were paying for someone else."

"You have every right to feel all of those things. And I can understand if you want to kick me out too."

She stood. "I'm not going to kick you out, Kat. You've changed. You're not that girl anymore. You made some mistakes—yes, they were huge—but I think you learned from them."

"Obviously not. I made the same mistake with Sid."

"I disagree. And the Sid situation aside, you've changed in other ways too. You're honest and happy. You were always bubbly and spontaneous, but you're responsible here. I'm so proud of who you've become."

More tears fell. At this rate, my eyes would be as dry as the Sahara by morning. "Thank you."

"I'm so sorry that happened to you and that you had to go through it alone. I'm sorry I wasn't there for you when you needed me and that I believed a lot of what Mom and Dad said instead of listening to you. That's not the kind of sister I want to be."

She sat back down and pulled me into a hug. I sobbed into her chest, completely spent from the day and all the

confessions. We settled on the couch together to watch a movie. I was asleep within minutes.

An hour later, I woke up alone on the couch. Rebecca had gone to bed, and the house was dark and quiet. I dragged myself into the spare bedroom and crashed onto the center of the bed. Except sleep eluded me.

I was back in Rebecca's house, and it felt like I'd started over. Again. That made me angry. I'd come so far since the Alessandro shit, and one man giving me attention put me right back where I'd been after my almost wedding. I was once again relying on someone to help me and feeling low and pathetic. Except last time, only my pride had been hurt. This time, my heart was involved. I never loved Alessandro, but I loved Sid.

Hearing him speak the truth in front of everyone hurt like hell. He was right, though. I'd repeated the same mistake and ended up in the same spot. I turned on my side and hugged a pillow while I cried. It was going to be hell seeing him in town and at all the family dinners. There was no way I could avoid him, and I was just so damn angry.

How could I face him? How could I face anyone in town? Thanks to the damn gossip blog, everyone knew about our business. It was only a matter of time before they found out the truth.

Oh God, my parents. What the hell were they going to do? And our friends. The looks on their faces when they found out. They were betrayed and hurt, and I did that. It was too much to take.

I pushed the pillow away and walked to the bathroom, carefully avoiding the mirror. With a groan, I stepped under the hot spray of the shower and tried to wash off the embarrassment and humiliation of the night. When it didn't work, I collapsed to the bottom of the shower, hugged my knees, and sobbed.

I missed Sid.

Half an hour later, I dragged myself out of the bathroom with my hair in a towel. Rebecca was standing outside of the door with a cup.

“Warm tea,” she said.

“Thanks.” I took the cup and walked to the living room. I didn’t want to lie in the bedroom and stare at the ceiling. I needed something to take my mind off everything.

“Movie?” she asked.

“You don’t have to stay up with me. It’s late, and I’m sure you have work tomorrow.”

“Come with me.”

“What?”

“Come to work with me. I’ll have Eli make you something delicious, and you can see how the restaurant is coming along. Kate will be there at noon to plan for the grand opening, but you don’t have to talk to her if you don’t want to.”

“I probably should. It will be good to do it sooner rather than later. I’m surprised my phone isn’t blowing up right now.”

Rebecca bit her lip.

“What?”

“I turned it off,” she said. “I didn’t want anyone to bother you tonight.”

“Thanks.”

She put on a rom-com and pulled me against her chest, kissing my forehead.

“It will be okay.”

“Are you okay?” I asked. It hadn’t been that long since she and Luke had broken up, and they’d dated for a lot longer than Sid and I had.

“Yes. Much better.”

“Why are you being so sweet to me?” I asked.

“Because you’re my sister and I love you. You might have made a mistake giving your heart to Sid, but you weren’t being flighty or making bad decisions. No matter what Sid says. You’ve changed, and I see it. Also, it was real love for you. I could tell.”

“Just me?” I asked.

“No. I think it was real for him too, but something spooked him.”

“I wish he would have just talked to me.”

“Sid has been grumpy for a long time. I don’t think he’s told anyone what has really been going on.”

“It just doesn’t add up. If he’s not interested in a relationship, why was he dating? Why did he ask Kate out when she first arrived in town? And what happened over time that made him so angry? Kate and Mindy said he was quiet but nice when they first arrived here.”

Rebecca sighed. “So many unanswered questions. I wish I had the answers to them, but by the time I came here, he was already closed off. We went on a date once.”

“What?”

I sat up and looked at her in shock.

“Relax. It was a long time ago, and it didn’t work out. We realized within five minutes that we were better friends. I think everyone thought we’d get together, but there weren’t any sparks.”

“There weren’t sparks with us either the first time we went out. But over time, he grew on me.”

Rebecca laughed. “Like an ugly pair of shoes?”

I swatted her with a pillow. “No. It was easy between us. His grumpy exterior didn’t bother me, and I saw what he was really like. He cares deeply for people, and he’s funny. When he smiled, it lit up his whole face, and the sex was”—I sighed

—“It was better than any I’ve ever had. We had chemistry that exploded when we gave in, but it was deeper than that. Being with Sid didn’t take work. We found a rhythm early on, and it was so natural. Like we’d done it for years and we really were engaged.

“Deep down, I knew it wouldn’t last. It was fake, and I kept reminding myself of that, but then something changed. One day, we slept together, and it wasn’t just sex. It was deeper, and I could feel him opening up. I thought we’d reached a turning point until he told me tonight that it was never real.”

Rebecca’s mouth dropped open. “He made love to you and then said all that?”

I nodded. “It was a week ago. Before the tree lighting.”

“I’m so sorry,” Rebecca said.

“Me too,” I whispered and fell into her lap.

# Chapter 33



## SID

KAT'S SCENT WAS EVERYWHERE, and her laughter followed me from room to room. She'd left her pillow on my bed, and it still smelled like her. Sunshine, vanilla, and happiness. The first few nights, I curled up with it, hanging on to what we had, but then I became disgusted with myself and tossed it into the spare room.

A week had passed since I'd fucked everything up with my friends and Kat. To make matters worse, it was Christmas, and I hated the holiday and all it reminded me of. I was miserable. I tossed the tree the first chance I got and boxed up all the decorations Kat had purchased to make this an enjoyable holiday.

I put them in the spare room where her bed and dresser still were. Rebecca had sent Peter and Jacob to retrieve the big items, but I wasn't ready to talk to anyone yet, and I didn't let them in. She sent me nasty messages, which I deserved, and Frank told me not to come around for a while.

I couldn't go anywhere in town without being reminded of Kat. People in town frowned at me when I walked around, as if I was the Grinch. A woman and her child even crossed the street to get away from me. Elouise refused to serve me coffee until I smiled, but I couldn't make it happen.

The town had exploded with Christmas, which only made my mood worse. Connie didn't want me at work, but my

office was the only place that wasn't filled with reminders of Kat or my past. It was the only place I felt an ounce of peace.

I spent my evenings at home drunk and slept on the couch to avoid the reminder of Kat in my bed. Her presence invaded every inch of my house and the town, and I couldn't get away. Part of me didn't want to because then all the good she'd brought into my life would be gone.

When she'd asked if we'd made love, I wanted so badly to take her in my arms and tell her yes. I hadn't been pretending, but I couldn't bring myself to tell her the truth. Happiness wasn't in the cards for me, and I would only hurt her.

A loud pounding on the door rattled through my bourbon-soaked skull. The bottle had been an engagement gift from my father, and I decided it was fitting to open it and drink myself stupid while wallowing. I hated my dad, and I knew he'd be the first to tell me what a fuck-up I was.

The pounding continued, and I looked at my phone to see what time it was. Ten in the morning. I nearly sprang up because I was late for work, but then I remembered I wasn't allowed at the office. After I fell asleep drunk on the sofa in my office, Connie sent me home on call. She told me to only come in if there was an emergency or they needed me.

"Open up," Will shouted.

He was the last person I wanted to talk to. I rolled over and pulled the blanket over my head. The handle to the door jiggled, and then there was the sound of a key in the lock. I cursed. Why had I given him a key?

"Up and at 'em," Will said, tearing the blanket off me. "Holy shit. You stink."

"Leave me alone."

"No can do. Let's go. Shower, then we need to talk."

I rolled my eyes and dragged myself off the couch, heading to the kitchen. "I need coffee and painkillers."

Will followed me and fed Shiloh while I filled up the biggest cup I could find with old coffee. Kat had set the large coffeepot on a timer, and if I remembered to add grounds and water, it still came on automatically at eight each morning. I took a sip and cringed.

“I’ll make a fresh pot while you shower. Go.”

I felt marginally better after my shower. I could smell fresh coffee when I walked into the kitchen, and that helped even more. Will was standing at the stove.

“Better?” he asked without turning around.

I grunted and he laughed. The sound of it echoed through my skull, and I growled, which only spurred him on more.

“Here, Sunshine.” He set a plate of eggs and bacon down in front of me. The toaster popped, and Will buttered two slices of toast and put them on my plate.

He sat down and tucked into his own breakfast. The silence was killing me.

“Why are you here?” I asked.

He finished chewing, wiped his mouth, and sat back. “It’s Christmas, and I know you have no intention of leaving the house.”

“Doesn’t answer the question.”

He chuckled, and it grated on my nerves. “Figured you could use a friendly face.”

“I’d rather be alone.”

“Hmm, that explains why you let her go.”

My head snapped up. “How did you hear about that?”

“News travels fast in small towns.”

That must be why my mom had been blowing up my phone. But how did they hear about it?

“I can see your wheels turning. Mom heard from Kat’s mom, who heard from Rebecca. Also, the damn gossip blog



you guys have here said the wedding was off.”

Anger burned through me. Who the hell was writing that thing, and how had they heard about it? It explained the scowls and whispers I got when I walked through town.

“Let me pull it up for you,” Will said.

“No,” I yelled. “I don’t want to hear what the fucking town has to say about me this time.”

He leaned forward. “Then why don’t you tell me your version? Why did you fake an engagement, and what happened?”

I sighed and sat back, taking a big gulp of coffee while I collected my thoughts. After a few minutes, I took a deep breath and dove into the story. Will laughed at the part where I played the hero to save Kat from her parents. I left out all the sex and how I fell for her. I fell hard for her.

I knew that was why I was so miserable. I hated myself for what happened, but I couldn’t be what Kat needed me to be. I wasn’t that guy. She deserved better, and over time, she’d heal and realize that I had done her a favor.

“Let me get this straight. You jumped in to save her by saying you were engaged, you lied to family and friends to keep up the charade—”

“Because it got out of hand, and we didn’t know what to do.”

“Right. Then you fell for her, and somewhere along the line, it stopped being fake, but instead of jumping in, you ran.”

“I didn’t run,” I gritted out. “I did her a favor.”

He raised one eyebrow and stared me down. I turned away and cleared my throat.

“You’re punishing yourself.”

I glanced at him with a scowl. “What?”

Will sat back in his seat, looking smug. “You won’t let yourself be happy because of what happened years ago.”

“That’s not true.”

“No? Then why did you run?”

I snapped my head straight. “I. Didn’t. Run.”

He laughed. “Yes, you did. You want to know what I think?”

“No.”

“Tough. I think you won’t let yourself be happy because of Lisa.”

“Don’t say her name!” I snapped.

“Ah. Hit it on the head. You know that wasn’t your fault, right?”

I turned away. Grief and guilt flooded me, making it hard to breathe. Will stood and walked around the table. He took a seat beside me and put a hand on my shoulder.

“It wasn’t your fault,” he said gently. “It was an accident.”

I shrugged him off and stood. “I know that.”

“Then why are you punishing yourself? She wouldn’t have wanted that.”

I whirled around and stepped into him. I towered over him since he was still seated. “Don’t talk about what she would or wouldn’t want. She doesn’t get a choice because she’s dead.”

“Sid, you almost died that night too. But you can’t let that rule your life. It wasn’t your fault.”

I tugged at my hair and paced. “I shouldn’t have insisted we go home. The weather was bad, the roads icy. It was hard to see. It was dark because we were on back country roads. It was my fault. She’s not here because of me.”

Sobs tore through me, and I fell to the floor. The weight of that night was too heavy to carry anymore. I hadn’t felt the

guilt for years because I hadn't allowed myself to open up to anyone or get close to anyone.

Sure, I'd gone on dates and asked women out, but I'd never let things go very far. Over the years, the guilt and grief had eaten away at me, causing me to become sulky, grouchy, and angry. I wouldn't let anyone get close enough to hurt me. I didn't want to feel the pain I'd felt the night I lost Lisa ever again.

Will put his hand on my shoulder again, and when I looked up, he pulled me into him. I cried into his chest. It was the most vulnerable I'd been since the night of the accident. After I got out of the hospital, everything was a blur. The funeral and the days after blended together. Eventually, days turned into weeks, which turned into years, and the open wound on my heart callused over.

But now the callus had been torn off, and I felt the gaping wound. My heart hurt, not just because of the loss I'd never truly grieved, but because I'd let Kat go, and she was the only one I wanted right now. She'd know what to say to make my pain better. She'd know when I needed her to just sit with me quietly so I could think or feel or bury my feelings. Whatever I needed.

I wanted to bury myself in her sunshine and warmth and never leave, but I'd fucked it up. I pushed her away and told her our relationship meant nothing to me.

After a few minutes, I pushed away from Will and wiped at my face. We sat back at the table, and Will refilled our coffee. He was clearly settling in to talk about the past. I wasn't looking forward to it, but it was necessary, and I had run for far too long. I was tired of running.

Will was silent, allowing me to gather my thoughts and feelings. The only thing I could pick out was the guilt I'd been living with for years. "It was my fault."

He shook his head. "No, baby brother, it wasn't. Yes, the roads were icy. Yes, it was dark and you took back roads and it

was snowing. But a deer ran into the road and caused the accident. When you tried to stop, you slid on the ice. It could have happened to any of us.”

“But it didn’t,” I gritted out.

“Duke and I left at the same time. Did you know that?”

“You did?”

He nodded. “We weren’t that far behind you, which is why I got to the scene first.”

“I had no idea.”

“You were in and out of consciousness. You’d hit your head.”

I gritted my teeth. I didn’t want to hear about the accident, but I needed to. I’d never heard what actually happened or what the scene looked like. One minute we were driving, then a deer ran out and I slid into a tree. The next thing I remembered was waking up in the hospital with a broken arm and a brain bleed. I had been unconscious for a week. The doctors said recovery would be slow and painful. But nothing compared to the pain I’d felt in my chest when they told me Lisa was gone.

She was my first love. I’d had a ring in my pocket and was planning to ask her to marry me the next day. Christmas morning. But she died in the accident. For years, I wished I had died too.

“Tell me,” I said.

“Are you sure?”

“I need to hear it.”

He sighed and rubbed at the scruff on his face. “Duke had taken another road, thankfully, because when I got to the scene, my stomach dropped. I saw your truck, and I”—he looked away and swallowed hard—“I thought the worst.”

I said nothing, and he looked down at his coffee, running his thumb around the rim.

“I ran to your door and found you slumped over with your head in the airbag. You had a gash on your forehead. You groaned, and I’d never been so thankful for anything in my entire life as I was to know you were alive. I told you to sit tight and ran around to the passenger side.”

He shook his head.

“Tell me.”

Tears welled in his eyes, and mine filled as well. “I need to know.”

He shook his head again, as if begging me not to make him say it.

“Will,” I gasped. “Please.”

He swallowed hard. “The deer was stuck in the truck’s grill. A low-hanging branch from the tree you hit had impaled Lisa. She wasn’t alive. I knew you wouldn’t be able to take it if you knew, so I went back to your side and talked to you. I kept you lucid until the emergency team arrived and told them not to tell you until you got to the hospital.”

I buried my head in my hands and sobbed. The accident had happened seven years ago, but it felt like it was yesterday. The pain was so strong that it felt like someone had stabbed me in the chest.

“You can’t keep punishing yourself. She wouldn’t have wanted that. You wouldn’t have wanted it if the roles were reversed. You deserve happiness,” Will said.

“No, I don’t,” I snapped. “It’s my fault she’s dead, and I’m just supposed to live my life like nothing happened? I don’t deserve happiness, Will. She’s not here to live a happy life because of me. We were arguing. She was mad at me for making us go, and the music was up too loud. She was yelling over it and fuming.”

I pictured her face and the way she crossed her arms over her chest and stuck out her chin. She’d been pissed, and I

remembered thinking how adorable she looked, but I was mad too.

“I yelled back. Telling her we needed to be home. Because I had a plan. We needed to wake up at home on Christmas morning so I could propose. She was ruining the plan, and I got angry. Then the deer darted out. I would have seen it if I wasn’t so focused on Lisa and our argument.”

“Sid...” I held up my hand.

“Don’t. I don’t deserve sympathy or love. I deserve a life of misery and pain because that’s what I caused her family by taking her away.”

Will scoffed. “You’re kidding, right? I bet if you called her parents up, they would disagree. They wouldn’t want that for you. The argument wasn’t the reason you had the accident. It was the deer and the conditions of the road. You couldn’t control that, and it wouldn’t have mattered if you saw the deer or not. You would have panicked and hit the brakes and slid off the road anyway.”

“You don’t know that for sure,” I muttered.

“Neither do you. The point is living like this isn’t what Lisa or her parents would want. It’s no way to honor her memory either. You’ve bottled it all up, as if she didn’t exist. You couldn’t even speak her name until now. Seven years, and you’ve never said her name.”

I stood and screamed. “You have no right!”

He stood. “I do. Because I found you that day.” He pounded on his chest. “Also, I’m your brother, and I fucking love you.” He grabbed me by the back of the neck and pulled me against his chest. “Let this go. You need to live again.”

I tried to push him away, but he held me tighter. “You have to find a way to let it go.”

“I can’t,” I said.

“I know. But over time, you will.”

# Chapter 34



## KAT

CELEBRATING CHRISTMAS ALONE SUCKED. Celebrating alone in New York because my friends were with their families sucked worse. I couldn't stay in Oak Springs, though. Everyone knew about what had happened between Sid and me. The gossip blog was talking about it. People looked at me with pity, and our friends wouldn't speak to me.

Mindy told me not to come to the farm. Kate was disappointed that she'd spent her time and energy planning a wedding that would never happen. She'd lost out on paying clients because she was working with me. Rebecca was supportive but was hurt that I'd lied to her.

But my mother was the worst. She wouldn't stop calling and leaving nasty voice mails. They ranged from how disappointed she was to how angry and embarrassed she was. All of them were hurtful and only added to the wound in my chest.

I'd spent most of the week following the breakup in the spare room at my sister's, so I hadn't run into Sid. I went to work, but that quickly became difficult since everyone wanted to talk about what happened during their sessions.

Once the gossip blog leaked the news, I ran. The only place I could think to go was to Riley and Anna's apartment back in New York. They moved to a one-bedroom apartment in Queens and took the subway to work. It took them almost an hour to get to the bakery. I felt horrible. If I wouldn't have

run to Oak Springs, I would have been contributing to the rent, and they wouldn't be stuck sharing a bedroom.

The weather was terrible, and Central Park was now an hour away so I couldn't walk through it to clear my mind like I used to. So instead, I stayed inside and binged romantic holiday movies and ate my weight in chocolate and ice cream. It had been a terrible idea because now I felt bloated, and the movies made me cry.

I had put my phone on silent days ago. Rebecca knew where I was. She was coming in two days for New Year's Eve, and Anna and Riley were due back any minute. Before they left, Anna had said I had a week to wallow and then I was done. New Year's Eve was for new beginnings and fun.

My wallowing week was almost over, but I still had a few hours left, so I burrowed under the comforter I'd dragged out with me days ago and continued watching sappy movies that made me cry. The door to the apartment flew open, and Anna walked in, wheeling her suitcase behind her.

"Wallowing time is over," she announced.

"I still have a few more hours," I said. The blanket muffled my voice. It covered all of me except for my eyes.

"Okay. I'll give you that, but then you're done." She walked over and sat on the opposite end of the couch. Her nose wrinkled. "What is that smell? Did you shower at all while we were gone?"

I sniffled.

"I'm going to leave you alone for tonight. Tomorrow, you shower and then clean our couch. We might have to burn it."

"Shut up," I wailed.

She chuckled as she made her way to her room, leaving me alone with my tears and sadness. An hour later, Riley came home. She took one look at me and ran to the kitchen. I was too sad to move and find out what she was doing.



“Sweet treats always make me feel better,” she said when she came back a while later holding out a plate of chocolate cupcakes.

I grabbed one and bit into it. The cupcake was light, and it was still warm. I moaned and shoved the rest into my mouth, grabbing another one before she could take the plate away. I’d worry about my weight later.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Riley asked.

I sighed. It was now or never. The girls still didn’t know about my double life, and the guilt had been eating away at me. I hadn’t realized how badly until I came back.

“I have something to confess.” I took a deep breath. Anna needed to hear this too, but I knew she’d be a lot harder on me than Riley. Still, I owed them both an apology. “Can you get Anna?”

“Anna!” Riley shouted.

“I could have done that,” I said.

She shrugged.

“Yo. What’s up?” Anna asked. “I’m gonna stand if that’s okay. Kat stinks.”

Yeah, this was going to go great.

“I need to get something off my chest.”

Anna raised an eyebrow. “If it’s food, I’m out. Also, it could be your sweatshirt. It’s probably stuck to your skin from not bathing.”

I scowled at her. “No. I owe you both an apology.”

“For what?” Riley asked.

“When I lived here, I missed a lot of rent payments, but I never told you why. The truth is, I was leading a double life.”

“Come again?” Anna said, taking a seat on a dining chair.

“I met a man named Alessandro in Italy before I moved here. I brought him back with me and got him a cushy

apartment. It was fine until my parents cut me off because my grades were slipping. That was why Rebecca asked you both to move in. We needed help financially. I was working as a nanny and a massage therapist. In my practically nonexistent spare time, I tended bar at a club.”

“What the hell?” Anna asked. “I had no clue.”

“Yeah, I know. Neither did my sister until a few weeks ago. Anyway, even with all those jobs, I still didn’t have enough to pay the rent at his place and here. So I need to apologize for choosing him over you guys.”

The room was silent, and my heart hammered in my chest. I was so afraid they were going to kick me out and never speak to me again.

“Damn, I don’t know what to say,” Anna said.

“Kat, I can’t believe you did that,” Riley said. “Why?”

I sat back in a huff. “I thought I loved him. The worst part of it all is that I flew to Vegas and almost married him, but when the doors opened and it was time for me to walk down the aisle, he was standing at the end with another woman.”

“Ho-ly shit,” Anna said.

“Oh my gosh, Kat. I’m so sorry,” Riley said.

“Yeah. That’s why I flew to Oak Springs. I was so embarrassed, and I needed to get away from the mess I’d created. I thought I’d hit rock bottom, but I guess I was wrong because this sure as hell hurts more.”

“That’s because you loved Sid. Otherwise, you’d be fine,” Riley said.

“You’re right. I did.” I sniffed and dug around under my blanket tent to find the Kleenex box.

“Can you take that off? I can’t take you seriously,” Anna said.

I pulled the blanket off my head, and she cringed.

“It’s worse than I thought.”

“Shut up,” I said, throwing a used tissue at her.

She screamed and ran away. “I forgive you!”

“I hope she means that,” I said.

“She does. I forgive you too. It’s in the past, and I’m sorry you held on to it for so long. You could have come to us. We would have understood. At least, I would have.”

“Thanks.”

“Do you want to talk about what happened with Sid?”

A fresh wave of tears threatened to fall. Just the mention of his name made my heart hurt. I missed him so much, but I was so angry at him.

“I don’t understand what was going through his head. He humiliated me in front of everyone I care about and said what we shared wasn’t real.”

“Are you sure he wasn’t just scared?” Riley asked.

“Even if he was, he never should have treated me the way he did. I didn’t deserve that. I’m so embarrassed. There’s no way I can go back to Oak Springs and face everyone.”

“That’s not the Kat I know. The Kat I know is fearless and faces things head-on with a smile.”

I shook my head. “I look like a fool.”

Riley wrapped her arms around me, and I cried.

“I’m so heartbroken,” I sobbed. “I feel so disrespected and broken. He knew how embarrassed I was about the Alessandro situation, and he still broke things off with me in front of everyone.”

“I’m so sorry, Kat. It will be okay. You’ll get through it and come out on the other side. With or without him.”

“Without him,” I said, wiping my nose with my sleeve. It was already dirty as hell, so why not? “I’m not taking him back after what he did. My mother is a monster and called me

fat in a wedding dress, but what Sid did felt so much worse. He betrayed me, and he did it with an audience. There's no coming back from that. What we had is broken."

No matter how badly my heart hurt or how much I wanted to take him back, I couldn't. Not after what he did. I kept our secret, not only for me but also for him. The worst part was when I asked him if we'd made love and he wouldn't look at me. His face had haunted me for the last week. He'd looked ashamed.

I deserved better. He was right about that. I wanted to be with someone who was proud to call me theirs, not someone who would run at the first sign of trouble. Or because they got scared. So my heart would just have to get on board with this decision because we were never going back to Sidney Lewis. Ever.

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"THREE...TWO...ONE...Happy New Year!" There was cheering and singing and lots of drunk people celebrating.

Rebecca grabbed me and hugged me. "Happy New Year!" She had a big smile on her face, and her cheeks were rosy from the cold and the alcohol she'd consumed. I smiled even though tears leaked from my eyes, no doubt making my mascara run.

"Aw, Kat. I'm so sorry," she shouted.

I waved her off and smiled again. Hands landed on my shoulders and spun me around. Riley grabbed me and jumped up and down. Excitement buzzed off her. "Happy New Year!"

I nodded and smiled, feeling like a puppet. Maybe if I faked happy enough, I'd actually feel it. Anna was next to hug me, but she said nothing, just gave me a knowing look, and that opened the floodgates.

Here I was in a short sexy dress, my hair in waves and my makeup on point, and I was sobbing. I was glad we'd rented out a table at one of the rooftop bars instead of standing in the

middle of Times Square. It would still be a few hours before we could leave, though. The streets were closed, and there were people everywhere.

Some guy walked by and grabbed my ass. I spun around and hit him upside the head with my clutch.

“Ouch. What the hell?” he said.

“You grabbed my ass.”

“That wasn’t me. I swear.” He held up his hands, and his eyes were wide.

He was so earnest that I believed him. “Sorry.”

“You could make it up to me by buying me a drink,” he said.

He was tall, dark, and handsome. The kind of man I would have dated when I lived here. He wore a fitted suit, had an expensive haircut, and smelled amazing. It did nothing for me, though. Instead, it brought on a fresh wave of tears, and the man grimaced and recoiled.

Rebecca pulled me to her side. “Excuse us.”

“Sorry,” I said with a sniff. “I’m a mess.”

“It’s okay. Do you want to go?”

“No. You guys are having so much fun.”

Riley and Anna were dancing near our table with two men. They looked like they were having a fantastic time, and I didn’t want to be the one to ruin it.

“It’s okay. We can go.”

“You should dance with someone,” I said into her ear.

She blushed and shook her head. “I’m not interested.”

“Is there someone else?”

She bit her lip.

“Who?” I yelled.

She shook her head again. I wanted her to tell me everything, but it wouldn't be fair to ask since I had kept so much from her.

“Let's go,” she said.

“How? The streets are blocked off and packed.”

“Oh, crap.”

“Let's get a drink. I'm done being sober and sobby.”

She laughed and followed me to the bar. We stayed for another hour, and I was beyond ready to go. My feet hurt like hell. Rebecca was drunk and sang loudly while we waited for a cab. Anna was holding Riley up.

When the cab arrived, Anna and I pushed Riley and Rebecca in and climbed in beside them. Back at the apartment, Rebecca and I took turns using the bathroom before pulling out the bed from the couch. I stripped out of my clothes and sat on the bed with my phone in my hand.

“Did he text you?” Rebecca asked as she brushed through her hair.

“No.”

“It's probably better that way.”

She was right, but that didn't mean I missed him any less. Two days ago, I had declared I was done with him, but it was a lie. He was all I could think about.

“Let's get to bed.” Rebecca climbed over me. The bed bounced as she settled in beside me and snuggled under the covers.

I lay down and closed my eyes. It was time to put it all behind me and focus on the new year ahead. Anna was right; wallowing time was over. I needed to focus on my next steps. Whether that meant staying in Oak Springs or starting over somewhere new.

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THE SMELL OF BACON permeated the air and pulled me from sleep. Rebecca was still snoring softly next to me. I carefully slipped out of bed, pulled on a hoodie, and walked down the hall to the bathroom. After washing my face and brushing my teeth, I made my way back to the open kitchen.

Anna was at the stove with a spatula in hand. Her tattoo-covered arms and legs were on full display since she was wearing shorts and a T-shirt. I'd always wondered how she wore that in the winter. It was freezing. She moved gracefully around the kitchen, humming a song I didn't recognize. The massive bun on top of her head wiggled from side to side as she bopped her head.

This was nothing new to me. Anna was an early riser, even when she had been out partying the night before. I was jealous that she never suffered hangovers but thankful because she was a good cook and always made breakfast.

"Good morning. There's orange juice in the fridge, and breakfast will be ready in a few. Grab some toast to start," she said without turning around.

"How did you know it was me?"

She shrugged. "It was you or Riley. I figured it was you since you used to wake up early with me."

I smiled and sat at the small dining table tucked in the corner. "Thanks."

"You've got two days left here. What are we doing? No more wallowing," she said, pointing a spatula at me.

"I want to go shopping."

"That's not me, but you're welcome to take Riley."

I laughed.

"I have to work at the bakery anyway. Riley took the time off, and I only got a day. So tomorrow I'm back in early."

"Boo," I said with a pretend pout.

"I'll be home by early afternoon. We can hang out then."

I nodded and took a bite of toast. Riley shuffled out, rubbing her eyes. She had on an adorable pair of fluffy dog slippers and a long robe that hung open, revealing a tank top and a cute pair of striped pajama pants. A strip of her pale stomach showed between the tank and pants. She was adorable, always had been. We always said she was pocket sized because she was so tiny.

“Morning,” she said, yawning. She plopped down in the seat across from me. “Coffee?”

“It’s brewing. Have some toast,” Anna said, setting a plate in front of her.

“Thanks.”

“Kat said she wants to go shopping.”

Riley perked up. “Yes!”

Anna set down two cups of coffee, and I quickly grabbed mine. I wasn’t nursing a hangover since I hadn’t drunk much last night, but I was exhausted from a week of crying. The coffee was perfect, and I closed my eyes, letting the warmth and caffeine seep in.

“When did you want to go?” Riley asked as she piled her long red hair on top of her head. She secured it with a hair tie and grabbed her mug, inhaling deeply.

We started drinking a lot of coffee when we were college students and running on fumes. Anna used to prefer tea, and apparently still did since she was dunking a tea bag in a mug while she waited for whatever was on the stove to finish.

“I’m working tomorrow, so you guys should go shopping then,” Anna said. “You know that’s not my thing.”

“You’re working?” Riley asked.

Anna bit her lip. “I took the shift so you could get the extra day.”

“I didn’t know that,” Riley shrieked. “That woman will be the death of me. We need to leave.”



“What woman?” I asked.

“Our boss and the owner. She’s terrible. Rude and nasty. The bakery is always a mess. Anna and I spend most of the morning cleaning, and it’s not even our mess to begin with. She hates giving time off. I can’t stand her.”

“The head baker is leaving, and Riley wants her job. I’m pretty sure she’ll get it,” Anna added.

“If I don’t, then I’m really leaving. I don’t know where I’d go, but I have talent and experience. I could go anywhere.”

“Or you could open your own bakery,” I suggested.

Anna pointed at Riley with her spatula, and Riley rolled her eyes. “I’d never open one here. It’s too expensive.”

“There are empty shops in Oak Springs,” Rebecca singsonged as she walked by us on her way to the bathroom.

“Now there’s a thought,” Anna said.

“I don’t think so,” Riley said. “No offense to you, but I’m not really a small-town kind of girl.”

I laughed. “You came from a small town.”

She threw a napkin at me. “It was a small town in Michigan. Not the same thing as the south.”

“It’s exactly the same thing,” Anna said.

“Are we still talking about you guys moving to Oak Springs?” Rebecca asked as she rejoined us at the table.

“Yes, but Riley said she’s not a small-town girl,” Anna said as she set down a cup of coffee in front of my sister. Rebecca laughed. “You grew up in a small town.”

“Yes, we’ve established that, but it’s not the same.”

“How is it not?” Rebecca asked.

“Let’s change the subject. Where would you guys like to go today? Anna has to work tomorrow, so let’s make the most of today,” Riley said.

The conversation shifted to making plans. Anna plated up breakfast, and we all dug in. It was so good to be back here. Anna and Riley were like sisters to me, and now that Rebecca and I were getting along better than we ever had, I felt at peace for the first time in two weeks.

## Chapter 35



### KAT

REBECCA AND I HAD returned home from New York two weeks ago, and I missed Anna and Riley terribly. Especially because my other friends still weren't talking to me. But I wouldn't stand for that anymore. Fierce Kat was back, and I was done hiding out.

My car bumped along the dirt road to Mindy's house. She didn't need me for the next few months. The farm was closed for the winter and would open again in the spring. I needed to clear the air with her, so I was planning a sneak attack. It was something she would have done, so she couldn't be mad at me.

Thankfully, there weren't any cars in front of the house when I pulled up, which meant they didn't have visitors. I got out of the car and walked up the porch steps, stopping to take a deep breath before knocking on the door. The door opened, and Frank looked out at me. I waved, and he reached forward, pushing the screen door open and inviting me in.

"She's in the kitchen. Shoes off," Frank said.

"Thanks." I toed off my shoes and walked in that direction. I rounded the corner and stopped in the doorway. Mindy put her hands on her hips and stared me down.

"Hey," I said.

"What took you so long?" she asked.

My eyes widened. "What?"

She ignored me and went back to chopping vegetables on a cutting board on the island. I took a seat at the breakfast nook. The air was thick with tension, and my heart raced. Maybe this wasn't the right thing to do.

"I'm hurt that you lied to me," she said.

Mindy wasn't a bullshitter, so it didn't surprise me that she cut right to the chase. Plus, it had been nearly a month since the incident.

"It wasn't that I didn't trust you."

"No? Then what was it?"

"It wasn't just my secret. It affected Sid too."

"Which means you didn't trust that I wouldn't say anything," she countered.

"You're right. I was worried that if everyone knew the truth, it would get out. Even if people didn't mean to leak it. The gossip blog was writing about us left and right, and you follow the blog voraciously. I couldn't risk it."

Mindy stared at me. Her jaw ticked, and her eyes were cold. I'd never seen her that angry before.

"I thought we were friends." She went back to chopping.

"We were—are friends. You mean so much to me, and it was killing me not to tell you the truth. I didn't even tell my sister."

"That I can understand because she would have told your parents, but me? If you would have said it was a secret, I wouldn't have even told Frank."

"It's true. She keeps things from me all the time," Frank yelled from across the hall in the living room.

"Shut up, Frank," she yelled back.

"I'm sorry," I said. "It got so out of hand. One minute Sid and I were going to join forces to trick our parents, the next,

we were engaged. And then we were banging on a mountaintop.”

“Wait, what?” Mindy asked. She set down her knife and rounded the island, taking a seat across from me. Frank wandered into the kitchen and leaned against the doorjamb.

“Go away, Frank.”

“No. I gotta hear this.”

“Go. Away,” Mindy repeated.

He muttered something under his breath, then stormed out the back door, letting the screen slam.

“Ignore him. Tell me what happened.”

I went through the timeline of our relationship from beginning to end. Mindy listened intently and then sat back.

“Wow.”

“That’s it? Wow?”

“I don’t know what else to say. I’ve known Sid for a few years, and he’s always seemed closed off. In fact, when Frank told me he set up a dating profile for Sid, I laughed. I thought there was no way Sid would participate, but then he did, and it was one awful date after another, and he got grumpier and grumpier. I figured he didn’t want to be with anyone. In the four years I’ve lived here, he’s never been in a relationship.”

I sighed.

“But then you came along. Things changed. His face brightened when you were around, and he seemed to relax. I could tell he was still tense, but he seemed happier.”

“I thought so too,” I said. A tear slid down my face, and I wiped it away. Damn these tears. When would they end?

“We haven’t seen him since it all happened. Frank tried to visit before New Year’s, but Sid didn’t answer the door. I thought we’d see him on New Year’s Eve, but he never showed.”

“I hope he’s okay,” I whispered.

“Me too.”

“Do you think he’ll be at Rebecca’s grand opening tonight?”

Mindy shrugged. “I honestly don’t know.”

Part of me hoped he would be there because I missed him so badly. But the other part of me didn’t want to see him at all. I was angry, hurt, and embarrassed. If this wasn’t Rebecca’s restaurant opening, I wouldn’t go.

“I don’t think I can see him.”

Mindy placed her hand on mine. “Of course you can, because you’re brave and strong.”

I shook my head. “Not at all. I’m weak and pathetic. You would think I might have learned from my mistake with that idiot in Vegas, but I ran right into the same kind of relationship with a different man. I’m so embarrassed.”

“You have nothing to be embarrassed about. What you and Sid shared wasn’t the same as your previous relationship. It was deeper and special.”

Tears pooled in my eyes. “I thought so too.”

She sat back. “Do you love him?”

I lifted my head. “Yes.”

“Did you love the other man?”

“No,” I blurted.

“Then it’s not the same. The situations may look the same, but they’re different.”

“Thanks. Can you forgive me?”

“Yes. But don’t you dare keep anything else from me.”

I laughed. “Deal.”

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I WAS ON MY THIRD glass of wine and my second lap around the room. My stomach was in knots, and the wine was going to my head. The grand opening for Rebecca's restaurant had turned out to be huge. People had come from Oak Springs, Ridge Point, and other neighboring towns. Which meant bumping into Sid's parents was inevitable.

My parents were here, too, of course. They'd ignored me when they arrived. My dad acted as if I didn't exist, and my mom looked at me with disgust before following my dad to say hi to my sister. I saw Sid once when I arrived, but Laney whisked me away to the bar and then made me tell her everything. Kate had easily forgiven me and told me to work on forgiving myself. I wasn't sure what she was talking about, but when I told her that, she just patted me on the arm and walked away.

I was staring at a painting on the wall, wondering how soon would be too soon to make my exit, when a deep voice startled me. "Hi."

Thankfully, I recognized that voice, and my shoulders relaxed a little. I turned around and smiled at Will. Damn, that man was gorgeous. He was wearing a suit, and the top two buttons of his shirt were undone to show some of his tattooed skin. He looked like he'd walked off a magazine cover.

"Hi yourself," I said, taking a sip of my wine.

"How are you?"

"About as good as can be expected, I guess. I don't know why I'm still here."

"We could get out of here," he said.

I studied his eyes. Was he hitting on me? It was hard to tell with him. "Are you trying to seduce me, Mr. Lewis?"

"Never. I was offering you an escape."

"That's nice of you, but I'm fine. It's only a few more hours. I can hold out until then."

"If you're sure."

I nodded and turned to survey the room. Sid's eyes locked with mine, and I glanced away.

"He's miserable, you know," Will said in my ear. His low timbre made my body shiver. If I wasn't so in love with his brother, I might have considered flirting with him.

"That makes two of us." I drank the last of my wine and excused myself. I refilled my glass and wandered over to where Laney was sitting in a booth with Jacob, Frank, and Mindy.

"My feet are killing me," I said. I kicked off my wedges and stretched my toes. The floor was clean since the restaurant hadn't been open yet. "I can't believe Jackson is bartending."

"Who is Jackson?" Mindy asked.

I pointed to the man behind the bar, and he winked at me. Always the flirt.

"Yum," she said. Laney agreed.

"Hey!" Frank said, drawing Mindy's attention back to him.

"No one compares to you." Mindy patted his chest and fluttered her eyelashes at him.

I laughed, and it came out as a snort. The wine was going to my head. I'd had very little to eat because I had been worried about seeing Sid. But now I was starving. The night was winding down, and I wanted a pizza. I pulled my phone from my clutch.

"What are you doing?" Laney asked.

"Ordering a pizza."

"From where?"

"Pizza Pan."

She giggled. "They're closed, silly."

I groaned and put my phone back in my purse. Maybe I could convince my sister's chef to make me a pizza to go. I



slid out of the booth and walked barefoot to the kitchen. There was a lot of noise, and the lights were bright.

“You can’t be back here,” a deep voice said.

A man wearing a toque and double-breasted jacket was leaning against the counter with his arms crossed over his chest. His blue eyes were mesmerizing, and I couldn’t stop staring. I took a step toward him, and he stood to his full height, towering over me. His dark blond hair curled at the nape of his neck. My hands itched to touch it.

“Did you hear me?” he asked.

“Yes. I’m Rebecca’s sister.”

He quirked a brow. “So?”

“I wanted to ask if I could order a pizza to go.”

His lips twitched. “A pizza?”

I nodded. “Mm-hmm.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Are you drunk? Where are your shoes? This floor is filthy. Go back up front.”

“I’m not drunk. Well, not completely, and my feet hurt, so I took the shoes off. I want a pizza. I’m willing to pay. The pizza place in town is closed.”

He reached forward and turned me around with his hands on my shoulders, then guided me back out to the main dining area. Rebecca was coming toward us.

“Kat? What are you doing?”

“I wanted a pizza, but your chef won’t make me one,” I spat out.

“I’ve got her. Thanks, Eli.”

“Make him cook me one,” I whined.

“I’ll get you one before I leave. Why don’t you see if someone can take you home?”

“Fine.”

I made my way back to the booth where my friends were. They looked like they were getting ready to leave. I got down and dug my shoes out from under the table. I also got Laney’s and Mindy’s while I was under there. When I stood, I wobbled and nearly fell.

A hand grabbed my arm to steady me. When I looked up and saw that the hand was attached to the handsome man I’d cried over for the past month, my knees buckled again. He grabbed me with both hands.

“Are you okay?” Sid asked.

“I’m fine,” I said, yanking my arm free. He dropped his hands, and I fell back against the table.

“You’re not fine. Let me walk you out.” He grabbed my arm again.

“Let go.”

“Kat, please let me help you.”

“Why?” I asked.

He ran a hand through his hair. That’s when I noticed the dark circles under his eyes and his sallow complexion. “Please.”

“I’m fine.” I walked past him and out to the parking lot.

All the alcohol I’d consumed hit me like a wave, nearly knocking me over. My stomach rolled, and I pinched my eyes shut to keep everything down.

“Katerina, can we talk?” Sid asked.

I spun around, which was a terrible idea, and faced him. “No.”

“Kat, please. Can we talk tomorrow? Will you meet with me?”

There were two of him, and I couldn't really process what he was saying. It wasn't the best time to have a conversation. I needed to find a ride home. My stomach rolled again, and I shoved him out of the way and threw up on the ground.

Laney stuck her head out the open window of Jacob's truck. "Gross. You're not coming home with us."

"Oh, Kat. Hold on. I'll get you something to clean your feet off," Sid said, heading back inside. I looked down and almost got sick again.

Embarrassment washed over me as I stood in the middle of the parking lot in bare feet while Sid cleaned them off with a towel. He stood and moved the hair away from my face.

"Can I take you home?" he asked.

"No. I can get a ride."

I looked around for someone to take me to Rebecca's house.

"Kat, let me take you home. Please."

"Fine." I marched to his truck and climbed in. He set my shoes down on the floor and handed me a plastic bag before walking around and climbing into the driver's side.

The drive to Rebecca's was filled with awkward silence. My head hurt and I was starving. I rested my head back against the seat and closed my eyes.

"We're here," Sid whispered.

My eyes fluttered open. Sid hopped out and ran around the front of the truck. He opened the door for me and helped me out. My feet hit the cold pavement, and I shivered.

I hurried up to the front door, thinking of all the popcorn I was going to eat when I got inside. I dug through my purse for my keys. When I didn't feel them, I panicked. My search became frantic as I realized they weren't there. I dumped the contents of my purse onto the porch, kneeled down, and

searched through everything. There wasn't a lot since I'd taken a clutch.

"Shit."

"What's wrong?" Sid asked, kneeling beside me.

"I can't find my keys or my phone."

"Do you want me to call Rebecca?"

The wind whipped around us, and I shivered again. I'd forgotten my coat at the restaurant, which was probably where my keys and phone were.

"Hi, Becks. Do you know if Kat's keys and phone are there?" Sid asked.

"They're in my coat. In her office," I said.

"Kat said they're in her coat in your office."

What the hell was I going to do now? Everything was closed, and I couldn't sit on the porch to wait for Rebecca. It was freezing out. Tiny snowflakes drifted from the sky and landed on my hair and eyelashes.

"Okay. Great. I'll take care of her. I promise."

He hung up with Rebecca, and when he looked at me, my stomach filled with dread.

"No. No way."

"Kat, it's freezing out, and it's snowing. You have nowhere to go, and Rebecca said she's going to be at the restaurant for a few more hours. Come to my house and get warm. I'll make you some coffee."

"I don't want coffee."

"How about tea?"

Emotions from the night mixed with the alcohol, and I sobbed.

"Kat, I'm so sorry."

“Stop! I don’t want your apologies. I don’t want to be anywhere near you. Take me to Betty’s.”

“It’s after ten. She’s asleep. You have to schedule a late check-in.”

I cried harder and then sat down on the porch. The cold seeped through my dress, freezing my ass and thighs.

“Come on. I promise nothing will happen. I just want to make sure you’re safe,” Sid said. He held out his hand to me.

It was my only option unless he dropped me off at someone else’s house, but he was right. It was late, and all of my friends had kids that would be asleep. I huffed and stood up, ignoring his hand as I made my way back to his truck. He stood beside the passenger door and waited for me to get inside.

I crossed my arms over my chest and stared out the front window. “Do you have pizza?”

“I don’t know.”

“Figures,” I said.

He climbed inside and started the truck. I fell asleep again in the few minutes it took to get to his house. I vaguely registered him picking me up and carrying me inside. Shiloh danced at his feet. I could hear the pitter patter of her nails on the hardwood.

Sid set me down and then stepped back. When I sat up and my eyes focused, I realized I was on my bed in the guest room. “I forgot this was still here.”

He ran his hand over his beard. “Yeah. I’ve been meaning to ask someone to help me return it.”

I nodded but didn’t have the energy to talk about anything. “Thanks for helping me.”

“You’re welcome. Can I get you anything?”

“Water?”

He nodded and disappeared. When he came back, he had a pair of sweats, a T-shirt, and a glass of water. He set the clothes on the bed and the water on the nightstand, along with two white pills.

“Let me know if you need anything else.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He left, closing the door behind him.

I swallowed the pills and drank the entire glass of water. Then I changed into Sid’s sweats and T-shirt and slipped under the covers. It was comforting to sleep in my own bed, with my own pillow, even if it was in Sid’s house. Within minutes, sleep pulled me under.

# Chapter 36



## SID

KAT WAS IN MY HOUSE again, and it felt like a second chance. I couldn't sleep knowing she was just downstairs. I wanted to pull her into my arms and beg her to never leave.

When I went to the grand opening for Rebecca's restaurant, I wasn't planning on talking to Kat. I didn't want to cause a scene, but by the end of the night, the need to be near her won out.

She was gorgeous. My hands itched all night to run over the soft curves beneath her skin-tight pink dress and tangle in her long tresses. Her honey blond hair looked a little darker now that it was winter, and I liked it. She was so beautiful it hurt, and I needed to fix what I'd broken.

Jealousy burned through me when I saw my brother talking to her. He was more her type on paper, the kind of man who could give her the world. Money, joy, forever. All the things I couldn't give her. I shook my head. I was letting my past dictate my future again, and it had to end.

Laney had been kidnapped two years ago, and it messed with her head for a while. She started seeing a therapist, and after talking with Will, I decided I needed one too. Laney gave me the number to a clinic in the city, and I'd been going twice a week for the last month.

Talking through things helped. I still felt guilt and shame, but it was easier to deal with and to see that it wasn't my fault.

Between Christmas and New Year's, I reached out to Lisa's parents and apologized for taking her away from them.

Her mom cried and said they had never blamed me. She said when I shut down and shut them out, it felt like they lost me too. Lisa and I had dated for years. All through high school and then after. I had been close with her parents, but the guilt of her death was too much to take. So I quit visiting and then moved to Oak Springs to get away from it all.

Speaking with her parents and talking to a therapist regularly had been freeing, but there was still so much pain. I loved Lisa, but it was nothing compared to the way I felt about Kat. She was sunshine, joy, and love. She was everything good in my life. Katerina could heal the broken parts inside of me with her light.

I'd been telling myself for years that I wasn't worthy of happiness or love. That I deserved to suffer because I'd killed Lisa by making poor choices. I bent over and gripped the counter as the grief and guilt hit me like a wave. I had a long way to go to undo the lies I'd told myself. I only hoped Kat would be by my side to walk through it with me.

I had a lot of groveling to do, so I got up early to make her coffee and breakfast. I hoped a meal would persuade her to stay and talk to me.

The door to the spare room creaked, and my heart thumped double time in my chest. I heard the bathroom door close, and I exhaled and relaxed a little. A few minutes later, she walked into the kitchen, and the air left my lungs.

Her face was free of makeup, and her hair was a mess of waves over her shoulders. She was wearing my T-shirt and sweats. And she was just as striking as she'd been all made up last night. I wanted more moments like this with her. I wanted to wake up together to breakfast and coffee. I wanted every day with her for the rest of our lives.

"Good morning," I said. My voice was still husky from sleep.



Kat stood still and rubbed one hand up and down her other arm nervously. She looked so scared, and I wanted to kick my own ass for making her feel that way.

“Are you cold?” I asked.

She nodded.

“Hang on.” I hurried out of the room to grab a blanket off the back of the couch, brought it back, and wrapped it around her shoulders.

She gave me a small smile. “Thanks.”

I handed her a mug, and she filled it with coffee. I did the same, then I gently grabbed her hand. She gasped and looked down. I wrapped my hand around hers and jerked my head toward the front room.

Thankfully, she allowed me to lead her. When she was living here, she spent nearly every morning on my front porch with a cup of coffee, watching the sunrise. I wanted her to experience that again. I opened the door, sat in the swing on the edge of my porch, and pulled her down beside me. She shivered and wrapped the blanket tighter around her.

It was a frosty morning, especially without the sun, and I almost regretted bringing her out here. But when Kat gasped as the first light of the sun shone through the trees and illuminated the dark town, it was totally worth it.

She sighed and snuggled into my side as she sipped her coffee. Shiloh was at our feet, and we gently swayed in the swing while the sun’s warmth spread through the town and over us. It felt familiar. Like the way Kat’s warmth seeped into me, making me come alive.

We were quiet for a long while, and when the sun was high, I cleared my throat, breaking the moment.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Kat said, sitting up and moving away from me. I quickly pulled her back to me.

“I wanted to talk.”

“Okay.”

“Kat, I’m so sorry for the things I said to you. For making you think that our relationship meant nothing to me. That *you* meant nothing to me. That was so far from the truth.”

She inhaled sharply.

“I pushed you away because I was afraid and because I had never dealt with my past. And it kept coming back to haunt me, no matter how hard I tried to stop it. Burying it wasn’t working, and the closer I got to you, the worse it became. I had been telling myself I didn’t deserve happiness or love for so long, and the deeper my feelings grew for you, the angrier and more anxious I became. I wanted to keep you, but I didn’t feel worthy.”

She looked up at me. “Why didn’t you talk to me?”

“I didn’t want to talk to anyone.” I took a deep breath. “For seven years, I lived my life with extreme guilt and pain. I thought I was okay, but it ate away at me deep inside. Growing close to you—opening up and allowing you in—sent a surge of those emotions to the surface.”

I lifted her chin with my finger and thumb so I could look into her eyes. She needed to know the truth of what I’d kept buried for so long. The reason why I acted the way I did.

“Seven years ago, on Christmas Eve, I was leaving our family’s house. The weather was bad, and the roads were icy. It was dark, and I took back roads. I shouldn’t have left the house, but I wanted to get home. I was excited about Christmas morning, and I wanted to wake up in my apartment.”

I took a deep breath.

“A deer ran out in front of me, and I braked hard, but the ice on the road sent the car into a tailspin. I lost control and ran head-on into a pine tree. A low branch crashed through the window and impaled my girlfriend, killing her on the spot. But I didn’t know that because I hit my head and was unconscious. They told me later in the hospital that she was gone.”

Kat gasped and sat up. She framed my face with her hands, and tears welled in my eyes.

“Oh, Sid, I’m so sorry.” She wiped away the falling tears with her thumbs.

“Her name was Lisa. I refused to think or speak about her for seven years. I carried around the guilt of her death and refused to think about it. Instead of honoring her and what we had, I buried it.”

I rested my forehead against Kat’s and closed my eyes.

“I’ve been talking with a therapist and working through the past. One thing I realized was that I stopped living after the accident and was only existing. Any time someone got close, I pushed them away. But I don’t want to live that way anymore.”

“No one should,” she whispered.

I nodded.

“When we first met, I wasn’t sure what to think. You blew into town like a whirlwind with your high heels and expensive clothes. Your personality was larger than life, and I found you intimidating. You also reminded me a bit of the women my mom tried to force on me year after year. Women who were concerned with status and money. Those were things I never wanted or could ever give them. So when you needed a date, I figured it would be safe to pretend with you because I’d never fall for you.”

She pulled back and looked offended. I grabbed her hand and held it to my chest.

“Katerina, I was so incredibly wrong. You’re nothing like that. The clothes, the shoes, the whole persona—you wore them like armor to protect yourself from your family, but when you truly let your guard down and shed your old skin, you blossomed.”

She relaxed a little.

“Light and goodness radiate out of you. You’re smart and passionate, spontaneous and carefree. My life was miserable before you. You bring me so much joy, and your sunshine lights up my darkness. I miss the hell out of you.”

Tears spilled from her eyes, and it was my turn to wipe them away.

“The house has been quiet without you this past month. I miss your laugh and smile. I miss coming home and finding you barefoot in the kitchen cooking dinner or stretched out on my couch with your damn popcorn of the month basket.”

She laughed and wiped tears away.

“Most of all, I miss you. I know we’ve only known each other for a short while, and I can’t promise that I’ll do everything right or that I won’t be a grumpy bastard, but I can promise to give you all of me. Even the parts I’ve kept hidden for many years. I can’t imagine my life without you. It won’t be easy, and it will take time for me to work through the pain. I won’t always feel worthy of you, but I promise to try every day to be the man you deserve.”

I dug into my pocket and held up her ring between my thumb and forefinger.

“Katerina Cooper, I love you so much. I’m so sorry that I hurt you and betrayed you the way I did in front of our friends. You opened up and shared something difficult with me, and I used it against you to push you away. I can’t tell you how sorry I am, and I know I’ll have to earn your trust back. But I promise I’ll spend every day doing that. I want to be someone you can always talk to. Someone you can lean on and trust. I promise to always stand by your side and support you. I’ll never leave you again. You’re my everything, and I can’t go another day without you in my life.”

Kat sobbed. I held the ring up between us. “I want to do life with you. Will you marry me, for real this time?”

She covered the ring with her hand and lowered it. My heart fell. When she stood and paced, I prepared myself for the

crushing blow.

“The last month without you has been hell. I never expected to fall for a grumpy, grunting, scowling man, but I did. I fell so hard for you.”

Hope bloomed in my chest as I waited for her to continue.

“You’re so much more than the angry armor you wear. You’re kind and compassionate, sinfully sexy, and your dirty mouth sets me on fire.”

I chuckled.

“But more than that, you love fiercely, and you’re protective of those you love.”

When she turned to face me with tears in her eyes, the hope was replaced with fear.

“Sid, I don’t understand why you couldn’t love me that way. Why you wouldn’t protect me like you do your friends. Even with your past, you’d still lay your life down for them. But you didn’t protect me. Worse, you embarrassed me in front of everyone by airing out my dirty laundry. The Kat I wanted to hide away was exposed, and I felt humiliated.”

“Kat—”

She put up her hand to stop me. “I love you, Sid. No matter how much I try to deny it, you have my whole heart. But I can’t marry you. I deserve better. I understand that you had something from your past to deal with, but so did I. We could have worked through our issues together. Instead, you chose to use your past as an excuse to lash out and hurt me. I would never do that to you.”

“Kat, I’m so sorry. I never meant to hurt you.”

“But you did.”

She pulled the blanket from her shoulders and handed it to me, then went inside. I was stunned to silence. This wasn’t how I’d planned for things to go. I figured that once I laid my

heart out and she understood why I did the things I did, she'd forgive me. I never expected her to leave me.

I bolted inside and found her coming out of the spare room with her clothes in her hand. "I'll wash your clothes and give them back."

"Please don't go," I begged.

Tears fell down her face. "I'm sorry, Sid. I have to start living my life for me. I can't allow myself to be that girl anymore."

"You're not her."

She nodded and looked around the room. "I can't do this. I'm afraid to trust you again. You're still working through your past. Seven years is a long time to hang on to something, and it won't go away overnight. You need time to heal, and I don't think me being here is a good idea."

My heart shattered as she walked to the door. "Kat, please."

"I love you, Sid. That hasn't changed. But we both need time to heal."

She walked out the door and out of my life for a second time. I collapsed to the floor and pulled the blanket to my chest. It felt like someone had ripped my heart clean out of it. Why did it fucking hurt so bad?

I dug my phone out of my pocket and texted Will to let him know what had happened. A few seconds later, my phone rang.

I didn't bother with a greeting. "She left me."

"I'm here," he said.

"What the hell do I do now? I laid it all out there, and she walked away."

He sighed. "For good?"

"I don't know. It felt pretty permanent."

“Hold on.”

I waited while the sound of clicking came through the line.

“Sorry. I was getting help.”

“Getting help how?” Shiloh licked my face. I pushed her off and stood.

“I sent a text to Rebecca.”

“What the hell for?”

“For help. I need to know a few things before I give you advice. Are you okay?”

“No, I’m not okay. The woman I love just left me.”

“I mean will you be okay for a few minutes so I can get a plan together and call you back?”

“I’ll be fine,” I said. I poured the old coffee out of the pot. In the cabinet I had single brew pods, and I pulled one down and put it in my Keurig machine. The aroma hit my nose and reminded me of mornings with Kat.

“I’ll call you right back.”

Will hung up, and I sat down at the kitchen table with my coffee, looking out the windows at the mountains. Now what the hell was I going to do?

## Chapter 37



### KAT

“HOW ARE YOU HOLDING UP?” Rebecca asked. She tipped her head to the side and put in a silver hoop earring.

I shrugged. “Okay, I guess.”

She frowned. “Kat, it’s okay to be sad.”

“I’m angry. I spent all that time in New York crying and getting over Sid. Only to come home and have him tell me he loves me and was afraid to be with me because of his past. I understand that what happened crushed him, but he didn’t let me in.”

After I left Sid’s house, I went straight to Rebecca’s and crawled into bed. I needed sleep. Now it was noon, and Rebecca was getting ready to go to Harvest House. They prepped until they opened at three for the dinner crowd and then remained open until eleven.

She tipped her head the other way to put the other earring in. She was wearing her power outfit today: high-waisted navy dress pants and a cream silk blouse. She wore it well. “I’m really sorry, Kat.”

“I understand that his past was painful, and he wasn’t allowing himself to move on, but he humiliated me and crushed me because of it. He hurt me, and I can’t run back into his arms when he still has healing to do. I deserve better.”

Rebecca sat down on the edge of the bed. “That’s true. You do. But what if he’s changed and he can give you what you



deserve?”

I opened my mouth to argue, but she held up her hand. “Hear me out. You guys were good together, and what you had was real, even if he tried to deny that. If the only thing holding him back was the trauma in his past, and he has opened up to you now, I think things can only get better from here. Your relationship has hit rock bottom. If you can make it through this, you can make it through anything.”

I sighed. “He has to prove himself to me. The words aren’t enough. I can’t trust him. He embarrassed me when I was at my most vulnerable, and I can’t forgive him for that yet.”

She patted my arm. “I know, and I agree. He should have to show you how serious he is.”

“Thanks for being on my side.”

She smiled and stood. There was a knock at the front door, and she left my bedroom to answer it. I flopped back on the pillows and stared at the ceiling. What was I going to do?

Rebecca came back in carrying a cup of coffee and a bag. “Looks like he’s starting now.”

“What?” I asked, sitting up.

She handed me the items and kissed my forehead before leaving. I plucked a note off the coffee cup and chuckled. The go-to apology for the men in Oak Springs was coffee, pastries, and notes.

Opening the bag, I pulled my favorite muffin out and sat back. I took a bite while I read the note.

*Kat,*

*I’m so sorry for how I handled things between us. I hope that in time you’ll forgive me. There isn’t anyone else for me. I will chase after you for as long as it takes to make you mine. I want to spend forever with you. Even if that means apologizing every day.*

*-Sid*

A tear slid down my cheek. Damn this man. He was making it super hard to stay mad at him. But I had to stand firm. He needed to know how badly he'd hurt me, and I needed to make sure it never happened again.

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THREE DAYS HAD PASSED since I'd last seen Sid in person, but he reminded me every day that he was still there. Coffee and pastries from Grateful Cup were always waiting for me in the morning on the porch. Tom Tracy delivered lunch to Mindy's house every day, and dinner was waiting for me when I got home to Rebecca's.

Each meal came with a note about how much Sid loved me. They started small: "I love your smile" and "You're the light that warms my life." Then they got a little longer, and he started pouring out his feelings. He was wearing me down, but I needed to remain strong.

Rebecca was still asleep when I pulled on my shoes this morning. Mindy wanted coffee and donuts for everyone at the farm, so I needed to leave a little earlier than normal. My routine of watching the twins and working at Knead to Relax was a welcome distraction from my feelings for Sid.

I opened the front door and froze. There was no coffee and paper bag on the porch today. Instead, Sid was standing at the bottom of the steps with them in his hands. He gave me a lazy smile that lit up my insides despite January's cold chill.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

He smiled. "I'm here to take you to work."

"Why?"

"Because I want to," he said with a shrug.

"Sid—"

"Kat, please. I only want to give you a ride to Mindy's. I'm helping Frank for the day, and I figured we could ride over

together. I'll bring you home after. I promise it's nothing more."

"Okay."

He smiled big and held out the bag and coffee. I took them and walked to the passenger side of his truck. He held open the door while I climbed up and settled in. Then he closed it and jogged around the front of the truck. His feet slipped on the fresh snow, and he grabbed the hood to stay upright. When he climbed in, he had snow in his hair, and his hands were red. He started the truck and held his hands in front of the heater vent. I laughed.

"Glad you find that funny," he said.

He put the truck in reverse and started to back out of the drive.

"Wait, I have to get donuts and coffee for everyone."

Sid pointed to the back seat, where two boxes of donuts, a small box of pastries, and a carrier filled with coffee waited. Warmth spread through me again.

"How did you know?" I asked.

"Mindy," we said at the same time.

"That little sneak," I said.

"Don't be mad at her. I asked them to help me."

"Sid, I really appreciate what you've been doing. But it doesn't change anything."

He was silent. I peered over at him, expecting to see his usual scowl, but there wasn't one. He was looking straight ahead at the road. I sat back and looked out the side window. There were fresh animal tracks in the grass, and I focused on them, wondering what animal had made them.

"I'm not going to stop."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because I love you."

“It’s not that simple.”

“No one said it was simple, Kat. But I can’t imagine life without you now, and I’m willing to show you how sorry I am and how much I care. I know I hurt you, and I’m trying really hard to make that up to you. Tell me what I can do.”

I wasn’t sure what to tell him. I missed the hell out of him, but I was afraid to go back. There was nothing he could do to erase that fear. It would have to happen over time. Maybe that was it. He needed to show me that he’d be willing to wait. To be there no matter how long it took and make me feel like he was someone I could rely on. Someone who wouldn’t break my heart or run when things got tough.

“I need time.”

“Time I can give you. Does that mean I have to leave you alone, though?”

I grinned and bit my lip. “No. I don’t think so.”

He let out a breath and relaxed. “Good. Can I take you to dinner tonight?”

“Sid,” I said, swatting his arm.

“Okay. Not yet. But soon, maybe?”

“Maybe.”

# Chapter 38



## SID

THE WARMTH INSIDE THE bar made my hands burn. It had snowed like hell throughout the night and most of the day. The roads were shit. We'd all pitched in to dig out Main Street and Grand Street so the businesses could open. My hands were like ice, and my clothes were soaked.

I stomped my boots on the mat inside the door to clear the snow off before going in search of the guys. Ice clung to my beard and the ends of my hair. I felt like a drowned rat that had fallen into arctic waters.

Jacob, Peter, and Charlie were sitting at a table near a large stone fireplace. Frank was standing in front of the fire, warming himself. I walked up beside him and stuck my hands in front of the orange and red flames. My fingers pricked like they were being stuck over and over with needles as the numbness started to wear off.

"Why is it so fucking cold? It hasn't been this cold in forever," Frank said.

"You're just a wuss," Jacob said.

"Shut up. You were just crying about your damn boots."

"Because they're ruined," Jacob argued.

Frank laughed. "Serves you right for wearing expensive boots."

Jacob threw a napkin at Frank.

“Hey! Y’all behave,” Candace, our server, drawled. She’d been working at Frosty Mug Tavern for a few years and knew all of us well. “What can I get y’all to drink?”

Frank and I took gave Candace our drink orders, then took a seat at the table. Charlie was chewing on his thumb, and his eyes bounced between his phone and the people in the room.

“What’s up?” I asked him.

“Huh?” he asked, lifting his head from his phone. “Oh, I’m waiting for someone.”

“Who?”

“Someone who’s interested in renting the spare room at my house. Remember how I put an ad in the town paper for a roommate? Well, I finally had someone respond. They should be here by now.”

“The roads are shit. I doubt they’ll be coming today,” I said.

“That’s what I’m worried about because they didn’t call to reschedule, and I can’t get a hold of them.”

I frowned. “Is it someone from town?”

“That’s what’s weird, I don’t know. I never got a name. Just a number. The applicant requested we only communicate through text or email. I thought it was weird, but I haven’t had any other interest, so I thought I’d give it a shot.”

“Do you want me to run the number?” I asked.

He shook his head. “No. If they don’t show up today, I’ll email them and find out what’s going on.”

Conversation moved to how we were going to continue to keep the town clear and how long the storm was going to last. Candace dropped off our drinks and took our lunch order while the conversation continued.

“I need your help, guys,” I said when there was a break in the conversation.

“With the barn?” Peter asked.

I’d been working on Mr. Thompson’s barn whenever I had time and when the weather was nice. It was a good distraction from what was going on with Kat. But the weather had been bad for the last few days, so I hadn’t been able to do any work. That meant my brain had been solely focused on Kat and all the ways I was screwing things up with her.

I was still bringing her food and driving her to and from work, but it wasn’t enough. She still kept me at arm’s length. No matter how many times I asked, she wouldn’t agree to dinner. I even asked her to meet me at the park for a jog, but she never showed.

I knew I could do more, but I couldn’t figure out what that was. Which was why I was reaching out to my buddies. Three of whom were already happily married. I knew they would have some good advice.

“No, the barn is on hold till the weather turns. I need help winning Kat back.”

Jacob clicked his tongue. “That’s a tough one.”

“You haven’t even heard what’s been going on.”

All three looked guilty. Frank was the first to laugh, of course, and even Charlie chuckled.

“We’ve all heard about what happened. The women talk and then they talk to us.”

“How did you hear about it?” I asked Charlie. I was irritated.

“Mindy.”

I rolled my eyes. “Okay, then help me out. I’ve been dropping off pastries and coffee with notes like you two told me to do.” I pointed at Jacob and Frank. “I’ve been driving her to and from work and asking her out. She won’t meet me for a jog or a walk in the park. She’s reluctant to get in the car, and she told me I have to stop with the food or she’s going to gain weight. So now what?”

Peter leaned forward. “What is it that she wants?”

“She said time. I asked if that meant I couldn’t talk to her, and she said no, that I could still continue on with what I’d been doing.”

Peter scratched at the winter beard he’d grown. He looked like a different man since he was usually clean cut and wearing suits. The look he had going on this winter was more lumberjack, and I was surprised the older folks in town hadn’t complained. They were the ones who forced him to wear suits as the mayor. It was brought up in town meetings.

“From what Kate said, she feels like she can’t trust you. She’s afraid that you’re going to run again if things get serious. She’s also afraid to open up to you again after what happened at Thanksgiving, and I can’t say I blame her. That was rough to watch.”

I took off my winter hat and pulled at my hair. “I know. I fucked up. I wasn’t in the right headspace, and I messed up. But how do I get her back?”

The guys were quiet, and I nearly lost it before Charlie spoke up. “Nothing says forever like a wedding.”

“What?” I asked. “I thought you said you heard what happened.”

He nodded his head. “I did.”

“Then you heard that I poured my heart out and asked her to be my wife for real and that she said no, right?”

“I did.”

I growled and grabbed my beer.

He laughed. “I’ve also been listening to everyone else speak, and it sounds like she wants to know that you’ll always be there. So plan the wedding.”

“She said no,” I scoffed.

Frank pointed at Charlie. “Shit. He’s onto something.”



Charlie grinned.

“Plan the wedding. If she shows up, you’ll know that she’s forgiven you. If she doesn’t, then you have to let her go,” Frank said.

Peter nodded in agreement.

“I like that,” Jacob said. “It’s the biggest gesture I can think of to show her how serious you are.”

“You guys might be right, but how can I do that without her knowing?”

Peter grinned. “My wife is a wedding planner. We’ll get the girls to help plan the wedding while distracting Kat. You have the venue already. The date is still saved, right?”

“Yeah. I told my mom to keep it in case Kat agreed to marry me. She said no a week ago, but I’ve been so caught up in trying to win her back that I forgot to call my mom and tell her to cancel.”

“There you go. You have until May to win her back,” Peter said. “I’d continue doing what you’re doing. Showing up, being there for her, and wearing her down slowly, all while secretly planning the wedding. Talk to Rebecca. You’ll need her on the inside.”

“Yeah. She’ll have to get the dress and make sure Kat gets there,” Frank said.

I rubbed the back of my neck. “I’m not sure she’ll come.”

“She will. She loves you, and once she sees how serious you are, she’ll come,” Jacob said.

God, I hoped he was right. It was a huge risk, but Kat was worth it. I never expected to find someone I wanted to marry, and I always thought I deserved to be alone. But after a taste of life with Kat, I never wanted to go back to being alone.

## Chapter 39



### KAT

THE DIM LIGHTS AND SOFT music of Harvest House created a romantic setting that normally made me giddy, but that wasn't the case now. As I sat across from Sid, my stomach roiled. I wasn't sure what to say or do.

He'd spent two weeks wearing me down, and I'd finally agreed to a date, but only if we ate at Harvest House. I figured it would be safe with my sister around. Oddly enough, Will was here as well. I'd address that at a later date. Right now, I needed to focus on making it through dinner without throwing up from nerves.

"How have you been?" Sid asked.

"Fine."

"Have you done anything fun or interesting?"

This was terrible. I hated awkward conversation, and this felt like we were right back where we started months ago in this very booth. Stilted conversation that wasn't going anywhere and the feeling that we weren't right for one another. Except now there was pain mixed in from everything we went through.

"Sid, what are we doing?" I asked.

He sighed and sat back. "I'm trying to get you to open up to me. I miss you."

I relaxed a little. "I miss you too."

He sat up straight. “You do?”

“Yes, but that doesn’t mean I’m not still angry about how you treated me.”

“I know.”

Silence settled around us. I sipped my wine and looked out over the dining area. After a few minutes, the waitress arrived to take our order. Once she left, I excused myself to use the bathroom.

Rebecca came in a few seconds later. “How’s it going out there? It looks painful.”

“It is. It’s like we’re reliving our first date all over again, but this time is worse because I know we were good together once.”

“You can be again. You just have to give it a chance.”

I tilted my head at her. “Give it a chance? We can’t even think of a single thing to talk about. All we’ve covered is that he misses me, I miss him, and he hurt me. There’s nothing more to talk about. He keeps bringing me meals and taking me to and from work, but it’s like we’re stalled. We’re not moving forward, but we can’t let go. I hate this!”

Rebecca put her hand on my shoulder. “Kat, I say this with love, but that’s because of *you*.”

I shrugged her hand off and spun on her. “What?”

“You’re afraid to move forward because of what happened last time, but you’re also afraid to lose him altogether. If the relationship stays in this middle ground, it’s comfortable and safe. You don’t have to worry about getting hurt, but you don’t have to let him go.”

Shit. She was right. That was exactly what I’d been doing. I was so worried that Sid would hurt me if I let him in again. But in a way, he’d been like a wounded animal, lashing out in self-defense. He’d deliberately set out to drive me away because he was struggling with feelings from the past. And he’d done a lot of work to pull himself out of that dark place.

Sid wasn't a malicious person. He didn't say those things to hurt me; he'd just panicked. He'd felt trapped, mostly by his past. I was just collateral damage.

Could I forgive him and move forward without letting that hold us back? To do that, I needed to let go of what happened, and I'd never been good at that. Whenever someone hurt me, I cut ties and walked away. I'd light a match and throw it behind me as I walked away. Forgiveness wasn't in my nature. Running was, and that was the other feeling I'd been fighting since this all happened.

I ran to New York, but when I returned home, the feelings all came flooding back. The desire to flee had been strong ever since, and I'd thought of leaving more than once. Packing everything up and starting fresh somewhere where no one knew me or my past. A place where I would be free to be Kat from New York. Or Kat from Oak Springs. But definitely not Kat the spoiled princess.

But really, I wasn't that girl here. No one cared who my parents were or if I had money. No one asked me to give them a handout or dated me to get ahead. I fit here. More than I'd ever fit anywhere else.

Not only did I fit in Oak Springs, but I fit with Sid. In his house and in his life. We fit together like two puzzle pieces. He liked me for me and not for what I had to offer. He enjoyed my company and my personality. He called me sunshine and told me I brought joy to his life. I'd never been called that before, and I'd certainly never had someone tell me I made them happy.

Most of the people in my life had called me names and told me how much I screwed up and how much I pissed them off. No one wanted the real me. They wanted me to play a part. But Sid didn't want me to pretend, and I loved that about him.

I also loved his big heart and his smile. When he relaxed and enjoyed life, he was so handsome. He'd always treated me with respect and love. Until he didn't, and it was that one time

that I couldn't get over. I'd forgotten about all the other times he'd stood up for me. The times that he'd complimented me and praised me in front of people.

That was what I needed to hold on to. Not the one time he'd messed up. Even though it was a big mistake, he deserved a second chance. I wanted to be happy, and I could only be happy if I forgave him.

"You're right," I said.

Rebecca smiled. "I know."

I stuck out my tongue, and she laughed.

"You guys are good together."

"Really good," I said with a smile.

"Sid is willing to let go of his past. Isn't it fair that you do the same?"

"Yes."

"Good. Now go back out there and get your man," she said, pushing me to the door.

I walked back to the restaurant and froze. Sid wasn't at the table. I looked around frantically to find him, but he was gone. My heart sank and tears welled up in my eyes. How could he leave me?

"Excuse me, miss. You're blocking my way."

The deep timbre of that voice rolled over me and caressed me like his big, callused hands had. I'd know that voice anywhere, and I was so relieved that Sid was still here. My legs nearly buckled. He was so close that I could feel the heat from his body. I wanted him to wrap his arms around me.

I spun around and smiled. "You're still here."

He frowned. "Where else would I be?"

"I thought you'd left."

He put his hands on my arms and rubbed them up and down. "I promise to never leave you again. No matter how

hard you push me away. I'm not going anywhere."

Warmth burst through me like the sun warming up the town first thing in the morning. I turned and walked back to the table, sliding into the booth across from him, even though I really wanted to be beside him. It was too soon, though. We needed to clear the air first.

"I'm sorry," I blurted out.

Sid was pouring wine and stopped mid-pour. "For what?"

"For punishing you. For keeping you away and fighting with you. I'm sorry I let what you did to me ruin everything we had."

He set the wine down on the table. "Kat, you didn't ruin anything. I hurt you, and you protected yourself. I'm proud of you for sticking up for yourself. For refusing to allow someone to walk all over you and being strong enough to stay this time and fight for what you want. It's admirable, and I wish I had an ounce of your strength. I wouldn't have hung on to the past for so long."

I wiped away tears and smiled at him. "That's the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me. You don't know how many times I wanted to run. To say forget it and go, but I have a life here. A life I love, and I didn't want to be the same old Kat."

"You are far from that girl. I don't even see her anymore when I look at you. You're beautiful and smart. Funny and kind. I love being with you even when we're doing nothing."

"Stop," I said, fanning my eyes with my hands. "You're making me cry."

He smiled and reached forward, taking my hand in his. "I'm only speaking the truth, Kat."

"Thank you."

For the rest of the meal, we sent flirty looks back and forth while catching up on life. It felt comfortable, like putting on an old sweatshirt that I loved. I'd missed him so much, and even

though I was still reluctant to trust him again, I wanted him in my life.

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“HOW ARE THINGS GOING with Sid?” Laney asked as she took a seat beside me on the couch.

We were having a much-needed girls’ day. We had lunch at Sandy’s Diner and then got manicures and pedicures before shuffling back to Rebecca’s with ice cream. Now we were settling in for a movie and pizza. The kids were with the guys, and Mindy, Laney, and Kate were fully relaxed and happy.

I smiled at Laney. “Things are good. Really good. He’s more open now than before, and I’ve learned a lot about him.”

“Yeah? And how do you feel about him?”

If my smile grew any larger, my cheeks would hurt. “My feelings for him have grown deeper. I’m opening up more and trusting he won’t hurt me. So far, I love everything I’ve found out about him. He’s amazing.”

She smiled. “That’s great. I’m so happy for you.”

I was happy too. Over the past month, Sid and I had eaten dinner together almost every night. Sometimes he cooked for us, and other times we went to different restaurants, trying new things. The nights he worked at the station, he’d drop Shiloh off with me and Rebecca, and I’d take dinner to him. It was nice to laugh and enjoy each other’s company without the weight of pretending hanging over us like it had in the past. I was giddy and excited to be near him.

Every morning when I opened the door, I felt a rush of happiness seeing him standing there. He walked me to Knead to Relax and drove me to Mindy’s for work. He brought me lunch every day and picked me up at night. He was showing me with his actions that I could rely on him and trust him to be there, and that was more than I could have ever asked for.

He was respectful and kind. He never pushed for more, even though we both wanted it. We had kissed a few times, but it hadn't gone any further than a heated kiss good night on my front porch like I was in high school again. I wanted him more than I ever had before, but I was also loving the intimacy we were building by opening ourselves up to each other. It was intoxicating in a way I'd never experienced before.

The weather had warmed up, and the town was gearing up for the Seedtime Fair. I was excited to walk around with Sid since we'd missed the Harvest Festival months ago and Christmas had been a disaster. I'd missed all the fun town events. He owed me for that.

There was a knock at the door, and I rose to get it since we were expecting pizza, but Rebecca reached the door first. I heard the deep rumble of a man's voice, and then Rebecca smiled and said thank you. She was handed something before she closed the door. It wasn't pizza.

"This is for you." She handed me a pretty blue envelope that looked vaguely familiar.

I carefully opened it and pulled out one of the wedding invitations I had picked out with Kate months ago. I inhaled sharply. The date I had chosen with Sid's mom was under our names and a time.

"What's this?" I asked.

No one spoke. Mindy smirked. Kate clasped her hands together as tears gathered in her eyes. Laney smiled, and Rebecca looked nervous.

"What's going on?"

"Read it," Rebecca urged.

I read it again. "It's our wedding invitation, but we never had them printed. I'm confused."

"Read the back," Laney said, flipping it over.

There was a note scrawled in Sid's handwriting. I read it aloud.



*My Dearest Katerina,*

*I never would have thought in a million years that I would fall head over heels for a girl who is my complete opposite. Especially not someone as bubbly as you.*

I laughed, and so did everyone else.

*But I'm so glad I did. Kat, you're the sunshine that chases away the darkness in my life, much like when the sun rises on our town. I love your laugh and how smart you are. But mostly, I love your warmth and smile. Even on the worst days, your light breaks through. No matter what I'm going through, you always make me feel better. I need you by my side. I can't live in darkness anymore, and when you're not around, the light is gone. You make me want to open up and be a better man. You're my other half, and without you, I'm not whole.*

I sniffled and wiped at my eyes so I could keep reading.

*Please do me the honor of meeting me at the vineyard on Saturday and making me the happiest man alive by becoming my wife. I'll be waiting for you at the end of the aisle.*

*Forever yours,*

*Sid*

Wetness dripped onto the invitation, and it took me a moment to realize it was from my tears. The only sound in the room was sniffing. I looked up, and everyone had tears in their eyes. Rebecca was handing out tissues, and I laughed.

“How can I say no?” I asked.

“Yes!” Mindy shouted, jumping up. She gave me a huge hug, and the room exploded with cheers and squeals.

“We thought you might say that, so now we have to get ready since the wedding is in two days.”

“Oh my gosh. It’s so soon.” I flipped the card back over and looked at the date and time again. Two days. Holy shit. “I’m getting married.”

“I’m getting married!” I repeated, shouting it this time. The girls jumped on me, and after the excitement died down, we got to work planning.

I couldn’t wait to walk down that aisle. Sid and I had gone through a lot, but our love had outlasted the trials. We were going to make it. For better or worse, I couldn’t wait to do life with him. To embark on adventures and grow, not only as a couple, but also as an individual. He wasn’t the type of man I ever would have picked for myself, so I was thankful that he’d asked me to pretend with him.

My heart pumped harder, and my stomach tumbled with nerves as Kate started pulling out decorations and talked about getting the bridesmaid dresses. Today was my bachelorette party, only I didn’t know that. The guys were taking Sid out the night before the wedding so he’d have a chance to cut loose.

Oddly enough, I trusted him completely and was more nervous about marrying him than what would happen at his bachelor party. He had been loyal and honest ever since he’d asked me to marry him again, and I no longer worried about the future with him. I knew that my heart was safe in his hands.

# Chapter 40



## SID

NERVES ATE AWAY AT me as I stood in front of the arbor arch at my parents' vineyard. I was just as anxious and nervous today as I was when Kat and I first visited here together months ago, but this time, I wasn't sure if Kat was coming. I had tried to see her over the past two days to find out if she'd said yes, but our friends kept us apart.

I couldn't wait to marry her. She was the love of my life. If someone would have asked me months ago if I thought Kat would be that person, I would have scoffed in their face and said hell no. But now I couldn't imagine life without her. She was perfect for me in every way. We complemented each other.

Even though I had been working hard on letting go of my past, I still had a lot of work to do. Forgiving myself wasn't easy. It was a process that took time. I had lived with the guilt and anger for so long it had become a second skin. Shedding that skin would not happen overnight.

The last conversation Kat and I had before I sent her the wedding invitation was about all of that. She'd promised to stand by my side because she could see the change in me and knew how hard I was working to make things different. My love for her grew that night, and I couldn't wait to make her mine forever.

When the music shifted to the entrance song for the bridesmaids, my legs got heavy, and my heart thumped double

time. Was she here? Did she say yes?

Kate stood at the back with an enormous smile on her face. I wiped sweat from my brow and took a deep breath. Will squeezed my shoulder reassuringly.

It had been hard to choose a best man, so I had three: Will, Duke, and Frank. They fought over who would stand behind me. Will beat out the other two at a game of poker. Jacob, Peter, and Charlie stood behind them as groomsmen.

Laney paused at the end of the aisle in front of me and winked before taking her place in front of Kate. I relaxed a little, hoping the wink meant Kat was here. Mindy appeared next. The dusty blue dress brought out her fiery red hair. I glanced at Frank. His eyes were glassy, and he smiled at his wife as she made her way to the end.

Kat's old roommates, Riley and Anna, walked down after Mindy, and I knew Kat was here. Her roommates wouldn't have made the trip if Kat was planning on standing me up. At least I hoped not. There was still time for her to run.

I glanced at Duke, who was grinning at Riley. Her long red hair hung in tight ringlets down her back. Half of it was up in a braided halo around her head, and she had flowers stuck in it. She was about Mindy's height, possibly shorter, and reminded me of a fairy.

Duke would tower over her, but I knew that wouldn't stop him. When he wanted something, he pursued it relentlessly. And from the smile that was splitting his face, I knew he'd spend the entire evening going after Riley.

Anna winked at me as she passed. She was a bit edgier. One arm was completely sleeved in with tattoos, and the other arm was nearly covered. Her blond hair was styled in a manner similar to Riley's, but she didn't have the halo. Instead, a single white flower was stuck in the side above her ear.

Rebecca was next. When she got closer, her eyes narrowed, and I looked over my shoulder in time to see a

smirk on Will's face. He winked at her. She blushed and shook her head. I would have to let Will know that Becks was off limits. She was too good for him.

Gracie started down the aisle, tossing petals. My legs almost gave out because she was the last one before Kat. I felt sick and yet hopeful at the same time. God, I hoped she was here.

Once Gracie reached the front, the music shifted, and everyone stood. I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and slowly opened my eyes again. There she was. Tears welled up, and I blew out a breath that everyone heard. Light laughter filled the air. I stumbled back a step, and Will was there to catch me.

Kat looked radiant. There were no words good enough to describe how beautiful she was. Relief swept over me, and joy burst from my chest. This was our new beginning. A chance at happiness and a fresh start.

She smiled and gave an adorable shrug before starting forward. Tears leaked from my eyes when I spotted my other girl at her side. Shiloh walked beside Kat without a leash but never left her side. She was wearing some frilly lace thing around her neck with a small pillow strapped to it. I assumed our rings were on top.

Kat's parents weren't in attendance. I'd attempted to smooth things over with them, but it didn't go well, and they had a lot of nasty things to say about Kat and me. Rebecca told me she'd break the news to Kat. I knew Kat would be relieved that they weren't here.

I hadn't been sure who would walk her down the aisle, but I never imagined it would be Shiloh. More tears gathered in my eyes and trickled down my chin. I held back the sobs that wanted to escape. Kat stopped in front of me, and when I saw the tears in her eyes, I lost it. The sob was like a hiccup and embarrassing as hell, but I didn't give a shit.

Taking her hands in mine, I walked her the last two steps to the arch. The officiant asked everyone to be seated. Kat handed her bouquet to Rebecca and turned to face me. I took her hands in mine and gave them a gentle squeeze. A tear trickled down her cheek, and I wiped it away.

She leaned into my touch and smiled.

“Hi,” I whispered.

She laughed. “Hi.”

“Thank you.”

She cocked her head to the side in question.

“For forgiving me and coming.” My voice was still a whisper.

“Thank you for showing me how much you love me and that you’ll always be there.”

I squeezed her hands again and bounced a little on the balls of my feet, trying to ward off more tears. There were chuckles in the crowd, and then the officiant started. I barely heard a word he said because I was so focused on Kat. She was looking at him and listening intently, but I was focused on her.

The elegant dress hugged her curves. Her honey blond hair was swept up in a fancy updo, with a few tendrils down and curled around her face. The sun made the golden highlights in her hair stand out. Her makeup was a little heavier than what she normally wore, but it made her blue eyes pop.

“Sid?” she whispered.

I blinked and looked around. Everyone was staring at me, and Kat grinned.

“Sorry. My beautiful bride distracted me.”

Her cheeks turned a lovely shade of pink.

“Do you take this woman to be your wife?” the officiant asked.

“Yes. A thousand times, yes.”

“I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

Wrapping one arm around Kat’s waist and the other on the back of her head, I pulled her against me and took her lips in a rough, sensual kiss. Sealing us together forever. I’d never been so happy in my entire life. The last of the darkness around my heart faded, replaced by the love Kat freely gave to me. I pulled back, looked into her eyes, and pecked her quickly on the lips before turning us to face the crowd.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Lewis,” the officiant said.

Cheers rang out. I raised our hands in the air and smiled big. Together, we walked down the aisle toward our future.

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“MMM. THIS CAKE IS AMAZING,” Kat moaned.

My dick throbbed in my slacks. I’d been dying to get my hands on her all night, and we were finally alone. I had booked a small private cabin in the mountains for us to retreat to for a week. I couldn’t wait to get under that dress. Kat insisted we eat cake first. Little did she know I’d brought a small one for us to indulge in over the week.

The girls had helped me by packing Kat a suitcase. I spent the day before our wedding packing the cabin with anything we would need. There was no cell service, and the way the cabins were set up, we would have all the privacy we needed.

Frank had told me about these cabins. He and Mindy had escaped to one when they were sneaking around trying to hide their relationship. I was glad they had because it was the perfect spot.

I snapped a picture of Kat. Her wedding dress was bunched up around her on the couch, and she had the plate of cake resting on her stomach. Her hair had fallen a little, but it

looked beautiful. Her head was tipped back, her eyes were half closed, and her lips tipped up in a small smile. I knew it would be my favorite picture of her.

“Did you just take a picture of me?” she asked.

“No.”

“Yes, you did. Let me see it.”

“No.” I held my phone away from her. She lunged for it.

“Careful now. You’re going to dump your cake.”

“Oh no!” She grabbed the plate and held it close to her chest.

I laughed. “You’re so cute. I love you.”

Happiness radiated from her face. “I love you too.”

I leaned forward and pulled her in for a kiss. Love and light exploded in my chest, warming my entire body. I needed to be inside her. As close as two people could get. While we kissed, I took the plate from her and set it on the small table. Then I lifted her into my arms and carried her to the bed that was separated from the rest of the cabin by a set of sliding doors.

There was nowhere we needed to be for days. I intended on spending that time worshipping her and showing her just how thankful I was for her.



# Epilogue



SID

“I CAN’T FIND MY RING,” Kat called from the bathroom.

Had she lost it like she lost everything else? I was always searching for her things. I’d always heard that men couldn’t find shit, but that wasn’t the case in our house. My wife was terrible at remembering where she put things. She’d also dropped a number of things down the sink.

My body stilled. Shit. Was the ring down the sink? We didn’t have time for that.

“If you wouldn’t take it off, then you wouldn’t lose it,” I called back.

She stomped down the stairs and glared at me.

“Is it down the sink?”

“No,” she said. She bit her lip. “I don’t know.”

I sighed. “Kat, honey, we need to go. We’re going to be late.”

She and Sarah had spent the last six months working on expanding Knead to Relax into a wellness spa. They’d renovated the top space above the store and turned it into a yoga studio, complete with a juice bar.

“I need my ring!” she shouted. Tears filled her eyes. There was no way she would go without it.

I walked upstairs to the bathroom and checked the sink and behind the toilet. We’d found it in the cabinet above the sink

before. No such luck today. After a few minutes, I started to worry. I walked out of the bathroom and stopped. Shiloh had something shiny in her mouth.

“Shit.” I dove for her, but she jumped off the bed and ran out of the room before I could get her. I chased her down the stairs, shouting profanities.

“Did you find it?” Kat asked.

“Yes, and before you panic, we can get it back.”

“Back? Where is it?”

“Shiloh may have eaten it.”

“*What?*” she shrieked.

“It’s not a big deal. It will come out eventually.” I chuckled, unable to hold it in. I’d hoped Kat would see the humor in the situation, but by the look on her face, I could tell she was furious.

“I’m not waiting for her to shit out my ring. Sid, do something!”

“What do you want me to do? We have to wait.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and tapped her foot. Shit, she was really mad. Nothing good ever came from that stance. Shiloh streaked past us again and I chased her back up the stairs, cornering her in the bedroom.

“Drop it,” I commanded.

She stared at me from her spot on the bed.

“You’re as stubborn as your mom,” I muttered. “Shiloh, drop it!”

She opened her mouth and dropped the ring. I scooped it up and collapsed to the ground. When I walked back downstairs, Kat was pacing at the front door, chewing on her thumbnail and muttering something unintelligible. I dropped to one knee and presented the ring. She squealed and threw herself at me, kissing me all over my face.

Kat took the ring to the bathroom, washed it, and then put it back on, examining it before she grabbed her clutch and walked outside. I hurried to catch up to her, thankful we were on our way.

We walked the short distance to Knead to Relax and gathered around the front with the rest of the town. Sarah was buzzing with excitement from her position behind a makeshift podium. Kat kissed me on the cheek and joined her.

Sarah gave her a big hug, and the two turned to face the crowd. Peter walked up, and someone handed him a microphone. He had on a crisp suit, and his hair was styled to perfection. He'd shaved off his long beard before our wedding, and I was thankful. Kate made him promise not to grow it again, but I could tell he missed it.

"Congratulations," Will said, nudging me with his arm.

"What are you talking about?"

"Getting married and your wife opening a store. What's next, a baby?"

I scowled at him, and he chuckled. "You wait, big brother. Your time is coming."

Will winced. "I prefer the bachelor life."

"You say that now, but one day you'll change your mind. Once you meet the right girl, the one who makes every day worth living, the one that makes you want to be a better man, you'll change your mind."

He looked at me like I had horns growing out of my head. "Does getting married make you a sap?"

I laughed. "I can't wait for you to find someone you want to share your life with. You'll be pretty damn sappy too."

"Never going to happen."

"It will, and I'll be there to point it out," I said.

"There will be nothing to point out."

“Okay,” I said with a smile.

Will growled. “Face the front and stop talking. Your wife is about to cut the ribbon on my new investment.”

I rolled my eyes. One day, Will would find his person. He’d look at a woman the same way I looked at Kat, like she was everything. His heart would beat only for her, and he wouldn’t want to spend his life with anyone else. He’d live to make that woman happy and be forever grateful she chose him.

It was the way I felt every day, and I knew the feeling wouldn’t fade. Kat and Sarah cut a thick red ribbon with the large novelty scissors Tom Tracy had insisted they use. Laney took pictures, and everyone cheered. I was so damn proud of Kat. She looked out into the crowd, found me, and winked. I smiled and winked back.

I’d spend the rest of my life being her biggest supporter because she did the same for me. Not a day would go by when I didn’t show her how much she meant to me and how much I loved her. I was forever grateful for a second chance at living, and it was all because of a lie.

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### *Daily Happenings*

*Congratulations to Kat and Sarah for opening Knead to Relax Wellness Spa. If you haven’t tried out their new hot yoga, get over there. It’s an experience.*

*We’re happy to see a smile on Sheriff Lewis’ face now that he’s married to the lovely Kat. Are babies on the horizon for the newlyweds? You know what to do, Ruth. Get over there with some of your tea.*

*In other news, Charlie Wilson is still looking for a roommate.*

*If you know of anyone who would like to rent a room, send them Charlie’s way. Also, Mindy is still looking for help in her store, so let her know if you’re interested or know someone.*

*That's all the news we have today, folks. Stay tuned for the next Daily Happenings.*

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WANT TO SEE WHERE IT ALL STARTED? Turn the page to read the first chapter of [Dare You to Love](#).

## **Dare You To Love: Chapter 1**

KATE

SUNSHINE SPILLED THROUGH the second-story window of my home and seeped into my skin. The heat, mixed with the smell of coffee, woke me from a peaceful sleep. Was there ever a better invention than a timer on a coffee pot? Not any I knew of.

Normally I used those quick-brew pods, but the brewer was already packed in one of the many kitchen boxes. Moving was a pain in the ass. I was ready for the next phase in my life, though. Ready to close this chapter and open a new one. Maybe even a whole new book.

Stretching out with my arms above my head, lengthening out my spine, I closed my eyes and counted to five. I sat up and put my feet flat on the floor and stretched my neck, five seconds on each side. Then I took a few deep, calming breaths before standing up.

It was the same routine every day. Stretching and deep breathing. It's what helped to center me before starting the day. My alarm hadn't gone off yet, which meant I had thirty extra minutes to get ready for work.

After a quick shower, I made my way down to the main floor of the house. I cinched my robe a little tighter as I walked down the carpeted stairs. I rounded the banister and stopped in the living room. This was the room I'd miss the most.

My best friend, Mindy, and I had spent a lot of time watching movies and curling up by the stone fireplace. A few open boxes were in the room awaiting their final contents before I sealed them up. I had to remind myself that selling this house was a good thing. It was too large for one person, and the bad memories in the house outweighed the good ones.

The smell of fresh brewed coffee wrapped around me like a warm blanket when I entered the kitchen. It was my second favorite room in the house. I'd taken a few cooking classes over the past few weeks and was really starting to love it.

Cooking for one was always a challenge, and lots of food went to waste until a few months ago when I discovered a local food bank close to the house. They were always happy to take any leftovers I had. It only encouraged me to cook more. Most times I didn't even eat the food, I just drove it to the food bank and dropped it off. Serving there a few times a month brought me great joy, especially since I was able to meet the people who ate my food.

Stepping around the obstacle course of boxes, I grabbed my favorite mug from beside the sink and poured the steaming liquid in. As I added cream and sugar, I looked out the kitchen window over the large backyard.

The parties I wanted to host back there died along with my dreams for this house when my ex-boyfriend, Vincent Bradbury, walked into this very room eight months ago and told me he was cheating on me. For the second time.

After I threatened to tell his mother if he didn't leave—he was a mommy's boy through and through—he packed his things and left. He transferred the house to my name shortly after. Hush money in the form of a half-a-million-dollar home that was too large for me to handle on my own. That, coupled with the expensive-as-hell mortgage I couldn't afford, was reason enough to sell.

The house still belonged to him, no matter how much I renovated it. He had it constructed for us a year and a half into our relationship. I was so excited to pick out flooring and paint colors. To decorate the inside and fill it with things we loved. Except none of that happened.

Vincent became a different person. Not the same man I met and fell in love with, if you could even really call it love. I was so enamored with the life he was promising me, I confused it all with love. It was just the hope of a different life, not that my life was terrible or anything. Far from it. It was just... boring.

I wasn't one to leave the nest on my own, and Vincent was the push I needed. We met when he was on a business trip in

my hometown in Pennsylvania. I fell in what was clearly lust and followed him to Bellport, North Carolina.

For the first year, we lived together in his fancy three-bedroom condo while I attended college. I was lucky to be able to transfer mid-semester. I think it had something to do with the school being Vincent's alma mater. He always managed to pull strings. I could see now that it wasn't luck or connections, but rather the specific strings that allowed him to control me.

Vincent didn't want me in school. He held to the old-school and sexist belief that many women had fought against: the woman's place is in the kitchen. Vincent wanted control, though, and the only way for him to have that over me was in the home. Everything in our relationship was always his way, and the young girl in me didn't argue.

It wasn't how my parents were with one another and wasn't how I was raised. Looking back, I couldn't figure out why I went along with it for so long.

After forcing me to drop out of school, he got me a job at a company owned by a friend of the family because I insisted on working. I was hired on as a secretary, where I remained for six years before they promoted me a year ago. A promotion I earned thanks to my hard work and dedication. Not because of Vincent and his connections.

The secondary alarm on my phone went off, indicating I had twenty minutes before I needed to be out the door. Thankfully, I only had to change. On my way to the master bedroom, I stopped in the hallway and stared into the spare bedroom just beside it.

Vincent and I had talked about marriage and kids. It was three years into our relationship and a happier time. Vincent started acting like the man I fell for again, and we started trying to have a baby. This room was meant for the baby, and I had started taping paint swatches on the wall.

This was also the room that changed our relationship for good. After a year and a half of trying, and a few doctor's visits where Vincent was told he couldn't have kids, he



changed. It started with ugly comments aimed my way. Then it escalated into personal digs that chipped away at my self-esteem and self-worth. Six months after that, he stopped coming home at night, claiming he was working late.

It took another six months before I found out he was cheating on me with his secretary. They were having late nights at the office, but not a lot of work was getting done. I left him and went to live with my best friend. He begged me to come home and promised he'd change. And he did, for almost a year. Until a woman I didn't know approached me with pictures, claiming she was pregnant with his child.

Turns out she was wrong. Vincent was still shooting blanks, and she was having someone else's kid. But I'd had enough and kicked him out. He tried to lie and manipulate his way back home, but I stuck to my guns. Unfortunately, I was still dealing with his bullshit. Calling every day, showing up at my work unannounced, and coming by the house often.

Speaking of work. Shit, I was going to be late. I was never late. I ran to the bedroom and threw on the pencil skirt and blazer I had picked out the night before. Flats were the shoe of choice today since I was going to be in and out of meetings all day, some outside the office.

My hair was in pretty good shape. I sprayed some dry shampoo on my roots and rubbed it in, then ran the warmed-up straightener through it, smoothing it out, and ran for the door.

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“YOU'RE LATE,” BONNIE, the assistant my boss and I shared, sang out.

“I know, but only by five minutes.”

“Mm hmm.”

I rolled my eyes at her and headed for my corner office. The door clicked shut behind me, and my feet shuffled quietly on the carpeted floor. I unloaded my bags from my shoulders and sat down at my desk. My computer was already on, which

I found a little odd, but it made things easier since I was already late.

My eyes nearly fell out of my head at the number of e-mails in my inbox. How the hell did I have three hundred overnight? It was a weekday. I was going to need more coffee to deal with those.

I headed for the small break room. Only a handful of employees worked on the top floor. A year ago, they promoted me from the ground to the top. It felt good to skip the middle. I now worked directly for the owner himself, Mr. Trent Lawrence.

Overall, he was a decent boss. A little sexist but he covered the comments well, and they were never aimed at myself or Bonnie. The only issue I had was that he was friends with Vincent and his father. Which meant that they both dropped in whenever they wanted, and Mr. Lawrence never told them to leave.

“Head’s up,” I heard Bonnie call out. I turned to see if she was talking to me, and my blood ran cold. Speak of the devil. Vincent strolled through the door.

“There you are,” he said, opening his arms to me for a hug.

When I didn’t move, he smiled bigger and opened them a little wider. I still didn’t move. I raised an eyebrow at him and continued to stir my coffee.

“Come on, Katherine. I thought we were past all this,” he said, dropping his arms.

“It’s Kate, and yes, we are past all this. Because we’re over.”

He sighed and stepped closer to me. “Still holding a grudge, I see. I had no idea you could be so stubborn.”

“I’m not holding a grudge against you, and I’m not being stubborn. It’s called a break-up.”

He chuckled. “Still playing that game, are we?”

“There’s no game,” I gritted out. He was maddening.

“Come to lunch with me,” he said, taking another step toward me.

My back dug into the countertop behind me, causing me to wince. “I just got here. I have a busy day with lots of meetings. Besides, we’re not together anymore. It’s been eight months, Vincent. Get a clue. We’re through.”

“Katherine, one of these days you’re going to run back to me, and because I’m such a nice guy, I’ll be there with open arms.”

I took a step toward him now. “The only way I’ll be back in your arms is if I fall and you have to catch me.”

“You fell for me once, sweetheart. It’ll happen again. You’ll see.”

I let out a frustrated growl and pushed past him. On my way back to my office, I almost ran into Mr. Lawrence’s sons. They were about as dumb as a box of rocks. Another downside of working here was that I had to work closely with the two of them.

My job differed from anything I’d ever heard of, and part of me wondered if Mr. Lawrence made it up because it fit what he needed. I was what he called a *closer*. When a large offer for development was on the table and the client needed a little push to accept, they sent me in.

I’d closed sixteen offers in the year since I’d been promoted to this position. I was damn good at my job, and I actually liked what I did. Especially because Lawrence Development Company was one of the top retail and housing developers in the southeast. Small-town expansions were our specialty and also my favorite.

Small towns were so charming. Every time I went to one, I collected a small trinket as a memento. They were always homemade items, not something you’d get at a big retailer which made them special. I loved that.

I had barely made it back to my office when Vincent strolled in. He unbuttoned his suit coat and sat down in the

lone chair in front of my desk. I resisted the urge to stab him with my pen and sat down in my office chair.

“What do you want?” I asked.

The corners of his mouth lifted in a smile, and he casually crossed his ankle over his knee. “I want to get lunch with you.”

“I already told you, I’m busy. It’s nine in the morning, anyway. Don’t you have to be at work?”

I clicked on several e-mails that I wanted to delete and sipped my perfect coffee. It made my taste buds sing when I got the blend of coffee, cream, and sugar just right.

“I don’t need to be in the office today. I’ve got a meeting with a client at three, but other than that, I’m all yours.”

I looked up at him and scowled. Or at least I attempted to scowl, but it didn’t seem to have any effect on him.

“Vincent, you’ve got to stop this.”

“Stop what?”

“This.” I gestured between us with both hands. “This following me around, at work, at the house, to the gym. Calling and texting. It all has to stop. We’re through.”

He frowned and leaned forward, dropping his foot to the ground. “You’re serious?”

“Yes, I’m serious! Did you think I was joking all this time? That this was some stupid game?”

“Partially, yes. I thought maybe you just needed time, and you’d come to your senses, but I see now that I need to try more aggressive tactics.”

“What does that mean?” I asked. My voice shook a little, like it used to, and it pissed me off. I was turning into the scared little girl around him again. In all fairness, though, his tone and words really scared me. What more could he do? He was basically stalking me already.

“It means that you need more convincing. I have just the thing.” He smiled and stood up, buttoning his suit coat before

walking out.

“Tell your dad our tee time is at eight. Don’t be late,” Mr. Lawrence called out as Vincent walked toward the elevators. I hadn’t realized he was standing near my door.

“We won’t. Thanks again for your help today, Trent. I think good things are coming our way,” Vincent called back.

Mr. Lawrence chuckled and waved to him before popping his head into my office.

“Kate, nice of you to finally show up.”

“I was only five—”

He cut me off. “Meet me in my office in ten to go over the Perkins deal. You’ve got a meeting with Mr. Perkins at eleven.” He tapped the door with his knuckles before walking away.

I let out a breath and pulled up the file. Before printing everything out for the case, I wrote *find a new job* on a sticky note. If I was going to make a clean break from Vincent, then I needed to get out of this place. The relationship Vincent had with my boss was not healthy for me.

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THE DAY FLEW BY, and I was more than ready for it to be over. We had a lot of new projects. Some that were in the development stages, a few which were in proposal stage, and two that were in the scouting stage.

I worked as a scout for six months before Mr. Lawrence promoted me. If I were being honest, I enjoyed scouting much more. Scouts went to the locations for the developments and checked them out. If it was a small town, they stayed somewhere local and checked out the area. Ate at local restaurants and talked to owners of small businesses to get a feel for how the town was doing.

Then Mr. Lawrence sent in his sales team. It was made up of four employees plus his two idiot sons. His sons usually took the simple jobs. The ones that basically sold themselves.

If a client was dragging their feet, then I went in and pushed their hand using my skill and charm.

Every project followed the same protocol, and every project went through to completion. My first two meetings today went well, and both clients signed on the dotted line. Then I met with a building owner who was ready to dump an apartment complex.

Mr. Lawrence wanted to purchase the building for a development idea he had. I went down to give the man our offer. He needed time to think about it, so next week sometime I'd follow up with him and give him a little nudge.

"Ready to go, dear?" a familiar voice that grated on my every nerve said from the doorway.

"Vincent," I said on an exasperated exhale.

"C'mon, let me at least buy you dinner. I wanted to talk to you about something."

"Tell me now. I want to go home and soak my feet."

He scrunched up his nose, and then quickly smiled when I caught him. He'd never approved of my nightly ritual. It wasn't every night. Just when I'd been running around all day. I deserved a glass of wine and a foot bath.

"We won't be all night. Just a quick dinner at that little bistro you like, and then I'll have you home right after."

I wanted to scream. Why wasn't this man getting it? I didn't want to have to file a restraining order, but things were headed in that direction. It would make things really awkward with my boss, considering they were friends. Vincent was sort of the reason I had this job. He helped me get my feet in the door. The rest was all me.

"Fine. One dinner. Consider it your goodbye dinner."

He laughed. "You're funny. I didn't know you had such a good sense of humor."

I shook my head and waited for him to exit my office so I could lock up behind him. He put his hand on the small of my

back as we walked to the elevators, and I sidestepped away from him.

“No touching me.”

He put his hands up. “Okay. No touching.”

“I mean it, Vincent.”

He crossed his finger over his chest. “Cross my heart.”

A muffled growl escaped me as we got into the elevator. We rode down in silence, and when we got to the car garage, he tried to persuade me to ride with him. I refused four times before he finally gave up and settled on me following him.

It only took two minutes to drive to the bistro. I could have walked, but I needed a few minutes alone to think of my next move. This was not part of my plan. Giving in to Vincent was only going to spur things on further. I should have just gone home.

Vincent tapped on my window, letting me know I was stalling. I could hear him yelling it on the other side of the glass. I quickly texted Mindy to let her know where I was and to send help if she didn't hear from me in half an hour, then I got out and followed Vincent inside.

This restaurant was our little spot. Even when times were bad, we'd come here, and time seemed to stop. All the anger and fighting stopped, all the mean words disappeared. The tension between us drained away when we were here. We'd just sit and enjoy our meal as two civilized adults, almost like friends. It was peaceful.

I hadn't been in here since we broke up. Vincent asked for our usual table, which happened to be open. I slid into the booth and placed my napkin on my lap. Vincent did the same and took a sip of the water that was already at the table.

“This is nice, huh?” he asked, looking around.

“Sure.”

“Have you been in here since we...” his voice trailed off.

“Since we broke up? No.”

I thought I saw him wince, but he covered it with another sip of his water.

“Vincent, can you just cut to the chase?”

“Relax, we’ll get there. Let’s just enjoy our dinner like we used to. Surely you can be civilized for one meal?”

“Yes. Can you?”

He chuckled. “Of course.”

Vincent ordered expensive wine and an appetizer. I nibbled at a slice of bread while we waited. The server brought out our wine, and a few minutes later, the appetizer came out.

We had almost finished with our meals when Vincent finally got to the point of our dinner.

“Katherine, I’m not sure if you heard, but my Grandmother Violet passed away recently.”

“Oh no, I’m so sorry.” I lifted my hand and reached for his before I realized what I was doing and put it back in my lap.

He nodded. “Thank you. The family is holding a memorial service on Saturday, and I’d love it if you’d attend. You know how much that would have meant to my grandmother. She always liked you.” He smiled. It wasn’t forced or fake, and it threw me a little.

It was true, his grandmother did like me, and she made it a point to tell me so every time she saw me. Which was often since Vincent and I had attended many family dinners.

“I’ll be there,” I mumbled. “For Violet,” I added.

“Yes, of course.”

Vincent paid the bill, and I finished off my glass of wine.

“What time should I pick you up on Saturday?”

I looked up at him and, for the first time since our breakup, felt bad about turning him down. It could have been my own sorrow about his grandmother passing away or the sad look on his face. Still, I wasn’t going to ride with him and get stuck there. Especially since his family would be there.



“No need. I’ll drive myself.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You’ll drive there? Do you remember how to get there? I was always the one that drove us.”

“I remember. I’m not an idiot.”

“I never said that you were. I was merely implying that you might not remember since you were always a passenger.”

I rolled my eyes. Tired of this conversation and the back and forth with him. “I’ll be fine, Vincent.”

“All right then. I’ll see you there at three.”

“Yes. See you at three.”

We walked out to our cars in awkward silence, having already said goodbye in a way. I slid behind the wheel and quickly shut the door before he could say anything else. He hesitated beside his car before getting in and driving away.

What had I just agreed to? I found myself connected to Vincent more and more lately. Here I was trying to sell the house to make a clean break, and I had just agreed to spend an afternoon with Vincent and his family.

CONTINUE READING [Dare You To Love \(Oak Springs book 1\)](#)

# THANK YOU FOR READING

## DARE YOU TO LIE!

I hope you enjoyed Sid and Kat's story as much I enjoyed writing it. These two took me for a ride the past year. I had drafted this story two years ago when I started writing the series. I knew Kat was going to show up like a storm and quiet Sid would end up with her. But then Sid grew grumpier and grumpier the more the series went on and as his friends started to settle down. He became the only bachelor in town and he had no interest in anyone.

There was something deeper going on though and as it unfolded during the writing process it took me by surprise. Sid demanded his story be told a certain way and Kat wanted to be painted in a better light than when she showed up in Oak Springs in Dare You to Stay. Together they were magical. I loved that no matter how much Sid grumbled, Kat wasn't phased. His gruff exterior didn't fool her. She also clung to the fact that things weren't real between them.

Things progressed and changed, but Sid was scared and with good reason. He was holding onto something deep inside that was rotting his core and eating away at him. Kat shown a light on those area's and it was hard for him to see.

But in the end Love won out and although Sid is still a little grumpy, he's soft and gooey when it comes to Kat. He'll always be more cautious and practical, but he'll have someone that brings out the fun side of him too. I truly hoped you loved their story. There is more to come from Oak Springs. Charlie's story is up next!

Thank you so much for reading,

Mina

Reviews are a great way for readers to discover new books and authors. If you liked this book, please take a moment to leave a review. Even if it's a short sentence or two. I can't tell you how much I appreciate it.

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A special shout out to Kate for another gorgeous cover and to Lindee for the amazing cover photo. Kat and Sid really came to life and I love it so much. The intensity of the couple and the colors of the cover are perfect.

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To my awesome readers in The Chatter Room, I love hanging out with you guys. I appreciate you all going on this journey with me. Thank you for reading and sharing my books. Thanks for commenting and interacting on posts and teasers. But most of all, thank you for loving Oak Springs and for all of your support. It means the world to me!

To everyone that read Dare You To Stay, shared on social media, left reviews, and expressed your love for it, thank you from the bottom of my heart. I couldn't have done this without you and I can't wait to bring you more from the series.

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# About the Author

Mina Cole is a contemporary romance author who writes swoony heroes, loveable, sassy heroines and steamy heartwarming stories with a guaranteed happily ever after. She loves giving her readers a place to escape and characters that will capture their hearts.

She survives on coffee, her Kindle, and a healthy dose of sarcasm. When Mina is not writing, you can find her lounging with her nose in a book, or enjoying time with her family. She lives in Michigan with her husband, sons, and two fur babies.

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