

FOREVER

Paired

FOREVER BLUEGRASS SERIES

KATHLEEN

BROOKS

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

FOREVER PAIRED

FOREVER BLUEGRASS #19

KATHLEEN BROOKS

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PROLOGUE

Katy, Texas . . . Eighteen years ago.

Kate held up the jersey for the youth football league her father had enrolled her in and couldn't stop the giggle and little dance she did when she saw ELLINGTON spelled out across the back.

Her father, Nick Ellington, had an equally big grin on his face. "You're going to kick ass tonight, kiddo."

"Language, Nick," Kate's mom chided, even though it did little good. At twelve, Kate could make a sailor blush. It was the byproduct of growing up on the sidelines of the high school football team where her father was the head coach.

"Come on. Let's go meet the boys on the field." Her father helped pull the tight uniform top over her quarterback pads. It took a moment to wrestle it on, then Kate tugged on her helmet and was ready to go.

"Good luck," her mother called out as her father walked her from the storage room they used as the women's locker room. Considering she was the only girl in the youth league, it was the best they could do.

"Now, kiddo, you know what to expect," her father stated. Kate nodded. "They're going to tease you. They're going to call you names. They're going to hit you hard. And what are you going to do?"

“Ram the ball down their throats.” Kate was already looking at the field as kids stopped and stared at her. The long braid sticking out from under her helmet was the only giveaway that she was different from the others on the field.

“That’s my girl. Go get ‘em.”

Her father smacked the top of the helmet and left to go sit with her mother in the stands.

The coach of her team frowned when he saw her, but motioned for her to join the huddle. Kate heard the boos from the stands. Her father had warned her the boos would be coming so she pushed them aside even as they simply made her more determined than ever to shut them up.

“First quarter, Jones is the QB. Second quarter, Ellington is. The rest of the game will be decided based on their performance,” Coach said. The boys grumbled before the coach quieted them to lay out the first plays.

Kate sat on the bench and watched every second of play. She might only be twelve, but her father had already won three 5A high school football championships. She’d been on the sidelines for each and every one of them. There was a picture of six-month-old Kate strapped to her dad’s chest as he coached in his first championship season. She knew football. She knew football players. And she knew how to find and exploit their weaknesses.

By the time she entered the second quarter as the quarterback, her team was down 14-0. “Okay, guys, listen up,” Kate said in the huddle. “Number thirty-five is slow at the corner position. Let’s go long to Wilson on a post route. On three.”

She didn’t get to two before the guys walked off. It was okay. She’d earn their respect. The ball was hiked. She caught it naturally as she locked onto her target. Wilson made his cut and the corner fell behind. Kate knew the hit was coming, but all that mattered was getting the throw off.

She aimed, threw, and felt the full impact of the linebacker slamming into her. Kate never took her eyes off the ball even

as she fell back onto the ground. She saw it fly. She saw Wilson hold out his hands. The ball dropped perfectly into his hands and Wilson was off like a missile for the endzone.

The stands were silent except for Wilson's parents yelling at him to run and her parents cheering wildly. Three seconds after the touchdown, the stands erupted. Her team jogged over to her with wide eyes. "What? You've seen me in practice. I have the arm and the knowledge to get you in the endzone. Y'all want to score, right?"

"What's the call, Ellington?" Wilson asked with a grin. Kate was in.

Seven straight wins! Kate jumped with her team as the game clock expired. They'd gone undefeated with her as the starting quarterback.

"We're going to win state!" Wilson called out as they all held up their helmets and jumped around chanting, "State! State! State!"

"Great game, team!" Coach called out. "Playoffs start next week. We're three games from our goal. Now, go get changed and we'll head out to celebrate."

Kate ran with the guys to the locker room, but instead of going in with them she made her way to the storage closet that still served as her changing room. When she opened the door after changing, she heard angry voices just around the corner from her. There were men arguing in the hall leading to the boys' locker room. Kate was going to walk on by until she heard her name and then heard her father's voice. Kate stopped walking before she turned the corner and listened.

"I'm telling you, Coach Ellington, my son deserves to play, not Kate. She's only out there because of her last name."

"And your son is out there because of his last name, too," her father said calmly. "The difference is my daughter has the arm to back it up. Your son is not a football player."

“I was the starting quarterback and won the 5A championship when I was in high school.”

Kate knew what was happening. She'd made the boy quarterback look bad by out playing him.

“Just because you were, doesn't mean your son is. Look, I have nothing to do with the playing time she gets. I sit in the stands like every other parent and that's it. I refuse to interfere with coaching. If your son wants to play, he needs to practice, study his playbook, work hard, and earn it.” Kate knew that lecture well. Her father gave it to her weekly.

“Listen, Ellington. I'm powerful enough to have you tossed as the head coach at the high school. My son plays during the playoffs or I'll get you fired. Your wife works for the school district too, right? Between my car dealership and my wife on the school board, I have enough pull to not only oust you, but your wife, too. You have until next week to get Kate to pull out of the game or I'm coming for you.”

“Then come at me. I won't tell my daughter that all her hard work isn't worth it because of a subpar player whose daddy had to threaten a twelve-year-old girl to get his son playing time.”

“Then pack your bags, coach. This will be your last season at Old Towne Katy High School.”

Kate heard the man storm off. She heard her father exhale and then take a deep breath to calm himself. Kate, however, was far from calm. She loved her parents and she couldn't have them lose their jobs just because she played football. Her father would never tell her to back down. He believed his daughter had the same right to play as boys. If she earned the starting position, he'd fight to defend her right to play it. But now it was time for Kate to stand up for her father.

Kate pasted on a smile as she rounded the corner. “Hi, Dad!”

“Kiddo! You did it. What a game!”

Her father wrapped her up in a hug and Kate felt as if she would burst into tears. Instead, she thanked him. She

celebrated with her team when they all went out for burgers and shakes. And waited for the first practice of the week.

The hit came as they were running practice. It wasn't at full speed. Heck, it wasn't even at half speed, but she flopped hard on her side and screamed out.

"Ellington! What is it?" her coach yelled as he ran out onto the field.

Kate held her shoulder as she gritted her teeth. "My shoulder, Coach. I landed it on it wrong."

"I'll call your dad," Coach said, but Kate shook her head.

"He's at practice with his team. Call my mom."

Her center, a nice kid who had never given her a hard time for playing, bent down and helped her up. "I sure hope you're not hurt badly. We don't have a shot without you. Jones can't throw for shit."

"Just in case, practice hard with Jones, okay?"

Because there was no just in case. They'd be playing with Jones because Kate was out. This injury was going to sideline her for the playoffs. She'd make sure of it. She knew enough about football injuries to know exactly what to say to mimic a serious shoulder injury.

At the next game Kate sat on the sidelines as Jones threw interception after interception. Even the crowd was groaning and she'd heard more than a few parents comment that if Kate was playing this game would be in the bag. They were playing a mediocre team and were losing, badly.

She hated seeing everyone upset. She hated seeing her teammates throwing their helmets in frustration. She hated all of it. However, her father's team was undefeated and ranked number one in the state of Texas. He loved coaching and he loved teaching. Kate wouldn't risk his job just to play junior league football. Yes, she had a hell of an arm. Yes, she was field smart. No, she'd never be a college player. She might make her middle school team as third string, but high school

was not even possible. Especially since it would be her father's team that was the number one high school program in the state and some would argue in the country.

In the end, Kate's youth league team fell from first place to last. Her father never questioned her when she said she didn't want to play anymore. This was the one year when she was bigger than most of the boys to play. Next year the boys would have grown taller and bigger. This had been her one shot.

Instead of going to football practice after school, she walked over to the high school and sat in her mother's math team practices for an hour while she did her homework. Then she and her mother would walk over to the stadium and watch the last hour of football practice.

"What's that?" Kate asked as she watched her mother work on a spreadsheet.

"I'm analyzing all the playing data for your dad. I use math to identify patterns, strengths, and weaknesses of the players and teams."

And thus began Kate's lifelong love of math and football. She spent every season on the sidelines with her father until she graduated from high school. Kate attended college in nearby Houston. The coach knew her father and asked if she wanted to intern with him. Four years later, she graduated from college with dual degrees in mathematics and statistics and an offer to be full-time on the coaching staff.



Keeneston . . . eighteen years ago

Landon Davies pulled the bow back, took aim, and released the bowstring. The arrow landed in the bullseye of the target. "If you think that's good, you should see what I can do with a rifle," Landon said to his sister Sophie's date. "Let's see if I can hit a moving target. Run."

His older brother, Colton, laughed.

The dude wore a suit to a Davies family dinner at his grandma and grandpa's farm. He was all wrong for Sophie and the confusion on his face as he looked to Landon's father, Cade, as if Landon was joking didn't help either. He'd find no help with Landon's dad or any of the other men there. Landon was a pussycat compared to his father and uncles when it came to tormenting Sophie's dates. Landon's dad and several uncles had been Special Forces. However, when people heard Cade was a high school biology teacher and football coach, they tended to dismiss him as a threat. That was their mistake. If someone did manage to get by his father, they wouldn't get by his mother. Annie Davies was former DEA. Although, Landon had a feeling it wasn't so *former* as they kept on "borrowing" her for assignments.

Either way, combined with the rest of the uncles and several of Landon's very intimidating cousins, boyfriends usually lasted less than twenty minutes. This one wasn't going to last ten.

"Landon. After you run that boy off, come to the kitchen," his grandma called out from the side door of her farmhouse.

"Go on, we got this," Colton told him, taking the bow from Landon.

Landon jogged into his grandma's kitchen, filled with the smell of home and love. His grandmother was bustling around, making sure the fried chicken was golden, the potatoes were perfect, and the apple pie delicious.

"Yes, ma'am?" Landon kissed her cheek and then took the apron she shoved at him.

"Taste my broccoli casserole. Something's wrong with it. Wrong, like the way I heard you wrapped Principal Park's car in plastic wrap and then covered it in peanut butter and birdseed. And what's this I hear about you and that Belle you called a date yesterday being caught making out at the Blossom Café? Are you trying to kill me before I can die happy?"

Landon leaned over and kissed his grandma's cheek again. "Of course I'm not trying to kill you, Grandma. The car was just a senior prank. I'm off for college and had to leave behind a legacy. And aren't the Keeneston Belles meant to be kissed?"

His grandmother rolled her eyes at him. "Hmph. In my day, the Keeneston Belles were a respectable group of unmarried ladies doing community service. Now they're all husband hunting vultures. But this isn't about them. It's about you, and I think it's about time you grew up. You're such a nice young man when you're not being a hellion. Any woman would be lucky to have a man who can cook like you do."

"Shh." Landon pressed his finger to his lips. "Don't let Mom hear or she'll make me cook for the family since she can't cook. And you know the guys would give me sh—sugar for it. They're all off in the FBI, the military, and such, and I'm telling you to add a dash of paprika to your casserole."

"Never discount a chef. I guarantee you I can get more information from someone with one of my apple pies than Ahmed can with those torture interrogations of his."

Landon laughed, but his grandmother didn't. But maybe she had a point. Maybe it was time to grow up. Or maybe he'd do it slowly so that by the time he graduated from college he'd be grown up. After all, there was still a lot of fun to be had in college and he wasn't sure he was ready to say goodbye to the Belles until he became a marriage target instead of a practice piece they used to hone their flirting skills on.

Landon held true to that promise to his grandmother to not discount a chef. By the time he graduated from college—having had a lot of fun throughout—he was ready to embrace being a chef. He'd worked hard, learned from the masters, and found his passion.

Current Day . . .

Kate closed the door to her car and looked up at the immense stadium on the outskirts of Lexington. She looked around cautiously. When she saw she was alone, she turned and snapped a selfie and sent it to her parents.

Her parents were her biggest supporters. Her father was still the head coach at the high school and her mother still taught math, but they made it to every Houston game when she coached. They made the trip from Katy, Texas to attend at least the opening game at every other college she coached at as she climbed the ranks. But this, this was a dream come true. At twenty-nine, she was a high-level coach in the professional football league.

Kate walked toward the employees' and players' entrance, but before she could get there the door opened and a woman smiled out at her. "Hi, Coach Ellington. I'm Janice Hemmingway. I'm the front office secretary and I'm so happy to be welcoming you to the Thoroughbreds."

Kate shook Janice's hand and smiled. She reminded Kate of the secretary at the high school. Older, kind, but not afraid to smack someone with a ruler if they got out of line. "It's nice to meet you, Janice."

"Right this way. Mr. Ashton wishes to welcome you and then introduce you around."

That was nice of the team owner. Will Ashton had made his mark in professional football decades ago as a player before retiring and taking over a thoroughbred racing farm. Hence the name of the team. It was also why Kate took this job over a better paying one for another team. She found team owners with actual playing experience approached the running of their club differently—and in her opinion, better, than those who either inherited a team or had more money than sense. Former players tended to understand the ins and outs of dealing with coaches and players and that resulted in a happier club and better performing players and coaches.

Plus, the other job she was offered was further down the organizational ladder. Now, as passing game coordinator, her next step would be offensive coordinator and then head coach someday.

Janice walked down a hall lined with pictures of a horse farm and the players were in nearly all of them. Some shots showed them tossing hay bales or riding horses. In others they were laughing at what looked like a pie eating contest.

“These are all taken at Mr. Ashton’s farm. Several times a year, the players head out there for days off or for team building exercises,” Janice explained. Yup, totally different from the other clubs she’d interviewed with. “Mr. Ashton and Coach Everett have put emphasis on this team being a family. So welcome to the family, Coach Ellington.” Janice’s smile was warm and genuine as she beamed at Kate.

They got into an elevator and rode up to the office level as Janice talked about where her office would be and let her know that she could decorate it any way she wished. The doors opened to the office level and Kate couldn’t believe she was finally here. Janice walked down the hall telling her whose office was where as they passed them.

“This one is yours.” Janice paused so Kate could walk into her new office. It was beautiful. A sleek desk sat in the middle with a bank of four big screen televisions against the hall wall. A full sitting area filled with leather couches, chairs, and large coffee table sat in front of the bank of televisions. But the real showstopper was opposite the door. The back wall was solid

glass made up of sliding glass doors that opened onto a small balcony that looked over the field.

“It’s stunning,” Kate said, setting her purse down on the coffee table.

“The televisions are part of a whole system that IT has filled with game films, player reels, and so forth. They’ll schedule an appointment with you to show you how to use it and set up your company phone and computer. Also, the coaches’ weekly dinner is tonight at eight. I’ve left the name and address of the restaurant on your desk along with a box of Thoroughbreds clothes and swag. Are you ready to see Mr. Ashton?”

“I am.” Kate gave one last quick look around her new office. She couldn’t wait to video call her parents and show them.

Janice led her farther down the hall showing her the coordinators’ offices, pointing out the head coach’s office, and then only two offices were left. One was the general manager’s and the other belonged to the team owner.

“Most team owners aren’t at the office, but Mr. Ashton is usually here every day. He’s very hands on,” Janice told her.

Janice knocked at the door and Kate heard the team owner call out for them to come in. Janice opened the door and then stepped back allowing Kate entry. “I look forward to working with you, Coach.”

Kate squared her shoulders and strode into the owner’s suite. Three men stood from a sitting area to greet her. Kate recognized the owner, Will Ashton, who even in his sixties looked as if he could throw a touchdown pass. The man on the other end of the trio was in his early fifties with sandy brown hair gelled back in a 90’s Wall Street style. She’d interviewed with Travis Browning, the GM, and Mr. Ashton so this wasn’t her first time meeting them. She hadn’t met the man in the middle or nor did she recognize him as being from the pro football world. However, he gave the impression of quiet money and power with the way he stood casually in a suit that was clearly made for him. He looked to be Will’s age with

dark hair that was sprinkled with silver and a naturally darker skin tone than hers. Everything about him was powerful and elegant.

“Coach Ellington, welcome to the Thoroughbreds family,” Will Ashton said with a huge smile as he walked over to shake her hand. “You already know our general manager, Travis.”

“Mr. Browning,” Kate said as a way of greeting as she shook his hand.

“And this is my best friend and silent owner of the team, Mo Ali Rahman,” Will introduced.

Kate shook his hand even as her mind raced. She knew that name, but why?

“It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance,” Mo said as he shook her hand. “Will has told me you haven’t been able to find a place in town yet. I have a fully furnished house on my farm that you’re free to use instead of living in a hotel. But only if you’d prefer it.”

“That would be great. Thank you. All my stuff will be delivered in two weeks and I’m afraid I haven’t even begun to look for a place to live.”

“Excellent. You have free use of it for as long as you need it. Will can give you directions tonight after your dinner.” Mo glanced at his watch and frowned. “I am sorry, but I have a meeting with Draven and Deming I must attend. I look forward to getting to know you, Coach. And do not be alarmed if my wife stops by to meet you. She’ll be thrilled to learn you’re staying with us.”

“Draven and Addison are in town this week? That’s great,” Will said. “Tell them I look forward to seeing them again.”

“Yes, they’re a major donor to Ava’s charity gala. They’re staying until then and we might as well get some work done while they’re here.” Mo turned to Kate and smiled kindly. “Welcome, Coach Ellington.”

All those names sounded familiar . . . *holy crap*. Kate knew why. Addison was the American queen of Bermalia, meaning Draven was her husband, the king. There was only

one Deming that Kate knew of and he was the president of Crusina. That meant that Mo was Mohtadi Ali Rahman, Prince of Rahmi. The man was walking out of the room. Was it too late to curtsy?

“Are you ready to meet your team?” Will asked, acting as if it were no big deal that an actual, freaking prince just walked out of the office. “We’ll start with the coaches and staff first.”

“Great.” Kate tried to play it cool as Will escorted her out of the room and to a conference room on the other side of the floor.

Kate was glad to see some other women even though she hadn’t expected to see any. She was used to working in an all-male environment.

“Ladies and gentlemen, our new passing game coordinator and QB coach, Kate Ellington.” Will clapped after announcing her as did everyone else in the room. Though some were clearly less energetic in their greeting, such as Coach Patel. He was the running backs coach and the running game coordinator. Again, not a surprise. They might be on the same team, but Patel would want more running plays called than passing plays. If the passing game was stronger, then it would effectively push him down the ladder to beneath her in terms of the unofficial team hierarchy.

“Welcome to the team, Ellington,” Coach Samson, the offensive coordinator, said first. She’d be working very closely with him over the season and it was good that he appeared to be happy to welcome her.

“Welcome! You’ve done great things and I can’t wait to sit down and talk,” Head Coach Trey Everett told her. “You’re coming to the coaches’ dinner tonight, right?”

“I am. Thank you. I look forward to getting to know all of you,” Kate said to the roomful of people.

A woman with auburn hair hanging loose around her shoulders and wearing a navy suit stood up and walked over to meet her. “I’m Dr. Sienna Parker. It’s so nice to meet you.”

“She’s the best sports psychologist around,” Will said with a wink.

Sienna rolled her eyes. “You have to say that because you’re my dad.”

“Doesn’t mean it’s not true.” Will Ashton was clearly very proud of his daughter and it made Kate miss her father.

“Since you’re meeting the doctors, I might as well jump in,” a very handsome man with hazel eyes said, holding out his hand. “Dr. Jace Davies. I’m here a couple of times a week and for games, but my main office is in Keeneston.”

“Nice to meet you both.”

Kate then met the PR team, the media coordinator, and all the rest of the coaching staff, trainers, and medical staff. There were a lot of them and she knew it would take time to remember everyone’s names.

In no time at all, she was downstairs in the players’ meeting room with the entire team of fifty-three players and sixteen practice squad players staring at her as Will and Trey introduced her.

Kate stepped forward after her introduction. She could see the players who were excited about the new move, the players who were not, and the ones who were clearly withholding their decision until they saw what she did.

“Gentlemen,” Kate said, not bothering to smile and play the sweet Southern belle she was at heart. These men didn’t need a woman who could make sweet tea or plan a cotillion. They needed one who wouldn’t bullshit them. “You know this is my first coaching job in the league. I’m also sure that you’re good at your jobs and you’ve already looked me up. I know my track record speaks for itself. Here are the things you need to know about me beyond the puff pieces or the hit jobs that have been published. I don’t play favorites. I won’t lie to you. I won’t be a bitch for the sake of trying to assert myself. I don’t need to do that. Do you know why?” Kate didn’t wait for someone to answer. “I don’t need to because I’m not trying to cover for lack of knowledge. I know football and I own my

mistakes. Also, if you're mad about plays, come to me. I'll tell you exactly why I ordered those plays and back up that call with a mountain of evidence. And when I'm wrong, I'll tell you that too. I expect the same from you. You mess up, own it. You want me to look at something else in your game, just ask. I've analyzed every player here, regardless of your position. We're a team and I will listen to you, listen to your concerns, and work with you all to form the best offense we can. My philosophy comes down to believing my job is to make you the best player you can be on and off the field. I look forward to working with you all. Can I answer any questions for you?"

A giant man with blond hair raised his hand. Kate knew he was Zack Sanders, an offensive lineman. "What's your locker room policy?"

"I want a drama free locker room, gentlemen. You're professionals, and that's your office. Any drama gets left at the door. I know enough to know y'all are worse gossips than middle school girls." Kate paused as some of the men snickered. "If there's a conflict, come to me and I'll help you with it. Here's the thing though, gentlemen. You bring that shit into the locker room and we'll have a big problem. I need your mind focused on the game, not on anything else on game day. I also promise the same. Got it?"

Zack blushed a little and cleared his throat. "Um, Coach, I mean will you be in the locker room before and after games? You know, when—"

"Zack wants to know if you're going to see him naked, Coach," a man called out. "Now, you can see me naked anytime you want."

Will moved to say something, but Kate held up a hand to stop him. She grinned and chuckled. "Jaylen, why would you think I'd want to see you naked?" She gave a little shiver and the men cracked up. Jaylen Cox was the star running back and from the interviews she'd seen, he appeared to be a funny guy with a good sense of humor.

“I can tell you that in all my other coaching jobs I was in the locker room when the other coaches were. I have a job to do and I’m very serious about my job. There’s a lot of last-minute information coming in and I want to make sure you have all the information you need to play your best. But let’s also get something straight. I won’t date you. I won’t tell anyone what happens in the locker room. And I certainly won’t bench you for any dirty jokes. In fact, I have quite a few of my own. When I’m in that room, I’m a coach and that’s it. However, I want you comfortable. I know this is new, so how about during pre-season I keep out until you’re dressed and in a couple of weeks you men vote on it. Deal?” Kate asked.

She heard the murmurs of approval and then saw the nodding heads. “Looks like you got a deal, Coach,” Jaylen said with his trademark smile.

“Great. Now, I’ll stay up here for a moment if anyone has any questions for me. Then I’ll be in my office and ready to go first thing tomorrow morning.”

Trey Everett clapped again and looked out over his team. “Gentlemen, get a good night’s sleep. Tomorrow the real work begins. Remember that Wednesday is media day and sponsor day so be on your best behavior. Then Thursday the PR team and the people who work with the sponsors will be taking all our biggest sponsors on a horse farm tour and bourbon tasting. You all know who is scheduled to be at which events. Friday is the charity event.”

Heads bobbed in acknowledgment before Trey turned to her and held out his hand. “I’m so glad Will listened to my suggestion to look into you. Can you meet me in my office when you’re done here?”

“Of course.” Having the head coach on her side of the hire was also very good news. Most head coaches were part of the hiring process, but not always.

“Yo, coach,” Jaylen called out as Trey walked away. He placed his hand over his heart and shook his head. “I’m heartbroken you won’t date me, but don’t rip my heart out by not giving me the ball, okay?”

Coach Patel of the running game glared at her. Yes, she knew the running back was a major part of the offense. No, she wasn't going to try to bench him. "Jaylen, your stats speak for themselves. You're an artist on the run. Now, that won't mean you always get the ball. It depends on the defense. When we play Nashville, you know they stop you behind the line more than you get through it, so how about we throw the ball some there?"

"Damn, Coach. You gotta call me out like that on day one?" Jaylen was smiling so she knew he wasn't mad.

"I told you I'd be honest with you. Just like you know you'll get tons of touches when we play New York. They can't stop you."

"Alright, Coach. I see what you're doing." Jaylen swaggered out of the room talking smack with his teammates in the best possible way.

But Kate knew where the real trouble lay and it wasn't with Jaylen. It was with Knox Everett and Jordan Bates, the two quarterbacks of the team. She was set to meet with them tomorrow morning before the media circus on Wednesday. But that didn't stop both of them from coming up and introducing themselves. Jordan first, but he didn't exactly introduce himself.

"I'm the starting quarterback," Jordan said as a way of introduction.

"And I'm your new coach. I'm looking forward to hearing how you're doing. I read your report from Dr. Jace Davies and it looks promising."

"I want my position back," Jordan said angrily.

Now in his early thirties, Jordan Bates was a couple of years older than Kate. Knox Everett, on the other hand, was just a couple of years out of college. It was the tale of two quarterbacks. One at the end of his career and one at the beginning.

"The doctor's report was encouraging. I won't make a decision without the other coaches or without seeing what you

can do at our workout tomorrow.”

Jordan didn't look pleased. He didn't say anything as all six feet two inches of brooding quarterback stormed off, making sure to “accidentally” hit Knox Everett in the shoulder on his way by.

Knox glared but didn't retaliate. Instead, Kate could see himself mentally shrugging it off. “Hi,” Knox said, turning on his smile. “I'm Knox Everett. I guess you know my dad is the head coach, but I want to say I wasn't drafted because of that. I'm a damn good quarterback.”

Kate shook his hand. “I know you are. You stepped up and covered the last several games when Jordan was injured last season. However, as you know, this isn't college and you still have a lot to learn. I'll tell you the same thing I told Jordan. I'll work with you both to pull out the best of you, but I won't make a decision on a starter until I've seen you work out and until I talk to the other coaches. Ultimately, it's not my call who the starter is. I'll tell you this. I know what it's like working with your dad. I was with mine on the sidelines, albeit unofficially, from the time I was in grade school, but we were both on that field. I know what it's like to be judged by his actions and he by mine.” Kate frowned as she remembered faking that injury so her father could keep his job. “I promise I will only think of you as Knox Everett the quarterback, not the coach's kid.”

Knox smiled, relief obvious on his handsome face. “I'm glad to be working with you, Coach. See you in the morning.”

As Kate finished meeting players, she began to feel more at home. It would take a bit of time to get to know everyone, get to know the routines and the personalities of the group, but she'd always feel at home on a football field.

“Knock, Knock,” Cady Woodson, the owner and master distiller at Barrel Creek Distillery, called out as she shouldered open the kitchen door that connected to the parking lot out back of the restaurant.

“Here,” Landon said, handing his sauté pan over to one of his cooks and striding over to Cady. “Let me take that.”

Landon took the case of freshly bottled bourbon from Cady’s hands and set it on the prep table. His bartender would be along shortly to get it ready for tonight’s coaches’ dinner. “Thanks. I have the gin you asked for, too.”

With a nod of his head, one of the cooks headed out to Cady’s truck to bring in the remaining bottles. Cady’s father had been a master bourbon distiller and taught her everything she knew. She’d become one of the youngest master distillers and then her father died. No one wanted to risk hiring a new distiller who was so young, so Cady bought an old distillery on the outskirts of Keeneston and spent years renovating it as the bourbon sat in barrels waiting to mature. She made small-batch gin and held weddings at the distillery to cover expenses until that time came. Now the first barrels of bourbon were ready and Landon had a deal to serve Cady’s gin and bourbon at his restaurant.

“I saw an article about your distillery in one of those restaurant industry magazines. They were raving about it. Although, I could have told them it’s one of the best around.” Landon gave her a wink and went back to the stove. Everyone

in Keeneston seemed to think that the two of them might be a couple. While Cady was pretty in that girl-next-door way he normally loved, there just wasn't a spark. Instead, they'd turned out to be great friends.

"I'm really excited," Cady said, taking a seat on one of the stools at the prep table. "It's gotten rave reviews. Some of the top restaurants in Kentucky are asking to have some bottles. Don't worry. You always get the bottles you want first."

"Aw, you're such a good friend. Hey, I was thinking of hitting up the farmers' market on the weekend. Want to go with?" Landon asked.

"I'd love to." Cady looked at her watch. "I better get going. I know your dinner rush is about to begin. Text me about this weekend."

"Will do. Thanks for bringing the order out." Landon walked Cady to the door.

It would make life so easy if he could fall in love with Cady. Too bad it just wasn't meant to be.



Kate slung her purse over her shoulder and ran for her car. She didn't care if the night staff looked at her strangely. She was late for her first coaches' meeting. Trey Everett had wanted to go over tomorrow's schedule and then plan a time to discuss the QB situation after practice. And it was apparently a situation that would require a great deal of attention and careful handling since both quarterbacks wanted the starting job.

Then Kate had begun to unpack her office so that it would be ready for meetings with the players the next day, only to be interrupted by the PR team. They were in a heated debate over which news outlet to give her first interview to while Kate set out photos and placed binders full of analytics on all the players in her bookcase. Only, when they finally reached a decision, Will Ashton came in and said, "The Keeneston Journal gets the first exclusive interview."

Kate had no idea where this Keeneston was, but it must be a big city to have that kind of pull. Plus, it seemed everyone lived there. Including, as of tonight, her.

Then as Kate was almost done with her office, Owen Clarkson, the Director of Corporate Sponsors, came in and gave her the rundown of the big sponsors that would be at the stadium on Wednesday.

After she got out of a long discussion with emphasis on how important corporate sponsors were to the team, Kate looked at the clock, realized she didn't know where she was going, and was undoubtedly going to be late now.

As Kate ran for her car, she programmed in the address into her phone's mapping app and looked at where it was in comparison. Fifteen minutes. Crap. Kate yanked open the door and took off out of the stadium as fast as she could. This was not the kind of first impression she wanted to make.

It turned out the drive was an easy one until she wound her way through the one-way streets of downtown Lexington. "Where is it?" Kate asked out loud as if her navigation would answer.

"Your destination is on the right in two hundred feet."

"Thanks, navigation," Kate said as she eyed the old buildings of downtown.

There! Landon's was on the right and it was freaking packed. There wasn't a parking space on the street for as far as Kate could see. She pulled up to the entrance and hoped for a valet. No such luck. However, she did see a sign that pointed to more parking behind the building.

Kate didn't waste time. She zipped around the building to find a small lot almost completely filled. Almost. She nabbed a parking spot and breathed out a sign of relief. She had one minute to spare. Kate grabbed her purse and pushed her door open.

The most mouthwatering aromas were coming out of the propped open back door of the restaurant. She heard the chef calling out orders, the sound of knives chopping, and pans

sizzling. Her stomach rumbled as she turned to close her car door and spun right into a solid wall of someone.

“So sorry!” Kate said, but the rest of her apology died on her tongue as she noticed the wall was a person far too close to her. A person in a black hoodie with the hood pulled over his head, casting his face in shadow.

“Hello, Coach.” The voice was low and soft, but each syllable was dripping with menace. His hands reached out and grabbed her arms. They squeezed enough to keep her in place, but not enough to hurt her.

Kate instinctively tried to pull away, but he tightened his grip. “Don’t worry, Coach. I’m not going to hurt you if you behave. We’re about to become really good friends.”

“What do you want?” Kate asked as she glanced around the parking lot to see if anyone was around to help. Unfortunately, there wasn’t a single person.

“You’re going to help me win a little money. Make a play or two to help me out. I’ll let you know what I need you to do. You do it and everything will be okay. It’ll be a win-win. You keep your job and maybe even get a small cut if you’re doing a good job.”

“You want me to throw games so you can gamble on them? That’s it, isn’t it?” Kate was outraged. She’s clawed her way into professional coaching and she sure as hell wouldn’t blow this chance, not just for herself, but for all up and coming women coaches, by cheating.

“That’s too obvious. I need you to play the spread or maybe some spot fixing here and there. None of it changes the outcome of the game.”

“The answer is no,” Kate said clearly. “I won’t be a part of cheating.”

“Then, I’ll have to make you.”

The man shoved her hard. Kate cried out in surprise as she landed hard on her back on the pavement. The air was driven from her lungs and she was left gasping for breath. The man leaned down and a glint of a knife shone in the light right

before he slashed two of her tires as he walked toward her until he was towering over her. “I can get to you anytime, anywhere. Remember that.”

“Hey!” a man yelled from behind her, but Kate still couldn’t fill her lungs with enough air to call for help. “Get away from her.”

“Back off, man. This doesn’t concern you.” The man reached down for her and Kate told her limbs to move but they wouldn’t listen.

Kate found her voice the second a male body in a white coat jumped forward, knocking the hooded man away from her. The man put himself between her and the hooded man. All Kate could see of the man was his backside. It was a great backside, but one that didn’t look as menacing as the hooded man.

The hooded man laughed. “Is that a spoon?”

“You’d be amazed at what I can do with a spoon.” The hooded man looked as if he were going to charge, and her rescuer widened his legs as if preparing for an attack. “Go ahead. Try it. I guarantee you that you won’t win.”

Her rescuer was cocky and Kate feared he was going to get hurt. Overblown egos were rife in her career and few men lived up to what they thought of themselves.

Kate’s stomach dropped when the man charged. Her rescuer didn’t move. Kate scrambled up to her feet. She had to protect this man who put his life on the line to protect her. She grabbed her purse and was ready to swing it when her rescuer suddenly bent and flipped the man over his shoulder, knife and all. Well, more like he tossed the hooded man like a sack of potatoes. The man went flying and landed hard on his back. The knife fell from his hand and skittered under a car.

His hood fell back enough to show the man had a black mask on, but from where Kate stood, that was all she could see before he rolled over and shoved himself onto hands and knees. Her rescuer was advancing on the man, but the hooded

man hadn't lost his breath as badly as she had. He got to his feet and took off like a sprinter.

"Want me to go after him?" her rescuer asked, turning toward her and finally letting Kate get her first look at his front.

Kate shook her head. "I don't want you to put yourself in danger. Although, you seemed to handle yourself well. Didn't expect that from a cook."

"Most people don't. Are you hurt?" His hazel eyes were slightly greener than brown. His thick brown hair was under a backward baseball cap with the name of the restaurant on it. And he was tall. Kate had to look up at him and she guessed he was the same height as her quarterbacks, and he was built like one too.

"I just had the wind knocked out of me. I'm fine otherwise. Thank you so much for helping me."

Kate didn't know what overtook her as she rose up on her toes and pressed a kiss to his lips. It was meant to be a thank you, but it was anything but a friendly kiss. Her whole body heated and she felt the cook move closer to her as they both deepened the kiss. A pan clattered in the background and Kate jumped back. What was she doing? He could be married!

"I'm so sorry!"

"No problem. It was worth the rescue to get that kiss. Now I have to get back into my kitchen."

"Oh crap. I do too. I mean, into the dining room. I'm late for a meeting."

The man looked her over again and goodness, he was sexy. Stubble from a long day covered an angular face, but those deep green eyes with just a hint of brown. They made her melt with their intensity.

"Are you Kate Ellington?"

Landon put the spoon back into his pocket as he looked the woman over who had just turned his world upside down with that kiss. She was here for a meeting. “Are you Kate Ellington?”

“I am. How did you know that?”

Because now that he had time to look at her, he would know her anywhere. She was the kind of woman that stuck with you after seeing her. Knox had shown him her photo then he’d read about her coming to the Thoroughbreds. She was around five foot seven with slightly curly, rich brown hair that reached her shoulder blades. Her dark brown eyes reminded him of warm, melted chocolate. She had a smattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose that made him think she looked cute. However, the athletic curves had him thinking in a different direction from cute.

“I’m Landon Davies. My friend is Knox Everett and my cousin is one of the team doctors, Jace Davies. Are you sure you’re not hurt? I could call Jace.”

“I’m sure. Now I’m very late and it’s the last thing I wanted to be.”

She looked anxious and Landon wanted to fix it for her. “I’ve got you covered. Follow me.” Landon turned and was glad to see she kept pace with him as they walked toward the kitchen. “Do you know what that guy wanted?”

Kate went rigid at the question. “No.”

That was a lie. Landon's father wasn't a super spy or a walking lie detector like his Uncle Cy, but that didn't mean he didn't pick up on lies just as well. Okay, maybe not as well, but he could hold his own. First, the uncles had made sure all the Davies cousins had the basics in self-defense, spying, weaponry, interrogation, and more while growing up. And even though Landon might have been wild in his youth, now he was more reserved and in a family of military and law enforcement, being the quiet one and observing everyone taught him a lot. Like, the fact Kate Ellington was a cute little liar with a sexy body and a kiss that had just rocked his whole world.

"Hmm," Landon replied as he opened the door wider to let her walk into the kitchen.

"You don't believe me?" Kate asked, offended.

"You can't be offended when you're the one lying." Landon grinned as Kate's faux outrage shifted to a grimace. "You don't have to tell me, but I'm here if you need me."

Kate seemed to deflate. "Thanks. It's been a long day and this week is going to be even longer."

"Well then, let's get you into your meeting so you can get home."

Kate groaned. "He slashed my tires so my car is out. And I don't have a home. I guess I'm staying on some farm that I thought belonged to a friend of Mr. Ashton, but I think he's a prince. I don't know if I can stay there."

"Mo?"

"You know him?" Kate asked and was clearly relieved to get some intel on where she was staying.

"Of course. Mo and Dani are practically family. I grew up with their kids and we ran wild on their farm. I know the house he's talking about. It's private and in the middle of the farm. It'll be perfect. It's a small house one of the grooms used to live in. When he moved back to Rahmi, they redid it and now use it as a guest cottage."

“Are there any cabs that can take me since it’s in a different town?”

“Um, no.” Landon laughed a little as he led her across the dining room to the private room that held parties and the weekly coaches’ meeting. “But it’s not far from where I live. I can take you if you want. So could Trey or Will. We all live in Keeneston.” Landon stopped at the door.

Kate absently bit her lower lip. “Would it be too much of a hassle for you to take me and not mention the whole slashed tires, attacker thing? I’m new. I don’t want them to think I have drama following me.”

“No problem. Just stop by the kitchen when you’re done with your meeting and I can take you home. Now, relax. It’s all okay.” Landon pushed open the door and walked in with a smile on his face. The coaches had been meeting here since he opened the restaurant. He knew them all pretty well by now. “Sorry for holding y’all up. Kate got here a while ago and I wanted to show her around the restaurant. Now, I got a new batch of bourbon in. Who wants to try it?”

Kate slipped into the open chair between Coach Samson, the offensive coordinator, and Trey Everett as Landon distracted them with the new bourbon. Soon he was back in the kitchen cooking up a storm, but his mind wasn’t on it. His mind was on Kate Ellington and what she was hiding.

“Landon?”

Landon’s head shot up from where he had just plated the last dinner of the evening. “Hey there, Kate. Is your meeting over?”

“It is. Are you sure you don’t mind taking me to Keeneston?”

Landon set the plate up for the waiter and turned to his second-in-command, Bryce, and asked him to close up the restaurant for the night. He shrugged out of his white chef’s jacket and held open the backdoor for Kate. “My SUV is right out here.”

“I need to grab some things from my car,” Kate said, walking toward her car. “At least he didn’t steal my suitcase.”

Landon walked with Kate to her car. “Let me help,” he said when Kate opened her truck.

“Thanks. I’ll get my things from up front.”

Landon reached in and pulled out two large suitcases. He had them all loaded into the back of his SUV by the time Kate joined him with her purse and a box of Thoroughbreds swag. Landon took the box and set it in the back before closing the tailgate.

“How was your meeting?” Landon asked as they pulled out of the back lot and made their way out of downtown.

“Good. We had a lot to talk about. Thanks for covering for me. Some of the coaches aren’t thrilled that I am here. They had wanted to fill the position internally after the last coach retired. Having an unproven woman come in wasn’t popular with all of them.”

“You’re not unproven. It’s your first year in the pros, but it’s not your first year coaching.”

“No one has put it like that before, except for my dad.”

“He’s a coach too, right?” Landon asked, trying to remember the details from the profile he’d read on her.

“He’s a high school head coach in Katy, Texas.”

Landon whistled. “I would say he has a more stressful job than you do.”

Kate laughed and he could see her begin to relax as she told him about growing up with a coach for a dad.

“Oh, I know all about it,” Landon said, turning off the main road and onto the country road lined with horse farms that led to Keeneston.

“You do?”

“Yup. My dad was the head coach at Keeneston High School. I was a wide receiver. I actually played for my dad.”

“Ouch. How was that?” Kate asked.

“Hell. He was ten times harder on my brother and me than anyone else.”

“So, your dad was a football coach. What about your mom?” Kate asked.

“She was with the DEA before becoming a sheriff’s deputy. She’s retired. I think.”

Kate laughed. “You think? You don’t know if your mom is retired or not?”

Landon smiled as he thought about his tough as nails mother with her curly red hair and dirty mouth. She could cuss you up one side and down the other. “Officially she is, but then she does these girls’ trips and they pack a lot of guns for a spa visit.”

Kate looked at him, trying to decide if he was kidding or not. “Um, okay. You said you have a brother. Older or younger?”

“Colton. He’s one year older than I am. Then my sister, Sophie, is the eldest of us three. She’s married and has a sweet little girl named Emersyn.”

“Are they chefs like you?”

Landon chuckled. “No. Colton is a firefighter. He’s captain of the department, in fact. A young one too. He started the fire department in Keeneston and is also the head of the emergency response team for our area. Then Soph develops weapons.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“She develops weapons.”

“Like, she makes bombs and stuff?”

Landon nodded. “Yeah, and stuff. The acid gun of death is my favorite.”

“I don’t know what to say about that. I’ve never met a weapons developer, let alone a woman who does that.”

“Well, Sophie has never met a woman professional football coach either.”

Kate laughed then. “I never thought of it that way. So, is Keeneston a big town? It seems as if a lot of you live there.”

“Oh no. Very small. I know everyone there and have known most of them my whole life. Keeneston is . . . unique. By tomorrow, everyone will know you’ve moved onto the farm and most of them will probably stop by at some point.”

“Like five or six people?”

“More like a hundred or two.”

Kate turned in her seat to stare at him. “Are you serious? How can I feed that many people? If they visit, I have to feed them.”

“I wouldn’t worry about feeding them. I’d worry about where to store all the food they’ll bring. That house isn’t very big but talk to Mo’s cook. He has a massive walk-in freezer for when they host diplomatic events.”

Kate was quiet for a moment as they grew closer to town. “You’re teasing me, right?”

“I’m hurt. You don’t believe me? Did you have an older brother that tormented you or something?”

“Nope. Only child.”

“Ah, a cynic. Layne’s the same way. She’s one of my cousins and the lone only-child among us Davies cousins. Here. We’re entering Keeneston now. It’s fairly simple to get around. This is Main Street. It’s one of the few roads. It’ll also lead you straight into Lexington if you follow it the way we came. It’ll also lead you straight to Mo and Dani’s farm on the other side of town.”

“This is the whole downtown? One street?” Kate asked, looking around at the buildings lining the road.

“Yup.”

“Creed Security?”

“Aiden Creed is a bodyguard and runs a personal protection agency,” Landon explained. He wouldn’t confuse her by telling her he was a cousin by marriage.

“SA Tech,” Kate read on a newly renovated building. Where Aiden had rented the first floor of an old building, Sebastian Abel had bought an entire building and then updated it from top to bottom. “Why does that sound familiar?”

“Sebastian Abel owns it.”

“The billionaire who is best friends with the President of the United States? Why on earth does he have an office in a town a quarter of the size of Katy?” Kate asked in disbelief.

“He’s married to my cousin Greer. He has an office here, in New York, Washington, D.C., and several overseas. But when he and Greer are in town, he likes to have an office of his own. He doesn’t like having meetings and such at his home, so he bought the building, redid it, and works from there when he’s in town,” Landon explained. “Oh, and if you turn left here you get to some of the old houses in town. There’s a bed and breakfast that you can also stay at, but you’d need to pay and you’d have no privacy.”

“Thin walls?”

“Nosy owners,” Landon chuckled. “A trio of elderly sisters. Lily Rae, Daisy Mae, and Violet Fae. They also own the Blossom Café,” Landon said, pointing out the restaurant that was closing down for the night. “Poppy and Zinnia, the Rose sisters’ much younger cousins run the bed and breakfast and the café for them now. But Miss Violet is a French-trained chef and taught me much of what I know about cooking, along with my grandmother.”

“That’s nice. I like that.” Kate said with a smile as Landon pointed out the rest of downtown.

“You’ll be able to see the farms better in daylight. It’s really lovely out here.” Landon drove down the winding country road by memory. He’s made this trip more times than he could count.

“Where do you live compared to here?” Kate asked.

“You remember that one road I showed you splitting off from Main Street?” When Kate nodded, he continued. “I live on that street. Here we are. Desert Sun Farm.”

Landon rolled down his window as the two soldiers at the gate came toward them. Kate looked around nervously but Landon just waved at them. “Hey guys. This is Kate Ellington. She’s staying at the cottage for a while.”

“Welcome to Desert Sun Farm, ma’am.” The soldier handed Landon a key to the cottage. “Let us know if you need assistance with anything.” The soldiers clicked a button and the large steel gates opened.

“There are armed guards here?” Kate whispered as if they would hear her even as they drove away.

“The property the house is on is considered an embassy, so it’s guarded as such.”

“I guess that makes sense.” Kate was silent as they drove the rest of the way to the cottage. “Is this it? It’s lovely.”

The cottage was built of limestone and had colorful flowers nearly overflowing their window boxes across the front. It wasn’t big. It had one bedroom, one bathroom, a living room, and a compact kitchen. However, it was freshly remodeled and would be perfect for a coach who would be spending most of her time in Lexington.

Landon found himself taking his time unloading Kate’s bags. He liked talking to her and didn’t want the night to end.

“Thank you for everything tonight,” Kate finally said when there was no more delaying Landon could do.

“You’re welcome. I’m here if you need me for anything at all. Even if it’s just a daytime tour of town.”

Kate smiled at him and Landon had to force himself to remember his manners. He wanted to kiss her senseless again, lock the door, and take her in the hallway, but this wasn’t the time for that. He didn’t even know if Kate was interested in him that way. It could have just been a thank-you-for-rescuing-me kiss with a big dose of adrenaline behind it.

“Thank you, Landon. I really appreciate it.”

Kate unlocked the door and Landon stepped off the small stoop. “Good night, Kate. Sweet dreams.”

Landon waited until Kate was inside before he got into his car and drove the short way down to one of the other houses on the property. When he’d passed it, he had seen the lights were still on so he figured it wasn’t too late to stop.

Landon knocked and the door opened. “Hey, man. What are you doing here this late?” Kale Mueez asked.

Kale’s father was a super soldier and former head of Mo’s security. Landon and Kale had been friends since birth. Both of them had bucked tradition in their choice of careers. Landon became a chef and Kale a computer genius. However, the past always catches up to you. In this case, Kale’s father’s past and expectations for his only son.

“I wanted to see you before you left in the morning for Rahmi. Six months as a Rahmi soldier. I’ll miss you,” Landon patted Kale’s shoulder as they walked into his living room.

“Mandatory service. I’m ready to get this over with. I have my own company, for crying out loud, but Dad still thinks I need to be like him.”

“Well, don’t tell anyone,” Landon said as they sat down, “but tonight I ran out to defend a woman with a spoon. I had a knife on the countertop but grabbed a spoon. Uncle Miles will tease my father forever if he hears this.” Uncle Miles had always been the one to say a spoon was a versatile weapon.

“Is the woman okay?” Kale asked.

“Yes. She’s staying in the cottage down the way. It’s Kate Ellington, the new coach.” Landon paused and sniffed the air. “Do I smell apple pie?”

Kale nodded. “Can I say something that might offend you?”

“I already know my grandmother’s apple pie is better than mine. She won’t tell me the recipe.”

“Not that,” Kale said with a grin that meant he agreed with Landon’s assessment. “Before my dad fell in love with his dog Nemi, he used to tell stories of Marshall’s vizsla, Bob. He said the dog could climb trees, open the refrigerator, and stare into his soul in such a way that told my dad that Bob knew things. It freaked my dad out. I would tease my dad about it, but I swear, your grandmother does that to me. She looks at me as if she just *knows* things.”

Landon laughed. “It’s just a pie, Kale.”

“And I’m just a computer programmer. I’m telling you, your grandmother knows things.”

“Well, she knows gossip. That’s for sure.” Landon caught sight of the suitcase by the door “Six months, huh?”

“Yup, then I’ll be back to my life.”

“What about your company?” Landon asked.

“Alex and Roxie are running it. I got Dad to bend a little and give me time to work on company matters while I am over there, but I had to wrap up any big projects before I leave. As you know, I’ve been working nonstop and haven’t been able to hang out with you all before I leave. But when I come back . . . get ready to be sick of me.”

“Stay safe and drop us a line every now and then to let us know how you’re doing. Don’t make me send my grandmother after you,” Landon teased, but Kale looked momentarily freaked out.

“Does your grandmother know how to use a computer?” Kale asked randomly.

“Grandma Marcy? Using a computer?” Landon laughed until his side hurt. She could barely text. “Why on earth would you think she could use a computer?”

“I found a deleted chat file on my computer, but couldn’t recover it. Then I pulled up security footage and saw your grandmother sitting at my desk during that whole mess with Parker and Tilly.”

“She was working on your computer?” Landon asked, confused since Grandma Marcy couldn’t figure out streaming movies, nevertheless a computer genius’s computer.

Kale frowned. “I couldn’t tell. The only view was from the back. It looked like she was just sitting there, but the deleted file was made at that time, so it had to be her or else someone accessed my computer remotely.”

“Who could do that?” Landon asked. “Because you know my grandma didn’t.”

“The Panther is the only one who could. But, it doesn’t make sense. What would they be looking for in my chats? I don’t even use that feature very often.”

“I don’t know. Maybe they wanted to make sure you weren’t onto them?”

Kale looked thoughtful and then shrugged. “I guess. It’s just a mystery.”

“Well, let me know if you want me to stick my grandmother on the case,” Landon teased and Kale shivered. “I’ll let you get back to packing.”

“Hey, Landon,” Kale called out after Landon walked out the door. “One last thing. You and Kate? Should I make a bet before I leave?”

“Ha,” Landon said, reaching for his car door. He had to turn his head to hide the smile from the memory of the kiss.

“Great. Then I can go say hi. I am a soldier leaving for deployment. Maybe I can get a special send-off.”

“The hell you will,” Landon snapped as he spun toward Kale, who grinned at him as he entered something into his phone.

“That answered that. I have twenty on a week from now. Don’t let me down.” Kale laughed as he headed back inside.

Landon glanced over his shoulder down the dark drive leading to the cottage. He should have kissed her again. He’d been focused on his career for so long that he hadn’t thought of romance in quite a while. Even as his cousins fell in love

and married. Even as his sister was ridiculously happy with her husband and daughter. Love and marriage hadn't been a priority for him. Lucky enough, his dad didn't think so either. He was too busy being a grandfather to pressure Colton or Landon into marriage and kids. His mom would mention things here and there, but she also wasn't pushy about it. Not like Aunt Gemma. She'd practically dragged Parker and Porter down the aisle. Well, they ran to their brides happily, but their mother made sure to give them a big push in the right direction.

Landon was thinking of Kate as he drove back to town. He liked her, but he also knew the last thing she had time for was a boyfriend. Being a boyfriend was also the last thing he had time for. However, a couple of phone calls couldn't hurt anything. He was just being the gentleman his parents raised him to be.

"Hey, I need a favor," Landon said into the phone as he drove through downtown on his way home.

Kate had always been an early riser. At the first ray of sunlight, she was up and ready to go. She thrived on five hours of sleep. Six and it felt like a vacation. The cottage was cute and perfect for her. The room had a comfortable bed and a window overlooking the farm.

She walked to the kitchen in an oversized T-shirt emblazoned with the Katy high school mascot, finding someone had fully stocked it. Kate turned on the coffee and found a mug in the cabinet. She laughed when she saw it was a new Lexington Thoroughbreds mug. She really needed to thank the prince for all of this.

Kate poured her coffee, grabbed her notes on the team, and headed to the small back porch. It was big enough for a grill, some outdoor furniture, and a flower pot. It was perfect. She took a deep breath of the dewy air and watched as the sun broke the horizon, lighting the rolling green hills dotted with horses and a naked man with a giant sword.

The sight of a naked man who appeared to be fencing with an imaginary foe surprised her into immobility, coffee mug halfway to her lips. He was tall, dark, and handsome. He was lanky yet muscular and young enough to be around her age. The rays of the morning sun glinted off the bejeweled sword as he lunged, parried, and slashed. The motion of the sword was almost as mesmerizing as the swinging of his other *sword*.

She'd been in the locker room for years and seen more dicks than most urologists. This was a pretty pecker. She

would have sworn it had been buffed and polished as the sunlight made it seem to glow golden.

“I see you’re taken with my royal member.”

Oh crap. The man spun to look at her. He placed one hand on his hip and the other leaned on the sword as if it were a cane.

“Don’t be embarrassed. Women cannot resist it, but it’s not for you.”

“Hell’s bells, mister, I don’t want your member!” Kate forced her eyes up to meet the man’s, who then frowned.

“You don’t?”

“No! I’ve just never seen one so . . . pretty before.”

“Pretty?” the man looked down at his dick. “It’s not pretty. It’s masculine and savage.”

“I mean there’s manscaping to help a woman out and to just clean up a little and then there’s *that*.” Kate pointed at his groin. “Do you have . . . are those *diamonds* glued to your balls?”

“A crown needs its jewels,” he said defensively.

“So, for your information, sparkly balls don’t scream savage. It says pretty.” This was far and away the strangest conversation she’d ever had.

“Huh. I’ll discuss this with my waxer. But you’re sure you don’t want this? And let me make this clear, you can’t have it.” He thrust his hips forward and the sun caught the diamonds, which sent out a myriad of refracted rainbows from his balls. “Oh,” he said, sounding dejected. “I see what you mean. It is pretty.”

The man hung his head and walked away, dragging his sword behind him. Kate just stared after him as he walked over the hill and disappeared from view. Surely, this would be the strangest thing to happen to her today.

Kate had just finished getting dressed when her doorbell rang. She hurried to the door, hoping it was Mo or his wife so she could thank them for the cottage and beg for a ride to the stadium. Kate opened the door and her stomach rumbled.

“Hello, dear. We wanted to welcome you to Keeneston.” Four elderly women stood at the door, each holding out food. “I’m Marcy Davies. Have this apple pie. It has fruit in it so you can have a slice for breakfast.”

“And I’m Lily Rae Rose-Wolfe. I brought you some delicious ham biscuits. These are my sisters, Daisy and Violet.”

“Come in. I’m sorry, I have to get to work soon, but I can offer you some coffee.”

“What excellent manners,” Mrs. Davies said to the Rose sisters.

“She’ll be perfect,” one of the sisters whispered. Kate thought it was Daisy.

“Perfect for what?” Kate asked as she took each food offering from them and then pulled out four mugs.

“For the town, dear. We’re a real nice bunch here and we certainly appreciate good manners,” Mrs. Davies said as if they hadn’t been caught talking about her.

“Mrs. Davies, are you any relation to Landon Davies?” Kate asked as she poured their coffee.

“Oh, you know my grandson?” Marcy seemed surprised as Kate told her how they’d met at his restaurant. Of course, she left out the attack. She didn’t want to worry the old woman. “Landon is such a dear boy. Well, gentleman now that he’s a man. Did you know he played football?”

Kate nodded as she set out the sugar and milk. “Wide receiver. He told me his father is also a coach, just like mine.”

“How about that?” the one she thought was Miss Violet said. “You two already have so much in common.”

“Every week I host dinner at my house. I’d love it if you’d join us so I can introduce you to my family,” Mrs. Davies said

sweetly. “I’m sure my son, Cade, he’s Landon’s father, would love to talk football with you. And several of the women in my family know all about working in a male dominated field. I’m sure you’d hit it off with them.”

“That’s so kind of you. I’d love to meet your family.”

The women set down their mugs as if they had gotten what they came for. “Excellent. And you must join us at the Blossom Café sometime,” Miss Lily said with a warm smile as she stood up.

“Yes, sorry we can’t stay,” Mrs. Davies said to her. “We have a priest to see about reserving the church.”

“Okay. Well, thank you for stopping by. And thank you so much for the food. It smells wonderful.”

Kate walked them to the door. She stood and waved them off as another car pulled in. Her house was a busy place this morning. Only this time she recognized the driver. “Good morning, Kate.”

“Dr. Parker, right?” Kate asked, hoping she got the name correct.

“Please call me Sienna. Landon asked me to give you a ride to the stadium this morning. He said you got a flat tire in his parking lot. Bummer.”

“Landon organized a ride for me?” Kate was stunned. That was so thoughtful of him.

“Yep,” Sienna said as she walked up to the cottage. “He said he’ll have your car fixed and delivered to the stadium today. He knew you were going to be swamped with media day preparation and your first practice and didn’t want you to worry about it.”

“Wow. That’s so nice of him.”

“Landon’s a nice guy. A true gentleman,” Sienna said, looking around Kate and into her house. “Wow, Dani did a great job with the house.”

“Come in and look around. I just need to grab my things. Then I’ll be ready to go.”

“I see Grandma Marcy brought her pie,” Sienna said, looking longingly at the pie.

“Wait, I thought she was Landon’s grandmother?” Kate was getting confused now.

“She is. My mother-in-law, Paige, is Marcy’s only daughter. Now, if I can give you some advice?”

“Of course. You’ve married into the Davies family.” Kate wondered just how large this Davies family was.

“I’d bring the pie tomorrow and cut it into small cubes and hand it out to the media. Trust me on this. You wouldn’t believe what people will do for one of those pies,” Sienna said as she picked up the pie and took a deep breath, smelling the apples, cinnamon, and preternatural yumminess.

“Great. I’ll do just that. I’m ready.”

Kate locked her door and followed Sienna out to her car. The drive to Lexington in the daylight looked different from last night. Now she could get a sense of the town and the landmarks Landon had pointed out.

“Oh, is this the street Landon lives on?” Kate said, noticing the stately homes with manicured lawns headed up the tree-lined street.

“Yes. He’s up on the left. So, tell me about yourself. Family? Kids? Pets? Husband? Fun hobbies?” Sienna asked as she left downtown Keeneston.

“My parents are in Katy, Texas. My dad is a high school football coach and my mom is a math teacher. No kids. No pets. No husband. No hobbies. No time.” Kate gave a little laugh. “I know, I’m pathetic.”

“You’re not pathetic. It’s hard to climb the coach’s ladder and I’m sure even harder for a woman. The right man will support you in that climb. Don’t discount the idea of dating. Just pick the ones who are worthy of your time. Also, it’s not a hobby, but if you’d like, several of us women get together for a girls’ night a couple of times a month. Just us, some alcohol, food, and a combination of venting, supporting, and gossiping. You’re more than welcome to join us. I think you’d love the

girls. There are several who will know exactly what you're going through. Take Cady Woodson for example. She's a master distiller. One of only a few women in that position in the country."

"That's very neat. I don't know much about bourbon. I'm more of a tequila girl, but I guess I should learn about it. Everyone has been so nice here. Your grandma invited me to meet the family over dinner. You invited me to meet your friends. I think I'm going to like it here."

"Shut the front door! Grandma Marcy invited you to family dinner?" Sienna asked, clearly shocked.

"Yes. Should I not go? Is it bad?" Kate asked.

"No," Sienna said slowly as she came to a stop at the first stoplight they'd come to. "It's great. The food is delicious. Do you know how to shoot by chance?" Sienna pulled out her phone while the light was red and did something quickly on her phone before putting it back in her purse.

"I'm from Texas. Of course, I know how to shoot."

"Oh, that's a relief," Sienna said with a smile. The light turned green and Sienna began to talk about her son, Ash, and her husband, Ryan. "He's the head of the FBI office in Lexington."

Kate didn't think tire slashing counted as FBI jurisdiction, but rigging sporting matches for gambling purposes did. In fact, the FBI just launched a special group to investigate such matters called the Sports and Gaming Initiative. Kate filed the info away, thinking that a friendly face might be available to help her if she was threatened again.

Sienna parked and together they walked toward the stadium as they talked about tomorrow's media day.

"You're big news. So is the battle for starting quarterback now that Jordan is healthy. Remember, I am here for the whole team, including the coaching staff, so if you need someone to talk to or techniques to manage stress, just let me know." She

and Sienna walked by an empty parking space and Kate noticed that her own name was on it.

“I can handle the media. No worries. Besides, my first exclusive is with the Keeneston Journal, so it’s not like it’s an international sportscaster.” Kate used her badge to open the stadium’s door and turned back to Sienna in surprise. “Did you just bless my heart under your breath?”

Sienna stepped through the door and smiled. “I did, but not in the F.U. way. This was in the way of asking God to have mercy on your poor soul.”

Kate laughed. She knew all the ways to bless someone’s heart. “I thought a small-town newspaper would be a good way to ease into the media day.”

“A word of advice—treat everyone from Keeneston as if they’re CIA interrogators and you’ll do just fine. Good luck tomorrow!” Sienna called out as they went in different directions to their offices.

Kate was shaking her head as she laughed about some small-town paper being equal to the CIA.

“Ellington!” Trey Everett called out. “Coaches’ room in fifteen minutes.”

“Yes, sir!” Kate called out before dropping her bag in her office. She grabbed her notebooks, her tablet, and her whistle.

She’d go from the meeting room straight to practice. It was time to do her job.



Landon dropped to his belly on the pavement and stretched his arm under the catering van in the parking lot behind his restaurant. Using a towel, he clutched the knife that had dropped from the attacker last night. He pulled it out and pushed himself onto his knees. It was a regular kitchen knife. Nothing fancy and also hard to trace. His only hope was there were fingerprints. However, he wasn’t hopeful as last night he’d noticed the attacker wore gloves.

Landon placed the knife in a zip top storage bag and stood up. He put the bag in his glovebox and brushed off his jeans and T-shirt. Then he pulled out the jack from the back of his SUV. Landon got to work taking off the two slashed tires on Kate's car and tossing them into the back of his SUV.

This morning he was going to run to the tire store and pick up two new ones to put on her car. When that was done, he was going to drive it over to the stadium between his lunch and dinner rush. It was the gentlemanly thing to do. However, that wasn't his only motive. He was hoping to see Kate again in the daylight and see if that spark was still there when danger was not.

The ringing of his phone drew Landon's attention away from his thoughts of Kate's attacker. "Good morning, Grandma," Landon said with a smile after he answered his phone. "How are you this morning?"

"I'm still upset that I can't die happy. Abby and Dylan's baby is late. Today is her due date and I just got off the phone with her. Nothing. Not a single contraction. She feels great. Darn it!"

Landon laughed at his grandmother. "One, you'll never die because you'll never be happy until we're all married and have more children than you can count. Then you'll simply refuse to die until your great-grandchildren are all married and having babies."

"There's nothing wrong with that. It's my job to look out after my family."

"Which brings me to number two," Landon said. "Isn't it good that Abby feels great?"

"Yes, but I had my bet on her having the baby today." Landon could hear his grandmother pouting over the phone. "Well, at least one good thing happened this morning."

"And what's that?" Landon asked.

"I got to meet that nice Kate Ellington. What a dear."

"Yes, she's very nice," Landon said honestly. "Knox has a lot of good things to say about her too."

“I’m sure they’ll have a great *working* relationship. I didn’t see a car when I stopped by. Sienna was picking her up when we left. Maybe we need to set up a carpool schedule with those of you who work in Lexington?”

Landon smiled to himself as he closed his tailgate and got ready to drive to the tire store. His grandmother was fishing and he wasn’t going to take the bait.

“I’m sure the team will work something out. Or maybe her car was just getting serviced.”

“You’re probably right. Well, I invited her to family dinner this weekend so she can meet everyone. It’s past time for your brother to settle down. I thought Kate would be perfect for him.”

“Like hell,” Landon snapped before he could stop himself. He could hear his grandmother smirk over the phone. He’d played right into her hands and now Landon had to squirm off the hook. “He’s been seeing someone in Lexington. If Kate is as nice as you say, she doesn’t deserve to have her hopes dashed.”

“Colton is seeing someone? Why didn’t anyone tell me? I’ll invite her to family dinner too.”

Landon cringed. He’d just thrown Colton under the bus and yet he had no regrets if it meant Kate wasn’t pushed to date his brother. “I don’t know her name so it would be impossible to invite her.” There, he tried to help his brother a little.

His grandmother made a dismissive noise as if it wouldn’t be hard to track the woman down in a town of 350,000 people. And while Lexington did have that many people in it, it still thought of itself as a small town. And for someone with as many friends and connections as his grandma had, it would probably take her less than an hour to find this woman. The woman Colton was seeing would probably turn out to be the granddaughter of a friend’s neighbor’s acquaintance from church.

“Well, it sounds like you might need an extra hand for cooking since dinner will be a big affair. If you want to give me your apple pie recipe, I’ll make a couple for you.” Landon held his breath. He’d been trying to get his recipe from her since he was eighteen.

“Maybe when you get married and give me some great-grandchildren,” his grandmother said with affection and a good bit of amusement in her voice. “However, I’ll gladly take several dozen of your honey bourbon biscuits.”

“Consider it done.” He’d do anything for his grandmother.

“You’re such a good boy. Someday you’ll find a nice young woman. I’ll see you at dinner. Love you.”

Landon hung up with a smile. A nice young woman. His mind instantly went to Kate. Too bad she was trying to build her career or maybe they would have the time to explore a future. However, he also knew what a big opportunity this was for her and dating was a distraction she probably didn’t want. But, just in case she did want it, he’d deliver the car to her himself.

Landon called the tire company and cursed under his breath. They only had one tire in stock, but could get a second one tomorrow. It looked as if she was going to be using that Keeneston carpool after all.

Kate looked at her phone and read the text from Landon. She'd actually forgotten all about her car. She'd been too busy to think about it. He said it would be ready and delivered to her tomorrow. He asked if she could give Sienna the key so he could get it delivered to her. He'd already talked to Sienna and she'd give her a ride home.

Almost on cue, there was a knock on her door. "Come in," Kate called out. Only it wasn't Sienna. It was Sienna's father, Will.

He took a seat across from her and Kate stopped packing up her bag. "What did you think about today?"

"I think you have two options for quarterback, and I think there are two viable ways to go." Will lifted his eyebrow, indicating she should continue. "One, just put in Knox and make him learn on the field. Two, put in Jordan and let him have one last good year while I work with Knox behind the scenes."

Will nodded. "It would give us more overall wins, then when Knox starts he'll be ready to go. No learning curve."

"Exactly. Also, this is just a thought and more in your wheelhouse, but next year there are a ton of good QBs that are going to enter the draft. If you have Knox starting next year he'll be at the beginning of his career. You don't need a first-round quarterback riding the bench. However, several other teams will want to trade out their older QBs for newer ones. You could either get a proven veteran on the cheap or a decent

college QB late in the draft until you're ready to draft the next franchise QB. Then you could use your first round on a new receiver for Knox or maybe a new offensive tackle to protect him. Or even a defensive end if a good one is still available."

Will smiled and Kate knew she hadn't overstepped. "Trey said he liked your football mind. I'll think about it. I know what it's like being an older quarterback. There are pros and cons, but Jordan's been good to us. I'd like to see him have one more good season. However, I need to see that he's able to provide it on the field."

"I agree."

"Good job today, Coach. Glad you're part of our team."

Will left the office and Kate sat back in her chair and squealed internally. She was proving herself and it felt great.



Another day and another morning of Sienna picking her up from her cottage. Today was media day. The parking lot was packed with media vans. Even though she was there early, it still felt as if Kate had arrived late. At least this afternoon she'd have her car back.

She'd talked to Landon via text last night. She felt bad he was getting her car fixed, but he swore it was no problem. Then they'd stayed up late, texting. They talked about little things, but neither had seemed to want to end the conversation. It was as if they were having a first date. They asked all those little questions and she hadn't wanted it to end. It wasn't nerve-wracking like other first dates. It was relaxed and fun as they just got to know each other.

This morning, however, she was paying for the late night. She was tired but didn't regret it one bit. Landon had put her at ease and stopped her stressing over media day. Besides, it wasn't anything a little concealer couldn't fix.

Kate strode into her office looking for a moment of peace before the storm only to find two women waiting for her. One

was older with dark hair sprinkled with gray that made her look more elegant, if that was even possible. She had quiet dignity and self-confidence down to her fingertips. The other was younger and dressed in the latest women's wear fashion of sky-high heels and a fitted suit that showed more than a little skin. Kate had met her yesterday. She couldn't remember her name but remembered the young woman was part of the PR team.

"Ah, you must be Kate Ellington." The older woman stood and held out her hand. "Morgan Davies. My firm heads public relations for the team, but I'm offsite as I handle other clients as well. This is Trina. She'll be working with you on behalf of the Thoroughbreds. She's full-time here at the stadium in the PR department."

"Nice to meet you," she said to Trina before turning to Morgan. "Another Davies? Are you also related to the others?"

"Which others?" Morgan asked calmly. She gave nothing away in her professional expression that only indicated that she was completely calm, cool, and collected.

"Landon Davies, Marcy Davies, Jace Davies, and Sienna Parker. I think that's all of them," Kate said, trying to remember if there had been any more.

"Ah, you've met my mother-in-law." Morgan took a slight sniff. "I can smell you did. You brought her pie."

"Sienna suggested I bring it and give it to the media."

Morgan smiled. "I like that you took her advice. It means you're coachable. Now, let's go over your schedule for this morning. I have a list of subjects I want you to stick to, sponsors I want you to bring into the conversation, and things I don't want you to talk about."

Morgan handed her a thick binder and Kate knew she had a lot to go over in the thirteen minutes before her meeting.

Kate loved Morgan Davies. Her team liaison, Trina, was okay. She seemed to do better flirting with the football players to get

what she needed out of them in terms of PR. That wasn't going to work with Kate. While Trina was technically part of the PR branch of the Thoroughbreds, it seemed when Morgan was on duty, Trina was basically Morgan's assistant. Morgan was straight to the point and gave zero consideration to delicate egos. Kate appreciated that.

"I think I'll send Trina with the players today and I'll stick with you. Is that okay for you?" Morgan asked as they walked to the coaches' meeting.

"That would be perfect. Thank you."

Kate pushed open the door to the meeting room and let her eyes travel over the group. It was only the coaches but then there was a man she didn't know talking to Will Ashton. He was tall and wore a perfectly tailored, expensive-looking suit. His back was toward her, but his brown hair was so dark it was almost black. "Do you know who that is?" Kate whispered to Morgan who shook her head.

The last of the coaches filtered in and took their seats. Several other staff members lined the walls as well, including Sienna. Kate took her seat at the table and waited for whatever announcement was about to be made.

The man turned and Kate blinked. His eyes were strikingly blue where the rest of his coloring was so dark. Several women in the room sighed. Trina might have moaned.

"Today is an exciting day," Will said to the room. "Our sponsors are here and will get a VIP tour of the facilities, starting in thirty minutes, before going into the locker room to meet the players. I expect each of you to stop and talk to them when we meet up for brunch in the corporate boxes before the light practice and drills we will run for the media. Morgan and Trina are here today to direct you to your interviews after the practice. Now, I bet you're all wondering who is with me today."

The man gave a slight nod of his head to the roomful of people, but didn't jump in.

“As you know, several teams have secured sponsorships with online gambling sites for in-stadium retail centers where fans can bet, watch the game, get a drink, and talk to fellow sports bettors. Today, the Lexington Thoroughbreds will join those ranks. We have signed a deal with Nico Saccone for the Sacc1 Sportsbook Lounge. Mr. Saccone, the owner of the company, is here today to help me announce our partnership. Everyone, welcome Nico to the Thoroughbreds family.”

The room clapped and with the announcement over, some people left, some mingled around, and Kate got up, ready to leave. However, Morgan was talking to Nico so Kate made her way to meet the newest sponsor.

“I’m glad Sebastian suggested me,” Morgan was saying. “I’m mostly retired, but since you’re practically family I can take a look and see what I can do for this campaign. Oh, Nico, I want you to meet Kate Ellington. She’s the new passing game coordinator and quarterback coach. Kate, this is Nico Saccone of New York. He’s friends with my nephew by marriage, Sebastian Abel, and also friends with my nephew in South Carolina, Ryker Faulkner.”

Kate held out her hand. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“You too. Congratulations on your new job.” Nico shook her hand and while the man was gorgeous and a bit mysterious, she didn’t get the same excitement she got as when she talked to Landon last night.

“Thank you. I’m hopeful we’ll have a great year ahead of us.”

Morgan smiled at them, but then turned to Nico “Kate and I have some things to cover before the chaos of media day begins. Let’s meet tomorrow to go over the account.”

“I look forward to it.”

Morgan led Kate from the room and instantly began the rundown on who was who in the sponsors she was about to meet. “There will be a photographer and a videographer with you as you meet the sponsors. We use this for PR. There are the big ones like Nico, the car company, the airline reps,

BroBar Energy and Protein Supplements, and Rich Brauen Beer. Then the next tier we have River and Elm Clothing, a regional grocery store, and a shipping company. Then the lower tier is more local brands. Here's a list of them all and the names of their reps or owners in attendance today." Morgan handed her a folder that Kate skimmed through. She liked to pay attention to the local brands more than the big, national or regional ones. They had enough people sucking up to them and plenty of discretionary money to spend. But the local companies were usually laying a lot on the line for these sponsorships.

Kate rolled her eyes. "BroBar Energy? Ugh, they have the most annoying commercials. Do I have to be nice?"

Morgan snickered. "Yes. The owner's son, Brayden, who is also a co-owner of the company, is in charge of corporate sponsorships. He'll be here today."

"Sports Queen Clothing?" Kate asked as she caught the name of one of the smaller sponsors.

"Yes, the owner is local. Shonda makes sports uniforms and sports clothing for women and girls. She's poised to go bigger, but can't get the attention needed to get her name out. She was hoping this would work."

"What does she get for her sponsorship?" Kate asked.

"Four pop-up style shops near the women's restrooms to sell her licensed Thoroughbreds gear for women and also her general sports clothing. Plus, she is allowed pictures of all the women's sports uniforms she's designed. She's just not allowed to promote or sell anything for any competitors."

"Well, Shonda I want to meet."

"I'll get you away from the big spenders and over to Shonda as quickly as possible."

Kate finished looking over the thick binder of information on sponsors and media dos and don'ts from Morgan with no time to spare. Kate followed the line of coaches into the corporate suites that were opened to spoil the sponsors. Private

chefs were on hand, along with multiple bartenders, to cater to everyone there.

Kate stood along the wall as Will welcomed everyone. He talked about them being a team and part of the family. It was a theme she noticed. She also noticed Prince Mo was not in attendance at any of these public events. He truly was a silent owner. Then Trey spoke of their upcoming year, gave an update on the players, and then all eyes turned to her as he proudly introduced her.

Kate smiled and nodded to the room before Trey went back to talking about their season and how the sponsors would be able to watch the media practice up here in the suites. Finally, the speeches were over and the mingling began.

“Coach! We need to get you some gear. Anything you want from the store is yours.” A man around her age with “preppy” practically stamped on him from his salmon-colored shorts to his lavender polo with an elm leaf emblem over the chest. His smile was easy going as he held out his hand.

“You must be Kev Rivers with River and Elm Clothing,” Kate said smoothly as she held out her hand to shake his. She’d never shopped there. She couldn’t afford the \$200 T-shirts they sold. Nevertheless, the \$400 casual dresses. She guessed she could now, but she liked her workout clothes just fine. “I love your clothing.”

“Then let’s get you hooked up. I must admit I wasn’t expecting someone so pretty. You hear female football coach and you think of a bulldog of a woman to work with these guys. Can’t wait to talk to your agent about a print ad with you in it.”

Kate plastered on a smile and kept her voice carefully neutral. “Thank you. I’m sure Morgan and Trina can organize everything after my agent works out the details since it’ll be a team affiliation.” You asshole. She was proud of herself for not saying that last part out loud. Unfortunately, schmoozing sponsors was all part of the job.

The names came fast, in a constant stream of meet and greets. The car company promised her a car if they made it to

the championship. Several of the companies wanted to meet to discuss her doing ads for them, which would also be nice for Kate, from a financial standpoint, as it would provide income outside of her team salary.

“Kate,” Owen Clarkson, the head of corporate sponsors for the team, called out as he brought several men over to meet her. “I want you to meet some friends of mine. This is Brayden Brothers of BroBar Energy. I went to school with his father. We’re fraternity brothers.”

Kate shook Brayden’s hand. He was everything you expected from a company that catered to men and featured scantily clad women in all their commercials. However, they were raking it in. The company was thriving. And Kate had to hand it to Brayden. According to the news, he’d built the company from the ground up—on, of course a foundation of unlimited funds from his father who was listed as the owner for his financial contribution.

“How do you do?” Kate said, trying to keep an open mind.

“Whoa. You could be in our commercials.” Brayden raked his eyes over her body in a way that was clear he only thought of her as a body and not a person.

Morgan stepped forward. “Kate, this is Friedrich Werner, III of Rich Brauen Beer.” Morgan smoothly turned the conversation to the other young man with Owen.

“Call me Tripp. Friedrich is my father and grandfather. It’s nice to meet you.”

Kate relaxed. Tripp seemed nice and professional. “You, too.”

“Are you excited about this new step in your career?” Tripp asked.

“I am. We have a great team this year and it’s an honor to be working with them, from Owen all the way to Janice in the front office. Then there are the great talents I have at quarterback. Jordan has years of experience and Knox, who is young and hungry. We can’t go wrong.”

“Excellent. One of the perks of being a sponsor is the suite. I can’t wait to bring clients to watch the games.”

“And party,” Brayden said as if he was already drunk.

Morgan stepped in again and introduced the regional grocery store chain president. Brayden was downing vodka mixed with BroG, their Bro brand energy drink. Kate stepped away under the guise of talking to Trey about practice, but Brayden reached out and took hold of her arm.

“You can’t go yet. We’re having too much fun.”

Kate wanted to kick the man in the balls, but this man represented a multimillion-dollar sponsorship for the team. Morgan was talking to the exec of the car company and Owen seemed oblivious to the fact that this behavior was not okay.

“Coach Ellington,” the smooth New York accent from Nico Saccone said as he stepped up next to her. His eyes flicked to where Brayden had a hand on her and then to Brayden. “I believe you’re needed over there.”

“Bro,” Brayden said, half drunk. “Read the room. It’s time to relax. Katie and I were having a bit of fun.”

Nico’s eyes narrowed and Kate shivered. “Coach Ellington has a job to do today. Excuse us.”

“Who do you think you are, bro?” Brayden asked, his voice rising enough to get Owen’s attention. Owen assessed the situation in an instant and then he was walking over quickly, a smile on his face.

“Mr. Saccone, do you need a word with Coach Ellington?” Owen asked as if he had just realized Nico was there.

“I’m talking to Katie. He can wait his turn. Doesn’t he know who I am?” Brayden’s words were slightly slurred and Kate wanted to die of humiliation as more and more people turned their attention to them. This was not how she wanted to make an impression.

The smile Nico gave was more of a snarl mixed with a sneer. “You obviously don’t know who I am or you’d be pissing your pants. Let go of her now or find out.” The threat

was delivered quietly so no one heard it except for Brayden and Owen.

“Look at the time!” Owen said loudly as he motioned for one of his staff to open the doors to the connecting suite. “It’s time for some team spirit.” The doors opened and the team’s cheerleaders came running in. Brayden dropped his grip as Owen led him toward the poor women.

“Thank you. You didn’t have to do that,” Kate said as the excitement in the room ramped up.

“It’s not often I get to be the white knight. Have a good rest of the day, Coach Ellington.”

Nico gave her a smile and walked away as Morgan brought Shonda over. Finally, a conversation she was excited to have.

Kate was fuming by the time she left the field after practice. Jordan hadn't listened to any of her coaching. Then he'd refused to leave the field when she'd wanted to put in Knox.

"You need to get him under control or the other men will start to believe you don't have any power as their coach," Coach Samson, the offensive coordinator, told her as they walked back through the tunnel to begin media interviews.

"I know. The thing is, Jordan has enough left in the arm to make a comeback if he would just let me coach him."

Coach Samson stopped outside the locker room door and looked down at her. "They said you were good, Ellington. When the front office told us they wanted to interview you, I looked into you. I agree with you on your assessment of Jordan. Let's see what you can do. You won't have any interference from me. Pick your QB."

"Thanks for trusting me, Coach."

Kate waited outside the locker room as the men got dressed. Media were set up outside on the field, talking to some of the coaches. The players were showering up and putting on clean jerseys before heading out to talk to them. Knox was the first QB out of the locker room and Kate pulled him to the side.

"Yes, Coach?"

"I promise you one hundred percent honesty. I never want you to wonder what I'm thinking or planning. Jordan is on his

way out, but the door hasn't closed yet. You're on your way in, but you're not through that door yet. I want to give Jordan a chance to work with me so I can give him one good final year. However, it's up to Jordan."

Knox didn't hide his disappointment. "Jordan's been an ass since his injury."

"Yes, but you'd want the same opportunity to go out on top, wouldn't you?"

Knox sighed. "Yeah. But what about me?"

"Oh, don't think you'll be twiddling your fingers. I'm going to throw more things at you than you can count because next year we aren't going for rookie of the year. We're going for player of the year. And if you work with me, you'll be ready."

"I've wanted nothing more than to work with you, Coach."

Kate smiled. "Good. Because we all know Jordan could just quit or be injured again. You'll be ready if he does. But, the idea is that next year we'll catch them all by surprise. It's going to be fun. If you think what you did in college or even at the end of last season was something, just wait until I show you what you're capable of."

"I won't pretend it doesn't suck, but I understand where you're coming from. I appreciate you giving it to me straight." Knox wasn't smiling, but he wasn't sulking either as he walked out onto the field.

Jordan came out a few minutes later. "Can we talk for a minute?" Kate asked him when it wasn't really a question.

"No time."

"I think you'll want to hear what I have to say." Kate didn't chase after Jordan as he walked away from her. He stopped and slowly turned.

"Lady, I don't give two shits what you have to say."

Kate shrugged. "Suit yourself. I was going to tell you that I think you have another year left in you as a starter and wanted to see if you were brave enough to put in the work to make it

your best year yet. But since you don't care to listen to me, I'll bench you and start Knox."

"Samson won't let you," Jordan said, but she could see his mind going over what she'd just said.

"Actually, he just gave me complete control over the QBs. Complete. Want to hear what I have to say now?"

Jordan looked pissed, but he walked over to her as other players headed out to the field. "So, talk."

Oh, the delicate egos of elite athletes. "I'm telling you the same thing I told Knox. I will be one hundred percent honest with you. You are not the player you were ten years ago. You're not as strong and you're not as quick." Jordan's jaw tightened. "But you are smarter. You've learned to stay in the pocket and pick apart the defense to make smart plays—when you don't let your ego get in the way."

"Is that a compliment or an insult?"

Kate smiled a little. "Both. You're your own biggest obstacle, Jordan. You want all the glory and believe you need to pass for five thousand yards a season to get it. The trouble is, sure, you're passing for two hundred plus yards a game, but your interception rate is one of the highest in the country because you're forcing throws. I want to start a new workout regimen with you and I want to study film with you. Play smarter, not harder. I want the commentators to see you as the unflappable leader of the team who is not afraid to make the hard pass or know when to hand it off for the run."

"You think this is my last season, don't you?" Jordan asked seriously. He wasn't angry now. He was listening.

Kate wasn't about to stop pulling punches now. "I do and I think you know it is, too. But if you work with me, we'll have one hell of a year, send you out on top, and let your agent make you a ton of money on endorsements to set you up for life."

Jordan was quiet for a moment. "I don't accept it's my last season. I'll do me. You do you."

“Then you’ll ride the bench,” Kate called out as Jordan turned to walk away. “My office, tomorrow morning. Just listen to what I have to say and then make up your mind about me.”

“Fine.” Jordan stalked off to do press as Morgan joined her in the hallway.

“Your exclusive is all set up on the field. I need to warn you, this will not be a fluff piece. Be on guard for anything,” Morgan told her.

“I thought my exclusive was with the Keeneston Journal.”

“It is.” Morgan turned and smiled at the woman holding a notebook and a tape recorder. She was maybe five years younger than Morgan and looked sweet as could be.

“Kate Ellington, meet Gemma Davies of the Keeneston Journal,” Morgan introduced after hugging the woman. “And my sister-in-law.”

“I’m beginning to think the entire population of Keeneston is made up of people in the Davies family.” Kate held up a piece of the apple pie. “I guess you know this pie then.”

“Oh, aren’t you clever?” Gemma took a bite and moaned. “You wouldn’t believe what people will do or say for a piece of this pie. Now, let’s get some photos, then we’ll get to the good stuff.”

“It’s funny, your name is the same as this author I’ve read. Great books,” Kate said to Gemma before she posed and smiled as a pretty blonde snapped pictures as if it were a fashion shoot. However, the way the photographer directed her, Kate was excited to see how they came out. They had to be better than the mug shot type photo most sports journalists got of her.

“Thank you,” Kate said once they were finished. “I’m Kate.”

The woman shook her hand. “Sydney McKnight.”

“Wow, not a Davies,” Kate said with a laugh.

Sydney, Gemma, and Morgan shared a look, but didn't say anything as Gemma got down to business. The questions came fast and hard. They weren't fluff. There were stats, hopes, dreams, realistic expectations, and what it was like as a woman in a male dominated field. They tackled sexism, if she felt she needed to play football to be able to coach it, and whether other coaches felt she was stepping on their toes as she climbed the ladder to the top. "You have to admit, you've made it to the pros earlier than a lot of men. Do you think you were promoted quicker because of your sex?"

"You mean despite my sex?" Kate questioned.

"No, because of it." Gemma wasn't pulling punches. "It's good optics to have a woman on the sidelines."

"It's better optics to have wins. If I were a man with my record, I would have been hired too. I'm proud of being a woman in this field, but I'm prouder of my record."

Gemma scribbled some things down. Sydney smiled at her as Kate waited for the next question. "Just a few more questions," Gemma said. "Are you single or married?"

"Do you ask the men that?" Kate asked.

"I ask everyone that," Gemma said seriously.

"She does," Sydney piped in.

"I don't think it's relevant, but I'm single."

"It must be hard to date. Do you tend to date athletes? What's your type?"

"We're done." Kate stood up.

Gemma set down her pen and turned off the recorder. "Off the record? Just making small talk. My sons just got married so love is in the air in Keeneston."

"Off the record?" Kate asked again. She didn't want to be portrayed as needing a man in the article.

"Gemma?" Morgan asked, crossing her arms and glaring at her.

“Off the record. It will not appear in print anywhere. Just a little getting to know our newest resident.”

“I don’t have time to date. I’m usually working late. I will never date anyone in the program. That could cause all kinds of ethical issues,” Kate said, standing up and looking down the long line of quickie interviews she still had ahead of her. It was like speed dating and it was exhausting.

“My daughter is thinking about having a second child. My husband was a badass,” Gemma said before Kate could cut her off.

“Was? I think Cy will have something to say about that past tense,” Sydney laughed.

“I can’t let him get a big head, now can I?” Gemma asked with a hint of mischief. “Anyway, this badass turns into a teddy bear with his kids and grandkids.”

“That’s sweet,” Kate said as Gemma showed Kate a photo of her husband and a baby. “Jeez, that’s your husband? I think Sydney is right. He is still very much a badass. Those muscles and shaved head—he looks like he could break a person in half.”

“Just all those bones in their body. Is that the kind of guy you like?”

“Or maybe like my husband, Miles,” Morgan said, turning a photo of who Kate guessed was her husband also holding a baby. “Miles owns his own company. He’s our Mr. CEO.”

The suit Miles was wearing shouted big boss vibes. But he was also incredibly fit for someone that age. “Do they work out together or something?”

“They do. All the Davies brothers do and now many of our kids do as well. So many of them are in jobs that require strength,” Morgan said. “Military, law enforcement, like that kind of thing. But then my daughter is a physical therapist. What kind of profession do you see your man being in?”

“I never gave it any thought. They’d just need to support mine and I’d support theirs. Military would be hard though.

With my travel schedule and theirs, we might never see each other.”

“That’s so true,” Gemma said as she packed up her things. “Well, I hope someone nice, with late work hours that match yours, shows up in Keeneston. And hopefully knows how to cook!”

Kate froze. Were they talking about Landon? No? They couldn’t know he drove her home or that for the first time in so very long she’d been tempted by a man. “Cook?”

“Honey, what woman doesn’t want a man who can cook?” Gemma asked rhetorically. “Well, I look forward to seeing you around. Speaking of cooking, you have to try the Blossom Café. It was great meeting you.”

“I’ll email you any good photos if you’d like,” Sydney said as Gemma turned to talk to Morgan.

“Thanks, Sydney. I can’t wait to see them. This wasn’t the typical mug shot that other photographers take.” Kate then turned to the group and smiled at them. “It was nice meeting you both.” Kate shook their hands and then Morgan was directing her to the long line of media. Ugh. Kate summoned up a serene smile and started down the press gauntlet. Here goes nothing.

Kate was exhausted by the time she finished media day. She just wanted to get her stuff from her office, call a taxi, and go home. She'd had to smile and pretend it was okay for reporters to comment on her looks and to question her ability as a coach because of her sex. She corrected the bias, but had to do it with a smile even though she wanted to pick up the stool she was sitting on and beat them with it.

Morgan stepped in halfway through and started redirecting the questions. When Gemma had asked them, it was in terms of a true discussion about sex in a male dominated field. It was to showcase Kate and encourage other women wanting to get into professional sports. When these guys asked it, it was disparaging. Now, a few of them hadn't been, but those questions were few and far between.

“Kate!”

Kate turned on the way toward her office at Will's call. “Yes?”

“I just got a call from Ava,” Will said as if Kate should know who Ava was. When she raised an eyebrow in confusion, Will clarified. “She's a doctor from Keeneston but works most of the time in Lexington. She's one of the chairs of an upcoming gala benefiting the children's hospital. Turns out one of the patients there is your biggest fan and saw you on the news today.”

Any weariness and irritability left over from the long day vanished. “I can stop by if they'll let me.”

“That’s just it. Ava is hosting the gala this Friday and the children have been decorating their halls for all the big donors and celebrity guests coming. Ava wanted to invite you to come for a tour of the hospital beforehand and then to attend the gala. Ava thought it would be a great surprise for the little girl to meet you.”

“Of course. It would be an honor to meet the kids there.” She had done some hospital visits with her college teams and had always left completely in awe of their strength.

“Great. Ava will drop off two tickets with Janice for you tomorrow.”

Kate stopped and blinked. “Two? There’s just me.”

“I was hoping you could bring someone. Just not a player. Most are going anyway, but that wouldn’t be good optics.”

“I don’t know anyone yet,” Kate protested even as she thought of Landon. She couldn’t ask him, could she?

“Sorry, my son is married or I’d offer him up. It’s just a thought so we can get away from these stupid questions about you dating players.” Will was visibly annoyed as he said it.

Kate knew the feeling. “You got asked those too?”

“They’d never ask that if you’d been a man. My wife would have had their head if they’d asked her the same questions.”

“I’ll find someone. That’s actually a good idea to put those questions to rest. Maybe then they’ll finally focus on my ability to do my job.”

“Then they’ll just second guess every call you make.” Will chuckled, as did Kate, even though they both knew it was a fact. “I heard from Morgan that you did a good job today. Go home and get some rest.”

Kate said goodnight and walked the rest of the way to her office. She opened her door and heard the crinkle of paper. She looked down and saw that she had stepped on a piece of paper.

Our discussion isn’t over. I’ll be in touch.

A chill raced through Kate and froze her to the spot. The person who had attacked her had been here. He'd been in her office. How was that possible?

“Coach? Coach Ellington?” Rigid, Kate turned to face Janice. She didn't think she could talk right now. “Your car is here. It's in your spot.”

Kate nodded and turned back around, leaving the woman to shut the door as she left. Kate's hands shook with a mixture of fear and anger. She had a big problem and she didn't know how to handle it.

Landon pulled Kate's car into her parking spot and called the front office. They told him Kate would be notified that her car was ready. Landon had wanted to get the car to her earlier today, but he'd gotten swamped with lunch and then the dinner rush. Luckily, Kate's day was just as long as his and he hadn't missed her by the time he could get away for the night.

The door opened to the parking lot and Landon pushed off against the car to greet Kate only to see it was his friend, Knox. Knox looked up with surprise. Landon wasn't usually around the stadium like some of the others from Keeneston.

“Hey, Landon. What are you doing here?”

“Kate got a flat tire at my restaurant the other night. I got it changed and brought it back for her.” Landon's eyes kept going to the door even when he was trying to pay attention to Knox.

“Kate, is it? I'd heard that you'd driven her home after the coaches' dinner.” Knox's tone was clearly suggestive in a teasing way. “And now you're waiting for her.”

“And?” Landon didn't know why, but he wasn't in a joking mood. Other dates he didn't mind his friends teasing him about, but there wasn't anything funny about his feelings for Kate. He liked her even though he knew the timing couldn't be worse for both of them. That and he just couldn't get that kiss off his mind or the feeling of it from his lips.

Knox noted the tone and just smiled as he pulled out his phone. A second later, Landon's pinged with a message. Landon already knew what it was. A bet had been placed at the Blossom Café. Landon looked at it and his eyebrows rose. "You bet on Kate and me getting married in two weeks?"

"I've known you my whole life. You've never been serious about a woman. Never. Sure, you dated some, even for a couple of months, here and there. But there was never any real emotional attachment to them besides liking them. You told me more with that one word than all the conversations we've had about past girlfriends put together. You like Kate and you like her a lot. Am I wrong?"

"You'll just place a bet on anything I say." Landon crossed his arms and glared at his friend.

"I already placed my bet. So, what's going on?"

Landon glanced at the door again before answering. "I like her. She's tough. She's smart. She's sarcastic. I don't know. We just seemed to get along really well. I've only just met her. It's too early to say, but I know I'd like to spend more time with her. I also know she doesn't have much time to spend and neither do I, so it's kind of over before it could begin."

"Yeah, and none of your family has ever found the right person when timing was off," Knox said sarcastically. The door opened and they both looked back to see Kate. "When it's the one, it's The One. I think your family is proof that love can overcome any kind of bad timing. Or terrorist attacks," Knox whispered with a grin.

"Landon?" Kate asked with surprise. "I thought you were having the car dropped off."

"Hey, Coach," Knox said, turning a not-so-innocent smile on Kate. "I'm so glad you're here. Landon needs a ride home since he brought your car. I can't take him as I'm not going home right away. Could you do me a solid and drive him home?"

Landon glared at Knox. His car was at the restaurant. He only needed a ride there.

“Oh, of course. I’m sorry, I’m kinda tired and didn’t think about that.”

“I don’t know about you two, but after a long day like today, I’m starving.” Knox grinned at Landon and winked.

“I am too. I was going to grab fast food on the way home,” Kate said as she joined them by the car.

“You should try the Blossom Café.” Landon was going to kill Knox. He loved him, but he was going to kill him with his bare hands, any minute now.

“You’re not the first person to tell me that. Do they have takeout?” Kate asked Knox.

“They do,” Landon answered instead of letting Knox keep control of this conversation. Landon pulled out his phone and sent a quick text to Zinnia, the cook at the café, and placed an order to pick up.

“See you tomorrow, Coach. Landon.” Knox strode off as if he didn’t just completely interfere in Landon and Kate’s love lives.

Landon looked down at Kate and frowned. There was having a long day, then there was the way Kate looked right now. “What happened?”

Kate’s eyes went wide. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, something bad happened. I can tell.” Landon felt fiercely protective when Kate seemed to deflate before him. It was instinctive to wrap his arms around her and pull her against his chest. Landon held her there, stroking her hair, soothing her until he felt her relax into him. Then he felt her begin to shake.

“I’m sorry,” she said, pulling away and wiping at her tears. “They’re tears of anger more than anything.”

Landon walked her around the car and opened the passenger door. “I’ll drive you home while you tell me what happened.”

“I want your grandmother’s pie, but I gave it all away to make the horrible media people like me,” Kate sniffed.

“Did it work?” Landon asked as he got into the car.

“For the most part. But some of them were just assholes.”

“Is that why you’re upset?” Landon asked as he drove out of the stadium parking lot.

“That was annoying,” Kate took a deep breath and told him about her day and about the reporters. “But when I got to my office, I found a note from the person who attacked me.”

Landon almost slammed on the brakes. “He was in your office?” Rage filled him at the idea of her being in danger.

“I guess he was. That’s what has me so mad. This should be the most exciting time of my life and this asshole is trying to ruin it.”

“Kate,” Landon looked at her quickly before turning back to the road. “I know we don’t know each other well, but you can trust me. Let me help you. What happened the other night at my restaurant?”

Kate let out a long sigh. “If this gets out, my career is over. I’ve worked so hard to get to where I am. One little accusation and it’s over, regardless of its truth.”

“I won’t say anything unless you want me to. Or unless your life is in danger. I promise.” Landon held his breath, hoping Kate would trust him enough to tell him what was really going on.

“The man who approached me wants me to rig the bets against the Thoroughbreds.” Landon cursed. “Exactly. Online betting is huge and if anyone found out that someone even approached me on this, if we lose a game or win by too much, suddenly everyone would be accusing me. Saying I threw the game since it’s my job to call the plays.”

“Do you have any idea who it could be?” Landon asked.

“No, and that’s frustrating too. I told him that I wouldn’t do it, but he obviously hasn’t given up.”

“I know you don’t want to hear this, but you need to talk to my cousin.”

Kate laughed and Landon looked at her with confusion. “How many cousins do you have?” Kate asked and Landon cracked a smile.

“A lot,” he said with a chuckle.

“I guess I’ll get to meet them all at your grandma’s dinner.”

“About that, do you happen to know how to shoot?” Landon asked as casually as he could.

“Funny, Sienna asked me the same thing. You do realize I’m from Texas, right? I just don’t know what that has to do with Sunday dinner.”

“That’s good. Now, back to my cousin. I was thinking, with your permission, of talking to my cousin Ryan. He’s Sienna’s husband and the head of the local FBI. You can trust him.”

Kate slumped back in the seat and stared out the window. “I’ll think about it. I really like Sienna. But if I tell Ryan, he’ll tell Sienna, she’ll tell her father, and then I’ll be fired even though I didn’t do anything.”

Landon pulled around to the back of the café, noticing Kate didn’t even pay attention to where they were. “I don’t know how much this matters to you, but I trust Ryan with my life. He and Sienna are very familiar with confidentiality. You can trust him. You can also trust Will and Trey. They will believe you if you go to them sooner rather than later. If you wait too long, then by not telling them it could look bad.”

Kate was quiet and Landon knew she needed a moment to think about it. “I’ll be right back.”

It was only then that Kate looked around. “Where are we?”

“I’m picking up dinner from the café for us. I’m just coming in the back so I can get out in under an hour.”

Landon parked the car and got out to walk to the back door of the café. Like his restaurant, there was a back entrance to the kitchen. Landon walked in through the open door to find

Poppy standing with her back to him in the walk-in fridge doorway.

“Hey, Poppy.” Poppy and Zinnia were his age and had moved to Keeneston years ago to help out their elderly relatives, the Rose sisters. However, they fit into Keeneston as if they’d been born here.

Poppy started and when she jumped around, Landon saw tears in her eyes. Poppy quickly wiped them away and laughed. “Landon, you scared the jeepers out of me.”

“Are you okay, Poppy?” Landon had never seen Poppy sad before. She was perpetually little miss sunshine.

“I’m fine. I hit my toe and that can hurt so badly it steals your breath. Now, why are you sneaking in the back?”

“I have a to-go order to pick up.”

Poppy gasped. “She’s here, isn’t she?”

“Who?” Landon asked.

Poppy didn’t answer. She shoved past him and ran out the back door. Crap. Landon raced into the kitchen and saw the bag sitting on the counter. “Thanks Z!” Landon called out as he snagged the bag and set down money for the order.

“What’s going on?” Zinnia asked, but Landon was already running out the back.

He found Poppy with her head in the window and her butt sticking out as she leaned over and talked to Kate.

“Oh my gosh, you’re going to love Keeneston!” Poppy was saying.

“My own sister is trying to scoop me!” Zinnia shoved past Landon and hip checked Poppy out of the window. “Hi, Kate. I’m Zinnia. It’s such a pleasure to meet you. Everyone is talking about our newest resident.”

“And how sweet Landon is for showing you around,” Poppy said with her teeth gritted, but a big smile on her face, as she shoved her sister aside.

“Yes, Landon has been very kind.” Kate looked between the two sisters, pushing each other for prime window position.

“Ladies, thank you for dinner.” Landon cut in before the real interrogation could begin. He gently wedged himself past the sisters and pried open his door. “I’m sure Kate will be in soon for a meal. Thanks again for dinner.”

“Smells great. I look forward to talking to you more soon,” Kate called out as Landon inched his way out of the parking lot while the sisters yelled questions. “They’re very nice.”

“All of Keeneston is. We’re a big family here. They’ll drop everything to come help someone in need, whether they’ve asked for it or not. That’s why I know, with no doubt in my mind, that Ryan, Will, and Trey would help you.”

Kate was quiet for a moment as she held the to-go bag. “I’ll think about it.” Then she took a deep breath and sighed in contentment. “Oh, this smells great.”

“Bacon mac and cheese and two beer cheese smothered burgers.”

“Sounds like the perfect comfort food after a long day.” Kate leaned her head back and closed her eyes. Landon thought she was asleep until she asked, “Do you really trust Ryan not to say anything to anyone?”

“I do.”

Kate was quiet until he pulled up to her cottage. “Would you like to come in? My mind is racing and just being with you comforts me. Is that strange since we just met?”

“I don’t think so since I feel the same way.” Landon took the bag of food from her and followed her inside, his heart feeling a little fuller at her admission.

Kate set plates on the kitchen table. They ate with a little small talk, but mostly in comfortable silence between some moaning comments about how good the food was.

After dinner, Landon made two cups of tea and they moved to the couch. Kate seemed to be nervous as she sat down near him. Three of his closest cousins, Jace and the

twins, Porter and Parker, both had told him how hard and fast feelings for their wives had hit. That they just knew it was different with their wives than with past women—regardless of timing.

“I have a favor to ask,” Kate finally said as she scooted a little closer to him. Close enough for him to lay his arm over her shoulder and with the slightest of pressure, to see if she’d lean back against the side of his chest. When Kate melted into him, Landon felt victorious and completely awed that a woman like Kate might ever be interested in him.

“Anything. What is it?” Landon asked as his thumb drew light circles on her shoulder.

“Do you know a doctor named Ava?”

Not the direction Landon thought it was going. “Yes. Ava Miller. She’s from here and about to get married to Luke Tanner. He’s a sheriff’s deputy here. Why?”

“She told Will that one of the patients at the children’s hospital is a fan of mine. She invited me to tour the children’s hospital and meet her before going to the fundraising gala for the hospital afterward.”

Landon nodded. “Yes. I’m going to the gala. Most of us are. We tend to be a supportive lot, and since Ava is one of the main hosts of this year’s gala, she hit us all up to buy tables.”

He felt Kate relax even further. “Oh good. I hate to even ask since you’ve helped me so much already. I don’t want you to think I’m taking advantage of you, but I’m in a unique position right now that only makes me madder than a wet hen.”

“I’m assuming this is something different from the threats?” Landon asked, already tightening his touch on her as if he needed to protect her.

“I swear that I’m not high maintenance and look how bad this is already and now I’m asking another favor. My being single was brought up in many of today’s interviews. Along with the idea that I could disrupt the team because I might date

a player, which I never would. Will suggested I bring a non-football date with me to the gala.”

Kate took a deep breath, and Landon jumped in. He knew where this was going and he wanted her to know this wasn't an obligation. “So, you're going?”

“Yes, that's what I want to talk to you about.” Kate looked up at him and he smiled down at her face. He loved how her cheek fit perfectly in the crook of his shoulder.

“I'm so glad. I was planning on asking you if you wanted to be my date for the gala. I've really enjoyed spending time with you and I'd be honored if you'd accompany me.”

The shocked look on Kate's face made his smile widen further. “Wait, you were going to ask me? I was going to ask you.”

“So, that's a yes to the date?”

“A date? Like a date, date? Not a favor?” Kate was adorable in her surprise that he was interested in her. Timing be damned. He was going to go for it.

“Yes, like a real date where we get dressed up, eat some food, have a dance or two, and then where I nervously walk you to your door and see if I'm lucky enough to get another kiss.”

He felt Kate smile against his chest as she snuggled closer. “Happen to know where I can get a dress on short notice? I'm not really a girly girl and don't dress up much. I'm more comfortable in workout gear than heels.”

“I think I have an idea,” Landon told her as an idea formed.

Kate woke up to the sound of her phone's alarm. She was on her couch with her pillow under her head and a blanket over her. The last thing she remembered was snuggling with Landon on the couch as they watched a movie. Now the television was off and there was a note next to her phone on the small coffee table.

You looked too cute to move. Hope you dreamed of me. – L
P.S. – try to be home by 7:00. I have a surprise for you. Don't buy a dress today.

Kate felt butterflies as she read the note a second time. She hadn't expected to find someone she connected with so easily. And that was what it was. Easy. It was easy to talk to Landon. Easy to imagine a future with him. And easy to see herself lose her heart to him.

She needed to focus on her job, though. But Landon wasn't asking her not to. And her boss literally told her to get a date who wasn't on the team. Landon checked that box. That Keeneston Journal reporter had said she hoped Kate found someone nice. Landon also checked that box. And, judging by the meal she'd enjoyed at that first coaches' dinner, Landon definitely could cook, so he checked that box, too. Strange. It was like the universe was pointing a big arrow at Landon Davies to tell her he was The One. She worked with a lot of

diagrams and arrows herself. Maybe she should pay attention to this one. Later. Now she had a bitchy quarterback to handle.



Kate had been sound asleep at five in the morning, so Landon had tucked a blanket around her and snuck out of the house. The smell of dewy grass, the sound of horses munching on grass, and the distant sounds of workers getting the horses ready for training filled the quiet of the morning.

Landon knew his brother-in-law, Nash, worked out at the private gym on the farm at this time and was hoping to ask for a ride into town to get his car. The stroll through the farm went by in a blur as he thought about how great it felt to have slept with Kate in his arms. It was funny how everything was the same, yet one night and everything had changed.

Landon waved at the camera to the security center and was buzzed in. Nash was the second-in-command for the royal family's security, but all the soldiers on Desert Sun Farm knew the people from town and had orders to let them in.

Landon walked down the stairs into the basement. In the basement were interrogation rooms, holding cells, locker rooms, and a gym. He heard the sound of fighting and pushed the door open. Nash and Dylan were sparring together in the boxing ring.

"Landon, what the hell are you doing here?" Dylan asked. The distraction let Nash land a punch to the face.

"You should know better than to let your guard down," Nash taunted the former Delta Force soldier who now ran a black ops group for the president.

Dylan spun quickly, but instead of a punch, he swept Nash's legs out from under him. "And you should know better than to think one hit equals a win. Now, what's going on, cuz?"

"I was hoping to get a ride into town. I left my car at the restaurant."

Nash and Dylan looked at each other and then back to Landon. “So, how did you end up here at five in the morning?”

“I walked through the door.” Landon could withstand an interrogation just like the rest of them.

“I’ll fight you for it,” Nash said, crossing his arms over his chest. “I win, you spill it all and I drive you to your car. You win and I’ll still drive you to your car, but I won’t ask you about it and I won’t tell everyone else about the fact you showed up here this morning needing a ride.”

Crap. Nash was a super soldier just like Dylan. There would be no winning. But there’d be no peace either if he backed out. “Deal.” Landon kicked off his shoes and yanked his shirt off over his head. “Let’s get this over with.”

“Remember, you trained with your Special Forces dad and uncles just like I did. Come on, Land,” Dylan cheered as he leaned against the ropes and helped Landon tie the gloves on.

Landon got ready to have his bell rung when the door flew open. Landon turned to look, but Dylan and Nash jumped as if ready to take someone down only to relax when they saw who it was. Colton stormed into the room, looking pissed.

“You asshole!” Colton pointed at Landon.

“What did I do?” Landon asked, surprised to see his brother here and to see him so angry. Most of the time the two got along like the best friends they were.

“Get out of the way, Nash. He’s mine.” Colton hopped into the ring as Nash stepped back. Dylan helped Colton with gloves as Landon was left standing there wondering what had pissed off his brother.

“How did you know I was here?” Landon asked. “And why are you mad?”

“Draven posted a picture of him doing something naked and weird with his sword and I saw you in the background. And you know what you did, brother of mine. You ratted me out!” Colton yelled as he slammed his now gloved hands together.

“Ratted what out to who?” Landon had no idea where his brother was going with this when Colton threw the first punch.

Now, Landon might not stand a chance against Nash or Dylan, but he’d been going head-to-head with Colton since he was born. They were evenly matched, which meant it was anyone’s win.

“You told Grandma Marcy about the girl I sometimes see in Lexington.”

“Oh. That,” Landon said as they both connected a punch at the same time.

“Yeah, oh, that. Grandma hunted her down and invited her to family dinner.”

Landon ducked a punch and landed an uppercut. “How did she do that? I don’t even know her name.”

“You don’t know it because it’s not serious! But now Raelynn thinks we should be exclusive. I have to break up with her all because of you!”

Colton charged and down they went. They rolled across the ring as they fought to get a lock on the other. Colton landed a knee to Landon’s side, but Landon managed to get Colton into an arm bar.

“Grandma was trying to set you up with Kate and I couldn’t let that happen. I didn’t think she’d actually find your mystery hookup,” Landon said between gritted teeth as he hung on for dear life.

“Oh, don’t worry. I will be sure to pass along to Grandma this morning when I call to let her know Raelynn and I broke up and how you spent the night here on the farm. Knox told us about how you and Kate left the stadium together yesterday. I wouldn’t be surprised if Grandma hasn’t already called Father Ben.” Colton was taunting him as he worked to break the hold.

Landon made a grunting sound of surprise as he realized that Grandma calling the priest wasn’t freaking him out.

“Huh? That’s all you have to say?” Colton took advantage of Landon’s realization that a serious relationship with Kate

wasn't sending him running by breaking the hold and pinning Colton to the ring. "You like her!"

"I thought that much was obvious," Landon said as Colton's forearm pressed against his throat.

"No, I mean you *like* her. Dad will be thrilled. A football coach for a daughter-in-law."

"No one is talking about marriage," Landon said, shoving his brother off him.

"Yeah, but you're not denying it either." Colton rolled off Landon and sprang to his feet. "This just sucks."

"Why?" Nash asked as Colton held out his hands to have the gloves taken off.

"Because now I'll be the sole focus of Mom. I'll be the only one without a wife, without giving her grandkids, blah, blah, blah."

"Don't worry," Dylan said. "You'll never be the last Davies. My little sister Cricket will probably outlast you. Maybe."

"She's a toddler," Colton said dryly.

"You're right. You better get a move on or you really will be the last of the Davies to get married," Dylan teased.

"How's Abby?" Landon asked Dylan about his very pregnant wife.

"Poppy and Zinnia are pissed. She's missed her due date and bets have been screwed up. Ahmed slept in my living room last night. Abby had to pee every two hours last night, but is so big she's having trouble getting out of bed so she wakes me up and I help her up. I'm exhausted. She's exhausted. Ahmed is exhausted. You see a theme?"

"But the baby is okay? And Abby's okay?" Landon asked with a bit of worry.

Dylan nodded. "Jace looked Abby over yesterday. Ultrasound shows the baby is fine, just not ready. And besides

feeling like a beached whale—Abby’s words, not mine—medically she’s doing great.”

“Good. Call us if you need us,” Landon told his cousin as Dylan and Nash got back into the ring.

“You know your sister is going to be an issue,” Nash called out as Landon pulled on his shirt.

“Sophie? What will her issue be?” Landon asked.

“At family dinner. You’re her little brother. You know how protective she is of you two.” Nash was right. Sophie was going to be ten times harder on Kate than anyone else.

Colton burst out laughing. “Serves you right after throwing me under the bus.”

“But we’re not dating yet. When the other wives went through the family dinner, there was a relationship there. There was something worth fighting for.”

“You’re worried she doesn’t feel anything for you?” Colton asked, no longer sounding like the teasing older brother.

“Yes. No. I don’t know. That’s the point. I know I like her, but she just moved here, has started a stressful job, and . . . stuff.” Landon wouldn’t spill Kate’s secrets, even to his own brother. “Moving, trying to get a team’s respect, it’s a lot. I can’t imagine throwing in a family dinner with someone you just met would go over well. Especially when it’s *our* family dinner.”

“Then you better get to know her quickly, because Sophie just saw Draven’s post. It wasn’t the ball-jazzling that got her attention either. It was you walking from Kate’s house at five in the morning.” Nash held up his phone where a text from Landon’s sister was in all caps asking who the hell Kate Ellington was.

Landon groaned. He should have known better than to think he’d have some time to get to know Kate before his family found out.

Kate loved the technology in her office. She had all four screens up and showing Jordan what he did well and what he needed to work on.

“See, you don’t get full rotation here. I talked to Dr. Davies and he suggested a Dr. Layne Greene to work with you. She’ll even come here.”

“What kind of doctor?” Jordan asked a little hesitantly.

“Physical Therapy. If you approve, we’ll get an appointment set up. Dr. Davies knows her.”

“He should. They’re cousins,” Trey said from the door to her office.

“Of course they are,” Kate’s sarcasm won a smile from Jordan.

“Hey, Coach. You need me?” Jordan asked.

“I’ve talked to the staff, and while Coach Ellington is behind you starting, I want to talk to you both about it.”

Kate saw Jordan shut down. His whole demeanor changed.

“I want to make sure you’re serious about following Coach Ellington’s plans. She’s gone over them with me and they’re optimistic at best. It’s not my job to make sure your feelings aren’t hurt. It’s my job to win. While Samson gave her the call for starting QB, I’m telling you that you have to win me over. The buck stops with me. I won’t put you on that field unless you’re ready and able to give us a hundred percent.”

Kate wanted to punch her boss. She'd worked hard all morning showing Jordan she knew what she was talking about. He'd begun to believe her and she'd seen a spark of hope that pushed the arrogance down enough for him to listen to her. Now she saw those walls fly back up.

"Let's see how you're doing in a team scrimmage. Then we can make it official."

Trey left the room and Kate debated running after him and giving him a piece of her mind, but instead she turned to Jordan. "I'll call the physical therapist and see if she can work you in every day from now until then. When you're not with her, you're training, watching film, going over the analytics, and working with me. Then we'll show him that you're more than ready."

Surprise lit Jordan's face. "You really want me to start? It would be so easy if you hand it over to the golden boy."

"I told you I'd be honest with you. Knox did a good job filling in those last couple of games for you, but he's not ready. He's damn close though. I have faith in both of you. I know both of you have potential. However, you have potential now. Knox has it in the future, which I have explained to him. So, Jordan. The question is: are you ready to work harder than you've ever worked?"

Jordan was quiet for a moment. He seemed to stare her down as if trying to determine if she was being honest with him. Kate met his stare with calm assurance. She knew what she was capable of and she knew what he was capable of, too. He had one more good year in him and she wanted him to have it.

"Call the therapist, Coach."

"Done." Jordan stood up, but Kate stopped him, adding, "I have a favor to ask you."

"Me?"

Kate nodded. "You're the captain of the team. As a leader, it's your job to encourage all the players. I want you to put your ego aside for the year. Think of the team before yourself."

I promise you. I'll work with your agent to make sure you're taken care of off the field. But here and in interviews, it's about the team. You motivate them with hard work and encourage them to join you. You lead and they will follow. You have the ability to make this year special. I need your help to do it."

"I don't have an ego," Jordan stopped himself and smirked. "Okay, maybe a little."

"One last thing. Do you remember your first couple of years in the league?" When Jordan nodded, she knew she had him. "Tell me about them. Where were you?"

"California. They were hell."

"Why were they hell? Were you the starter?"

Jordan frowned. "No, I didn't start for three years. Appleton was the quarterback and he made my life hell. I got traded to the worst team in the league. I finally got my chance to start. Got my ass kicked, but I showed the world what I could do. After two years, Lexington picked me up when my contract expired."

"Appleton had a career ending injury the year after you left, didn't he?" Kate asked, already knowing the answer.

"Yeah," Jordan asked with a tone that said he wondered where Kate was going with these questions.

"Imagine if he'd mentored you instead of bullied you. You'd have walked into a top team ready to go as the starting QB when he went down. Maybe Appleton would have been different if he knew it was his last season. Then again, maybe not. No one ever thanked him for helping them in award speeches or interviews. Oh, well. What's done is done. Now it's time to set your own path."

Kate turned and headed back to her desk. She smiled to herself when Jordan didn't leave.

"I know what you're doing, Coach."

Kate turned around and smiled at him then. "Is it working?"

Jordan shook his head with amusement and left without answering. That was okay, Kate had planted the seed and that's what mattered.

The day flew by. Dr. Layne Greene came over at lunch and evaluated Jordan. Kate missed meeting her because she was in coaches' meetings, but Jordan stopped by afterward and gave her a thumbs up through the window of the conference room.

Kate glanced at the clock as she finally made it back to her office. It was five and she had promised to be home by seven for some mystery Landon had set up.

"Katie, girl. I was wondering when you were going to get back."

Kate cringed as she turned to the door to see Brayden leaning against the frame with his arms crossed a smirk on his face. "Are you looking for Owen? His office is down the hall to the left."

"I'm looking for you, babe. I'm going to do you a favor." Brayden strutted into the office as if he owned it and expected her to fall at his feet.

"I don't need any favors, but thanks for stopping by. I have a lot to do and an appointment coming up." Kate took a seat behind her desk, putting space between them.

"Ah, but you do need a favor. I heard you need a date for the gala and I have graciously decided to take you with me. All of us sponsors have been gifted tickets to attend and several of us have donated items for the auction. Anything for the kids, right?"

The arrogance was just too much, but she tried to get back in control of her face and took a deep breath. "Thank you for that kind offer." Brayden puffed up at his own importance and Kate delivered the needle to the balloon. "But I already have a date."

"You don't need to lie to save face. I already know you don't have one. Owen told me." Brayden made himself

comfortable in her office and Kate silently fumed. This ass was a major sponsor and a friend of Owen's. If she pissed him off, it could be bad news for the team.

"No lie. I have a date. Plus, I never mix my personal life with my professional one."

Brayden stood up and leaned across her desk, invading her space. "And I'm saying you do what I tell you or you lose your job. You think the Thoroughbreds will keep you over a major sponsor? It's your job to keep me happy."

"No," Kate said, leaning into his space, "My job is to coach my players. It's Owen's job to babysit you. Now, I have a job to do. Please leave."

"I'll leave when I'm ready to." Brayden looks pissed. His eyes had narrowed, and there was a tick in the vein across his forehead.

He surprised Kate by grabbing her. His fingers clutched her jaw until it almost hurt.

"Let go of me this instant," Kate said, already reaching for a pen. She would stab it through his hand on her desk if he continued down this path.

"I'd do what she says or you'll lose some valuable body parts."

Kate had no idea who the woman with strawberry blonde hair was who had just leveled that threat, but was very grateful to have backup. At the very least Kate had a witness for when Brayden tried to get her fired.

Brayden smirked, but dropped his hand from Kate's jaw. "I'll see you at the gala, Katie girl. Now I have a dinner with Owen and some of the bigger sponsors." It was a threat to her physically as much as it was also a threat to her career. So much for being respected for her coaching. Kate was going to have to take this up the chain and all it would do it create drama around her when she wanted nothing more than to focus on the players.

"Thank you," Kate said after Brayden sauntered off down the hall whistling.

“Who was that asshole?” the woman asked as she took a seat across the desk from Kate.

“A sponsor. I’m sorry, but who are you?”

The woman held out her hand. “Sophie Dagher. Sophie Davies Dagher.”

The name rang a bell and Kate smiled as she remembered. “Oh! You’re Landon’s sister. It’s so nice to meet you.”

Sophie seemed surprised Kate already knew her name. “Landon’s told you about me?”

“Sure. And about your brother, the firefighter, Colton. Did I get that right?”

“You did.” Sophie glanced back at the door and then to Kate. “You need to tell Will what just happened.”

“I know.” Kate sighed and the excitement at meeting Landon’s sister fled and dread filled her. “I just want to do my job, but it seems no one wants me to do that.”

Sophie raised an eyebrow, but Kate didn’t go into the threats.

“You can’t do your job if that ass tries to get you fired. There are only so many things you can handle on your own until you need to ask for help. Asking for help isn’t a sign of weakness. It’s a strength.”

“Thank you. I’ll talk to Mr. Ashton.” Kate took a deep breath and then focused back on Landon’s sister. “I don’t mean to sound rude, but what are you doing here?”

“Oh, I came to see Sienna. I heard that you and Landon were going to the gala together so I thought I’d stop by and meet you. See who captured my little brother’s attention.”

Kate felt a blush spread on her cheeks. Talking football and math was right up her alley. Girl talk about dates, not so much. Before Kate had to say anything, Will walked by the door and then froze. He took a step backward and looked into the office. “Sophie! I thought that was you. What are you doing here?”

Sophie stood up and hugged Kate's boss. "I was seeing Sienna, but then something happened that upset me."

"Upset *you*? That takes a lot." Will looked worried and Kate felt her heart speed up and her palms get sweaty. No matter how badass you thought you were, it was hard stepping forward with allegations, even if they were true.

"Yes, I witnessed a man physically harassing Kate." Sophie looked pointedly at Kate and she knew it was her time to tell her story.

By the time Kate finished retelling her two past incidents with Brayden, he was frowning and Kate knew she had just become a problem. "Kate," Will said seriously and with a bit of disappointment in his voice. "You should have told me after media day. I won't tolerate anything but respect for my team. I'll handle it."

"I'm sorry. I don't want to cause problems."

"Don't apologize. You didn't cause a problem. Brayden did. He's the problem, not you. I can't believe I'm saying this, but Sophie, do you have a spare taser?"

Sophie grinned and reached into her purse. She pulled out a tube of lipstick and handed it to Kate. "Here. If he becomes a problem, just take off the top and press it to his skin. He'll go down instantly."

Kate looked with fascination at what she would have sworn was a tube of lipstick and nothing more. "This little thing can do that?"

"Oh, you wouldn't believe the things I can make." Sophie laughed and Kate suddenly saw her for what she was—the Queen of Weapons. Sophie was beautiful, smart, and from what Kate had just seen, she never backed down. "But, I need to get going. It was lovely meeting you. I look forward to seeing you at the gala and at the family dinner. Do you happen to know how to shoot?"

"Why does everyone ask me that?" Kate asked, not understanding the joke.

Sophie just winked and strode out of the room with a smile.

Kate blew out a breath and packed her bags. It had been a long day and now she needed to get home to see whatever Landon had in store for her.

Kate heard Will talking to Owen as she left, but didn't stop. She'd told him what had happened. She didn't need to listen to Owen covering for his old family friend. She'd been around enough men to know how it would go. *He was just joking.* Or her favorite, *she needs to lighten up.*

Kate stepped outside and headed to her car. In minutes, she was waving to security as she turned onto the access road leading out of the stadium to the main road. Suddenly the car in front of her slammed on its brakes. Kate slammed on hers and swerved to miss rear ending the car. Her tire slipped off the side of the road. Kate battled her car and somehow managed not to hit the fence encircling the stadium.

Kate got out of the car to see if the other driver was hurt when the door was shoved open and the man in the hooded sweatshirt appeared. Kate screamed and went to jump back in her car, but was too late. His hand closed around her arm and she felt his fingers digging into her muscles so hard it felt as if her bone would snap.

“You have until the first game to do what I say or you'll be out of a job and embarrassed so badly you'll never work again.”

Kate balled her hand and slammed her fist into the man's nose. He stumbled backward with surprise, dropping his grip on her arm enough for Kate to break free and leap back into her car. She didn't care if she hit him as she threw the car into reverse. Grass was thrown as she floored it off the side of the road and back onto the pavement. She shifted into drive and took off as the man stared after her, his face still lost to the shadows.

Landon was busy with the dinner rush when his phone vibrated. Normally he'd ignore it, but this time it was Kate's name that came up, not one of his cousins.

"Bryce, watch this, will you? I'll only be a second." Landon hurried out of the loud kitchen and into the back of the pantry. "Hi, Kate," he said, answering his phone.

"Do you really trust Ryan?" Kate's voice shook as she talked.

Landon's whole body went rigid. "Are you hurt?"

He heard Kate gulp. "I don't think so. I got away. I punched him in the face."

"That's my Kate. Who was it?" Landon understood at that moment what his cousins went through when their wives had been in danger. It was a horrible feeling. He wanted to simultaneously protect her and murder the person responsible.

"I don't know. I didn't see his face. He was in that hoodie again. First Brayden and now this. I'm going to get fired for sure. I've been nothing but a problem since I got here."

"Who is Brayden?"

Kate let out a sigh. "Just a jerk who happens to be a major sponsor of the team and friends with the head of corporate sponsorship. Your sister saw him in action and told Will. Will said he didn't blame me, but then, if I add on someone wanting to rig bets, it's just too much. Some jerk hitting on me

is not equal to something that could get the team suspended or worse.”

“I’ll meet you at your house,” Landon was already ripping off his apron.

“No. I have whatever it is that you have planned in twenty minutes. I’ll be fine. But I would like you to introduce me to your cousin Ryan tomorrow morning if possible.”

“I’ll bring Ryan to your house tonight at ten. I’ll be off and you should be done with the surprise I have planned for you by then.”

“It doesn’t have to be tonight, but I think I’ll feel relieved when it’s over,” Kate admitted.

“I’ll see you soon. Call me if you need anything.” Landon’s voice softened as he fought the overwhelming desire to race to her side. She’d tell him if she needed him by her side.

“Thanks, Landon. You’ve done so much for me already. I don’t know how to thank you.”

“I’ll see you tonight.” Landon hung up and immediately called Ryan. “I need a favor.”



Kate didn’t breathe again until the large iron gates of Desert Sun Farm closed behind her. She had to admit it felt safe being on the farm surrounded by soldiers—even the naked one with glittery balls. After all, he did have a big sword.

Kate waved to the soldiers on duty as she drove by the pastures to her little cottage. She should start looking for a house of her own, but until she knew she wasn’t going to be fired, she thought she’d stay here.

The old pickup truck sitting by her cottage gave her pause. Kate crept forward, wondering if she needed to hightail it to the nearest soldier when the door opened and a long leg appeared. Definitely not her attacker. She didn’t know any

attackers who wore flip-flops. Then a pair of jean shorts appeared a moment before the blonde hair of the photographer from the other day came out of the truck.

Sydney waved at her with a big smile on her face. Kate was more relieved than she realized at recognizing her. The tension of the threats and even putting up with Brayden combined with starting a new job had been weighing on her more than she knew.

“Hi!” Sydney called out as Kate got out of her car. “Landon said you needed a dress for the Children’s Gala. I’m here to help. Hop in.”

“We’re going shopping?” Kate asked. She’d never really gone shopping with a girlfriend before. Being on the coaching staff, the coaches’ wives tended to either look at her as a threat to their husbands or assumed she “just wasn’t into that kind of thing,” whatever that meant.

“Uh-huh, at a very exclusive shop nearby,” Sydney told her and she backed her truck out of the cottage’s small parking area. “The pictures I took turned out great, if I may say so myself. Grab the tablet there and swipe through. Just favorite any you like and I’ll send them to you.”

Kate picked up the tablet that was sticking out of Sydney’s bucket purse and couldn’t believe what she saw. “Is that me?”

Sydney laughed. “I bet I see you differently from your typical sports photographers.”

“I look like a warrior goddess.” Kate was clad simply in her Thoroughbreds shirt, but the way Sydney played with the light and the angles made her feel as if she were a goddess leading her team into battle.

“These are great for the Keeneston Journal, but I have a friend who owns a women’s magazine. I’d love your permission to pitch an idea to you and the team.”

“The team?”

“Yeah, some of the players you work with. My idea was to show all your sides. It would resonate with a lot of girls and women. Hopefully it would give them the confidence to try

careers or sports that are typically dominated by boys and men. It would range from casual, to business, to high fashion. Show that women can be all things.”

“I love the idea. My understanding is you run it by Morgan then she’ll get it signed off by the team. Which magazine?”

“Here we are,” Sydney said, pulling into a driveway and not answering the question.

“I thought we were going shopping? Is someone else joining us?” Kate’s eyes widened as a large house came into view. A handsome man was outside pushing two young children on a swing set off to the side of the house.

“Deacon? No, he’s watching the kids so we can have some privacy.” Sydney parked the truck near the front door and smiled as she got out. “Kate, this is my husband, Deacon.” Kate shook hands with the man still wondering why they were at Sydney’s house. Maybe she was just borrowing a dress?

“Nice to meet you.”

“You too. I’ve already heard so much about you from the text tree that it’s great to meet you in person.” His voice held more of a slow Southern accent than Sydney’s, and that wasn’t a bad thing. Sydney was a very lucky woman.

“And these rascals are our kids, Brynn and Donovan.” Deacon tickled their stomachs as they swung forward, resulting in the cutest giggles Kate had ever heard.

“They’re adorable,” Kate said, giggling right along with them.

“We’ll be in the work room if you need me.” Sydney kissed her husband’s cheek and then kissed each child as they swung forward, resulting in more giggles. “It’s right through here.”

Sydney led her through the front door and then turned to the side and opened a door. Kate stepped in and stopped in her tracks. There was a giant table in the center of the room with materials tossed all over it. Pieces of fabric were attached to sketches tacked to a giant corkboard and then there were the racks and racks of clothes.

“What is this?”

“My office. It’s where I work.”

“I thought you were a photographer?” Kate said, taking in pictures of models and actresses wearing clothes and posing with Sydney on another wall. “Did you take all these photos?”

“No. I designed all these clothes. I only take photos for fun. Here is where I thought we should start. These are all from my evening gown collections. This rack is last season. This one is what the industry would call vintage even though they’re not that old. And then this rack is my newest collection that will be on the runway this September in the various fashion weeks.”

Kate looked at Sydney with surprise. “Who are you and why do I feel stupid for not knowing?”

“Ever heard of the supermodel, Katelyn Jacks?” Sydney asked.

“Of course. I still remember that cover she did with her daughter—” Kate followed where Sydney was pointing. There was the cover with Katelyn Jacks and her daughter who had followed in her modeling footsteps. “You.”

“Yup. My mom married my dad, Marshall Davies, and I followed in her footsteps before becoming a designer and starting Syd Inc.”

Kate found herself giggling like Brynn and Donovan. “You’re another cousin. How many Davies cousins are there?”

Sydney laughed and just shook her head. “Here, this color would look fantastic on you.”

Kate looked at the rich red dress and stopped laughing. It was stunning. She’d never worn a dress like this before. Most of her dresses were off the rack at the department store. This somehow looked sexy and sophisticated.

“Then there’s this one.” Sydney held up a deep gold dress that made Kate feel as if she were in a movie montage getting a makeover.

“And if you want to try something unexpected,” Sydney reached into the rack that hadn’t been shown yet for the upcoming fashion weeks and pulled out a dress the color of sapphires, both deep and bright in color. “Let’s try them all on!”

By the time Kate left, she’d picked a dress, borrowed a pair of heels that matched it, and had an appointment with Nora from the Fluff and Buff to do her hair and makeup.

“I wish I was going to be there to see Landon’s face when you come out.” Sydney wasn’t anything like Kate had expected a former model to be. The messy ponytail and flip-flops actually fit her more than the designer dresses. Knowing Sydney as the down to earth, easy-going woman she was, made it very hard to imagine her as the powerful supermodel and designer who ruled the runways.

Sydney slowed down as she approached the cottage and frowned. “Why is Ryan here?”

“Oh, I’ve wanted to meet him since Sienna’s been so great.”

Sydney gave her a look that said she didn’t believe her.

“Okay, I’ve had some trouble at work,” Kate admitted.

“You need me to talk to Will and Trey? Or better yet, you want me to talk to their wives, Kenna and Taylor?”

Kate gave a little chuckle. “It’s nothing they did. Thanks for tonight. It was a lot of fun.”

Sydney looked as if she were going to argue, but she just smiled. “I love that you went with the new dress. It’s an honor to have you wear it. I might just make you walk the runway in New York with it.”

“Lord, no! That would be a nightmare for me. I don’t know how you did it with all those people looking at and judging you. At least when I’m judged, it’s on my wins and losses and not on how pretty I am.”

“I’ll let you in on an industry secret. It’s not about beauty. It’s all about confidence.” Sydney nodded to the cottage. “Remember that with whatever problem you’re having. Tackle it confidently and no one will see the fear beneath the surface. Also, if you ever need it, my husband is a private investigator.”

“I appreciate it. Thanks again.”

Kate climbed out of the truck as the front door to her cottage opened and Landon stepped outside. He waved at Sydney as she backed out of the drive and he walked over to take the heavy dress bag from her arms.

“I know I left with the door locked,” Kate said as she took in the wide-open door.

“I’ll let you in on a fun fact about me,” Landon said, lowering his voice as if it were a secret. “I can pick locks.”

“He’s not as special as he thinks. All of us Davies cousins can pick locks. It was mandatory learning by our parents,” a man said from the cottage door. “Hi. I’m Ryan.”

Ryan was lean, yet from the way his T-shirt fit him, it wasn’t from lack of muscles. The man was built. It must be an inherited trait right along with the same hazel eyes Kate noticed they all had.

Kate held out her hand. “Kate Ellington. Thanks for coming so late. I don’t really know the best way to handle the situation I find myself in and Landon said I could trust you.”

Landon walked into her house and disappeared into her bedroom with her gown. Ryan looked from her to the bedroom door and then back to her. “Landon’s one of the best men I know, cousin or not. If he asks for a favor, it’s done. Plus, the team is a part of Keeneston and if something could hurt them, I want to know.”

Kate began the retelling of what happened when Landon rejoined them. She told him how she’d met Landon all the way through the incident tonight by her car. Ryan nodded as he let his phone record the conversation. “You can see why I have to

be careful. I don't want any rumors to ruin both my career and the team."

"I do understand, but it's also a serious charge. One I know the FBI is serious about and so is the professional football league. I'm glad you told me. Now, I have a few questions. First, what happened to the knife?"

"What knife?" Kate asked before remembering the knife the attacker had at the restaurant.

"I have it." Kate looked at Landon with surprise. She'd forgotten about the knife after Landon had knocked it from the attacker's hand. Landon reached over to the kitchen table and picked up a to-go bag from his restaurant. "I didn't touch it."

Ryan took the bag and nodded. "Good. I'll see if I can find anything."

"He was wearing gloves," Landon said with a frown. "However, the attacker is probably sporting a black eye thanks to Kate's punch tonight."

Ryan turned to Kate. "I'll see what I can find out about any game rigging right now. But if you see anyone with a red mark or a black eye on their face, call me. This person has to be known to the team since he was able to slip that note into your office. I also think we should meet with Will and Mo tomorrow evening and fill them in after I run this knife for prints."

Kate's stomach plummeted. "Do we have to? I already caused a problem with a sponsor and now this. They'll fire me for bringing too much drama with me."

"Other team owners might, but not Will and Mo, I promise. They'll do everything to get to the bottom of it. Plus, by coming forward it really does clear your name faster than hiding it." It was the same thing Landon had said, but hearing it with the strength of Ryan's law enforcement experience behind it, Kate decided it was best to defer to him.

"Okay, but if I get fired, I am blaming you two."

Ryan chuckled. "They won't fire you. Will's wife is a judge and former lawyer. She hates injustice and Will hates

anyone trying to sully the game he loves. Trust me. They'll be angry, but not at you. I'll call them in the morning and set up a meeting at Mo's house tomorrow afternoon at four so it doesn't interfere with the gala. Also, that way the team as a whole won't know anything about it. Any spies in the organization can't tip them off either."

"You think there are spies at the Thoroughbreds?" Kate couldn't believe this was happening.

"I do. Or at least someone who can get close enough to threaten you. They knew enough to wait outside the parking lot tonight. If they were inside the parking lot they'd have been caught on camera. They know the building. They can get to your office. You see my point?" Ryan asked.

Kate nodded. "Is there anyone I can trust?"

"Sienna," Ryan said instantly. "And Jace."

"And Morgan," Landon added. "Basically, anyone from Keeneston."

Ryan nodded his agreement as he stood up and took the to-go bag holding a deadly weapon. "I wish we'd met under different circumstances. Sienna told me you would fit in Keeneston perfectly. Know that we take care of our own. If you need anything, just holler."

Kate held out her hand and shook his. "Thank you. I'll see you tomorrow afternoon, no matter how much I'm dreading it."

"It'll be okay. Landon can look after you and I'll run this knife through the system and talk to some of the guys on the FBI's sports and gaming initiative. See if they're hearing any chatter about blackmailing coaches into rigging bets."

Kate thanked Ryan again and collapsed onto the couch as soon as Landon closed the door behind the agent.

"Are you okay?" Landon sat on the couch and pulled her into his arms. "I was so worried when you called."

Kate was used to being the strong one. She was an only child and grew up knowing how to handle things on her own

more often than not. Then as a female coach in a male dominated sport, she could never show weakness. It felt strange but so good to crawl into Landon's lap and have him hold her.

“I'm angry. I'm scared. I'm worried I'll lose my job, but I'm not hurt.”

Landon held her snuggled up against him. The warmth from his body and the safety of him holding her allowed all the fear and adrenaline to leave her body. For the second night in a row, Kate fell asleep in Landon's arms.

Landon woke to the sound of a farm truck filling the large water troughs in the pastures. The sun was just rising as Landon slipped from Kate's bed. Last night he'd picked her up from the couch and put her in bed after taking off her shoes. He had intended on leaving her then, but in her sleep, she'd reached for him. That gesture found him kicking off his own shoes and lying on top of the covers as he held her, protecting her as she slept.

Landon went into the kitchen and turned on the coffee pot. He'd just poured the first mug of coffee when Kate stumbled into the kitchen. Her curly hair was all over the place and she was still half asleep in the most adorable way.

"I fell asleep on you again, didn't I?" Kate asked as he handed her the coffee.

"You did. I hope you don't mind that I stayed."

Kate took a big sip of coffee and sighed. "Not at all. I slept great. I hope you weren't too uncomfortable. I remember grabbing hold of you and just not wanting to let go."

"No worries. I slept well, too. But I have a restaurant critic coming at six tonight and I need to hit up my favorite local suppliers this morning. I hate to leave so abruptly, but I'll pick you up at eight. I know that will make us a little late . . ."

He stopped talking when Kate cringed. "I have to meet the kids at the hospital at seven."

“I feel like a horrible date, but can I meet you at the hospital?”

“Actually, that’d be great. Sydney offered to pick me up and take me to the Fluff and Buff. I’m sure she won’t mind taking me to the hospital. She said she’s also going with gifts for the kids.”

“That’s perfect.” Without thinking Landon leaned forward and placed a kiss on her cheek. “I can’t wait to see you tonight.”

Landon felt the spring in his step as he got into his car. He rolled the windows down, turned on his favorite song, and drove through the farm.

Suddenly a flash of bright blue light caught his eye as he saw someone run in front of the car. Landon slammed on the brakes and blinked repeatedly at the image in front of him.

“Sorry about that. I was practicing my sword skills and didn’t see you.”

Landon opened his mouth and closed it again. It took a second to think of any words. “Draven, why are you naked?”

“I always practice my sword training naked. It’s very freeing and powerful. And look how masculine my swords are.”

“Draven, your balls are blue.” Landon felt weird for staring at a guy’s package, but he couldn’t look away.

Draven shoved his hips forward. “You noticed, yes? It’s the sapphires the royal waxer put on since the diamonds shot off rainbows and were too sparkly. Some woman called them pretty. Well, now aren’t they masculine?”

“I mean, you literally look like you have blue balls.”

“Blue balls?” The slang term for a sexually frustrated man finally sunk in and Draven’s shoulders slumped. “I thought blue was masculine. I didn’t think of blue balls. Well, back to the royal waxer. You’re a good friend, Landon. Thank you for not letting me walk around with blue balls.”

Landon nodded solemnly. “You’re welcome, Draven.”

Well, if that set the tone for Landon's day, it should be an interesting one.



Kate didn't have time to be nervous about her meeting with Will and Mo. She'd been so busy today working with both Jordan and Knox, reviewing films, and studying stats that before she knew it, she was racing to Keeneston.

It was strange to drive up to the main mansion instead of veering off earlier to her small cottage. Kate wasn't even out of the car yet when an older woman was standing by her car door.

"I just couldn't wait to meet you!" The second Kate was out of the car she was enveloped into a hug. "I'm Dani."

"Hi. It's so nice to meet you. Thank you so much for letting me stay in that beautiful cottage."

"It's my pleasure. Also, I hope you don't think it's presumptuous of me, but people have been dropping by with food all day. I think they assumed you'd be off work. I hope you don't mind, but I had them drop it off here. I have a fridge full of food for you for when you leave."

"Thank you so much. I had been warned I might need a bigger freezer."

Dani hooked her arm around Kate's and escorted her up the large stone steps. "Feel free to only take what you want for now. Just pop on over anytime to grab another freezer full." Sure, Kate would just pop by a prince and princess's house. "I heard you're going to the gala tonight. I can't wait to introduce you around."

Kate tried not to stare as they entered a large entry hall, but soon they were in a more private part of the house. The walls in this part of the house were lined with family pictures instead of priceless works of art.

Dani didn't stop at the closed door. She opened it and walked right in. Kate followed behind and found Ryan, Will,

and Prince Mo already in the room. “Here’s Kate. Don’t take too long. We all have to get ready for tonight.”

The men all rose to their feet as Dani spun around, and with a wink to Kate, left the room, closing the door behind her.

“Welcome, Kate.” Mo inclined his head in greeting and gestured to an open seat. “Let’s get to whatever this is so I don’t make my wife late.”

Kate’s stomach rolled as she took a seat. She glanced at Ryan who pulled out a file and tossed it onto the coffee table between them. “I think it’ll be best if I give a brief summary of why Kate called me and what I’ve found.” Bless Ryan Parker. He took the lead, laid out the events, the facts, and what very few theories he had on the case.

Will cursed. Mo simply sat regally in his chair. Kate wasn’t sure if she was remembering to breathe.

“I understand if you want to fire me,” Kate finally managed to say.

“Why would we fire you?” Mo asked as Will ran his hand through his hair.

“I’m bringing too many problems to the team. First Brayden, then this.”

“Brayden?” Mo asked.

Will stopped cursing and filled him in on what Sophie had seen, what Kate had told him, and then his meeting with Owen, who swore it was just simple fun by Brayden.

Mo turned his eyes to Kate. “Did you think it was simple fun?”

“No. I didn’t.” Kate might as well be honest. Everything was coming out now.

“Let’s see if Brayden is sporting a black eye tonight,” Ryan suggested.

“Brayden? You think it could be him?”

“He’s already causing you problems,” Ryan told her.

The door opened and a beautiful young woman strode in and stopped short when she saw there were people in the room. “Oh, sorry. I just want to get my tiara.”

Mo smiled and his whole face softened. “My dear, come meet Kate Ellington. She’s—”

“The woman going to the gala with Landon.” The woman suddenly looked just like Mo—regal. “Landon is one of the nicest men I know. You better be good to him or I’ll throw you in the dungeon. He’s one of my best friends.”

“Kate, this is my daughter, Ariana. Ah, and here’s her husband, Jameson. Don’t take the threat too seriously. We don’t have a dungeon, only holding cells.”

A man with wide shoulders, light brown hair, and the most intriguing gray-blue eyes joined them in the room. “You’re the new coach. Nice to meet you.” Jameson held out his hand and shook hers.

“Ari,” Mo said, interrupting the discussion as he stood and walked over to a painting on the wall. “What would you do if a man wouldn’t leave you alone and thought because he donated money, he was allowed to grab you, all in *good fun*?”

“I’d cut off his balls,” Ari said simply, as if she might actually have done so.

“I’d hand her the knife,” Jameson added. “Is someone bothering you?”

All eyes turned back to Kate.

“I think we’ll know the proper response to give Owen,” Mo said as he opened a safe and handed a beautiful sparkling diamond and emerald tiara to Ariana. “Finish getting ready. We’ll be done here in a moment.”

It was said nicely, but it was an order. One that Ariana completely ignored. “Does Landon know?” Ari asked.

“It’s not a big deal. I can handle it. Really,” she said to the room en masse.

Ari raised her eyebrow as if Kate had just told a really big lie. “Tell Landon. Now, I have to get ready. It was nice to meet

you, Kate.”

“You, too,” Kate said, waiting for the room to clear before turning to her bosses. “I don’t want to make a scene. I don’t want to be a problem. I don’t want you to lose a big sponsor. I just want to win games.”

“We can find a new sponsor if we need to. We’ll meet with Owen and Brayden to see if we terminate the contract now or at the end of the season,” Will said and none of the anger was in his voice anymore. “However, this gambling threat is definitely an issue. Thank you for bringing it to us. They obviously thought you’d be a weak link since you’re new and have worked so hard to get to where you are. They thought they could exploit your fear of failing.”

“By telling us so soon and bringing in Ryan, you have saved us a tremendous headache if someone in the media or league found out and accused us of trying to hide it. Nash and Nabi are at your disposal. I can call Kale in if needed, but he’s on assignment in Rahmi as you know,” Mo said, shifting his attention to Ryan. “What do you need us to do?”

“First, I want you to put up cameras in the hall so we can get a view of who is coming and going from Kate’s office. I’ll keep this as undercover as I can, but I need to work with the team of agents who specialize in this. I’ll let you know if they need anything else. Mostly, I just wanted to notify you both so we can work together on this.” Ryan gave her a look that said everything was okay. Kate admitted to herself that she did feel relief that she was no longer hiding anything. Now she just hoped the team didn’t get in trouble with the league.

“We’ll work on this. You work on your QB situation,” Will said to her. “You have our support.”

Kate thanked them both and was met by Dani and a butler carrying casseroles and pies to her car. “I grabbed a small selection for you.”

“This is so nice. Do they have cards attached so I know who to write thank you notes to?” Kate asked as she grabbed a casserole dish from Dani.

“I made a list, ma’am,” the butler said, indicating he had it.

Dani helped her load the food into her car. “Everyone is so excited to meet you. It’s all the text group can talk about.”

“I look forward to meeting everyone, too. Thanks again for everything.”

Kate waved goodbye to them before driving to her cottage. She had to move quickly to make her appointment. Kate grabbed her dress, shoes, and jewelry. She had Thoroughbreds swag for the kids already in the car. She was back out the door and driving to the Fluff and Buff within minutes.

Kate parked on Main Street where she met Sydney and Sophie on the sidewalk.

“I hope you don’t mind, but I invited Sophie to get ready with us,” Sydney said as she greeted Kate.

“Of course. It’s good to see you again.”

“I thought this would be a good time to get to know each other better.” Sophie smiled, but it was in that oh-so-Southern way that Kate’s mother would when she’d ask what she’d done on a night when her mom already knew Kate had gotten in trouble.

“I’d love that,” Kate replied with a bright smile of her own. Two could play at this Southern women’s game.

Kate stared at herself in the mirror. She looked like herself, just enhanced in every way. The makeup was subtle, but defining. Her cheekbones popped. Her lips were clearly defined by the lipstick. Her eyes shone.

“You’re amazing,” Kate said to Nora, the owner of the Fluff and Buff.

“Thank you,” Nora said before emptying a can of hairspray on the updo she’d just completed. “I love your curls.”

Normally Kate hated them as sometimes they were actual curls and other times they were a wavy mess. It never seemed they did what she wanted, when she wanted it. However, Nora had used the curls to make the updo seem less stiff—even with all the hairspray.

Sophie had interrogated her, to put it mildly, but Kate felt she’d held her own. You don’t grow up in Texas without knowing how to handle a battle of polite, yet deadly, questioning ranging from who is your momma’s people are to why did you break up with your last boyfriend. But, Kate got some of her own *polite* questions in. “I just loved getting to know you,” she had said to Sophie and blinked innocently. Sydney had to hide a laugh under a cough and Kate felt victorious.

The bell over the door rang as the door opened and a dangerous looking man walked in wearing a tuxedo. It wasn’t that he was tall, dark, and handsome that made him look

dangerous. It was the way his eyes seemed to take everything in as if analyzing it as a potential threat he would handle. He just had an air about him that screamed “deadly.”

“Honey, this is Landon’s date for the evening.” *For the evening* added on as if Sophie wasn’t sure Kate would be around for longer than that.

“Hello. I’m Nash. It’s very nice to meet you.” Kate shook his hand.

“Stop talking,” Syd chided as she tried to apply lipstick to Sophie.

“Is that all it takes?” Nash asked with a quirk of his lips. Sophie narrowed her eyes at him but Kate saw the love there.

“Help Kate get all her stuff out of the car, will ya?” Syd asked Nash. “Deacon just got here. Tell him I need three minutes.”

Nash bowed to Kate. “My lady?”

Kate laughed. “I just have stuff in my car I need to move over. Are you sure it’s okay to leave my car overnight on Main Street?”

“No problem at all,” Nash assured her as he opened the door. “Are they watching?” Nash asked Deacon.

“You know they are. Your wife is scary with her ability to see everything,” Deacon said to Nash and Kate wondered what was going on.

“Everyone to the trunk,” Nash ordered. Kate instantly went to her car and opened the trunk where all the team swag was packed. “We only have a few moments. We heard you’re invited to family dinner.”

“Yes. I am.” Kate didn’t know what was happening and why it seemed they were part of a secret mission.

“Do you know how to shoot a gun?” Nash asked.

“As I’ve told the ten other people who have asked me, I grew up in Texas. Of course I know how to shoot a gun.”

“Do you know how to throw a punch? Throw an axe? Handle water boarding?” Deacon asked.

“Yes, yes, no. But what does this have to do with family dinner?” Kate asked them.

“We’re the in-laws. Just know we’re here for you. If you need combat practice, just come to the security center on the farm at five a.m. It’s when I work out. Don’t worry. You’re not alone,” Nash whispered as the bell rang indicating the women had walked out of the shop.

“What’s in here?” Deacon asked loudly as he picked up the box.

“Stuff for the kids,” Kate answered, still slightly confused.

Nash slammed her trunk closed and went to open the passenger door of his car for Sophie. “See you there. We are going to get Layne and Walker and head over in a little bit,” Sophie said before climbing into the SUV.

Kate slid into the backseat of the SUV Deacon was driving. What a weird evening. Why in the world was everyone freaking out over a family dinner?

Landon dipped a clean spoon into the sauce and tasted it. It was perfect. The restaurant critic for a national magazine sat at his best table. He’d served her the best of Cady’s bourbon made into his bartender’s twist on an old-fashioned. It paired perfectly with the appetizer she was just finishing.

Landon’s cooking was a mixture of his grandmother’s down-home comfort food, the Blossom Café’s southern best, and Miss Violet’s traditional French recipes. He loved deconstructing the dishes and reassembling them with complementary tastes from old, new, and regional cuisine.

“Do you want to plate?” Bryce asked him as he brought over the deep-fried cheesy grits cake.

“I’m all ready,” Landon said as he took the pan from Bryce and placed the grits cake perfectly centered on the plate before topping it with a barrel cut filet mignon. Grilled asparagus and

sautéed mushrooms in a light truffle butter completed the plate. The finishing touch was the bourbon demi-glace he artfully poured onto the dish that offered just a hint of smokey flavor without overwhelming the dish.

Landon handed the plate to the waiter and nodded to the bartender to pour the wine that would enhance each bite. He wanted to rush out and see what her reaction was, but he wouldn't do that. He had to focus on the perfect plating of the dessert—his own twist on bread pudding.

He plated the dessert and artfully decorated the plate with caramel.

“She loves it,” Bryce whispered. “I took the order for her dessert cocktail and just happened to overhear her sigh as she ate the last bite of dinner.”

Landon looked at his watch. The timing was perfect. “I’ll take the dessert out as soon as the table is cleared.” Landon replaced his working chef’s jacket with a clean one. He grabbed the bottle of Cady’s bourbon he’d used tonight and took a deep breath.

“Ready,” Bryce said, picking up the dessert plate.

Landon walked out of the kitchen just as the bartender placed the after-dinner drink on the table. “Miss Meade, I’m Landon Davies. Thank you for joining us this evening. To top off your dining experience, I present you our signature dessert. Also, I thought you’d be interested in knowing that the bourbon you’ve been served tonight is from Barrel Creek Distillery. It’s a local, woman-owned, distillery not thirty minutes from here. All your food and bourbon from tonight is locally sourced.”

Miss Meade nodded and took a bite of the dessert. Landon saw how she closed her eyes and saw the slight smile on her lips. “It’s been an excellent meal. Thank you for telling me about the bourbon. I think I’ll set up a tour for tomorrow before I head back to New York. My review will be in next month’s magazine.”

“I’ll let you enjoy your dessert. Thank you for traveling all this way to see us.”

Landon and Bryce strode away. Both of them tried to contain their excitement as they entered the kitchens. Landon hugged Bryce and high-fived the other cooks that comprised his team. It had been a successful evening.



Kate stepped out of the SUV at the entrance to the children’s hospital. A woman with curly hair and a huge smile was waiting for them.

“I am so glad you all could make it. I’m Ava Miller.” Kate instantly liked this bubbly doctor who, while wearing a gorgeous gown, also had on a red clown nose. One she seemed to just realize she had on as she yanked it off. “So sorry. I was just with the kids.”

“I’m Kate. It’s so nice to meet you. I brought some gifts for the kids,” Kate said as Nash pulled out the large box of swag from the back of his SUV just as the rest of her gifts for the kids arrived. “And them, too. I hope it’s all right?”

Ava turned to the large group of large men getting out of the SUV that just pulled up and smiled. Kate had asked Jordan to step up and lead the team. He had done so by recruiting some of the players to visit with the children. Out came Jordan, Knox, Jaylen, and Zack looking stunning in tuxedos. However it was the big grins they wore that really stood out. That and the armfuls of swag and gifts they carried.

“Hey, Coach,” Jaylen called out. “You look smokin’, but not as smokin’ as if you were my date.”

Kate rolled her eyes. Jaylen always made her laugh. “Gentleman, shall we go cheer up some children?”

Ava told them about the hospital and the children’s wing and some of the patients as they made their way into the hospital. When they reached the pediatric floor, Kate spotted several people already there from a balloon animal maker to

several volunteers with therapy dogs. The hall was decorated with artwork from the children but it was the smell of freshly baked cookies that caught her attention and the sound of children giggling.

“Landon brought his famous cookies,” Ava told them as Zack’s stomach rumbled.

“Sorry, but those cookies are better than sex,” Zack whispered. All the men nodded in their agreement. “He makes them for us a couple of times a year,” Zack told Kate.

“He does the same for us here. Anytime a patient gets to ring the bell and go home cancer free, he makes cookies for everyone. He also makes them for every holiday and they are delicious. Everyone’s favorite food, second only to Mrs. Davies’s apple pie.”

Zack’s stomach rumbled again as they started talking about the pie. Now even Kate was hungry. Kate was pretty sure sex with Landon would beat out her desire for a cookie when she saw Landon sitting at a table made for young children. His knees were practically up to his chest and he looked devastatingly handsome in a tuxedo as he laughed with the children and passed out cookies.

“That’s Cherice,” Ava said, lowering her voice and gesturing to a girl with her black hair in braids tipped with blue and white beads. She was sitting in a wheelchair with her mother and father standing close behind her. “She looks like she’s eight years old, but she’s actually eleven. She has sickle cell anemia and that can stunt development. It was diagnosed at birth. It was treated with medications when she was younger and then she moved to blood transfusions, but it’s getting worse. There’s pain, extreme fatigue, and frequent infections that are only growing worse. Her brother, who is thirteen, is donating bone marrow for the transplant that will take place next week.”

“Will that cure it?” Kate asked as they grew closer.

“It’s an invasive surgery, but it’s the only known cure for sickle cell. If the transplant takes and her body starts making

healthy blood cells, she'll feel good for the first time in her life. We're very hopeful."

Cherice turned and caught sight of her. Her eyes widened in surprise and she tapped her parents' hands. When they looked to see where their daughter was pointing, they quickly pulled her from the crowd and wheeled their daughter toward Kate.

"You're Kate Ellington. Your play calling helped win the college championship last year. I want to do what you do. I could never play football, but I love the patterns and the plays. It's like chess in motion." Cherice was talking a mile a minute as Kate knelt down so she could be at eye level with her.

"That's a great way to describe it." Kate held out her hand and shook Cherice's. "I'm Kate and it's nice to meet you."

"I just love your throwing plays," Cherice told her.

"Hey now. Not too much throwing. Some of us look like superheroes breaking tackles and running the ball into the endzone." Jaylen struck a pose and Cherice laughed.

Kate glanced over and saw that Landon was smiling as he watched her. He didn't try to interfere or draw attention to himself. Instead, he was happy handing out cookies and catching glances at her.

"Is he your boyfriend?" Cherice asked after catching Kate sharing a look at Landon.

"I'd like to know that, too." Knox winked at Cherice, but then looked at Kate waiting for an answer.

"Aww, Coach is sweet on Mr. Cookie." Kate wanted to glare at Jordan, but when she looked at him she saw that he wasn't saying it spitefully. He was actually joking around with her. "I don't know how Zack is going to handle this, Coach. You know he loves those cookies."

"Coach Kate can give Zack cookies for keeping the defense from sacking Jordan or Knox," Cherice suggested.

Zack high-fived her. "Yes! I like our little coach here."

Cherice beamed, but the draw of the players started to create a crowd. Kate grabbed the box of Thoroughbreds swag and made sure to give Cherice the big bag of things she had put together for her.

The guys stepped away from Cherice and were handing out the signed swag they'd brought. The doors opened and a group of people that included Will, Mo, and others stepped from the elevator. Landon chose that moment to join her as several kids gasped at seeing Dani and Ariana all dressed up — real-life princesses.

Ariana immediately took off the tiara of shining diamonds and emeralds and placed it on a girl's head.

“Close your mouth or you'll catch flies,” Landon whispered in her ear.

“I never saw a princess just hand a priceless tiara over to a little kid that has chocolate on her fingers before,” Kate whispered as she watched while several crowns and tiaras were produced by several of who Kate guessed to be the royal family.

“I told you. They aren't like other royal families. I've got something for you.”

Kate turned to look at Landon standing next to her. She had to look up into his face and saw his eyes twinkling with humor. The tuxedo must have been made for him. His shoulders were broad, his waist was tapered, and his thighs were strong.

The overall look of him in a tux had turned her mouth dry.

Landon pulled out a cookie he'd been hiding behind his back. “I hear my cookies are better than sex.”

Holy smokes. Kate's mind went straight there and even the scent of the cookie wasn't bringing her back from her fantasies.

“Come on, I'll take you to the gala and you can meet my parents.”

That brought Kate crashing back to reality as her fantasies popped like bubbles.

Landon watched Kate with the kids. She glowed even more than the sapphire blue dress she wore. She was magnificent with her quiet kindness and confidence. The kids gravitated to her as she made her way around the room. When Will and Mo arrived with their families, it was finally Landon's chance to talk to Kate. He'd been admiring her from afar for too long.

The floor was getting crowded and he knew Ava wanted them to visit in short shifts, so Landon guided Kate to the elevators. The doors opened, and once they shut, he finally had her to himself. "You look so beautiful tonight."

Landon turned so that he was facing her and brushed his thumb over her cheek. "I want to kiss you so badly, but I don't want to ruin your lipstick."

"It would be worth it."

Nothing could stop Landon then. He lowered his lips to hers and kissed her. It felt as if his whole world has just changed in that kiss. It was her. It was Kate and it was him. Together.

The sound of a throat clearing had Landon finally pulling away from Kate. His chest puffed with pride at her slightly dazed look after he'd kissed her senseless.

"Nice shade of lipstick, bro. It really brings out your eyes."

A snort of laughter escaped Kate as Landon pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his lips.

“Kate, this is my brother Colton. Colton, this is Kate,” Landon introduced as they walked off the elevator and into the hallway leading to the gala.

They chatted as they entered the event and found their tables. He felt Kate stiffen next to him and looked to see what had happened. A man in a tuxedo was smirking at Kate and walking toward her.

“Who is that?” Landon asked.

“He’s a sponsor for the team and an ass,” Kate whispered back.

“Katie girl!” the guy called out and Landon could practically hear her teeth grinding together. “So, this is the guy you brought instead of me. I’m sorry you downgraded.”

Landon’s lips quirked. This guy was half drunk, and while he appeared good looking, his roving eyes said he wasn’t faithful and the nickname he used that was clearly unwanted showed he wasn’t respectful. Landon dismissed the guy instantly.

“Would you like to get a drink with me?” Landon asked Kate, ignoring the peacock trying to get their attention.

“I would love that.”

Kate laced her arm through his and he turned to escort her toward the bar when he felt Kate being pulled away. Landon looked over to see the guy with his hand on Kate’s arm.

Nice was the last adjective to describe what Landon was feeling right now. Landon reached over and grabbed the man’s hand, forcibly removing it from Kate and placing her behind him. “Touch her again and I’ll break every bone in your hand,” Landon whispered the threat with no emotion in his voice because he felt every word of it. He saw the red mark where the man had grabbed Kate already forming on her arm.

“I’d like to see you try. Do you know who I am?”

“No fucking clue. But let me tell you who I am. I’m Kate’s boyfriend and if you touch her again, I’ll end you.”

“We know a lot of places where your body will never be found,” Colton said matter-of-factly as he came up to stand next to Landon.

“And I have diplomatic immunity,” Nash said coolly, joining them as well.

“I have a gun that will melt you and leave no evidence behind except for a puddle of goo.” Landon’s lips quirked as his sister leveled a very real threat. “This is your second strike, *bro*. You get a third and I turn you into tapioca pudding.”

“Hey. Kate, right? I thought I would introduce myself again. I know we didn’t get to talk much the other day.” Landon turned to see a man around the same age as the one being threatened, but he didn’t look sleazy. He looked nice.

The man being threatened yanked his hand from Landon’s grip and stormed off.

“Hi. I’m Tripp Werner of Rich Brauen Beer.”

He shook Kate’s hand and then Kate introduced him around. Landon made small talk with the beer giant as some other men joined and Kate introduced them around as sponsors.

“Miss Ellington, would you like to dance?” A dark-haired man who reminded Landon slightly of Sebastian, except with blue eyes, asked.

Kate glanced at Landon and Landon smiled at her. He wasn’t going to tell her who she could dance with. He was just happy that she hadn’t run when he’d called himself her boyfriend.

“Ah, I see you met my friend.”

Landon and everyone around quieted down as Sebastian Abel and his wife, Greer, joined them. “Who is he?” Landon asked.

“Nico Saccone from New York. He’s a pet project between Ryker and me. I believe he’s also invested heavily in the Thoroughbreds with the development of an online gambling site.”

“Of course. That’s who he is. I didn’t make the connection,” Landon said. He was the one who had rescued Kate. She’d told him about Nico, and Landon couldn’t wait to thank him for his kindness. Plus, if he was friends with Sebastian and Ryker, he was practically family. However, Landon didn’t particularly like the way he looked at Kate, but he noticed Kate was not returning the same look. In fact, she had glanced over at Landon and smiled.

“I see my grandmother. I’ll be right back.” Landon excused himself right as the song ended. Kate hadn’t seen where he’d gone so she was heading back to their table. Sophie would introduce her while he was gone.

“Mr. Saccone,” Landon heard his grandmother call Nico over in her *you’re going to be in trouble* voice. Nico turned and smiled at Landon’s grandmother. “I’m Marcy Davies. I’ve heard you’re a reasonable young man trying to right the wrongs of the past.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Nico said politely, slightly confused as to why he’d been called over and how this old lady apparently knew about his past—a past Landon was now very interested in.

“Good, then you’ll understand this. That girl isn’t for you.” Marcy Davies’s sharp-eyed gaze was clear, her tone of voice even clearer.

“Excuse me?” Nico was no longer smiling.

“Kate Ellington is not for you. She’s for my grandson and if you mess this up for me, I will make your grandfather seem like a cuddly old teddy bear.”

“You do know my family then? Most people don’t threaten me after knowing that.” Now, seeing the surprise on Nico’s face, Landon was really wondering just who and what the Saccone family might be.

“Oh child, as if a New York mob boss has anything on a Southern grandma trying to find love matches for her grandchildren so she can die happy.”

Mob? Landon was about to charge forward when Nico's lips turned up into a slow smile. "I'm guessing it's akin to the evil eye my Italian grandmother uses to threaten people."

Marcy patted his hand kindly. "Exactly. Now, if you drop the longing stares and the handsy dancing, I'll send you over a nice apple pie with my thanks."

"Deal," Nico said quickly. "But you were never in danger, Mrs. Davies. Miss Ellington only has eyes for your grandson. I know a thing or two about bets and I knew I would be on the losing end." Nico said to Landon's grandmother, but he was looking right at Landon when he said it. Landon gave him a slight nod of his chin and Nico did the same. A silent agreement between the two men.

Landon waited a moment for Nico to walk off before approaching his grandmother. He gave her a kiss on the cheek, understanding now that she played a bigger role in all of this than anyone realized. All because she loved her family. "Hi, Grandma. You look lovely tonight."

"Oh, pish-posh. You look so handsome and that nice sweet Kate looks so pretty on your arm. You should ask her to dance, especially since your mother and father have her cornered. I'd hate to miss the fireworks tomorrow at family dinner if they get to know her tonight."

Landon quickly kissed his grandmother on the cheek and hurried back to Kate. "Mom, Dad." Landon kissed his mother and noted the slightly shell-shocked expression on Kate's face.

"We're just talking with your . . ." Annie Davies, Landon's mother, turned to look at Kate. "I don't know what to call you. Friend? Girlfriend? Friend with benefits?"

"Mom!" Landon gasped as Colton laughed so hard he lost half his drink down the wrong pipe and started choking.

Kate looked at Landon. "Girlfriend?" she said with a bit of question in their tone. Since they hadn't discussed it yet, but thanks to outside forces, they were making that jump tonight.

"Are you sure about that?" Cade, his father asked.

“Yes, she’s my girlfriend,” Landon cut in, saving Kate from having to answer. “Are you all happy now?”

His mother beamed. His father placed a bet on his phone.

“Would you like to dance?” Landon asked Kate, hoping the dance floor would be safe.

“I’d love to.” She did an admirable job hiding the relief from her voice as they walked out onto the floor and he pulled her in for a slow dance. “What is he doing here?” Kate suddenly tightened her grip on his hand. “There are children present and that man should not be here.”

“Who?” Landon spun to see who Kate was looking at before she turned back to Landon.

“And why does he have a giant sword?”

Landon couldn’t contain his laughter as Draven sauntered towards them, cool as a cucumber.

“Oh gosh. He’s coming this way,” Kate was frantic. “You wouldn’t believe what I saw him do the other day.”

“Oh, I can guess,” Landon said as he tried to calm himself so he wasn’t laughing quite so hard by the time Draven made it over to them.

“Landon. Lady I don’t know,” Draven said with a slight bow of his head to Kate. “I have to thank you both for helping me with my jewel problem. My waxer has attached beautiful purple garnets that are supposed to inspire love and sex while giving off a very royal feeling with the purple glow. To say thank you, I have these for you.”

Draven reached into his pocket and pulled out two jewelry cases. “For you, lady I don’t know.”

Kate hesitantly reached out and took the slim case. She opened it and revealed a beautiful dark royal purple garnet pendent necklace. “Thank you, strange naked man.”

Draven found her response amusing and chuckled as he handed a box to Landon. Landon opened it and found a pair of purple garnet cufflinks. “Thank you, Draven. Would you like to meet my girlfriend?”

Draven's face lit up. "Of course she's your girlfriend. You both have good taste in jewels." He turned around to catch his wife's eye and motioned her over.

Landon could see Kate was confused when Addison came over. She looked lovely in a stunning gown, her updo topped by a tiara made of diamonds and possibly more purple garnets. "Kate Ellington, meet their majesties, Draven and Addison, King and Queen of Bermalia."

"Shut the front door!" Kate burst out and immediately slapped a hand over her mouth, horrified, as Addison laughed.

Draven looked toward the door of the gala and frowned. "I do believe the front door is closed. Should I have someone check?"

Addison laughed harder. "It's a southern saying. It means she's surprised," Addison told her husband.

"Oh, like when I found out they're boyfriend and girlfriend?" Draven asked his wife.

"Shut the front door! You made it official? Damn, I don't have my phone on me to place a bet. How am I the last to know this?" Addison looked around wildly and motioned to a man in a black suit who rushed forward and handed her a phone. A second later, Landon felt the vibration of a notification that a bet had been placed on the Blossom Café app.

"I'm so confused right now," Kate whispered to him.

"Addison and I grew up together. Draven met her when he was visiting Mo. The rest is history. Now they live and rule in Bermalia, but visit Keeneston often to see all of us," Landon explained as Draven told Addison how they helped him choose the purple garnets to adorn his own jewels.

Addison groaned. "Please tell me you haven't been showing everyone your balls? Dray, you are not to flash them around anymore, especially when they look like a disco ball. I should never have let you hire the waxer from that trophy wife reality show."

Landon saw Kate bite her lip as she took several deep breaths. Addison must have, too. “Just laugh. It’s okay. Heaven knows I did. Did you see the diamonds? I had the sudden desire to listen to disco and go roller skating.” Addison glanced behind Kate and nodded. “The governor is signaling us. I guess it’s time for me to make my speech. It was a real pleasure to meet you. Landon is a good one. You’re very lucky.”

“It was really nice meeting you too.” Kate turned to Landon the second the couple left them. “He’s seriously a king? He was running around naked on the farm with his sword, um, swords. What kind of king does that?”

“The kind who had a gold cast made of his royal member and manufactured dildos from it. My understanding is the sale of them helped rebuild a small city that had suffered from his father’s negligence toward his people. For as unconventional as Draven seems, he’s a great king and Addison is his perfect opposite. They complement each other so well that the country is beginning to thrive. Draven isn’t above learning and several world leaders, including Mo, have helped him learn how to be a good king after his father died when Draven was still young. Now, enough about Draven’s jewels. How about we grab a drink and dance some more?”

Kate placed her hand in the crook of his elbow that he’d offered her and smiled. “That sounds wonderful. I’m not a big dancer, but I like dancing with you.”

“I also like having you in my arms. If you couldn’t tell from how many times we’ve already slept together.”

He loved the way Kate blushed. He loved it even more that he knew it was from good memories and not embarrassment by the way she licked her lips as if hoping he’d kiss her right here and now. Oh, he had plans for kissing Kate tonight, but it wouldn’t be in front of everyone. Now, exactly how soon could they leave?

Landon and Kate danced to every slow song. She introduced him to the coaches and players he didn’t already know and he

got to see the ones he already knew. Finally, the first group of people started to leave.

“Would you like to go home now?”

Kate looked to the door as several elderly couples headed home. Then she yawned. “I am tired. It’s so late. We should get home.”

We and home. Landon loved hearing those words together. He laced his fingers through hers as they snuck out of the gala. The incessant buzzing of Blossom Café betting notifications let him know he had not succeeded in leaving undetected.

They walked into the night air that was still warm and humid. “I’m in the parking garage across the street.” Landon turned to tell Kate and from the shadows of the building, a figure emerged. He was hooded, but didn’t approach them.

Kate was looking at the countdown to cross the street ahead of her and didn’t see the man. The second the light changed, Kate stepped into the street. She tugged his hand, not realizing Landon hadn’t moved when a car engine roared and a car with no lights on barreled toward her in the crosswalk.

Landon didn’t even have time to yell her name. He yanked her arm back so hard she stumbled back and practically flew into his arms. Landon wrapped his arms around her to protect her as he fell backward. He exhaled to keep from losing his breath, knowing he was going to hit the cement hard. The hit came with the added force of Kate in his arms. Landon blinked several times and took a deep breath after the impact. The hooded man stood over them as people began to shout and run toward them. Landon looked up into a face covered with a black mask that gave the man the appearance that he was faceless.

“He won’t always be here to protect you. You know what you need to do. Your time is running out,” he whispered harshly to Kate even as Landon rolled to the side, putting his back to the man to protect Kate the best he could.

When Landon glanced back, the man darted across the street and disappeared into the shadows.

Landon fought the impulse to chase after him as he felt Kate shaking in his arms. “Are you hurt?” Landon asked even as people appeared around them to help them up. Someone was calling the police, but Landon would text Ryan as soon as he knew Kate wasn’t hurt.

“I’m fine thanks to you. But how are you? I fell on you.”

“I’ve been told I have a hard head. I’m fine.”

People were converging on them as Landon sent a text to Ryan. A doctor was flashing a light in his eyes checking his head when Ryan appeared. Spending the evening getting examined, recounting the story to Ryan, and trying to avoid the Keeneston gossip tree was not how Landon envisioned this romantic evening going.

Kate didn't think her heart settled until they'd reached Keeneston. She calmed down the second they turned onto Main Street. The town was a balm to her frayed nerves.

"Do you mind if we stop at my house quickly?" Landon asked. "I'd like to change clothes and then I can drive you home."

Landon hadn't said anything, but Kate had seen blood on the white collar of his dress shirt. He'd been injured protecting her—again. "I realized tonight that we'd never talked about us, but tonight we announced we were dating."

Landon winced as he turned left onto his street. "I'm sorry. I should have asked you first."

"I'd been worried about dating someone. If you'd have asked, I would have said no. I would have claimed to be too busy and that time was wrong. However, I also realized tonight that we are already dating." Kate smiled at him so he knew she wasn't upset about it. "It just feels so . . ."

"Natural?" Landon supplied, sounding hopeful.

Kate nodded. "It feels right. It just happened and I don't want it to change. You've become someone very important to me. Obviously, I feel safe with you, but I can't imagine you not being on the other end of the phone or not talking with you at night. How is it possible that after two nights of accidentally falling asleep together, I can't imagine you not next to me when I go to sleep tonight? I guess I'm just wondering if I've read too much into this or if you feel the same."

Landon pulled into the driveway. “You haven’t read into anything, except that I feel the same way. I was trying to figure out a way to ask you if I could spend the night with you again. I hate the idea of not holding you in my arms tonight.”

“You don’t need to ask. I want you with me every night. Now, want to show me around?”

Landon got out of the car and unlocked the front door. The house was an old two-story brick house, with a brick pathway leading up to the front door. A giant red maple tree stood stoic in the front yard with a magnolia tree that bloomed all spring every year on the opposite side of the yard, closer to the house.

Kate took in the living room, dining room, office, and gigantic kitchen on the first floor. The interior of the house was done in whites and pale grays with accents of navy blue. It was all clean lines, yet comfortable and relaxed. Kate hated to admit it, but being single and moving as much as she did, she lived more like a college student. Two-bedroom apartments closest to the stadiums had been her go-to living arrangements since she was in college.

“Feel free to look around. There are four bedrooms upstairs, way more than I need, but I loved the house and didn’t want to pass it up when it went on the market last year. I’ll be right back.”

Kate watched Landon walk up the old carved-wood staircase and then looked around more closely. She stepped into the living room and looked at the pictures Landon had in frames. There was a picture of him, Colton, and Sophie. There was a picture of him holding the cutest baby that had Nash’s dark hair and Sophie’s hazel eyes. Food magazines were tossed on the coffee table. A basketball was sitting in the corner next to a duffle bag. It was comfortable and it was Landon. Sometimes she’d gone into a date’s house and wonder, *who is this person?* Not here. Everything about this house fit Landon.

“Let me just grab something from the kitchen and I’ll be ready.” Landon dropped a duffle bag at the bottom of the stairs

before turning down the hall and heading into the kitchen. A minute later he came out carrying another bag. "Ready?"

Kate had the weekend off and a sexy gentleman wanting to take her home. Hell yes, she was ready.

Kate unlocked the door to her cottage, but when she went to go inside, Landon didn't follow. She turned to see that Landon had set his bags down and was watching her. "Is everything okay?"

"Well, it was a fun night until my parents interrogated you and you were almost run over. I was sort of hoping for a goodnight kiss."

Kate walked back to him and pretended to think about it. "No."

She almost laughed at Landon's surprised reaction. "No?"

"That's right. I don't want a goodnight kiss. I want a kiss now and more later and then a good morning kiss, too."

Landon's lips tilted up into a sexy smile that showed a little of mischievousness that she'd been told he'd had as a teen. It was a look that made her stomach flip and her pulse pound. "Yes, ma'am."

Landon slid his hand to the nape of her neck and Kate's pulse skyrocketed as his thumb traced her bottom lip a moment before his lips met hers. It started off slow and so damn sensual that Kate couldn't stand it anymore. No more short runs. She wanted the touchdown.

Kate grabbed his shirt, feeling the hard muscle underneath her fingers and she curled them into the cotton material. She pressed her body against his, tilted her hips in just the right way to tease him, and then the gentlemanly restraint snapped. Landon had been kind, caring, and protective. He'd never pushed for anything, until now. That tilt of her hips that cradled him perfectly pushed him over the edge and Kate felt victorious.

Landon's hands speared into her hair, sending the bobby pins of Nora's hard work scattering across her floor. His tongue plunged into her mouth, no longer teasing but demanding. And Kate was happy to meet that demand.

Hands touched, grabbed, and stripped each other as they stumbled back to her bedroom. Their kisses broke only long enough to pull the shirt over Landon's head and then they were together again, each press of the lips, caress of the tongue, deeper, harder than before.

Kate's body reacted. Her mind was firing sparks of pleasure as Landon's hands, lips, and tongue covered her. All she heard was her own heavy breathing, the cries of pleasure when Landon touched just the right spot. Then begging came from her lips in an unconscious stream of words, but Landon had no trouble understanding her. Kate opened her eyes when he pulled his lips from her body and looked up at him. Landon's hair was tousled from where she's been grabbing him. His lips were swollen from their kissing. He was breathing hard and the look of desire matched hers.

"I have to warn you," Landon said, trying to stop his hands from touching her as he spoke, but failing, "if we do this, there's no getting out of family dinner tomorrow."

"I love family dinner."

"You've never had a family dinner like this before," Landon warned.

"And you've never had a woman like me before."

Kate felt so sexy and powerful when Landon groaned and reached for a condom. Then Kate forgot all about family dinner, breathing, or anything else except for the kaleidoscope of colors bursting behind her eyes as Landon took her in a way that was most definitely not described as gentlemanly.



Kate woke up with a smile still on her face. She'd kicked off the covers during the night and was half on top of Landon.

Wow. Just thinking about last night made her happy and thinking about things she'd never thought of before. Mainly, a future with someone she loved.

Kate blinked as she rolled the word love around in her head. It seemed to fill up her heart and leave her feeling like a warm blanket covered her. It felt right. She loved him. Kate almost laughed out loud. She'd had relationships before and even after months with someone else, she'd never felt like this. And now, at the worst possible time, she found love.

She had a new job. She had a family dinner that everyone was freaking out about for some reason. She had someone after her to put her career on the line with illegal gambling. She had a temperamental QB she was turning around. She had a sponsor who was a dick and creating headaches for her at work. And somehow, through all this, she and Landon had found each other.

Kate looked at his face. He needed a shave, although the scruff made him look incredibly sexy. Landon was everything she could dream of. He made her feel supported, safe, sexy, and important. He made her feel loved. The question was what was she going to do about it when everything else seemed to be working against her?

Kate flashed back to the moment she'd been twelve and her parents' jobs had been threatened all because she played football. She'd done the hardest thing in her life. She'd backed away from something she loved—football. She'd done it to protect someone she loved. Would the adult Kate handle that situation the same? Would she walk away from someone she loved in order to protect something she worked hard for?

Kate sat up in bed. No. She wouldn't. She was going to fight. For her job and for Landon. Timing didn't matter to her anymore or maybe the timing was perfect, after all. She had love and she had the job of her dreams. Someone was threatening that happiness and she wasn't going to take it sitting down. She wasn't going to take a step back to soothe male egos. Landon had saved her twice. It was time she fought for herself. Yes, it felt great having Landon's support, but she had never been any kind of damsel in distress before and she

sure as hell wasn't going to sit back and do nothing when everyone around her was trying to help her. That wasn't her style. Kate had worked hard and never backed down from a challenge. That was the only way she had made it to where she was today.

Kate slid from the bed and tugged on a pair of black athletic leggings with the Thoroughbreds logo on her hip. She silently dressed in her workout gear and slipped from her house as the sun rose over the farm.

She was a little late when she pushed the button by the door.

"Can I help you?" the voice asked over the intercom.

"I'm Kate Ellington. Nash invited me to workout with him. I'm a little late. Is he still here?"

The door buzzed open and she was met by a guard. "This way, ma'am." She followed him through an open office center with large screens and then down the stairs into the basement. "Right through those doors."

"Thank you."

Kate squared her shoulders. She heard the sound of men's voices and the grunts of people working out. She could do this. Kate pushed open the doors and walked inside. Soldiers were working out on weights. Nash was leaning against a boxing ring calling out instructions to the two shirtless men in the ring who were going at it. They looked similar in their dark looks, but not identical.

"Time," one of them said as his blue eyes, such a contrast to his black hair, zeroed in on Kate. "Can I help you?"

Nash turned, and while he looked surprised to see her, he quickly waved her over. "Kate. I'm so glad you're here. Are you looking for me?"

Kate nodded. "You know about last night. I need to be able to defend myself. I want to be able to defend Landon. I want to be able to defend my team. And I want to know why everyone is freaking out over dinner with the Davies family."

The two men in the ring let out a low whistle. “I’ve heard those dinners are brutal,” the one who had spotted her first said.

The other man nodded. “I’ve heard SEAL training is easier.”

“It’s true,” Nash told her. “Kate Ellington, meet Zain and Gabe Ali Rahman.”

The names clicked into place. “You’re Prince Mo’s sons.”

“Yup,” Gabe said.

“We’ve heard all about you.” Zain grinned.

“You have?” Kate didn’t know if it was a good thing or bad.

“Of course. Everyone is talking about you. The football fans in Keeneston are all discussing who will be the starting quarterback and the gossips are all discussing if you’re good enough for Landon. If you haven’t figured it out, he and Jace are the resident nice guys. The town is pretty protective of them.”

“Well, I’m here so I can be worthy of him.” Kate took a deep breath and turned to Nash. “Will you help me?”

“I’ve been preparing for this day for years.” Nash pulled out his phone and sent a text.

Twenty minutes later more than a dozen people encircled the large black padded mats where Nash stood by Kate’s side. “Kate, meet the in-laws. You already know Deacon and Sienna. This is Sienna’s brother, Carter. Then there’s Evie, Sebastian, Camila, Walker, Aiden, Abby, Stella, Matt, and the newest, Willa and her best friend, Tilly.”

Kate blinked at the billionaire, the socialite, and a very pregnant woman who came with her own bodyguard. Why the bodyguard had a fifty-pound, shorthaired red dog strapped to his chest in a baby sling, she had no idea.

“I’m Abby. Dylan is my husband,” the pregnant woman said, holding out her hand. “And this is my father, Ahmed. And his dog, Nemi.”

“Is Nemi injured?” Kate asked Abby after the introduction.

Abby rolled her eyes. “No. She just likes being carried. Nemi believes she’s a princess and my father believes she is, too. Don’t let her fool you. She’s faster than a bullet and smarter than most of us. She just happens to be very, very spoiled.”

“Camila, Evie, and I are here for moral support,” Abby added. “We’re all pregnant, so hand to hand combat isn’t really advisable for us.”

Camila and Evie nodded. “But we can give you some great advice,” Evie told her cheerfully.

“I’m here because, well, they’re my friends.” Sebastian nodded to the group even though it sounded as if the admission was painfully ripped from his tongue. “And I think you’re a good coach.”

“Thanks.” Kate felt like laughing, but the uncomfortable look on Sebastian’s face told her he was very serious and probably didn’t like being laughed at.

“We’re not what you call experts. We’re what you’d call Davies family dinner survivors,” Stella said, pointing to herself, Tilly, and Willa. “But we are here to support you in anything you need.”

“We’re the team here to help,” Nash said as Walker, Aiden, and Matt stepped forward. “Let’s start with how to throw a punch.”

“I’m seriously going to have to punch someone?” Kate asked, horrified.

“Probably Sophie,” Abby told her. “The siblings usually claim the hand-to-hand portion of the test.”

“What kind of family dinner is this?”

“Honestly, the best,” Matt said. “It’s the worst kind of hazing, but the bonding that comes from it is . . . well, it’s why Sebastian showed up. That should explain everything.”

“I have to agree,” Tilly said. “Make it your own. The family just wants to see that you’ll fight for your love. It’s

really a lot like summer camp. You hate the obstacle course, but then you all get together and laugh about it after you make it through.”

“Well, I want to be with Landon and I want to make sure I can protect myself if I get attacked again, so let’s do this.”

“Wait,” Ahmed said, unstrapping the dog from his chest. “You were attacked? Why am I just hearing about this?”

“Because you’ve been too glued to my health tracker to notice anything else going on around you,” Abby said, rolling her eyes at him.

“Well then. Let’s get to work.” Ahmed grabbed Kate’s hand and with a quick twist spun her around and had her in a chokehold.

Kate almost panicked, but Matt, Aiden, Walker, and Nash were there, teaching her how to get out of it. When their instruction was too hard to understand, Abby stepped in to explain it better. By the time she left two hours later, she was drenched with sweat and her muscles were sore, but she felt alive. She felt knowledgeable. She felt powerful.

Kate walked back to her cottage with a big smile on her face and an appointment for another in-law lesson tomorrow, only this time with fewer in-laws. They’d all given her moral support and promised to help her tonight. Carter and Stella had broken down the events well and Tilly helped her refine them to showcase Kate’s strengths. Now, Kate fully understood what she was walking into and it wasn’t any different from what the freshmen or rookies went through. It was team building and she could kick team building ass.

Kate sniffed the air as the smell of sausage wafted from her house. Kate opened the door and Landon turned with a plate of food in his hand. “I heard you were on your way back, so I thought I would make breakfast. How was your workout?”

“Workout?”

“Yeah. Nash said you’d asked him to show you the gym so you could work out someplace besides the stadium.”

Bless Nash's heart. She totally understood why Sebastian showed up. These were all good people. "It was great. Can't you tell by how sweaty I am?"

"You're not sweating. You're glowing."

Kate laughed as she sat down at the table. Landon took the seat across from her. They talked, laughed, and Kate wanted this every day, forever. Landon stood to do the dishes, but Kate stopped him. "You cooked. I'll clean."

"Are you sure?" Landon asked.

"I'm sure. Besides, you have brunch to get ready for. I'll see you tonight though. For family dinner."

"About that. I feel as if I need to explain."

Kate rose up on her toes and kissed him. "No explanation necessary. I can't wait for tonight."

Landon paled. Then he took a deep breath before confessing, "Kate, I have done some truly horrible things to the guys my sister brought home. Sophie has been waiting years to get payback. This isn't a warm and fuzzy dinner. I mean it is, *after*. That is if you make it to after. And, well," Landon looked nervous as he ran his hand through his hair, "I don't want my family to mess up the best thing that has ever happened to me. That's you, by the way. In case I wasn't clear."

"You're the best thing that's happened to me too. No dinner will change that."

"Are you sure I should leave? You can come to work with me if you don't want to be alone." Landon still held her against him as if he didn't want to let her go.

"I'll be fine. I'm going to get some work done here on the farm and Ahmed said he wanted to stop by with his wife after lunch."

"Oh, then I definitely don't need to worry."

"Ahmed is pretty scary." Kate chuckled at the badass dog dad.

“Yeah, but I was talking about Bridget.” Landon stopped her laugh with a kiss. “Call me if you need anything.”

“You call me if you need anything,” Kate called out as Landon walked toward the front door.

Landon turned and gave her a smirk. “Good to know you’ll come if I call.” The innuendo was clear as his eyes devoured her.

Holy. Smokes.

Kate was so immersed in watching video from the past practice she didn't hear the knock on the door. She was sitting on the couch, her notepad on the table in front of her, elbows on her knees as she watched Jordan throw pass after pass.

Slurp

Kate yelped and fell back onto the couch, scrambling away from the sudden wetness on her cheek. She stared at the spot on the couch next to her where a rust-colored dog sat, tongue hanging out the side of his mouth. His matching rust-brown colored eyes looked back at her happily and he smiled. The dog freaking smiled at her.

“Coach?” she heard a voice call from out front.

Kate didn't recognize the female voice, but she got up, keeping her eye on the dog as she moved toward the door. The dog cocked his head to one side as if he were amused by Kate's actions. He might have laughed. She couldn't tell, but there was something in his look that said he was highly amused by her.

Kate unlocked the door and opened it, keeping her eye on the dog still sitting on the couch. He thumped his tail as if to mock how stunned she was. “Who are you?”

“I'm Bridget. You worked out with my husband, Ahmed, this morning. I tried knocking, but no one answered. I sent Rip in through the bedroom window to get your attention.”

“Rip?” Kate looked around for a man, but only saw the dog grinning at her.

“Rip, *komen*.”

The red dog leaped over the back of the couch. He slammed his butt on the hardwood while running so that he skidded to a seated stop right in front of Bridget. “This is Rip.” Bridget looked behind her and saw Ahmed walking toward them off in the distance. “I call him Robert since his granddad was Bob, but my husband didn’t think that was intimidating enough. I suggest Bert as a nickname, but my husband secretly took Robert in the mornings and trained him to recognize Rip. He did the same with our daughter so she’d say dada first.” Bridget rolled her eyes and Kate had to smother a laugh.

Rip’s tail thumped against the floor as if laughing along with her. Rip looked over at Kate and lifted his paw, placing it on her leg. Aww, Rip still seemed part puppy and his butt wiggled even as he kept it glued to the floor.

“You’re still a good boy, aren’t you? Up!” Bridget held her arms open and Rip launched himself off the floor and up into her arms.

“I see this breed likes to be carried,” Kate said, stepping aside to escort Bridget inside.

“Vizslas do think humans are here to serve them. However, I brought Rip for a reason. Ahmed told me about the incident after the gala. Rip is first and foremost a trained therapy dog since he couldn’t cut it in military training. Bless his heart. He’s just too much of a goober. He’s smart enough, brave enough even. He just chose not to. He had another calling in life.”

“And what calling was that?”

“Anything that involves a couch and a bed.”

Rip saw Ahmed enter the open door and, in an incredible act of agility, leaped over Bridget’s shoulder and into Ahmed’s arms. Bridget rolled her eyes and Kate laughed. “I like him. He’s got personality.”

“And then some,” Ahmed said, carrying the dog over to where the women had taken seats in the living room. “It’s why I thought of him for you.”

“For me?” Kate asked. She’d never had a dog. Her parents were too busy for one, as was she. “I can’t take care of a dog. I’m never at home.”

“Yes, but he’s trained to go with you. He has all the certifications as a therapy dog and I bet you could use him with your players in that role,” Bridget told her.

“You think I need a therapy dog?” Kate asked even as Rip jumped onto the couch and lay down, resting his head on her leg. Okay, so he was really sweet.

“No. I think you need a personal protection dog. Rip is trained in that too. It’s just not his passion. I won’t make a dog do anything they don’t love. Now, doing it for someone he loves and doing it for a job are two different things. I think he’d keep you safe and make anyone think twice about attacking you. Plus, Will’s already agreed that Rip can come with you to the stadium every day. Therapy dogs don’t have the same ADA rights of access that service dogs do but they can go anywhere they’re invited.”

Kate looked down at Rip. He did look like a Robert more than a Rip. “Will he answer to Robert, too?”

“Think of using Robert like a mother throwing in the middle name when she’s upset. It grabs his attention big time. So yes, he’ll respond to it, but save it for emergencies.”

“What about away games?” Kate asked as Rip began to snore.

“We’ll take care of him for any away games or anytime you need a sitter, even if it’s just for the day. He can come to the military training facility with me and I can keep him sharp on his training. I thought, if you wanted him, you could see how y’all get along this afternoon, then I’ll pick him up tonight before your big family dinner—bless your heart—and bring him back in the morning with all his things. What do you think?” Bridget asked.

“I’ll include one of my extra doggy-slings if you’d like.” Kate swallowed hard, trying not to laugh at Ahmed’s serious offer.

“That’s very nice of you,” Kate said before looking down at the dog who was clearly more of a Robert than a Rip. He’d rolled over onto his back. His feet were in the air, and his jowls had flopped down to reveal shining, pearly white teeth as he snored. “I think I’ll take you up on that offer.”

“Great. Do you happen to know any Dutch?” Bridget asked as she stood up.

“Um, no.”

“He does okay with English commands. I’ll teach you some Dutch ones tomorrow. They’re mostly the attack commands.”

Kate swallowed. Would this goober of a dog really obey an attack command? She was just hoping his presence would be enough to scare someone away.



Landon was exhausted. Owning a restaurant was a lot more than just cooking. First, he’d arrived this morning to find his front window broken. After an emergency call, and a ton of money, the window was replaced, both a police report and an insurance claim were filed. Then it was on to management of the staff and more business details than he could count. Brunch had been packed and dinner was fully reserved, which was all excellent news. However, a sold out restaurant didn’t get him out of family dinner where his girlfriend was being introduced. That’s one of the many things Bryce was there for—to step in for Landon when family called.

He’d meant to have more time alone with Kate before dinner to go over who was who and emergency exits. As it was, they’d both lost track of time. Now he was driving at full speed down the dirt road to his grandparents’ farmhouse while Kate tried to put on makeup. When he came to pick her up,

she'd been lost in reviewing game film. Meaning they were both discombobulated tonight and not for fun reasons.

“Just remember they smell fear like sharks smell blood.” Landon slammed on the brakes, causing Kate's lipstick to slide across her cheek and up to her ear instead of over her lips.

Kate was frantically wiping off her cheek when his grandma and grandpa came out onto the porch. “Time's up. We can still make a run for it. They look all sweet and old. And while they are, they're hiding the horrors inside.”

“Trust me. If I can handle Texans after a Friday night loss, I can handle a family dinner.”

“There's a window in the bathroom if you need an emergency escape. Also, try to stay away from my sister,” Landon whispered as he led her up the stairs. “Grandma, you already know Kate. Grandpa, this is Kate Ellington. Kate, this is my Grandpa Jake.”

Kate shook his grandfather's hand but before she could say anything, a loud curse word rang through the air and then Dylan came out on the porch, looking sheepish. “Sorry about that. Abby was told eating something spicy would hurry along labor. When she didn't even flinch at the jalapeno pepper, I gave her a habanero. She tasted that one.”

His grandmother frowned. “She's tried every one of the old wives' tales I know.”

“My turn,” Grandpa Jake said, motioning for Dylan to follow him as they headed to the storage barn.

“I don't like the look of that, but my bet is blown and I just want to see my great-grandbaby.”

“What bet?” Kate asked his grandmother in all innocence.

“Oh, we tend to place bets on things here and there. Like a baby's due date,” Grandma Marcy said casually as she opened the door to the house. What she'd left off was they'd also already placed bets on when Landon would get together with Kate—both engagement and wedding date bets were thriving so much that Landon had to turn off the notifications to the Blossom Café Betting App.

He smiled at Abby, who was pacing the room with Piper and Greer on either side of her. Landon didn't stop there though. He led Kate over to his closest friends first. Jace and his wife, Stella. Colton, even if he was a pain in the ass of an older brother. Porter and his wife, Willa. And then the other newlyweds, Parker and his wife, Tilly.

"You already know each other?" Landon asked with confusion as Stella, Willa, and Tilly hugged Kate as if they'd already met.

"Hmm?" Stella murmured innocently, but she wasn't a good liar. It was clear they already knew each other.

"Oh, here's Cassidy. You haven't met her yet. She's the youngest of the Davies cousins, other than her sister, Cricket, who was a late-in-life surprise," Willa said, distracting them all as Cassidy joined them.

Landon introduced them and luckily Cassidy seemed to like Kate. Hopefully that meant she'd go easy on her tonight. "Know anything about shooting a bow?" Cassidy asked Kate.

"This family has some kind of obsession about shooting, don't you? I feel as if I need to wear a button that says 'I grew up in Texas.' I can shoot just about anything. Gun, bow, slingshot . . . you name it, I've shot it."

"This might be fun then," Cassidy said cryptically. Landon knew that tone. Cassidy was highly competitive and that just meant she'd up her game tonight. "So, I got a job offer and I don't know if I want to take it. I need to talk to y'all about it tonight. But I'll wait until later."

Hmm. Something was up with this job and it was clear Cassidy wanted it in the family only. He glanced at Kate and saw that she'd picked up on it. He hoped she wasn't insulted about being left out.

"What do you do?" Kate asked.

"I speak a lot of languages," Cassidy answered vaguely.

"Very cool." Kate glanced around and smiled at Landon's parents. "I better go say hi to your parents. I think your dad was upset we didn't get to talk much football at the gala."

Landon was about to go with her when she turned and placed her hand on his arm. “Stay and catch up with your cousins. I’m sure since there’s so many it’s hard to get time with each of them.” Kate chuckled and walked away. It was a houseful.

“Wow, that was nice of her. I didn’t mean to run her off. She doesn’t seem upset,” Cassidy said, watching Kate walk across the packed room to greet his parents. “I might go easy on her now.”

“So, what’s the job?” Porter asked.

“I got a visit this morning from a friend of yours,” Cassidy said to Porter and Parker. “One Agent Naylor of the CIA.”

This wasn’t one of her normal translator or interpreter jobs. This was serious. Agent Naylor was in charge of undercover CIA agents.

“My favorite person,” Porter said dryly.

“What does he want with you?” Colton asked.

“He said he has a way for me to save the United States with my talented tongue.”

“Eww,” Willa said with a shiver of distaste.

“He’s such an ass,” Porter muttered.

“He wants me to meet him next week. He left me a message. How far would I go to save my country and my family?” Cassidy sighed. “I think you all know the answer to that.”

“There’s nothing we’d not do to save our family,” Landon said, glancing to where Kate was laughing with his dad.

Suddenly the front door banged open and a murderous clown straight out of a horror movie charged in right as Abby was walking by the door. The clown had a white face with red and black makeup around his eyes, nose, and mouth. His hair was a rainbow poof. A dirty and faded clown ruffle collar was around his neck and red puff balls ran down his chest of the multi-colored jumpsuit. He was carrying a big mallet that had been painted white at some point. The paint was chipping and the ends of the mallet looked to be splattered with blood.

Abby didn't scream. Instead, before anyone moved or even screamed, she punched the clown in the face, sending him flying backward out the door.

"Dammit! You made me pee myself," Abby yelled at the clown as he slowly got up, shaking his head as if to clear it from the punch.

Then everyone jumped into action. The clown was yanked to his feet and when the wig was torn off, Abby screamed again. Only this time it wasn't at the clown. It was when she gripped her stomach.

"I don't believe it. It worked," the clown muttered in surprise.

Landon looked at the clown and saw his grandfather smiling behind him. "Told you it would," Grandpa Jake said as all eyes turned back to the clown.

"Dylan!" Abby said between clenched teeth. "Thank you so much. Finally!"

"You're welcome, sweetheart," Dylan wrenched himself free from where he was being held to put his arm around his wife. Some of his makeup was smudged from the punch she'd given him.

"Jake Davies! Did you do this?" Uh-oh. Grandma Marcy was *pissed*.

"It worked on you getting Pierce into this world. I thought it might work again." Grandpa Jake wasn't the least bit fearful as he sent a wink to Grandma Marcy. "Besides, your arthritis won't let you pick up the mallet to hit me again."

Grandma Marcy chuckled as Jace hurried to Abby's side, saying, "Dylan, go get changed and stop creeping us out while I check Abby out."

Landon joined his family as he put his arm about Kate. "I think you just got out of family dinner. You might be in without having to fight my sister."

Sophie rolled her eyes. "I like her already. I wouldn't have hurt her . . . much."

“Well, I know this was all to treat both sexes equally,” his mother started to say. “But I like her too. I mean, the woman can’t cook. But there’s one more thing. Kate, what’s your favorite Christmas movie?”

“Easy,” Kate said. “*Die Hard* and I’ll fight you if you say it’s not a Christmas movie.”

Annie put her hands over her heart. “She’s a daughter of my heart.”

“I get to talk football with her. I’m good,” Cade said with a wink to Kate. “I’m also assuming you’ll get your father and me on the sidelines. I bet that will be a lot of fun.”

“So, no one wants to see me shoot something?” Kate asked curiously.

“We’ll go shooting. Don’t worry. You’ll have time to practice so you don’t embarrass yourself,” Sophie told her.

Kate rolled her eyes. “I bet I could outshoot you.”

“Oh, it’s on. Next girls’ night. You, me, and a bunch of weapons and targets. Ever heard of an acid gun of death?” Sophie asked.

“No, but it sounds awesome.”

Landon watched as Sophie and Kate fell into a discussion about turning things into goo. Landon practically hummed with excitement. Kate was in.

“Okay,” Jace said, leading Abby out into the living room. “Time to go to the clinic. Abby is going to have this baby sooner rather than later and has opted to stay in town to deliver.”

Landon cocked his head. “Do I hear a helicopter?”

“It’s probably just Ahmed,” Jace said.

“Well, he’s not going to deny me the ability to see my grandchild born because he passes out and blocks the door,” Dylan’s mother, Tammy, said before grabbing Abby’s other arm.

Pierce, Dylan's father, came running through the front door. "Come on. I pulled the car around. Ahmed is still a minute from landing. Dylan, now!"

Dylan came running in from the kitchen with most of the makeup off his face and back into his regular jeans and a T-shirt. He didn't even slow down as he swooped his wife into his arms and sprinted down the steps to the car.

"Put my daughter down and step away from the vehicle!" Ahmed's voice called over a loudspeaker from the helicopter as it was lowering down.

"Can't hear you! Going to Jace's!" Dylan yelled back as he set Abby in the back of the SUV. The second he was in, Pierce was peeling out.

"Come on!" Marcy yelled. "I'll be damned if Ahmed gets there before me."

Landon grabbed Kate's arm and yanked her forward so she didn't get swallowed in the swell of the people running to their cars. "Births are a very big deal here. Everyone shows up. Jace's office isn't nearly as big as the hospital's lobby, so we have to get there before the rest of the town shows up."

"What's this about Ahmed blocking a door?" Kate asked once Landon was racing down the driveway.

"He's a super soldier but he faints anytime there's a birth—human, horse, dog—it doesn't matter. He's been known to fall down right at the door and one time the town had to crawl through a window because no one could open the door."

"This sure is an interesting town," Kate muttered as she held on tight.

"I wouldn't change it for the world."

"Neither would I. I'm thinking I might just want to live here instead of Lexington," Kate said before she let out a strangled curse as Landon took the turn out of the driveway and onto the main road on two wheels.

Kate followed the crowd of Davies family members into Jace's medical practice. Tammy and Pierce were Dylan's parents, and for now Pierce was standing guard at the exam room door while Abby, Dylan, and Tammy were inside waiting for Bridget, Abby's mom, to arrive.

The door to the lobby was pushed open and the Rose sisters were escorted in by someone Kate hadn't met yet. She was a beautiful Black woman with curves in all the right places packed into a small package. Her hair was pulled back with a silk headband that matched her pink earrings and lipstick. While everyone was happy and excited, this woman seemed unusually tense. There was a smile on her face, but it didn't reach her eyes. She ushered the Rose sisters up to the front where several of the Davies cousins gave up their seats for them. Then she took a step back, as if she wanted to disappear.

Kate glanced to her side and noticed that Landon was laughing with several of his cousins. She stood up and quietly made her way to the opposite side of the lobby. The woman looked up from where she was gripping her fingers and plastered on a forced smile. "Hello. You must be Kate. I've been hearing all about you."

"I am. This is quite the event, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes. This town loves them some babies." The woman's eyes dimmed before she shook her head just a bit as if to bring her back to the present. "I'm so rude. I'm Aniyah."

“It’s nice to meet you.” Kate turned and looked out the window when she heard a noise. “What’s that noise?”

“It’s probably Ahmed in his helicopter,” Aniyah said a moment before a loud noise came from the roof. “Yup, that would be Ahmed.”

The front door opened and Bridget ran in. She looked up at the sound of her husband running across the roof and shook her head. “I told him just to drive, but no.”

A moment later Ahmed ran into the room after Bridget arrived and everyone settled in for the wait. Kate met the town, but kept glancing over at Aniyah. Poppy and Zinnia brought food in for everyone, including the dinner that Marcy had made and the food Landon had also brought. It was a happy town picnic in a doctor’s office.

“It’s time!” Pierce yelled several hours later.

“Ahmed, get out! We can’t have you passing out and distracting Abby,” Tammy could be heard saying.

“I’m not leaving my baby. My baby is having a baby and she needs her dad. I’ve used a Swiss Army knife to perform surgery before. I can handle it.” Ahmed sounded very sure of it.

“When have you ever handled it?” Tammy asked. “Now, out. Let Abby focus.”

Kate saw the petite, fairy-like woman push Ahmed out the door. Everyone shrugged and went back to talking, but like Aniyah, Kate felt a pull to him. She thought he looked so sad when everyone else was excited. And while he was a tough and very scary man, he’d been nothing but kind to her. He carried a dog in a baby sling. He had to have a good heart.

“What’s the matter, Ahmed?” Kate asked quietly.

“It’s embarrassing,” Ahmed said as Cade and several uncles Kate had met joined them.

“He passes out at the slightest hint of birth,” Cade whispered to her.

“It’s just different when it’s someone you love,” Ahmed admitted.

“Ah. Do you know my quarterbacks have that problem too? Not with birth, but with starting the game. The crowd, the stress to perform, media, expectations, fear . . . it all comes to a head. It’s not uncommon for players to vomit on the sidelines because of nerves,” Kate told him.

“What do they do to get out onto the field?” Ahmed asked.

“We have a game plan. Each player knows their role and then executes their duties one play at a time.” Ahmed nodded so Kate went on. “Childbirth is like a football game. It’s a process of two halves. The labor and then the delivery. Each person has a position. The doctor is the quarterback, running the show. The nurse is the running back, ready to take a hand-off from the doctor and run with it. The grandmothers are like tight ends. They’re hybrid players filling the role of whatever their daughter needs. Then there’s the husband and you. You two are the offensive line protecting the mother to be. Dylan protects the ball, in this case, the baby. You protect your daughter while she’s giving birth. Your role is to protect, encourage, to calm, and to focus your daughter for the safe delivery of the ball to the quarterback.”

Ahmed looked at her and nodded. “That makes sense. I got this.”

“Hell yeah, you do.” Kate raised her voice to pump him up. “Who has this?”

“I have this!” Ahmed said louder.

“I can’t hear you. Who has this?” Kate asked, raising her voice louder as everyone quieted down and stared at her.

“I have this!” Ahmed yelled.

“Now, get in the game and focus on Abby. You’re there for support and protection. Here we go. Mind sharp. Eyes on the ball. This is the night that you make your stand and you get that touchdown,” Kate said, raising her voice as she finished her speech.

“Dad!” Abby yelled from inside the office.

“Focus, breathe, execute your role. Now, get in there!” Kate smacked Ahmed on the ass like she did her players, sending him into the delivery room.

Cade turned slowly to her and grinned. “Best almost daughter-in-law ever!”

Kate blinked. Whoa, daughter-in-law? She guessed she had passed the test. Landon joined her and slid his arm around her waist. “I guess I missed something but I heard that Ahmed has whatever this is.”

“She got Ahmed back into the game,” Cade told his son.

Kate talked with Landon and his family until suddenly the sound of a baby’s cry instantly quieted everyone. Kate glanced around and caught Aniyah sitting against the back wall with her head down while everyone else crammed as close to the door as possible. “Excuse me for a minute.”

Kate threaded her way through the crowd and took a seat next to Aniyah. She quietly reached over and took her hand in hers. She didn’t say anything as Aniyah cried silently. Kate simply held her hand.

Finally, Aniyah wiped the tears and took a deep breath. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Aniyah took a deep breath as the last of the tears dried. “I can’t believe I fell apart like this. I’m in a roomful of my closest friends, but I can’t seem to tell them what’s going on. I know they’d be there for me without me ever having to ask, but I don’t want them to know. I thought it would be easier to struggle in silence than to constantly be asked about it.”

Kate didn’t say anything. She just nodded and continued to hold Aniyah’s hand.

“My husband and I have been struggling to conceive. I want a baby so badly, but it’s like the universe has deemed me unsuitable. Even knowing it was a problem with my husband doesn’t make me feel less of a failure. He’s recovered from surgery now and we can start trying, yet it still didn’t work last month. I see people get pregnant on drunken one-night stands

and I find myself jealous and angry and hating how easy it is for them. I'm not like that. I'm a good person. I love people. It's just that I want our own baby so much. I don't know what to do. I'm trying to be happy for Abby and Dylan, but I find myself just feeling sorry for something I might never have."

"Then let's go get drunk," Kate said. "We'll smile and welcome the baby and then we'll slip out and go to the Blossom Café and eat the entire dessert menu and drink all the alcohol we want. You can take one night off from worrying, one night off from trying to do all the right things, and just let loose. Cry, laugh, do whatever you want. And if anyone asks, we'll tell them I've had a rough couple of days and just want to let loose. And being the nice person you are, you offered to go with me."

Aniyah took a calming breath. "Really?"

"Yep, make it all about me and that way no one will ask you about your struggle. You can keep it to yourself or you can share it. The decision is up to you."

The door opened and out walked Dylan and Ahmed. In Dylan's arms was a little bundle. "Now, for what you're all waiting for so you know if you won the bet," Dylan said loudly. "Ahmed did not pass out. When he would normally pass out, he kept his eyes on the prize and told Abby it was fourth and inches and she had to push the baby into the endzone. Strangely, it worked and our little one was born."

Ahmed smiled and looked proudly down at the bundle.

Groans and one cheer went up from Cade. "I won!" he looked around the room and spotted Kate with Aniyah and pointed at her. "Birth coach for the win!"

"Now, everyone meet Abby's and my little"—Dylan paused and Kate could swear everyone leaned forward and held their breath—"Bunbun."

"Oh good gravy," Miss Lily snapped. "Is it a boy or girl?"

Dylan looked down to Ahmed who nodded. The two were smiling so joyously that the love they had for that baby was felt all through the room. "Everyone, meet Cameron."

No one moved. No one breathed. No one blinked. Kate smothered a laugh at the gender-neutral name. “We were thinking Cam for a nickname,” Ahmed said with a smirk. Still, no one moved.

“Or Ronnie,” Dylan said into the silence. Suddenly a wooden spoon smacked him on the back of the head. Ahmed’s lips twitched, but he didn’t laugh. Dylan just sent a smile of pure joy to the room. They were basking in the torture.

“Don’t make me get the crepe pan,” Miss Violet threatened.

“You’d hit a father holding his newborn baby?” Dylan asked with mock horror.

“No. I’d hit the grandfather standing next to him with a smirk on his handsome face,” Miss Violet told them with a glare.

“And I’ll cut off the apple pie supply,” Grandma Marcy said, coming up to get a look at the baby. “Now, tell me if I can die happy with a great-grandson or a great-granddaughter.”

“Hurry and tell her. I’m not losing my apple pie,” Ahmed whispered.

“Grandma, meet your great-granddaughter, Cami.” Dylan placed the small bundle in Marcy’s arms and there wasn’t a dry eye in the building.

Next to her, Aniyah had silent tears streaming down her cheeks. Kate took her hand in hers and pulled her from the office as everyone offered up their cheers and talked about their bets. Kate sent a text to Landon to let him know she was heading out with her new friend. Ahead of them, Zinnia and Poppy ran down the street and into the café.

“The crowd will be coming soon,” Aniyah said as she sniffed.

“That’s fine. We’ll be half drunk by then and dancing on the tables.”

Aniyah laughed. “I think we might be good friends, Kate.”

Kate squeezed her hand. “Me too, Aniyah.”

Landon looked down at his phone. It was a text from Kate saying that she and Aniyah were at the café and that they were having some girl time so that Kate could decompress after a stressful week at work. She said to take his time and enjoy the time with his family.

He looked up to where Ahmed had walked over to him. “Where is Coach? I need to thank her.”

“She went out to celebrate with Aniyah.”

Ahmed nodded. “She’s a good one, Landon. You mess it up and I’ll make an arranged marriage between her and Kale.”

Landon laughed but stopped when he saw that Ahmed was deadly serious. “Tell Kale he has to find someone else.”

Ahmed grunted and walked back to the delivery room where Abby and Bridget were still behind closed doors. Tammy, Pierce, and Dylan were on top of the world in the waiting room, showing off Cami. Landon got to hold little Cami for a quick second and all he could think of was a future he wanted with Kate in it. Would she want this? She was climbing the coach’s ladder. Marriage and children took time away from a ladder that never let you miss a step without falling.

“What has you frowning?” his mother asked him as she drew him away from the crowd.

“Nothing. It’s a great night.” His mother cocked her eyebrow as if to say she knew he was lying. “Did you want kids when you were in the middle of climbing the ranks of the DEA?”

He’d obviously shocked his mom with that question. He’d never talked about marriage or children before and certainly not with his parents. He loved them, but that wasn’t a topic he had any reason to bring up.

“No,” his mother said honestly. “I never dreamed I would have children. Not all women want them and you know I

didn't have the best childhood. I didn't want them until I met your father. That's when things changed."

"And you gave up your career. That doesn't seem very fair."

"I'm proud of you for thinking of that. It's not easy being a woman in certain career fields, but I made that decision. Not your father. Not the DEA. *Me*. And we both know I never gave it up. I just made it work for me and what I wanted," his mother winked. "Just don't tell your father. I let him have his boys' weekends and I get my girls' trips. Where is Kate? I thought she'd be here after being the MVP of the night."

"She went out with Aniyah to the café. I believe drinks were mentioned."

"Hmm." His mother looked thoughtful for a second and then reached out and placed her hand on his forearm. "Just keep having these conversations with Kate. It's so important to know what you both are going in for. Don't think you'll change her after you're married. That never works. Just make sure you're both on equal footing with expectations and desires. Everything else finds a way to work itself out. Trust in the love. It never lets you down with it has a solid foundation of honesty."

"Or mutual love for guns," Landon teased. His mother liked to joke that she fell in love with his father when she saw his gun room.

His mom winked at him and disappeared back into the crowd. She gave him a lot to think about but more so a lot to talk to Kate about. They were just starting out in their relationship and while baby talk might not be on the list right now, honest conversations about their demanding careers should be.

"I can't believe my brother is now a dad," Cassidy said as she joined him. "It makes me feel very old. Mom is going to be a pain in my ass from now on. I guess the CIA isn't looking so bad if it ships me overseas."

Landon laughed at his cousin, but when Tammy caught sight of them, the laughter died. “Kate’s at the café with Aniyah having drinks. If you run now, your mom might not see where you went.”

“Don’t tell the others, but you’re my favorite cousin.” Cassidy slipped from the room, showing the reason the CIA wanted her. She’d become invisible when she’d moved about the room. “Aunt Tammy!” Landon said, drawing her attention and truly earning the best cousin award.

Kate looked at the pitcher in front of her. “I thought you wanted to get drunk? Iced tea really won’t cut it.”

“Girl, this iced tea will.” Aniyah poured Kate a large glass and then lifted her glass up into the air. “To new friends.”

“I’ll hold your hair back if you hold mine,” Kate said, sniffing the drink. It smelled citrusy.

“Now that’s friendship. Cheers.” Aniyah clinked her glass against Kate’s and then downed it.

Kate took a little sip. “Oh, this is yummy.” Then she followed suit and downed the glass.

Aniyah poured them both another glass and motioned for the newly arrived Poppy to get another pitcher ready.

“Are you sure you want another?” Poppy asked as she eyed them.

“It’s just fruity iced tea. It’s really good.”

“It’s *special* iced tea,” Poppy told her.

“Yup. It’s pretty special alright.” Kate looked at Aniyah. “Is it getting hot in here?”

“What’s getting hot is how Landon looks at you. You need some of my sexy oils. That will really heat things up.”

Kate took another big sip of her drink and shook her head. “You know, you shouldn’t use just any lube when trying to have a baby. I overhear a lot being one of the only women at

work. One of the guys at my last job was trying to have a baby and the lube he was using was slowing the mobility of his sperm. They learned it can cause a drastic decline in his little swimmers. He asked his fertility doc and they recommended special lubes just for fertility.” Kate nodded in emphasis.

Aniyah tossed back her drink and then dumped her purse on the table. Kate felt her eyes go round. “Um, Aniyah. I know we’re now drinking besties, but why do you have a gold dildo in your purse?”

“Most women in Keeneston have one. It was a wedding gift from King Draven. It’s made from a mold of his royal member,” Aniyah said absently as she rifled through her things on the table.

“Oh, I thought it looked familiar.”

“Here it is!” Aniyah held up a bottle and squinted. “Is this it?”

Kate looked at the bottle and the ingredients. “I think some of these ingredients were ones he mentioned. Anyway, he got a specific lube just for fertility. Do you want me to ask him what it was named?”

“Thank you!” Aniyah launched herself up and threw herself at Kate. She hugged her tightly as she jumped up and down. Kate’s face was buried in Aniyah’s impressive bosom and felt as if they went from new friends to bosom besties in a very short time.

“I’m going to get it on tonight,” Aniyah sang as she continued to jump up and down.

“Should I tell my son that he needs to find a new girlfriend?”

“Miss Annie! Don’t you dare,” Aniyah called out, finally letting Kate go. “Kate is hands down the best girlfriend Landon could have.”

Kate sucked in a breath and she was filled with warmth. If it was from the tea or the kind words from Aniyah, she didn’t know.

Poppy set down the second pitcher and poured four drinks. Four? Kate turned to see that not only Annie was joining them, but Cassidy, too.

“How many of these have you had?” Cassidy asked looking at Kate and Aniyah.

“Two glasses. Aniyah said they’d get me drunk but they’re just yummy. They’re like Arnold Palmers.” Kate felt *good*. Not drunk, but nice and relaxed. “DeAndre is going to *palm her* tonight.” Kate nodded to Aniyah and Aniyah held up her drink to click it with Kate’s before they both took a deep drink.

“Um, Kate, that’s not an Arnold Palmer,” Cassidy began to say, but Kate saw Annie shake her head. Instead, she raised her own glass as she took a seat at the table.

“To my son’s girlfriend.” They clinked glasses and Kate took a deep sip.

“To Landon!” Kate said, knowing her face flushed just thinking of him. They clicked glasses again and Kate took another sip.

“To not being able to cook, still, after all these years. Just don’t tell my mother-in-law. I go to Lexington and get pre-made meals when she comes over.”

Kate turned to Annie with a huge smile. “I can’t cook either! Cheers!”

All four ladies downed the drinks and Aniyah poured another round.

“So, can you shoot a gun?” Annie asked.

“I am so tired of everyone asking me this. I’m from Texas. Of course, I can shoot a gun. Anyone have a gun so I can prove it right now?” Kate asked.

“Here you go,” Aniyah said, holding out hers at the same time Annie held one out.

“Oh, no, no, no,” Poppy said in her best kindergarten teacher voice as she plucked the guns from their hands. “No weapons when drinking. You know the rules.”

“Look, there’s Lucas,” Cassidy said, and Poppy whipped around only to turn back and flip Cassidy off when no one was there.

“Who is Lucas?” Kate whispered in a loud voice.

“He’s FBI hostage rescue. He and his partner, Talon, have the hots for Poppy and Zinnia, but they’ve all been dancing around it forever,” Cassidy explained.

“They need to get together already,” Aniyah also not so quietly whispered.

“You know who needs to get married?” Annie asked them as they continued to drink.

“According to my mom, me.” Cassidy rolled her eyes.

Annie shook her head. “I meant Landon. He needs to get married. He’s such a good man. But I got your back, niece. Enjoy your stint in the CIA and then settle down.”

“How did you know?” Cassidy asked as Kate made a wow face. She never knew anyone in the CIA before.

“Aniyah told me,” Annie said, looking at Aniyah.

“My sugarbear told me.” Aniyah shrugged. “It’s not like it’s a secret. Half the town has worked for the CIA at one time or another. I knew last week you were going to be asked.”

“Are you talking about Cassidy joining the CIA?” Miss Lily asked as she walked over with her sisters. “I knew about that last week too.”

“I knew on Monday afternoon,” Aniyah said in a way that sounded like a challenge.

“Ha! John told me Monday morning.”

“How?” Cassidy asked still looking stunned.

“Aliens is my guess,” Annie said, taking another deep drink. “It’s been a long time since I’ve had your tea. I forgot how good it is.”

“It’s so good, but where’s the alcohol?” Kate asked.

Miss Lily and her sisters grinned. “Hun, there’s a healthy pour of bourbon in there.”

“Really?” Kate looked at her drink differently. “Huh. I do have a really high tolerance from all the tequila I drank back in Texas, but I don’t even taste it.”

“That’s what makes it special,” Miss Lily said with a wink before heading to a table with her sisters.

“So, Kate. How do you feel about marriage? What about children?” Annie asked as she topped off the iced tea in Kate’s glass.

“I love children. I have the best parents in the world and they set a wonderful example of marriage and parenting. I want to find someone who will be that with me. A great husband and a great father. Someone who will support me and really be a teammate with me.” Kate sat back in her chair and felt every muscle relax. Maybe there was bourbon in it. Huh, who knew?

“You know, Landon loves children and having a chef as a husband would have big perks,” Annie said before taking another sip.

“Being able to cook and loving kids is so hot. You have a hot son. I mean, like so hot. His arms . . .” Kate fanned herself as the words just poured out. “I never knew arms were so sexy and that was before I saw more than his arms. Have you seen him naked?”

“I did birth him. He kinda came out that way. The better question is, have you seen him naked?” Annie asked.

Kate nodded and slapped a hand over her mouth when she giggled. Okay, she was buzzed. She was perfectly balanced between being very happy but not yet drunk.

“Oh, girl. Spill.” Aniyah leaned forward. “It’s always the nice ones who are freaky-decky in the bedroom.”

Kate still had her hand over her mouth and looked at Annie. She wanted to talk girl talk so badly. She never had anyone to talk to since she worked with men.

“I’ll just pretend it’s someone else,” Annie said with a knowing smile.

“I licked his abs. There are six of them,” Kate stage-whispered to the table.

“Cade still has four of his. I kiss them.”

Kate giggled when Annie sighed with a happy little look on her face. She wanted that happy look a well-loved wife had.

“Talking about kissing and licking things has gotten me all flushed.” Aniyah waved a hand in front of her face.

“Or frustrated. I haven’t been able to get laid since I stepped foot back in the state of Kentucky because of my grandma and Mom. It’s been eight months. *Months.*”

“Mercy me! We gotta get you laid tonight.” Aniyah started to look around the quickly filling café. “Cousin, cousin, cousin, hot firefighter but still a cousin.”

“What about him?” Kate asked, pointing to a really hot guy across the room.

“Priest,” Cassidy sighed.

“Bullshit,” Kate said before slapping a hand over her mouth when she realized she’d cussed about a priest.

“Nope, he’s an honest to God priest. See why it’s so hard?” Cassidy asked.

“Okay, getting laid isn’t worth going to Hell for. What about him? He’s hot.” Kate pointed to the guy who had just walked in through the door.

“Cody is a deputy and sleeps around a bit,” Cassidy told her.

“I am failing to see the problem, Cassidy,” Kate enunciated carefully, and Annie snorted in response.

“That’s not a bad point,” Cassidy said as she looked at Cody again. “What the hell? Let’s see how this goes.”

Cassidy stood up and right then the door opened and in walked . . . well, everyone. Including Cassidy’s parents.

Cassidy groaned and dropped back into her chair.

“Normally I’d run interference for you, but we were talking about abs and kissing and licking and well, look at him.” Annie motioned to her husband whose eyes had gone straight to hers with so much love in them that Kate thought she was watching a romantic movie play out in front of her.

Kate wished she had that. Then her eyes moved off of Cade and connected with Landon. He was already watching her. The giggles she’d been suffering from for the past hour died in her throat as her whole body flushed. One look and Kate knew everything she needed to. Landon was the man for her. The only man for her. Timing didn’t matter. Her career didn’t matter. Her FBI investigation didn’t matter because Landon was with her. He’d never make her choose her career or him. He’d be by her side through it all.

Kate turned to tell Aniyah she had to leave now only to find her in the arms of a very tall, very handsome man. That must be her sugarbear, DeAndre. He had a big smile on his face as she clung to his neck.

“I guess I have you to thank for this? I’m DeAndre by the way.”

“Kate. And you’re welcome.” Her flush caused by lust was back and then DeAndre was striding out the back door as Aniyah whispered not so quietly about licking. All Kate could think about was doing all those things with Landon.

A warm hand slid slowly across Kate’s lower back. “I see you’ve discovered the Rose Sisters’ Special Tea.”

Kate felt a zing right to her core at Landon’s deep voice whispering into her ear. She felt his hot breath and instantly went straight to the last time his hot breath had caressed her neck. “Take me home,” she whispered to him.

“With pleasure.” Was it just her or did he growl the word, *pleasure*. Either way she felt it throughout her entire body as if it were a torch.

Landon had thought he'd had a heart attack when he'd looked through the windows of the café and seen Kate sitting with his mother. However, his mom wasn't grilling her like he'd thought she would. Instead, they were laughing. All of them.

"That's a special woman right there," Aunt Tammy said, putting a hand on his arm to stop him from rushing forward into the café. "I love Ahmed but I kicked him out of the room because I didn't want his dramatics and his fainting to distract Abby. The baby was big and she needed to focus. But whatever Kate said to him worked. When it got tough for Abby, she called out to her dad and Ahmed rushed in. He headed straight to her, looked her in the eyes, and told her it was fourth down and she had inches to go to push the ball into the end zone," Tammy told him as Landon's lip quirked up. Sounded like Kate.

"Ahmed," Aunt Tammy said with a smile on her lips, "saw Dylan was starting to freak out. Abby was in pain and the baby wasn't coming. She was getting tired of pushing and Dylan felt helpless. Ahmed grabbed him and said they were going to protect their babies. Then he slapped Dylan on the ass. Ahmed took Abby's hand, got into her face, and ordered her like a drill sergeant to push while Dylan acted the good supportive husband telling her what a good job she was doing. Ahmed took all her anger, fear, and pain onto himself as Abby cursed him with every push. But he didn't stop. He fell right into his soldier role and never stopped with his horrible mish-mash of football references as he ordered her to push and breathe all the way until the baby was born. He and Dylan worked as a good cop, bad cop team and brought little Cami into the world. I've only seen Ahmed cry once—when his car was destroyed. But tonight I saw a single tear travel down his cheek when Abby handed little Cami to him. A woman who was able to give that gift to Ahmed and Abby is a woman you need to marry. They don't come along every day."

Tammy walked into the café, leaving Landon standing with his father. "Kate probably doesn't even realize the importance of what she's done. But she helped fulfill Ahmed's dream of seeing his grandchild born tonight, is giving support to Cassidy when she's wrestling with a tough decision to join

the CIA, and has your mother smiling during her inquisition. That's a very special lady you have, Landon," his father said quietly as they watched the scene through the window.

Landon couldn't tear his eyes from Kate even though he just saw the back of her head. His body was always aware of where she was. It was like an invisible cord drawing him to her.

"How is the investigation going?" his father asked him.

"Hmm?" Landon had been caught dreaming about getting Kate home and having her to himself.

"The person who is trying to intimidate her into cheating."

Landon shook his head. "Should I even ask how you know that?"

"DeAndre told me yesterday afternoon and John Wolfe told me yesterday at the gala."

"So, everyone knows?" Landon asked.

"Of course. We're just waiting for you to tell us what you need us to do." His father looked inside and grinned. "I think I'm going to take your mom home."

Landon nodded. He was tired of standing outside looking in. He wanted Kate in his arms, in his bed, and in his heart.

Landon stepped inside and his eyes never left hers. Kate turned and their gaze connected. Dear Lord. Kate licked her lower lip as if she were imagining something not appropriate to say in the middle of the Blossom Café.

She turned back around when DeAndre scooped a giggling Aniyah up into his arms. That's when Landon moved forward. The desire to touch her was overwhelming. He crossed the café, leaned down behind her, slid his hand over her lower back, and whispered into her ear.

"Take me home," Kate whispered back to him. She didn't need to ask twice. His house was closer, but he wanted the privacy of the cottage. He loved his neighbors, but the Rose sisters had spy equipment to rival anything the CIA had.

Landon took Kate's hand, and with a goodbye wave to the café, he had them out the door and into his car in under a minute. He didn't remember the drive to the farm because Kate had a way of talking dirty that was a mix between Henry's bad pickup lines and a football announcer. Yet somehow it worked. When she talked about finding the hole and sliding through before banging it into the end zone, Landon only slowed enough for the guards to open the gate before racing through the farm to her cottage.

He didn't even make it into the cottage before Kate kissed him. Once her lips touched his, Landon was lost. She fit perfectly in his arms, against his lips, and in his heart.

"Where have you been my whole life?" Kate whispered as she pulled off his shirt while they stumbled through the house.

"Right here, waiting for you." Landon reached down, grabbed her by the ass, and hauled her up into his arms. Her legs wrapped around his waist, her tongue surged into his mouth, and her hands speared his hair.

Lost was the nervousness of the first time. Even though words hadn't been spoken about love, it was clear something special was going on between them. Their bodies knew each other, their hearts were connected, and when she touched him, his world seemed perfect.

Landon woke up to something warm and wet on his face. His eyes shot open and he stared into the rich brown eyes of a dog standing over him. The dog's tongue lapped out and licked him from cheek to forehead. He expected to find Kate in his arms, but when he reached out, she wasn't even in the bed with him. Only a strange dog that shoved his nose under the covers and burrowed under them. The dog turned around so his legs were pressed against Landon's side and his head rested on the pillow next to Landon's. Then his paws pressed against Landon's side. The dog yawned and kicked his legs out, pushing Landon from the bed. Landon fell from the bed, landing on his butt. When he stood up to chastise the dog, the dog had the covers up to his neck, his head on the pillow, and his eyes shut. A soft snore emanated from his jowls.

Landon got up, slipped on his pants, then headed to the kitchen. He found Kate in nothing but his shirt, humming as she made coffee.

"Morning. There's a strange dog in the bed." Landon placed a kiss on her lips that was supposed to be quick, but turned out to be several minutes of tongues tangling and hands caressing. They were both breathing heavily by the time the kiss ended.

"Good morning. Ahmed and Bridget gave him to me. His name is Robert but he also goes by Rip. He's a therapy dog, but he also can be a protection dog. So," Kate said gesturing to the small kitchen table now set with two plates, toast, cut strawberries, and two coffee mugs, "I can't cook, but I thought

I could throw together breakfast anyway. I had a sudden desire to cook for you.”

She was adorable. He loved that she couldn't cook. Loved it even more that she'd tried anyway for him. He didn't comment on the burned toast. Instead, he ate and loved every bite as they talked about their day. Rip sauntered out of bed thirty minutes later and sat by the table. He yawned and rested the tip of his snout on the table.

“No, sir. Your breakfast is over there,” Kate said, pointing to a dog food bowl. Landon smothered a laugh when the dog rolled his eyes.

“You want some toast?” Landon asked, taking a small piece and handing it to the dog. Rip sniffed and the look of disappointment almost had Landon laughing out loud. Slowly, reluctantly, the dog got up and sulked over to his dish to have breakfast.

“I'm going to head into the stadium today for some one-on-one sessions with my QBs. We have our first exhibition game next week and I want to make sure we're all on the same page and ready to go.”

Landon stood and collected the plates and took them over to the sink where he began to wash them. “Will you take Rip with you?”

“Yes. Will said I could bring him to the stadium.”

“Good. If Bridget trained him, he'll keep you safe.” Landon rinsed another plate and began washing it. “Cady and I are going to the farmers market this morning. I like to go on Sunday mornings to see what I can use for each week's special menu. I like to highlight local produce.”

“I love that,” Kate said as she grabbed a towel and began to dry the dishes. “Cady's the master distiller, right?”

“She is. I use her bourbon in my restaurant.”

“It's really nice how y'all support each other. I'm not even technically a resident and feel supported by the entire town. I mean, I've been given food, a house, and a dog all within a week.” Kate yelped as Rip snatched the towel from her hand

and ran around the kitchen shaking it and trying to kill it. He shook his head, sending the towel whipping back and forth, then tossed it in the air. It dropped to the ground and Rip leaped on it, grabbed it, and zoomed around the house with it in his mouth.

“Well, that explains both how he can protect you and why he flunked out of military school. Poor baby,” Kate said, as the red bullet of a dog zoomed through the living room, up and over the couch, and listened to him thunder down the hall and leap on the bed. “Those other police dogs must have teased him daily.”

“Somehow I think he thought himself superior to them,” Landon said as Rip strolled out with the towel, now dead, presumably, and dropped it at Kate’s feet.

Landon turned off the water and turned to lean against the sink. He watched as Kate dried the last dish. “Magazines and movies get it wrong. Lingerie is nice and all, but seeing you in my shirt and only my shirt is way sexier than any lingerie out there. You’re making it very hard for me to leave.”

Kate turned with a grin on her face. “Are you going to go deep and score?”

“Every chance I get.” Landon pulled her to him and kissed her as he shoved his shirt up her thighs, finding nothing but smooth skin.

Kate was already pushing his pants down when Landon grabbed her by the waist and lifted her onto the counter. During the motion, his eyes connected with Rip’s. Rip sat not four feet away watching with his head cocked. “Rip, out.” Landon ordered. The dog didn’t move. “Um, Kate. The dog is staring.”

“Rip, go to bed.” Kate ordered. The dog rolled his eyes again and sauntered off to the bedroom.

Landon smothered a laugh when Kate grabbed him and then all laughter stopped. Her hand on him was heaven. Last night had been wild and free. This morning it was slow and

hot. They teased, they tasted, and then they exploded in each other's arms.

Kate clipped the leash to Rip's collar and let him jump from the car. He looked up at the stadium and sniffed the air. "Come on. We have work to do."

Rip stayed right by her side as they made their way to her office. She set down her bag as Rip jumped up on her couch and made himself comfortable. The stadium was empty today. Next Sunday it wouldn't be. Everyone was enjoying their last Sunday off for the season at home relaxing and spending time with their family.

Kate grabbed her playbook and a whiteboard if she needed to draw up a new play or explain how a play worked. She was about to leave when a motion by the door caught her attention. She was embarrassed to say her fear level spiked, but then she noticed Rip hadn't even lifted his head. Some guard dog, she thought as Ryan walked into her office.

"I didn't mean to startle you. Landon told me you were coming into the stadium today," Ryan said, patting Rip on the head. "I'm glad you have this guy with you. Just his presence will hopefully deter any more confrontations."

Rip had now rolled over onto his back and was receiving belly rubs. "Yeah, he's real scary. Have you found anything out?"

"Yes and no. We looked into Nico Saccone. His betting books are new and he's trying to go legit after taking over his family business and cutting all their alleged ties to organized crime. However, his system is impenetrable, even from the inside. Turns out I know the group that made the digital betting network. Trust me when I say, there's no way someone on the inside is rigging bets. Also, once I got a look at his system, he doesn't even take those kinds of bets. He runs over and unders. Never spot fixing bets, like the first pass being received by X player at Y time. He's built his betting platform to be exclusive and cater to the elite bettor. There's a minimum bet one has to place and he sees spot betting as the slots of

sports betting. He wants his sportsbook to be more like to the high stakes tables.”

“Okay, so we know who it is not.”

“Correct,” Ryan said. “I’ve also eliminated seventy others associated with the team. It’s slower going than I want, but I wanted to let you know we are still working on it. The deadline is next week’s game. Since you haven’t told them you’ll be complicit, I know they’ll be coming after you again. Keep Rip with you and try to keep people with you when you can. Like right now. You’re here all alone. Not a good idea.”

“I’m a couple of minutes late to meet Knox on the field. And when he leaves, I am working with Jordan. I won’t be alone.”

“We haven’t cleared Jordan yet. I know he’s struggling after being injured and is facing retirement. He’d be ripe for either working with the group running the betting scam or possibly be the one behind it to increase his bank account before retirement.”

“Well, I guess today would be a good day to find out if it’s him since I’ll be here alone with him.”

Ryan frowned. “I can stay. Maybe that would be better than you being alone.”

“It’s Sunday. Enjoy the day with your family. I have Rip with me.” For as much as Kate and Jordan butted heads last week when she started, she felt as if she’d finally gotten through to him over the past couple of days. That didn’t mean he wasn’t part of a betting scandal, but she never got the impression he’d be violent with her like the other attackers had been. Plus, she knew that neither attacker could have been Jordan for one simple reason: they were too short. They weren’t in elite athletic form either. No, if this was someone in the team organization, it wasn’t someone from the field. She shared her impression with Ryan.

“I tend to agree with you. However, Jordan could be the player making sure to throw a pass at a certain time or to a certain person in order to ensure the bet is won.”

“I’ll pay attention to everything he says. Maybe even hint around it. I’ll text you when I leave at four and let you know if I hear any red flags. But now I really have to get going.” Kate went and opened her sliding door. She saw Knox jogging around the field, warming up. She blew her whistle and waited as Knox looked around to find her. “Stretch when you’re done warming up and I’ll be right there!” Kate yelled. It echoed across the empty stadium even with the open roof.

Kate turned back to Ryan. “Thank you for stopping by. I can’t wait for this first game to be over with so this threat can be gone.”

“I’ll walk you down to the field. I hope they’ll give up if you don’t give in, but I wouldn’t count on it. We’ll find them. Call me if there’s anything suspicious.” Ryan clipped Rip’s leash on and handed it to Kate.

Rip placed his front feet onto the ground and stretched. Kate rolled her eyes. “Come on, Rip.” Rip yawned and took his sweet time climbing off the couch. “Some guard dog,” Kate muttered. It was very clear Rip believed he was in charge and she was only here to serve him.

Ryan chuckled. “When I married Sienna, I became a dog father to the ugliest dog you’ve ever seen. But he’s a good boy who would give his life to protect Sienna and our son even if he looks as if he’s only good at producing slobber. Don’t let Rip’s blasé attitude fool you. Bridget wouldn’t have given him to you unless he could actually protect you.”

“I think you have more faith in him than I have. But I do feel better just having him with me,” Kate admitted as they rode the elevator to field level.

They walked through the tunnel and onto the field. It was an experience Kate always loved. There was something about emerging from the tunnel to the open sky, the stadium seats expanding upward, and the broad carpet of green field stretching out under her feet that somehow made her feel small yet also part of something so big.

“I’ll be expecting your text at four. If you don’t send it, I’ll call in the army to come get you. Got it?”

“The army? Really?” Kate said with a snort.

“Fine, not the army, but former special forces, FBI Hostage Rescue, and the entire town of Keeneston. Four o’clock.” Ryan reminded her one more time before leaving.

“Hey!” Knox yelled. “You brought a buddy.”

“Yep. Bridget and Ahmed gave him to me. His name is Robert but goes by Rip.”

“Is this about the person threatening you to make you cheat? You know it’s not me and I’m trying to find out who it is.”

“How do you know about it? Did Ryan say something?” Kate was floored. She didn’t want anyone to know about this. Her reputation was at stake.

“No. DeAndre told me a couple of days ago. Don’t worry, only the Keeneston crew knows about it. I’m not hearing any rumblings about it in the locker room. Of course, with my dad as the coach I’m usually the last to know, but I’ve been eavesdropping and nothing is coming up. What about that Nico guy? He runs a brand-new betting app. That is suspicious.”

“Ryan just cleared him. Are you sure no one knows about me being approached about this? You do realize it’s my reputation and job on the line here.”

Knox absently scratched behind Rip’s ear. Rip groaned and leaned into Knox. “I’m sure. Look, I want you here. I know what’s on the line. It’s just as bad if a player is associated with something like this. So I get it. Keeneston won’t tell anyone outside of the town. It takes getting used to—having no privacy—but then you realize you’re never alone. You always have someone ready to jump forward to help, to support, or to protect. You don’t realize how much it means until you go off to college and don’t have it anymore. Just know I’ll be here to help if you need me and I’m on your side.”

“Thanks, Knox. Now let’s get to work.”

Landon and Cady roamed the farmers' market. He'd already ordered all his vegetables and meat for the week and was now looking for something to make a special dinner for Kate. He knew she was stressed over this betting scam and he also knew she was frustrated with the lack of answers. Heck, he was too. Ryan had just called to tell him he'd left Kate at the stadium and gave him the update. Landon knew taking suspects off the list was just as good as adding them to it, but it was still frustrating. He wanted this threat to Kate over and over now.

Kate had mentioned she missed her TexMex so Landon decided to make some for her later this week. Tonight he was on dinner duty and had a full house. He wouldn't be home before ten.

Landon was paying for his ingredients when he saw Poppy. Her side was to him and she was looking down at her phone. Her entire body went stiff and then a tear rolled down her cheek. Landon was about to go see if she was okay when Zinnia approached her.

Poppy shoved the phone into her back pocket and put a smile on her face. She shook her head and gave a fake laugh. Zinnia looked worried but headed off to purchase the goods in her basket. Poppy took a deep breath and pulled her phone back out. She stared at it, her face pale, her body shaking slightly. Landon couldn't just sit back. Poppy was a friend and it was clear she was hurting.

Landon wove his way through the food stands until he was close enough to say her name loud enough for her to hear, but not so loud as to draw attention. “Poppy? I know something is upsetting you. Please let me help.”

Poppy shoved her phone into her back pocket and smiled through her red rimmed eyes. “Landon! Oh, I just saw one of those videos with a dog that tugs at your heartstrings. Did you get some good stuff for the restaurant?”

Landon sighed. “Poppy, you don’t have to lie to me. Let me help.”

Poppy’s fake smile fell away. Fear, sadness, and guilt were etched across her face. “No one can help me.” Poppy shook her head as if to clear it and the fake smile was back in place. “Because there’s nothing I need help with.”

Landon didn’t believe it. By the worried looks Zinnia was casting her sister as she paid for her goods, told Landon that Zinnia didn’t believe it either. “Just remember I will always have your back. No matter how bad you think something is, I will support you and help you no matter what.”

“Thanks, but everything is just peachy. Well, speaking of peaches. I think I’m going to grab some to make some cobblers for the café. They’re not as good as your peach cobblers, but they sure sell out fast. I’ll see you later, Landon!” Poppy called out cheerfully only it fell flat. Poppy wasn’t good at faking happiness.

Zinnia joined him a moment later as Poppy disappeared from view in search of peaches. “Did she tell you anything?”

“No. Something is wrong, isn’t it?” Landon asked.

“Something is most definitely wrong.”

“Lucas?”

Zinnia shrugged. “I don’t know. But I’m worried about her.”

“I’m always here if you need me. I’ll look out for her as best I can.”

Zinnia nodded, worry clear in her eyes. “Thanks. You know, it’s always just been her and me against the world. I don’t like her keeping something from me.”

“She’ll tell you when she’s ready.”

“I hope she tells me before it’s too late.” Zinnia sighed and went to find her sister.

Landon glanced at his watch. He had to get going. He flagged Cady down, said goodbye, and headed back to finish a very long day of work.



Kate loved working with Knox. He listened, processed what she told him, and saw the reasoning behind it. He talked it out, often offering suggestions, but never demanding she use them. Some worked, some didn’t. He didn’t get offended when she told them there was a flaw or that he didn’t execute something correctly.

Time had flown by. Until now.

Now she had Jordan fighting everything she was telling him. He refused to listen to her reasoning, and he threw a fit if she corrected something he did wrong.

“Jordan. You said you would listen and give my plan a shot. For the past two hours, all you have done is fight against everything I have asked of you. Are you trying to sabotage yourself or me?” Kate finally yelled when he’d done the complete opposite of what she’d asked.

“What do you know about being a quarterback? You’re a girl.”

“No shit. I am a girl. That doesn’t mean I don’t know what I’m doing. You’re a boy and you’re showing me you have no idea what you’re doing.” Kate saw Jordan’s face turn red and he was about to lay into her. “Look, you trusted me with Dr. Layne. Your arm is improving. Right? I’m not leading you down the wrong path, am I?”

Jordan shut up and reluctantly admitted things were going well with Layne.

“Can I show you what I’m trying to do and why? Will you look at it with an open mind? Please?” Kate asked as she pulled out the whiteboard.

“Fine. But I think it’s stupid.”

Kate managed not to roll her eyes at the veteran quarterback sounding like a spoiled teen.

An hour later, Jordan had finally worked up a sweat and they were in sync. It had taken twenty minutes to walk him through her plays step by step. She’d explained her reasoning behind everything and finally he’d stopped rolling his eyes and started asking questions.

Kate didn’t want to jinx it, but it seemed they were on the same page now and the results were exactly what she’d hoped for. “Here, I made you a new playbook with everything laid out in it. Start studying it and tomorrow we’ll go over any questions. Most are plays you already know, but I just tweaked them to play to your strengths.”

Jordan took the book but didn’t head off to the locker room yet. “You really are looking out for me, aren’t you?”

“I am. I told you, I’ll help you make the best of this last year both on and off the field.”

“There’s something I need to tell you.” Jordan stopped and looked over her shoulder. “But we can talk later.”

Kate turned and frowned as Brayden sauntered onto the field as if he owned it. “No, we can go to my office and talk now.”

“Coach! I’m glad I caught you so we can talk,” Brayden winked and Jordan mumbled his goodbyes.

“Jordan, wait!”

“It can wait, Coach. See you tomorrow.”

Kate’s temper was already up by the time Brayden sauntered over to her. Rip had been lying in the sun on the

sidelines all practice, but now she felt the dog lean against her leg. Kate reached down and rested her hand on his head. Just having him here brought her some comfort.

“There’s my Katie girl,” Brayden said as he stopped in front of her. He was too close, but Kate refused to back down. However, Rip moved to stand between them, forcing Brayden to take a step back.

“It’s Coach Ellington. What do you need? I have someplace to be.”

“What you have is a deadline, Katie girl,” Brayden said as if it were nothing. He just came out and said it. It was him. He was the one threatening her. “And I’m tired of waiting. It’s no longer a question.”

Kate stood frozen to the spot as Brayden loomed over her. This asshole was the one threatening everything she worked hard for? “It never was a question. I’d never cheat.”

Brayden chuckled as if what she said was cute. “As I said, it’s no longer a request. It’s a demand. You’ve been bad trying to get me in trouble, but it won’t work.” Brayden held an envelope out to her and smirked. “See for yourself. You’re the one about to lose it all. A picture is worth a thousand words, right?”

“Brayden! There you are, son. Ready to go?” Owen called out from the tunnel. “Coach,” he said when he saw her. The tone was clear he wasn’t thrilled with her.

“Why?” Kate asked before Brayden could leave. “You have money. You don’t need to earn it illegally.”

“I have money but it’s tied up in my company and my dad keeps me on a short leash. Besides, it’s fun. We could have some fun together you know. You scratch my back and I scratch yours, Katie girl.” He raised his hand and was reaching out to touch her cheek when Rip growled. It wasn’t loud, but that somehow made it more threatening. “Don’t worry, boy. I’m not touching your mommy . . . yet.”

Kate felt chills run down her back as Brayden winked at her before sauntering away yelling some fraternity chant that

Owen joined in on. When they were out of view, she opened the envelope.

At first, she couldn't even compute what she was seeing. Her brain couldn't make sense of it. It was her face, but she was naked and clearly engaging in sex acts with Trey Everett. Picture after picture of her and Trey having sex in all different positions. That is, until she got halfway through and then it was her with Knox Everett. After the last picture was a notecard. On it were the bets she was meant to ensure happened. There didn't need to be a written threat. She knew what would happen if she didn't do this. Not only would her life be ruined, but so would the Everett family, and the entire Thoroughbreds team. No one would believe her if they saw these pictures, even if they were fake, because they had to be. However, nothing looked fake about them. Nothing.

Rip put his paw on her leg, sensing her impending breakdown. She had to warn Will and Trey. But then her phone buzzed with a text message. It was from an unknown number. With shaking hands, she opened it and pressed the audio file that had been sent to her.

"There are already rumors of people on the team banging Kate. It's all the guys are talking about in the locker room." Kate stopped breathing as she listened to Owen talking to someone—Brayden most likely.

"I hate to add it to the rumor mill, but this isn't a rumor. It's a fact," Kate heard Brayden say. "Katie and I are a thing. Well, she likes *my thing* anyway. Begs for it. I never thought she'd also be with a player. I had heard the rumors of her sleeping her way into the job, but then to go after other players while telling me she loves me? What kind of woman does that?"

"The kind that will ruin the entire team," Owen answered.

"Surely they're just rumors," Brayden said. "After all the time she and I have spent together, it can't be a lie. But this is a lot to process. Maybe I should put a PI on her to find out for sure. See if he can get some photographic evidence." Brayden playing the scorned lover was enough to make Kate sick.

“Great idea. Then I can take it to Will and he’ll have no choice but to fire her if it’s true.”

“I’ll know if it’s true by the end of the first game.”

The voice recording stopped, and before she could try to save it, it automatically deleted. Just like that, Kate’s whole world collapsed around her and she was once again the twelve year old girl having to lie and give up what she dearly loved, to save someone.

Kate paced her cottage. She'd texted Ryan and said all was well, but all was far from well. She hadn't been able to eat. She hadn't been able to stop her mind from going a million directions. And most importantly, she hadn't found a way out of this mess. Instead, it all came back to those pictures being released and the lives of so many good people being destroyed.

The sound of a car coming near her cottage had Kate shoving the photos into a kitchen drawer to hide them. Rip jumped off his spot on the couch and was standing guard by the door. He'd picked up on Kate's frayed nerves and had been more serious tonight than she'd ever seen him.

There was a knock on the door and Rip growled. "Kate?"

Rip's tail started to wag at the same time Kate resumed breathing. "Landon?" she raced to open the door. "I thought you were working late tonight?"

"I was. I did. I was afraid I was going to wake you, but when I saw the lights on I decided to stop."

Kate only then noticed it was dark out. She'd been lost in thought all evening and hadn't even realized it was so late. "Oh goodness. I didn't realize it was so late."

"Caught up in work?"

"Yeah," Kate said, instantly feeling bad for lying to him. She opened the door, and when he kissed her, she could temporarily forget the hell she was living. She was so in love

with this man already and just having his support gave her strength to fight. But, would he still support her if she showed him the photos? Would he believe her that they were fake? She couldn't even tell they were fake and it looked to all the world that it was her body splayed out nude for everyone to see.

"I brought you some leftovers in case you hadn't had dinner yet." Landon handed her the bag and Kate quickly turned away from him to take it into the kitchen. He could tell something was wrong.

"Great, thanks." Kate faked a yawn. "But I'm so tired. I was about to head to bed."

"I'm sure you have a busy day tomorrow. Do you want me to stay or leave?" Landon asked casually, but Kate knew there was nothing casual about it. There was a tone in his voice that made her think he was feeling her out.

"Of course, you can stay. I love sleeping with you."

"Sleeping with me or *sleeping* with me?" Landon asked with a wink. Kate laughed and once again for one second forgot her world was about to be destroyed.

"Both."

Kate turned off the lights, locked the door, and headed back to bed with Landon. Kate hurried into the bathroom to get ready for bed while Landon stripped. When she came out, she was surprised to find him in a pair of athletic shorts. He wasn't naked like she'd expected.

Kate got into bed and turned off the lamp. Landon held out his arm and Kate slid over to rest her head on his shoulder. He wrapped his arm around her and began gently stroking her hair and back. Kate felt her body relax and she breathed him in. Sandalwood and chocolate. It couldn't get any better.

"How was your day?" Landon asked.

Kate might have forgotten to breathe for a moment. "Oh, um, busy. Jordan might finally be listening to me, though."

"He gave you a hard time today?"

“Yeah, but then we had a no BS talk and he finally agreed to listen to what I was doing and why I was doing it. I think I got through to him. He actually looked as if he was going to open up and talk to me, but that asshole, Brayden Brothers, interrupted us.”

Kate again froze. She hadn't meant to even say Brayden's name. “What did he want?”

What did he want? He wanted to ruin her life. “Just wanted to talk about an opportunity with his company.”

“Hmm.”

What did that mean? Kate began to freak out, but a part of her brain just screamed for her to change the subject. What subject? Her mind was blank except for the threats and photos.

“I had a dilemma today,” Landon said, changing the subject for her. “See, I love my brother very much. I trust him to no end. However, I had something happen that worried me. When I went to tell him about it, I freaked out and didn't say anything. Should I have?”

“Oh, um, I guess it depends on what it was.” Kate was so relieved to be talking about his problems instead of hers that she smiled into the dark and finally took a deep breath.

Landon knew Kate was lying to him and it had something to do with Brayden. He knew something had happened today based on several things. One, Ryan suspected based on her text to him that all was good that something had happened. She'd included several emojis. Kate wasn't an emoji person so Ryan had called him up to see if Kate had said anything to him about her day. Landon looked at his phone and not only had she not said anything to him about her day, she hadn't said anything at all. Not that they were in constant contact all day and night, but they'd been leaving each other sweet texts throughout the day when they each had a moment. The last one he'd gotten was right before she'd started working with Knox and he hadn't heard a word from her since.

Second, it was very clear she was hiding something from him when he'd arrived. Something big enough that she would go through the motions of being a girlfriend when she clearly didn't even want him there that night. That was why he hadn't fully undressed and instead gone a more roundabout way of finding out what was wrong. Then the clear giveaway, the way she held her breath when he'd asked about Brayden. So, he'd made up a fake dilemma and wanted to see how she'd answer.

"It depends on what it was."

"Oh, I found out Colton was taking too much on himself. He didn't ask for help when he needed it and now he's in over his head. I know he is, but he doesn't think I know. I can easily help him, and I want to because I love him. All he has to do is ask."

Kate held her breath again. He wondered if she realized she did that every time he said something she didn't like. "Maybe he feels he's too far under and can't ask for help. Or maybe he's protecting you because he knows you'd get pulled under too if you came in to save him."

"Good points. So what should I do?" Ah, so something had happened and now Kate didn't want to tell him because she was afraid it would be too much for him. It was something she thought he couldn't handle.

"Well, you could either help him anyway, but be prepared for him to be mad that you did or you can just let him know you're there for him and ready to help if Colton wants you to in the future."

Landon nodded in the dark as he held her tight to him in order to feel her every reaction. Something else Uncle Cy had taught him growing up. "Great ideas. If I knew specifically what it was, I would know which path to take. That's what's frustrating."

"Have you asked him?"

"Yes," Landon said, looking down at her in the dark. "But he lied and said nothing."

Kate laughed nervously. “The dreaded *nothing*. Then it’s clear he doesn’t want to tell you.”

“I was thinking of helping him anyway. He’s proud and used to doing everything on his own. I know it would make him mad, but isn’t being mad at me better than drowning on his own?” Landon noticed Kate had stopped breathing again.

“Maybe his only option is to drown and there’s nothing you could do to save him.” Her voice was far away and it was clear she was talking about herself and not this make-believe situation with Colton.

“There’s always a way to save someone, even if it’s just them knowing you have their back and will love them no matter what.” Landon reached across his chest to place a finger below Kate’s chin. He angled her chin up to his so that their lips were only inches apart. “Kate, I’d do anything for you and I’d never let you drown. Because I love you.”

Landon felt the wetness on his hand as he cupped her cheek. Kate was crying. “I know it’s only been a week and I’m not telling you this to make you say it back to me. It only took two days to fall in love with you. Take your time falling for me. It’ll be worth it.” Landon let the cocky chuckle ease the tension in the air. “I just wanted you to know. I love you, Kate. You’re smart, brave, and funny. I love watching you with a whistle on the sidelines. I’m so freaking proud of you and what you’ve accomplished. You’re a good person who deserves more than me. But I wanted to let you know that I will always be here if you need me.”

“Colton’s lucky you’re his brother.” Kate sniffed and then fumbled in the dark until her salty teared lips met his and she kissed him. “Because you will always do what’s right, even if it’s hard. That’s one of the many things I love about you, too.”

Landon kissed her back. His heart was both full and breaking. She loved him, but not enough to trust him with what was the matter. Yes, she said he would always do what was right, even if it was hard. Even if it meant losing this fragile love he held in his arms. He would protect her.



Landon felt Kate slip from the bed early that morning. He'd told her he loved her and she'd told him she loved him, but the excitement that should have been there wasn't. Instead, it felt more like a goodbye than a new beginning.

He'd held her to him all night as she slept. He'd finally drifted off a couple of hours earlier only to be awakened when she slipped from the bed to get dressed in the bathroom. He should have told her he knew she was lying, but he was afraid she'd kick him out of her life in a misguided attempt to protect him. Whatever had happened, it wouldn't change how he felt about her. So he'd decided to risk it all. Landon would find out what it was and help her, even if she didn't want him to, because he loved her. If that meant losing her to keep her safe, then so be it. As long as she was safe, that was all that mattered to him. Sure, his heart would break, but it was a sacrifice he was willing to make to protect her.

Kate not only slipped from the bed, she'd slipped from the house with Rip in tow. Landon rolled onto his back and looked up at the ceiling. Guilt tore at him. He knew he was invading her privacy and doing something Kate didn't want him to do. But it was abundantly clear she was too afraid to ask him for help.

Landon pushed off the sheets and got dressed. Then he started going through the house, inch by inch. This was a skill he'd learned from his mother, Miss DEA. She'd occasionally spring a drug search on them as teens. He'd never know it because she was so thorough yet nothing was moved, except one time she'd found an adult DVD and tossed it on the table in the middle of dinner. She'd sat down as Landon and Colton stared at it in horror.

"I want to know one thing," his mother had said as she put some salad on her plate. Landon was preparing for the inquisition of what they were doing with it and where they'd gotten it. "Please tell me you're smart enough to know that is not the way most people have sex. I would hate for the poor

girl you lose your virginity to, to think you're both so inconsiderate of her own feelings as to walk into a room and just start groping her."

Obviously, their father hadn't known either because he'd started to say it was natural for boys to want to know about sex, but his mom had cut him off. "I know it's natural. Having sex isn't the issue. Even the video isn't the issue. Unrealistic expectations and the correct, respectful treatment of their partner is the issue. I just need to know that they know the difference between reality and fantasy." Then their mother had tossed a romance novel onto the table. "Read that if you want to know how to impress a woman. A good man cares more about her fantasy than his own."

When their mother left the table after dinner and Landon grabbed the book while Colton had taken the video back. They'd both gone upstairs, and for the life of them, they couldn't tell that she'd ever been in the room. Finally, Landon just came out and asked her how she'd done it and she showed him.

Now Landon felt like a traitor as he used that skill to search Kate's house. It didn't take long to find the pictures and the note in the kitchen. Anger raged through him as he looked at them one by one. Then he saw the note at the end with the instructions for how she was to cheat and it all became clear.

Landon sat down and took a deep breath. He cleared the anger from his mind. Kate would never act like this, so he studied the photos. The doctoring was impressive. He couldn't tell that they were fakes, but he knew they had to be. His first reaction was to call Kale, but Kale was in training and he knew, even though the pictures were fake, Kate wouldn't want any man to see them.

Landon pulled out his phone and sent a text to his cousin Greer. A moment later he had a contact card that simply said, *Roxie*. Greer didn't ask any questions although a note came through next that said she was there with anything he needed. His family had his back. Not only his, but Kate's. She just didn't know it yet.

Landon pressed the number and the phone rang.

“Hello, Landon,” a woman’s London-accented voice said.

Landon smiled. “I won’t ask how you know it was me.”

“I have the phone number for every person in Keeneston saved to my phone. I figured if any of you were calling, I needed to answer, especially since Kale is mostly unavailable. What can I do for you?”

“My girlfriend is in trouble.”

“Kate. She’s good for you. Ryan had us clear Nico so I’m guessing it has to do with that.”

“I shouldn’t be surprised that you know everything about Keeneston.”

“Who do you think runs the betting app? Kale redeveloped it about eight years ago and now we maintain it.”

Landon shook his head and grinned. Nothing surprised him anymore. “What I tell you stays between you and me. Not Alex, not Kale. Got it?”

“Oh, you have my attention now,” Roxie said.

Landon filled her in on the entire week and ended with the search of her house and the photographs. “Can you first prove they’re fake? And second, find out who did them? I have a hunch, but I need proof.”

“What’s your hunch?”

“Brayden Brothers. Kate mentioned his name to me and stopped breathing for a moment. He’s involved somehow.”

Landon heard the keys clicking and then a grumble. “This guy is a dick. There are several sexual harassment charges from women employees that he’s paid off, resulting in his father putting him on a very short financial leash even though this whole douchey brand was his idea. Give me a bit. I’ll dig around and see what I can find. As for the photos, I need to see them.”

“Can I scan them or should I mail them?”

“I’ll be there in a couple of hours. This is a delicate process and if the bets are any indication of how much everyone loves you and Kate, I want to be there to answer any of her questions after she yells at you for invading her privacy.”

“Think she’ll forgive me?”

“If I find something that saves her? Heck yeah. See you soon, lover boy.”

Yeah, Kate was going to kill him.

Kate was so jumpy at work that she'd ended up locking her door because she was too scared Brayden would show up. She jumped when there was a knock at the door right before practice.

“Coach?”

Kate hurried to the door and unlocked it. Jordan was a wreck. His eyes had dark circles under them and he looked nervously around before walking into her office with his playbook.

“You look like crap,” Kate said to him with concern.

“So do you. And I think I know why.”

Kate's heart stopped beating. He knew she was going to cheat to save the team. Jordan opened his playbook and tossed out a picture of her and Knox having sex and then one of her and Trey. “I found these in the locker room taped up to the whiteboard this morning.”

Kate dropped to the couch, her face pale, her hands trembling. “They're fake.”

“They don't look fake.”

“I swear, they are.” Kate didn't know what to do. It felt as if the ground had just fallen out from under her.

“I know.”

Her head popped up and she looked across at Jordan. He ran his hand through his hair and leaned back in his chair.

“You know?”

“Yeah. Anyone who has met you for more than three seconds knows you’re a rule follower. I took it down before anyone saw it. At least I think I did. Look, I wanted to talk to you at practice yesterday because, well, I don’t have anyone else to turn to. I realize I’ve been a bit of an asshole and the team isn’t behind me anymore. Heck, I think you’re the only person who is. My agent has even stopped taking my calls.”

“Why?”

“Because this was sent to my agent and me a week ago when you said you wanted me to be the starter.” Jordan turned his cell phone around.

It was a grainy video of what looked like security footage from the stadium late at night. Jordan and a woman walked out of the players’ entrance, hand in hand. She wore the same clothes that Kate did and even walked like her, because it was her. There was no mistaking it. It was her and it was Jordan but they’d never walked out together and certainly had never held hands. Then they reached the side of the building, where just enough of the light from the doorway made it possible to make them out, but not enough to make it a clear picture. The fake Kate shoved Jordan to his knees as she leaned against the wall. Jordan pulled Kate’s pants down and Kate stared at her own face as she came under Jordan’s attention. The video paused with Kate’s fingers holding onto Jordan’s head as she held him to her. *The real reason you got the starting job. Do what I say or everyone will know.* Kate stared at the words on the screen in shock and then at Jordan who couldn’t meet her eyes.

“This is why you didn’t want to listen to me. You didn’t want to start, did you?”

“My agent didn’t believe me when I said it wasn’t true. He dumped me and said I’m a liability. Then you started really working with me and you actually, honestly, want me to succeed. But how could I start a game when this would get out and ruin what was left of my career? It would damage your

career and the team's reputation. The team you've been trying to get me back with and succeeding."

"I know who it is," Kate said, her voice trembling. "Because they told me I had to cheat. I left the note at home, but they gave me specific instructions on when to do to what."

Jordan nodded. "Me too. We're co-conspirators, Coach. We're going to have to do it or everyone will pay."

"I know. I have asked for help, but so far they don't know who is behind it. But I do. It's Brayden Brothers."

Jordan's jaw tightened and he slammed his hand to the table. "That little prick? He's the son of a billionaire. What does he need money for?"

"I asked him the same thing. He said his father has him on a short leash and it's fun." Kate paused as Jordan stood up and cursed. She let him take a deep breath to settle down before she continued on. "But there has to be someone else, too."

"A second person? Why do you think that?" Jordan asked.

"At the gala, someone tried to run me over in a car. It was a second person who threatened me."

Jordan raked his hand through his hair. "How big is this organization? How can we fight it? Or do we just go along with it and hope like hell we don't get caught?"

"I wish I knew." Kate longed to call Landon. He'd help her if he could. The trouble was, she didn't think he could and she didn't want him to be wrapped up in something that could result in him being arrested.



"Hello, lover boy."

Landon almost chopped off his finger at the British voice behind him. He'd come to the restaurant early to help out with lunch and prep for dinner. Anything to get his mind off those photos.

Landon turned around to find a cute woman who looked like a goth My Little Pony cosplayer standing there with a laptop bag over her shoulder.

“Hello, Roxie. Thank you for coming all this way to help me.”

She shrugged a shoulder and rolled her eyes. “With Kale gone, the excitement level is pretty low. Plus, I’ve read about Kate Ellington. She’s a badass woman breaking through glass ceilings. Just the kind of person who deserves my help. Now, where can I get a good internet hookup?”

Landon took off his apron and handed everything over to the Monday crew. “I know just the place.”

Landon led Roxie into the Rahmi security building. Nabi, the head of security, looked at him and questioned. “Is it a field trip for disadvantaged youth?”

“Dude,” Roxie said with attitude.

“Oh no. No!” Nabi yelled, pointing his finger at her. “I’m dude-free for the next six months.”

Roxie rolled her black lined eyes. “I just need your internet hookup.”

“It’s good to see you again, Roxie,” Nabi said with his hands on his hips. “But you can only stay if you never say the word *dude*.”

“Yeah, sorry. It’s the hazard of the job.” Roxie smiled and batted her eyelashes at Nabi. That seemed to calm him. “It’s good to see you again, too. So, internet?”

“Yeah. You can use Kale’s desk. What is this about?” Nabi asked as Roxie’s fingers flew over her keyboard.

“It’s a favor for me,” Landon told him.

That got Nabi’s attention. “You? You haven’t been in trouble since you graduated from high school. What’s going on? Is this about Kate? Do you need my help?”

“I don’t know if I need help yet, but thanks for the offer.” Landon and Nabi leaned back and watched Roxie work.

Landon handed over the photos he had taken from the cottage and eventually Nash joined them. “Why are we watching porn in the security center?” Nash asked.

Suddenly the video of the woman riding the man froze on the big screen.

“This is the original video,” Roxie called out to him.

“Are you sure?” Landon couldn’t see it. Everything had been changed from the video to the pictures.

“These tits don’t lie,” Roxie said. “This is the woman the guy used to make those deep fakes with.”

“What is going on here?” Nash asked quietly as Roxie went back to work.

“I need to talk to Kate first. Then I’ll fill you in.”

“On the printer,” Roxie called out to Landon. “You want me there or do you want to do it yourself?”

“I want you nearby. I want to talk to her first and then have you explain everything.”

“She can stay here,” Nabi told him before turning to Roxie. “Do you want a room in the security building or do you want a small cottage on the farm?”

“Here is good. I’ll be working all night anyway. Thanks, du— Nabi.”

Nabi hid his smile, but gave her a nod. “Let me show you to your room. There’s a kitchen area too and I’ll have dinner sent over. You’ll have unlimited access to our internet as well.”

Landon thanked Roxie and headed back to the restaurant. Tonight was the coaches’ dinner. He’d see how Kate was and if she felt comfortable confiding in him yet.

Landon's mind didn't stop racing as he prepared dinner service. Luckily, his kitchen ran like the well-oiled machine it was, because he wasn't focused on dinner at all. The first coaches began to arrive and Kate walked in about five minutes after Will arrived.

Will was chatting with Landon by the private room when Kate joined them. Her eyes were dark from lack of sleep and while she smiled as if nothing was wrong, her whole demeanor told a different story. For one, she didn't kiss him hello. She didn't even look him in the eye.

"How were your QB workouts today?" Will asked. "Practice went great. I'm happy with Jordan's progress."

"Me too, but Knox has been equally impressive as he works on his training. I believe you can't go wrong in your quarterback position. Excuse me, I wanted to talk to Samson about a new play."

Will and Landon turned to watch her go into the dining room with matching frowns. "Has something else happened?" Will asked.

"Yeah, but I'm working on it. I'll fill you in after I talk to Kate and get the whole picture."

Will nodded. "I trust you. Just don't let me be blindsided."

"I won't. I promise. It's just that I owe it to Kate to talk to her first."

Will gave Landon's shoulder a supportive squeeze before heading into the room. Landon knew Kate didn't want to talk to him, so he sent in one of the waiters to handle the room tonight instead of doing it himself. After all, he knew where Kate was going after this.

Kate couldn't stop bouncing her leg during dinner. It seemed to last forever, but in reality, it was only a couple of hours. They were all prepared for their exhibition game where Jordan would be making his comeback to prove he was able to start one last year. Although, after today, she didn't know if she *should* start him.

The dinner was finally breaking up when Owen walked in. He wasn't invited to the coaches' dinner and Kate saw several coaches looking confusingly at him as they walked out.

"Will, Trey, I need a moment," Owen said before his eyes landed on her and narrowed. "Alone."

"Good job today with the passing play calls," Trey told her with a kind smile as she grabbed her things.

"Thanks. I'll see you tomorrow."

Kate walked from the room and avoided the kitchen. She was going to hurt Landon when she showed him the photos. How could she tell him they were fake when they looked so real? So real she practically believed they were her.

Kate pushed out the door and onto the street. She'd had to park a block away and she felt the absence of Rip as she walked down the dark street alone. Sienna had taken him home and dropped him at the cottage for her. Kate had her keys in her hand, but never made it to her car.

A hand shot out from the side of a building yanking her into darkness. A hand quickly covered her mouth as the man

shoved her against the brick wall, pinning her there. Kate struggled, but he punched her in the stomach. Not too hard, but hard enough to send all the breath shooting from her body.

“Listen closely. Your time is up. I need your answer right now. Are you in or do I get rid of you?”

“We already talked today, Brayden,” she said between gasps.

The dark mask under the hood shook. “I’m not Brayden. This is bigger than just one man. Are you in or not, Coach? Right now, this video hasn’t been sent to anyone, but I can send it to the media with one push of this button.”

“What video?” Kate asked, not wanting to get Jordan in trouble by letting him know she’d seen it.

“The one where all your pretty still shots came from. See?” The man turned his phone around and the sound of her voice filled the alleyway. “Take me! Faster! Harder! If you do a good job, I’ll make you the starter,” Kate heard herself say. Her whole world spun as she watched a sex tape with her very clearly talking on it. She knew her voice, and this was her voice. It was so convincing she couldn’t even deny it was her. “The next clip has you shouting his name and showing his face. It’ll get sent right this minute if you don’t agree to our plan. So, what’s your decision, Coach?”

Kate was out of time and out of options. Either her entire career was blown apart or she bought herself a couple more days to try to figure out who to stop this from happening. “All right, I have the card Brayden gave me. I’ll do it.”

“Good. Remember, we are always watching. No quitting the team to protect them. No going to the cops. No telling your boyfriend or this cute restaurant will burn to the ground. One wrong move and your entire life, and the entire team, will be destroyed.”

He shoved her to the side so hard that Kate stumbled and dropped to her knees as she felt her arm scrape along the brick wall as she fell. When she looked back, the man was gone.

Kate wanted to curl up and cry, but she wanted to get to her car first. She needed to get home, cuddle Rip in her arms, and find a way out of this. No more Ryan, no more team, no more Landon. She couldn't risk the men watching her finding out and destroying them all. She had to protect them, and that meant she had to push them away even if it broke her heart.

Landon knocked on the door to the cottage. He'd given Kate enough time to get home and settle in before he confessed to her what he'd done today. Their relationship might have been new, but the love he had for her felt as if it had been there his whole life just waiting for Kate to walk into his life. And now he would most likely lose it all for betraying her trust by searching her house.

Landon knocked again when no one answered. "Kate? It's me, Landon."

Again, no answer. He knew she was there. Her car was out front, its hood still warm. "Kate, are you safe?"

Still no answer. Fear coursed through him. What if they had gotten her? Landon pulled a folding knife from his pocket and had the lock picked in seconds. He pushed the door open to find Rip standing there with his teeth bared. "Hey, Rip." Landon put the knife away and stood still. The dog stalked slowly forward and sniffed the air around him. Then his tail wagged wildly and he leaped forward, grabbed a stuffed football, and wiggled over to Landon. "Where's your momma?"

Rip play growled as he wriggled and then took off for the bedroom. Landon followed him, but didn't see any signs of Kate. Rip sat by the closed bathroom door with the oversized football in his mouth. "Good boy."

The sound of crying reached his ears and Landon knew why she hadn't heard him. Landon knocked on the door gently. "Kate, it's Landon."

The crying stopped instantly. "Landon?" she called out over the sound of the shower.

“Yes, love, it’s me.”

The water turned off. “I’ll be right out.”

Landon sat on the bed and awaited the betrayed look he knew she’d give him. She opened the door a minute later, her hair damp and tangled, and wearing an oversized T-shirt. “Is everything okay?”

“We need to talk.”

Her face somehow went even paler than it already was. Then she sighed and her whole body seemed to fall into itself. “Yeah, we do. I’m sorry, but I’m just too busy with my job right now. It’s not the right time for a relationship. You’re everything I could ever want, but I just can’t have it right now.”

Landon frowned, the pain of the potential broken heart becoming a reality and it was so much worse than he could imagine. “So, you know what I did? I’m so sorry, but I knew I had to do something when you wouldn’t confide in me. But I did it because I was trying to help you.”

Kate finally met his eyes and he saw the confusion and near panic in them. “What did you do, Landon?”

“I found the pictures, Kate.”

Kate dropped onto a chair in the corner of the room as if she just didn’t have the strength to stand anymore and dropped her head into her hands. “They’re not me.” It sounded as if she almost didn’t believe it herself.

“I know. I knew instantly they weren’t you, Kate. Did you think I would have?”

“I thought they were me.” Kate said in agony. She paused and closed her eyes, “Oh Landon, it’s so much worse than just those photos.”

“Kate, when did you stop trusting me?” Landon moved to bend down in front of her and took her hands in his. He waited until she looked at him, tears in her eyes.

“I didn’t mean to. It’s just all too much. I’m going to be ruined. I thought you’d hate me because of those photos. The

team is going to be ruined and now, after today, I have no option. I have to cheat and hope like hell I won't get caught."

"What do you mean, after today?" Landon asked, then listened as she told him about Jordan, Brayden, and the man who accosted her after dinner and threatened his restaurant. Landon kept himself under iron-willed control so he didn't scare Kate with his instantly furious reaction. Right now, he wanted very much to be the old Landon. He wanted to kick down Brayden's door and beat him until he confessed.

"I have to tell you something. Something I know will make you mad. After you left this morning, I searched your house and found the photos."

"Why?"

"Because I could tell you were hiding what happened from me and I was worried you were in danger. But, I know I violated your trust and privacy." Landon waited for the harsh words to come, but they didn't.

"Thank you for believing that it wasn't me. I can't even deny it with the video. It's my voice. Mine. I'm out of options. To protect you, you need to get as far from me as possible." Kate sounded so weary and despairing, it made his heartache

Landon shook his head. "Kate, I didn't tell you the rest of what I did today. It might be easier if I just show you." Landon pulled out his phone and sent a text to Roxie. "Get dressed. We have company coming in a couple of minutes. I'll start some tea for everyone."

"Oh, Landon. What have you done? If one word of this gets out—"

"Trust me, okay?"

Kate deflated again. "I should have trusted you to begin with. Okay. I'll be right out."

Landon had the tea started and was getting the leftover desserts from his car when Roxie arrived. "So, how pissed is she?"

“We’ll see after I introduce you. There’s been more.” Landon filled her in and Roxie nodded. “I’ll show her the clip and see if that’s the one he showed her. It would be super easy to put her voice in it. It probably is her actual voice pulled from interviews or from the sidelines. Put that in a program and Bob’s your uncle— you have Kate’s own voice which you are able to make say anything you want.” Roxie explained and Landon knew he’d made the right call in asking for help. “Now, let’s meet your girlfriend.”

Landon carried the bag of various desserts in. Roxie followed him and immediately took over the living room. She was working to hook her computer up to the television when Kate came in. She blinked at Roxie’s punk rock pajamas and then looked to Landon.

“Roxie, meet Kate. Kate, this is Roxie.”

“And what does Roxie know and how can she help?” Kate asked as Roxie muttered under her breath as she got all the technical stuff hooked up.

“She’s a computer genius and knows everything you’ve told me. Please, just listen. She can help.”

“Hello, Kate. Such a pleasure to meet you and help out another girl boss,” Roxie said with a smile before putting up the giant picture of a naked “Kate” on the television.

“You’re British. You’ve come a long way. If you can help, I thank you for it.”

“Oh, I can do more than help. This is one of the pictures you were threatened with, right?” Landon sat back and let Roxie talk to Kate. “And then is this the video the man showed you tonight?”

Moaning filled the room and Landon had to blink at the image of Kate on the screen. He’d seen the porn before, but now it was Kate and Trey. Even knowing it was fake, it made his stomach clench with anger thinking of anyone seeing Kate like that.

“Yes, that’s it. Where did you get it?” Kate asked.

“I made it.” Roxie then clicked on her computer and the screen transformed. “It’s a deep fake. They took several pictures of you and fed them into an artificial intelligence program to create a 3-D you. They stuck your head on this amateur porno and bam, there’s your deep fake. I haven’t heard it, but I’m sure the video they showed you tonight used your own voice to say whatever they wanted.”

“How did you find this all out? I can’t believe it. Proof it wasn’t me.” Kate stared at the different layers of images Roxie had pulled apart.

“I searched her breasts. Don’t ask why I have a program for that, but I do. I loaded the boobies from the picture and then searched all the porn sites for a match. Winner, winner, titty dinner.”

Kate launched herself onto Roxie, knocking her on her side on the couch as Kate hugged her tightly. “Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

Kate pulled out her phone and placed a call. “Jordan, sneak out of your house, borrow a car, and meet me at my cottage. I have good news. I’ll send you directions.” Kate hung up and turned to Roxie. “I should have asked first, but can you do the same with the video they sent Jordan?”

“Of course. But, now, let’s talk about Brayden Brothers.”

Roxie pressed another button and the screen filled with information on Brayden. “This is why he’s on a short leash. I’ve dug up seventeen settlements so far. Three in high school, ten from college, and four from the past five years at his company. He harasses women, crosses a line, they threaten to sue, then his daddy swoops in and pays them off after having them sign an NDA. That’s why he was downgraded from president of his own company to head of corporate sponsors. Every dime of his credit card purchases has to go through dear old dad for approval, yet he’s been able to buy several new things that I couldn’t find on said credit card statements. However, they did line up to a credit card tied to a bank account without dad’s name on it. A bank account he opened five years ago that is tied to several online gambling sites.”

“Could he be that stupid to have all the evidence right here?” Landon asked.

“Oh, yeah. Being rich doesn’t equal being smart. Arrogance seems to be the deciding factor how hard it is to catch someone,” Roxie explained.

“This is great info on Brayden. But the person who stopped me tonight was not Brayden,” Kate pointed out.

“I’ll see what else I can find when I cast a wider net. Now, let’s have some tea and biscuits while we wait for the other one to join us, shall we?”

Landon answered the door when Jordan knocked. He looked just as bad as Kate had earlier, but now Kate was smiling. Jordan looked surprised at seeing Landon and then did a double take at the sight of a goth girl in rainbow pajamas with clouds in the shape of skulls. That look was nothing to the look on his face when Rip shoved his nose in Jordan’s crotch, racking his balls in a strange sign of dominance before rolling his eyes and going back to sleep on the couch.

“What’s going on?”

“Jordan! We have hope. This is Roxie and she’s a genius. I’ll let her explain everything,” Kate told him.

Landon was relieved to see the hope on Kate’s face. As Roxie talked and demonstrated, Landon began to see hope on Jordan’s face as well.

If Landon had thought watching Kate’s fake video was hard, watching her with Jordan when it was clear they were both real people was even more difficult. Landon looked to Jordan to find his cheeks red and his head down. He couldn’t look at Kate. As hard as it was for Landon, it wasn’t even close to the humiliation Kate and Jordan had to be feeling.

“Oh, this should be no problem to handle,” Roxie told him.

Jordan’s head finally shot up. “Really?”

“Really,” she said with a kind smile. “The bad quality is because they’ve manipulated the image to do the things they

did and then covered it up by pixelating it and using shadows.” Roxie began typing and a second later a live video feed of the stadium was on the television. The same feed from the deep fake. “See, the real camera is ultra-clear. The stadium didn’t skimp on their technology, yet the video threat is worse than a gas station camera from twenty years ago.”

“Did you just hack into the stadium security feed?” Kate asked and Jordan’s surprise was obvious.

“You say *hack*. I say proving a point.” Roxie didn’t seem worried about it.

“Who are you?” Jordan asked finally.

“Aren’t you lucky I’m a friend?” Roxie replied instead of answering. “Now, let me work.”

“Jordan, can I get you some coffee?” Landon asked as Roxie got to work. Jordan nodded and joined Landon in the kitchen, letting Roxie talk to Kate as she worked. Landon overheard her asking when she wore the outfit in the video.

“Thanks, man. You’re being real cool about this. I would have slugged me if I were you. Instead, you’re making me coffee.” Jordan leaned against the counter.

“If it had been real, I would have done more than slug you. However, I know Kate would never do that. I knew they were fake the instant I saw them. That’s why I called Roxie to help y’all out.”

“Again, really cool.” Jordan took a sip of coffee and dropped his voice. “I’ve been a bit of a dick since my injury. Well, more than a bit. But Kate took a chance on me. Now, because of this video and all, my agent has dropped me and I’ve put my whole team in danger of an FBI scandal. I was feeling pretty hopeless until just now.”

“Kate has faith in you and I won’t let anything happen to her, and consequently, to you. Actually, I have an idea. Do you mind some more company?”

“I’m beginning to think I’ll do anything you say,” Jordan chuckled as Landon sent a text. It was going to be a long night,

but hopefully one that would bring clarity and a way out of this trouble by morning.

The sound of a knock prompted Landon to leave Jordan in the kitchen and he met Rip at the door. Landon opened it and waved Cassidy inside. Rip wagged his tail and flirted shamelessly with her. Jordan pushed himself off the counter when he saw Cassidy walk in.

Cassidy always had an air of not giving a crap about anything. She had self-confidence that would let her stride into a formal dinner wearing pajamas and dare someone to say something. She inherited Aunt Tammy's short stature, and much like her mother, she was five foot three inches of feistiness. The curls of her blonde hair were escaping the messy bun she had them in as she strode in wearing jean shorts, flip-flops, and a cropped T-shirt from a 1970s rock band.

She glanced around the room with bored curiosity until she landed on the television. "You invited me over to watch porn?" Then she saw it was Jordan and Kate in the video before her gaze slowly turned and rested on Jordan. "Oh, you invited me here to kill him. No problem. It's been a while since we cousins got together to hide a body. Always a good bonding experience."

The embarrassed blush on Jordan's face faded as the blood drained from his face.

"I like her," Roxie called out from where she was working on her computer. "Kale always talks about you, you know?"

Cassidy shrugged one shoulder. “He can talk all he wants. Doesn’t change anything.”

“What would it change?” Kate asked.

“We might have tried to date.” Landon was surprised that Cassidy admitted it to anyone other than their small group. “It was like kissing your brother. It is the event that shall never be spoken of again.”

“I can guarantee kissing me wouldn’t be like kissing your brother.” Jordan had recovered and Landon wanted to roll his eyes.

“Stop hitting on my cousin.”

“Oh, no. Hit away. Especially if anything in that video is true.” Cassidy winked at him and Landon watched a professional football star melt into a puddle of goo at her feet. That was Cassidy for you. “Now, why am I here?”

Because of another pile of goo. “Remember at Sydney’s charity ball in Atlanta that guy that was hitting on you all night?”

“Be more specific,” Cassidy said. It should sound arrogant, but it wasn’t. That was when Kale had thought briefly about making a pass at her, then Knox and Holt had famously almost got in a fight over her, and the son of a billionaire swooped in to get the dance instead.

“The son of the billionaire.” Landon was having fun watching Jordan’s eyes get wider and wider.

“Ah, I thought you meant Knox or Holt.”

That definitely got Jordan’s attention. “You’re dating Knox Everett?”

Cassidy looked at him as if here stupid. “Did I say that? I said they hit on me. They have since we were thirteen. Doesn’t mean I’m dating them or would ever date them. They fall into the ‘kissing brothers’ category since I’ve literally known them since birth.”

“Good to know. I’d hate to get in a fight with Knox for you when we’re finally getting along.”

“Hmph. And who are you?” Cassidy could cut a man to the core and Landon loved watching it.

“You don’t know me?” Cassidy raised a single eyebrow, managing to appear both expectant and bored at the same time. Jordan looked at Landon. “See, that’s another reason I need a new agent.”

“And that’s why I called you here,” Landon said to Cassidy. “Jordan is the quarterback for the Thoroughbreds.”

“Oh, yeah. You look different without your helmet. So, you need an agent? What do I have to do with that?” Cassidy asked.

“The billionaire boy,” Landon said, getting her attention back from where she was eyeing Jordan in a way Landon didn’t want to think about. “I remember he mentioned he had an uncle who was a big-time sports agent. I was hoping we could get him in contact with Jordan. It’s his last year playing and Kate thinks it’ll be a damn good year. He needs a good agent to take advantage of it.”

Cassidy was nodding as her eyes traveled back to Jordan. “I don’t remember too much, but does the name Finn ring a bell?”

Jordan didn’t hide his surprise. “Finn Williams?”

“I thought the last name was Simpson, but I could be wrong.”

Jordan shook his head. “Finn Williams is married to Allegra Simpson and his sports agency falls under the Simpson Global brand.”

Cassidy snapped her fingers. “That’s it then.”

“So,” Landon said slowly, “does billionaire boy still reach out to you? I thought you could ask for an introduction for Jordan.”

“Nah, he’s dating some model now. Very cliché. But that won’t stop me from reaching out.” Cassidy stopped scrolling in her phone and looked up at Jordan. “Are you worth it?”

“Go out with me after the game this weekend and find out.”

“I’ll see how you play the field first before I answer. Kate,” she said turning to the couch, “is he worth it?”

“Yeah, he is. He’s going to have one hell of a last year.”

Cassidy pressed a button on her phone and walked outside, leaving them all staring after her.

“I don’t have the heart to tell her that Kale says she scares the crap out of him,” Roxie said, never looking up from the computer. “Here we go.” On the screen there was video of Kate walking out of the stadium by herself, but the walking pattern and the outfit matched the one in Jordan’s video. “And here’s Jordan.” The timestamp showed that Jordan had left that day two hours before Kate. “Now I take the layers . . .” Roxie’s voice trailed off as she went back to work.

The door opened and Cassidy walked back in. “You owe me, superstar. Finn Williams will be calling you first thing in the morning.”

Jordan crossed the room in four strides, wrapped his arms around her, and lifted her off the ground as he spun them around. He set her back down, lowered his face toward hers and paused. Landon knew he was waiting for Cassidy to say no. When she didn’t back up, Landon turned away as Jordan kissed her.

“You are wonderful. Thank you!”

“And you were right. You don’t kiss like a brother. Okay, anything else y’all need from me?” Cassidy asked.

“Your number,” Jordan said, pulling out his phone and handing it to her, but Cassidy didn’t take it.

“As I said, superstar, let’s see how you play the field before I give you my number. Later!”

“Night,” Roxie called out after Kate thanked her for helping.

“Wait,” Jordan said, racing after Cassidy. “You do mean how I play football, right?”

Cassidy didn't answer before getting in her car and driving off. Jordan came back looking like the others—completely in over their heads and not even realizing it. It would take a very special, very strong, very secure man to ever get Cassidy to settle down.



Kate woke up to find herself lying on the couch with a blanket over her and a pillow from her bed under her head. Roxie was still at her laptop when Kate blinked her eyes open.

It was then she realized what had woken her. It was the sound of a ringing phone. Hers. “Hello?”

“Are you still coming to practice?”

Kate shot up on the couch and looked out the window. It was still dark out. Finally, her head registered the voice, the time, and the practice in question. “Yeah, give me ten minutes. Sorry. Long night.”

“What’s that?” Landon asked from where he was sitting on the chair across from Roxie.

“Oh, um, just a morning meeting I have on the farm that I forgot about.”

Landon looked at his watch and nodded. “If you see my brother, make sure to kick his ass.”

“You know?”

“Well, it’s five forty-five in the morning. Only the workout room in the security building is full right now. I guessed. I think it’s a great idea. Do you want me to join you?”

“Maybe another time. Help Roxie.” Kate rushed to get dressed and ran to the building. The security guard let her in and chastised her for being late. She wanted to keep up with as many workouts with Nash and the in-law group as possible.

She burst through the doors in the basement and the in-laws all turned and shook their heads. “So unfair,” Deacon said.

“Saved by a baby,” Walker said with a sigh.

“I mean, not even a single knife or spoon thrown,” Willa said as she and Tilly crossed their arms over their chests.

“It was strange not threatening to arrest anyone for taking it too far,” Matt said, sounding slightly disappointed.

“I was really hoping to see Cade grumble, but you just swooped in and saved the day by getting Ahmed not to pass out,” Nash said with mock anger. “Making me look bad and all.”

Then everyone burst out laughing.

“It was nice,” Kate told them. “Annie even joined me for iced tea and we talked after Cami was born.”

Everyone stopped laughing. “Oh, honey,” Evie said sympathetically, “That wasn’t a cozy chat.”

“That was an interrogation,” Wyatt’s wife, Camila informed her.

“No, it wasn’t,” Kate protested.

“Did she ask about marriage?” Aiden asked.

Kate thought back. “No, I don’t—” then she paused as she began to remember.

“Yup, she asked about marriage,” Aiden said with a chuckle.

“What about children?” Stella asked.

“Oh my gosh, she did interrogate me!” Kate spoke softly, in stunned wonder, as Nash strapped boxing gloves to her hands.

“People are scared of Cade when they find out he was Special Forces, but Annie’s way more dangerous,” Nash told her.

“It doesn’t sound too bad for you,” Carter told her.

“Yeah, when I was dating Riley,” Matt began to tell Kate, “she was in the hospital on morphine and told everyone about

our sex life. Her father wasn't thrilled to hear she loved my dick."

Kate felt all the blood drain from her face as part of the conversation she had with Annie came back to her.

"Looks like I spoke too soon," Carter chuckled.

"The Rose Sisters' iced tea strikes again," Stella said as they all nodded understandingly.

"What did you say?" Aiden asked.

"I told her I saw Landon naked and that I licked his six pack." Kate groaned and used the boxing gloves to hide her face.

The room was quiet for several seconds until Nash laughed out loud and soon everyone joined him. "Welcome to the family, Kate. You've embarrassed yourself in front of your in-laws and also gained their respect. I think you passed the test without having to punch anyone. Now, let's get to work. After your attack the other night at the gala and for whatever reason Roxie is here, I think we should continue these sessions even if you don't have to go through the family dinner interrogation. Now, hands up."

Kate jogged home. Her body hummed with energy. She'd learned how to disarm a man today and her punches were getting a lot stronger and better aimed.

Jordan was outside the cottage, talking on his phone. He looked very serious and Kate guessed he was talking to the super-agent, Finn Williams. He was talking animatedly but Kate was stopped from eavesdropping when a black SUV drove up. The window rolled down and Annie looked out. "Good morning, Kate!" Annie waved and Kate eyed the friendly woman with bouncy curls, who she now knew had interrogated her, with suspicion.

"Good morning, Mrs. Davies."

Annie parked the car and got out. She motioned for Kate to follow her to the back of the truck. "You said you could shoot. Pick one and we'll go shooting tonight when Landon brings you over after work."

Annie lowered the tailgate and Kate blinked as Annie went to work unlocking and opening gun safe after gun safe. “Well, I normally shoot a rifle,” Kate said absently as Annie opened them all up and then stepped back.

“I know my nieces and nephews are teaching you to fight, but if you’re familiar with a gun, you should carry it for protection.” Annie looked at her dubiously. “Are you sure you know how to shoot?”

Kate rolled her eyes. “I’ll take the Glock 19.”

Annie’s brows rose in surprise. “Good choice.” Annie closed the carrying case the Glock was in and handed it to her. “There’s ammunition secured on the other side of the case.” Then she gave her the code to open the carry safe and began closing all her guns back up.

“Thank you,” Kate said. It actually did make her feel better. She was armed with a dog and a gun. Bring on Brayden the little douche. This Texan was ready for anything.

“You’re welcome. I happen to notice my son is not at his home this morning. Would he be here by chance?”

“Oh, sorry, my phone!” Kate avoided answering her and answered Will’s phone call. “Hey, Will.”

“Good morning, Kate. I need to see you at my office as soon as possible.”

Damn. This couldn’t be good. “I’ll be there within the hour.”

The day had started with such promise, but now she had a nosey mother, a pissed-off boss, and a dog who was a whore for belly rubs. At least that’s what it appeared when she walked inside her cottage.

Landon and Roxie were both rubbing Rip’s stomach as they looked on the screen. “Have you found anything yet?” Kate asked.

“Getting there,” Roxie told her.

“Thank you for all your help. I’ve been called into the office early. Can you call me if you find anything?” Kate was

already walking through the room to get to the shower.

“Of course,” Roxie called out.

“I’ll drive you,” Landon offered.

“Thank you.” Kate worried the whole time she got ready for what had happened. Owen had talked to Will last night. Did it have anything to do with the threats? Brayden and Owen were tight. It was one of the things Brayden held over her head. He would be believed, not her. It was just one of the things that made him dangerous. She was worried she might find out it wasn’t the only thing dangerous about Brayden Brothers.

Landon felt a mixture of emotions ranging from helplessness to anger. He didn't know what he could do to protect Kate. He wanted to go after Brayden, man to man, but according to Roxie, Brayden and his private jet had left town the night before.

Now he watched as Kate and Rip hurried into the stadium, leaving him in the car. He'd made her promise to call him when she was ready to head home. Until then, he'd stay in town in case she needed him.



Kate went straight to Will's office only to find Owen sitting and waiting for her, a smug look on his face. Will didn't look too pleased when he got up from his desk and joined them in the sitting area. Kate chose a seat as far away from Owen as she could.

"You wanted to see me before practice?" Kate asked. Rip, sensing her nerves, moved closer to her.

Will took a deep breath, but before he could talk, Owen answered. "Brayden Brothers came to talk to me yesterday. He said you've been acting inappropriately toward him. He said you told him that your complaint against him was simply a power move to force him to give in to your advances."

"Are you fu—" Kate blurted before Will silenced her with a gesture.

“Let Owen finish,” Will said, cutting her off. “Owen, please continue.”

Owen had never made her feel welcome, so the smirk as if it brought him great joy to destroy her career was expected. “Further, there are some nasty rumors about you sleeping with several members of the Thoroughbreds team. I’m sorry, Will, but Kate is a blight on this team and must be put in her place.”

“Thank you for bringing this to my attention, Owen. You may go.” Will waited patiently as Owen stumbled along, trying to find a reason to stay. Finally, he got up and gave Kate a smug look on the way out.

Will waited for the door to close behind Owen before letting out a long breath full of frustration. “What is going on, Kate?”

“Please don’t ask to see them, but something has happened.” Kate caught Will up on everything that had happened to her and also to Jordan. “And you have evidence they’re fakes?”

“Yes, this goth genius named Roxie, who says *dude* a lot in this fantastic English accent, has taken them apart layer by layer to show how they were faked. She works with someone named Kale and everyone swears she knows what she’s doing.”

Will nodded. “If she works with Kale, I trust her completely. So, Sunday is our deadline. It speaks to you being a good coach that Jordan came to you with this, but I don’t know what to do next.”

“Me neither,” Kate admitted. “What about Brayden and Owen?”

“Right now it’s a keep your enemies close thing. Know that as soon as this is over, they’re fired. I’m gathering evidence and backing up accounts and records in preparation for his firing. Until then, let’s pretend you’re on shaky ground. You’re not, but we don’t want them to know that.”

“Good plan. I’ll let you know what Roxie finds. Thank you, Will. Most owners wouldn’t do this. They’d just fire us

all and move on.”

“It’s not the right thing to do. You’re a good coach and a good person, Kate. Plus, if I fire you now, Annie will kill me, and she scares me almost as much as my wife does when she crosses her arms over her chest and gets that judge look on her face.”

Kate chuckled as she left Will’s office. She put a frown on her face as soon as she was in the hall in case Owen was watching. The short walk to her office felt like an eternity.

Before she was settled in her office, there was a knock on the door. Kate was surprised when Landon walked in. “Did you tell him? What was the meeting about?”

“Yes, but what are you doing here?”

Landon took a seat and handed her a bag with some breakfast in it. “I know you were nervous and I wanted to check on you. No matter what, you aren’t going to give in to the blackmail even if this gets hard.”

Kate got up to close the door he had left open. “Neither Jordan nor I will do it. Hopefully it’ll work out. But even if it doesn’t, I’ve worked too hard in my life to cheat. I won’t let another man railroad my career.”

Kate closed the door and went back to join Landon. “I don’t have much time. I have practice starting soon.” Kate took a seat on the couch next to him.

Landon instantly put his arm around her and pulled her to his chest. “Roxie is working on a full Brayden report. She has an alert on him so she’ll know the second he boards a plane or the second his family’s jet takes off.”

“Good.” Kate sighed and leaned closer to him. “One way or the other this will be over on Sunday.”

“Just a couple more days. Stay strong. I’ll pick you up anytime you need it. Just call me.”

“What about your work? I don’t want your work to suffer because of me.”

“It won’t. I put a great team in place to make sure it doesn’t. After the review comes out next week, I’m hoping we’ll be more than just a hidden gem.”

Kate leaned up and kissed him. “You’re going to be so busy you won’t notice when I’m at an away game.”

“Oh, trust me. I’ll notice. I already miss having you in my arms after sleeping apart last night. But, it works out well, doesn’t it? You’re rising to the top of your profession while I rise to the top of mine. We can rise together,” Landon said, kissing her between each sentence.

“I missed sleeping in your arms too.”

A knock sounded on the door and then Trey called out, “Practice time, Coach.”

“I have to go.”

“What’s your schedule like today?” Landon asked as he watched her gather up her things.

“Practice until eleven or twelve. Break for a long lunch. I’ll be working in my office, so don’t worry. Then position meetings from three to five.”

Landon opened her door for her. “Then I’ll be here to pick you up at five. Call me if you need to change the time. I love you, Kate. Have a great practice.”

Kate rose up and kissed him. “I will! Love you!”

Landon’s heart was full as Kate sent him a saucy wink before racing down the stairs toward the field.



Kate was energized from the tip of her toes to the ends of her hair. It had been one of those practices where all the pieces clicked into place for the offense. The passing plays were perfectly executed. The running plays had crisp handoffs. It was perfection and it gave her a glimpse into what kind of winning year they could have.

“Coach,” the offensive coach called out to her. Samson grinned and shook his finger at her. “I’ve never seen this side of Jordan. Damned if you didn’t make him the starter when everyone else thought he was done. Damn good job, Coach.”

Samson patted her shoulder and shook her hand before calling Jordan and Knox over. “Meet in Coach Everett’s office at two forty-five.”

“Yes, sir,” they both said before walking off the field together.

“How did you know to go to the tight end instead of the receiver?” Knox asked Jordan as they walked away.

Samson was staring in wonder as Jordan began explaining the play call to Knox. “You’re a miracle worker. Not only is Jordan up to starting, he’s mentoring Knox now?”

Kate smiled with pride. “They’re two great quarterbacks.”

“Coach Kate!”

Kate looked over to see Trina from public relations running out onto the field in high heels. “You’re late! You have a photo shoot for River and Elm at twelve, then the commercial for Rich Brauen in River and Elm clothing, at one!”

“I do?” Kate asked, pulling out her phone and sure enough, there was a text from both her agent and Morgan, reminding her of the photo shoot. Apparently, Kev hadn’t lied about wanting to get this done and fast. “How long will the commercial take? I have a meeting at three.”

“You don’t even have a line. It’s just you smiling before taking a sip of beer,” Trina told her. “You’ll be back by three.”

“Go ahead,” Samson told her.

“Come on. I’ll drive you,” Trina said as she grabbed Kate’s arm. Kate was pretty sure it wasn’t to pull her along, but more to stop Trina from falling as she winked at the players walking by.

“Jordan is single, right?” Trina asked when they drove out of the stadium. “And what about Knox?”

“I never asked,” Kate told her as they drove to a more industrial part of town.

“Girl, how could you not ask? I need this kind of information,” Trina teased. “So, this shoot you’ll be in three or four outfits. No talking, just print. Then you’ll wear one of the outfits to the beer commercial. All you will do is toast with Jordan. Then turn to the camera with a smile and take a sip of beer.”

“I think I can handle that. But my hair and makeup?” Kate didn’t wear makeup often and certainly not when she was on the field for several hours. She always wore sunscreen but hardly ever wore makeup.

“They have a hair and makeup person there, so no worries. They wanted to get these collaborations done before the game on Sunday,” Trina explained.

Sure enough, when they arrived at the warehouse, Kate was instantly pulled away by hair and makeup. Although the outside was nothing more than a warehouse in the industrial part of town, the inside looked as if it were a posh tailgate with a greenscreen behind the props.

“Tailgate theme, but they’ll add the stadium in afterward,” the woman dressing her explained. “That way they can change the color of the cars or even the stadium itself depending on your outfit to make sure it’s the clothing that pops and not something in the background.”

“Coach Ellington!” Kev called out even as the dresser hurried to pull the two-hundred-dollar sweatshirt on over her head to protect Kate’s privacy. “Thank you for fitting me in so quickly. I just couldn’t wait to get you into print. I have spots reserved for advertising at the stadium and wanted to get the hottest coach in the league in my clothes for game day.”

Why did everything Kev say sound like a sleazy double entendre? The thing was, the darn sweatshirt was comfortable. Someone at Kev’s company knew quality clothing. Kate was quickly led to the set where she met the photographer. Random models stood in the background, acting as if they were laughing as Kate posed with a football.

Coaches were not natural models. However, had she mentioned to anyone that she'd grown up in Texas? Pageants were more dangerous than the football games there. While she hadn't participated in pageants herself, her best friend and most of her graduating class had been deeply involved in that world. She'd picked up several tricks for posing and how to present a believable smile from them and put them to good use today. The shoot went smoothly and several outfit changes later, Kate was rushed out of the building by a happy Kev and a stressed Trina.

"Keep the outfits. They look great on you," Kev said, handing her a bag of clothes as they walked out to the parking lot.

"Shit, shit, shit," Trina cursed as she stared down at her car. "I must have run over a nail and the tire's flat. Kate has to be over at the Rich Brauen commercial in fifteen minutes."

"I'll just change the tire," Kate said, looking down at the luxury sports car and trying to figure out where they kept the spare.

"There is no spare," Trina said as she put the phone up to her ear. "How soon can you get here?" Trina walked off yelling at the auto club to hurry.

"Hey, Trina," Kev called out once Trina hung up the phone. "Where is the commercial?"

"It's at a horse farm not ten minutes from here," Trina said as she worked on her phone. "Nearest car service is twenty minutes away."

"Ladies, I have a car. I can drop you both off," Kev said, for once not sounding like a sleazeball.

"Can you?" Trina looked so relieved.

"Of course. Just give me the address."

Kate didn't mind if Trina was with her. Kev had never actually done anything wrong. He just rubbed her the wrong way in that gut reaction women sometimes got. He wouldn't hurt her, but he'd make her feel very uncomfortable for the entire ten-minute ride.

“Here’s the address,” Trina said, texting it to him. “The auto club will be here and I have to sign for the new tire. Then I’ll meet you there.” Trina shoved a binder at Kate. “Here is a very detailed, step by step, instruction manual for your commercial. I’ll be there as soon as possible and drive you back to the stadium. If you need me for anything, just call me.”

Kate looked to where Kev was walking toward a convertible with the top down. Well, if she needed help all she had to do was scream.

“And make sure they use the lip gloss I told them to!” Trina yelled at the last minute. A thought occurred to Kate and as she nodded, she wasn’t thinking about lip gloss, but lipstick.

Kate reached into her purse and pulled out the lipstick Sophie had given her. Supposedly it was a taser. If Kev got too fresh, then she’d zap him at a red light and jump out of the car.

Kev opened the door and Kate got in. Trina was already on the phone trying to get the auto club to hurry. At least Kate wouldn’t be alone long. And the commercial was easy. Plus Jordan was there. She’d be back at practice before she knew it.

Kev turned on the car and electronic dance music began to thump so loud her seat vibrated. These next ten minutes were going to be an eternity.

Landon was in the middle of topping off the final plate of a large lunch party when his phone rang. He glanced at it on the back of the counter and immediately reached for it.

“Hey, Roxie.”

Landon motioned for one of the cooks to clean up the plate and get it out to the waitstaff as he walked out of the kitchen.

“I found it. I found the whole thing!” Roxie said excitedly over the phone.

“Whole thing?” Landon asked. She’d already found the bank accounts. Maybe she found his betting record and could connect it to threats made to other coaches.

“It’s bigger than we thought. We thought Brayden was behind it all. Or him and some muscle, but it goes all the way back to boarding school.”

“What does boarding school have to do with gambling?” Landon asked as he put the phone on speaker in his office and pulled off his apron.

“Picture this,” Roxie began. “A crisp autumn day in September almost twenty years ago. Three high school boys walk up the worn stone steps to their new dorm at an old, traditional, elite boarding school in the mountains of Massachusetts. One was from old money, one from new, and one on scholarship. Together, they ruled the school. They joined one of the oldest secret societies in prep school history in the United States. I mean, England’s youngest secret

societies are older than your oldest one, but I digress,” Roxie said, getting back on topic.

“They reach out to a former head of that secret society which was then the head of admissions at a top Ivy League school. One had the grades to get in. Two did not. However, leaning heavily on their connections all three got in. Together they joined yet another secret society, this one with names even I recognize on their lists. I’m not talking fraternities with beer-binge weekends. I’m talking hookers on a yacht parties. Now, one of the boys also joined a fraternity while the second joined the academic society and the third a work study program. They graduated, and life took them away from each other. However, they always kept in touch, met for hooker and drug-filled parties, and always had each other’s backs. Which was how this gambling ring started. It was the result of one of them needing money for a start-up.”

“Brayden didn’t need money for a start-up,” Landon said, processing the story. “His father was new money and funded it.”

“Correct,” Roxie said. He could hear the smile even over the phone. “Brayden Brothers was the new money in the story.”

“But then, who are the others?”

“The scholarship student who needed money was one Kevin Rivers, or Kev as he prefers to be called. With seed money from the gambling crimes, he started River and Elm. Brayden was already on a short leash and couldn’t invest. Old money’s assets are nearly always tied up in trusts. Trusts whose trustees denied the investment into River and Elm as foolhardy, leaving no friend to help poor Kev.”

“Who is the old money?” Landon leaned forward to make sure he didn’t miss it.

“Old money is Friedrich Werner, III, also known as Tripp, of Rich Brauen Beer.”

“You’re a rockstar, Roxie. I have to call Kate.”

“They do call me rockstar. Let me know if you need anything else.”

Landon hung up and immediately called Kate. Roxie had finally gotten to the bottom of this and he couldn't wait to tell her.



Kev drove farther away from Lexington until he came to a rundown farm. He turned into the drive and all Kate could see were rolling green hills, dilapidated wood fences, and overgrown grass.

“This is the address Trina gave you? It doesn't seem like a good place to shoot a commercial.” Kate glanced around as they drove farther onto the property.

“This is it. They are probably doing what we do—rent someplace on the cheap and fix it up in post-production.”

Finally, a barn came into view. Another SUV was waiting outside of it and the barn door was wide open. Kate could see lights inside, but it wasn't anything like the set she just came from. She couldn't tell how many people were inside or what the set looked like as Kev parked right next to the SUV.

Kate turned, reached behind her, and grabbed her purse. She began to dig around in her purse for her ringing phone when Kev yanked it from her grasp. “What the hell?” Kate yelled without thinking.

“You won't need that for the commercial,” a familiar voice said beside her. Kate turned away from Kev to find Brayden leaning against the SUV.

Kate didn't ask what was going on. These were the two behind the whole blackmail scheme. Kate didn't wait to find out what they wanted either. She hopped up into her seat, leaped onto the back trunk of the convertible, and then jumped off the car and onto the gravel drive.

Brayden was on her before she'd regained her balance enough to start running. “You've been a pain in my ass from

the moment we reached out to you,” Brayden said between clenched teeth as he dragged her over the gravel toward the barn.

Kate screamed for help. She lashed out and kicked at Brayden, but then Kev grabbed her other hand. In seconds he had her hands zip-tied in front of her. The second he did, Brayden picked her up from behind and carried her kicking and screaming into the barn.

“Scream all you want, Katie girl. No one can hear you all the way out here,” Brayden said, dropping her onto the hard ground.

Kev joined them and tossed her purse on the ground. Some of the contents spilled out, including her phone. “Tsk, tsk. Can’t have you calling for help.” Kev’s heel came down on the phone, shattering it. There went calling for help.

A muffled shout caught her attention and Kate finally looked around the barn. A man with a bag over his head was tied to a post, but Kate recognized him even before Brayden strolled over and pulled off the hood to reveal a very pissed off and slightly panicked Jordan.

“I have to go make my appearance at an event. I’m sure they’ll come looking for them sooner or later,” Kev said to Brayden. “I’ll be back as soon as they finish questioning me.”

“You left with me in your car. How do you expect to get away with this?” Kate asked.

“Easily,” Kev said with a smirk. “I also got a nail in my tire and didn’t make it to the commercial. But Jordan drove by and picked you up. Then when they ask at the commercial shoot they’ll say you never arrived. Jordan will be the main suspect, but both of you can fix this. Text me when they do the right thing,” Kev said, turning back to Brayden who nodded in response.

Kate watched Kev strut out as if he hadn’t just kidnapped someone. They’d tied Jordan, but they hadn’t tied her up. Sure, she had her hands zip tied together, but that wouldn’t stop her from escaping.

Brayden pushed back his suit coat and revealed a gun tucked in his waistband. “Just in case either of you are thinking of trying to escape, I won’t shoot the person trying to escape first. I’ll shoot the one left behind first. Don’t be responsible for killing each other.”

“What do you want from us?” Kate asked.

“You both had to agree. You were pinned in a corner. Help us make a little money and then you two could be on your way. But no, I have to hear that you and Jordan had a little convo yesterday and decided not to help us.”

“You were at my office?” Kate asked, horrified to know he was listening to her.

“No. I have friends everywhere and they told me all about these nasty rumors you were starting about me and cheating.” Brayden cocked his head and smirked at her. “I told you that no one would believe you if you went forward with the allegations. I heard Will Ashton lit into you this morning for your inappropriate advances on my person. I wanted to give you a little taste of what I could do to you if you don’t comply. That was a taste, but now I’m going to give you the whole pie. If you two don’t fall in line, one of you will die. I won’t tell you which one, but I wanted to show you how easy it was to get to you.”

“Why are we still here?” Kate asked, hoping it wasn’t Trina who had worked with Brayden because she’d never report them missing until they didn’t show up for practice at all. Only when Landon couldn’t find her would they come looking for her. The stupid flat tire. It had to be Trina. Damn, she needed to find a way to rescue herself and Jordan or one of them might not get out of this alive.

“To be punished, of course. I want to know I can trust you going forward. If not, you’re of no use to us. Now, let’s get started.” Brayden pulled out his gun and Kate’s mind went blank. How was she going to save them?



Landon bit his lip as he looked at the phone now going to voicemail. Kate could be at practice, but something didn't feel right. He ended the call and went to call Sienna to have her check on Kate when his Aunt Morgan's name flashed up on his phone.

"Hello?" Landon answered immediately.

"Is Kate with you?" Morgan didn't mince words and now the feeling something was wrong felt like a boulder in the pit of his stomach.

"No, she's at the stadium."

"She's not. Trina, the PR person for the team, just called me freaking out. Kate was supposed to do two commercials during her lunch break. She did one for River and Elm, but Trina's car had a flat. They were in a warehouse and she ran over a nail. Kev Rivers of River and Elm drove off with Kate to take her to her next commercial for Rich Brauen Beer. Trina got her tire replaced and drove to the set. Neither Kate, Kev, nor Jordan had appeared. Trina went back to the stadium to find Kev meeting with Owen about how happy he was with the photo shoot and Rip was in Kate's office—alone. Trina asked Kev if he had dropped Kate off, but he said no. He was halfway there when he had a flat. Apparently, he picked up a nail, too. Jordan drove by and said he'd take her to the commercial since he was in it, too. That's the last anyone has seen Kate. She got in the car with Jordan and drove off."

"That's not right," Landon said. He knew it instantly. "Jordan is in as much danger as Kate from Kev and his group. I have to go. I'll find her. I promise, but now I need to call Ryan."

Even as Morgan demanded to know what was going on, Landon hung up. He grabbed the leather knife roll on his desk. Landon called Ryan and filled him in as he ran for his car.

"I'm going to call Roxie and have her trace Kate's phone," Landon told his cousin as he took off toward the stadium. He didn't know where else to go, but he had a feeling Kev knew exactly where Kate was.

“They have Kate,” Landon said with no preamble when Roxie answered.

“On it.” He heard the sound of keys being pounded and then Roxie gave a little grunt. “GPS has been disabled, but I have the last location. Or at least as close as possible. No one ever thinks to disable the GPS on their coffee shop app. I’m sending it to you now.”

“And to Ryan,” Landon added as his phone pinged with a text message.

Landon pulled into the stadium. Knox was out walking Rip when he pulled up.

“Hey, where is Coach Kate? We have practice and she’s not here. Rip was agitated so I took him out, but he’s just trying to pull me from the stadium.”

“No time to explain,” Landon told him as he opened his door. “Rip!” The dog yanked free from Knox and with agility Landon didn’t know the goober of a dog had, he leaped over Landon’s lap and landed in the passenger seat, ready to go.

Knox was yelling out questions, but Landon didn’t hear them. He was too busy pulling a tight U-turn and flooring it out of the stadium. He just hoped he wasn’t too late.

Kate watched as Brayden strolled over toward Jordan and yanked down the gag that had been in his mouth. Brayden squatted down in front of him and held the gun as casually as if it were a beer.

“So, Katie girl, what would you do to keep me from breaking your starting quarterback’s arm?”

“You won’t break it,” Kate challenged. “Then you wouldn’t have a player to help me cheat.”

Brayden looked over his shoulder with another one of his smirks. “Oh? And now you’re going to help us out? How nice of you.”

Kate saw it happen in slow motion and wanted to scream not to do it. Jordan kicked out and knocked Brayden to the ground. Brayden dropped the gun but Jordan didn’t have use of his arms, so he was left trying to pull the gun closer with his legs.

“No!” Kate yelled as Brayden jumped up and slammed his fist into Jordan’s face.

“You think you’re a tough guy, huh?” Brayden taunted. “I can show you tough.”

“Stop! Hit me instead,” Kate yelled as a plan she hoped like hell would work began to formulate in her mind.

“No! Don’t touch her!” Jordan yelled as he breathed heavily.

“I have other plans for you, Katie girl.” Brayden picked up his gun and turned back to Jordan. “What to try that again? You think you’re such a stud, but you’re just a washed-up player about to become my bitch.”

The sound of a car driving up had Kate screaming for help, but Brayden only laughed. “No one is coming for you, Katie.”

Kate’s heart pounded as she held her breath hoping against hope it was help arriving. Instead, she got lightheaded from hope’s crushing fall as Kev sauntered back in. “Miss me?”

Kev looked around and took in Jordan’s bleeding face and the dirt on Brayden’s backside. “Someone’s been bad,” Kev said to Jordan.

“Katie girl said for me to hit her instead of Jordan,” Brayden said, walking over toward her. “Maybe those videos are true? Are you screwing your quarterback?”

“Come here and I’ll tell you,” Kate challenged. She just needed him to get a little closer. She wasn’t tied to a post like Jordan. And her hands were tied in front and not behind her. She had a plan, but she had to draw him in.

“I think you want me to touch you, Katie girl.” Brayden winked at Kev who sauntered forward instead of Brayden. Damn, that made things harder. She needed that gun.

Kev reached down and grabbed her by the biceps. In a quick move, he hauled her up him and winked.

“Let her go!” Jordan fought against his bindings as Kate’s heart pounded.

Landon pulled into the address the GPS coordinates gave him and stopped. She was a mile up the road according to the last pinged location. However, this was wide-open farmland. They’d be able to see or hear him coming.

Landon backed out of the drive and drove a couple of hundred feet over a hill. He parked his car off the side of the road, leaving the hood up, so anyone passing by would think he had car trouble. He reached over and grabbed his knife set

before he began jogging through the rolling hills of the bluegrass.

Rip knew there was trouble. The dog practically radiated with tension. He didn't bark. He didn't whine. He didn't ask for belly rubs. Instead, he jogged silently by Landon's side as if glued to him.

Landon jogged parallel to the drive, but then heard the sound of a car off in the distance. Landon dropped to the ground and, at the same time, Rip did, too. A sportscar flew down the drive and Landon saw the back of Kev's head as he sped by.

Jogging was no longer an option. Landon was out of time. He sprinted along the fence, but couldn't keep Kev's car in sight. By the time he saw Kev's car again, it was parked at a barn next to an SUV. Landon took some calming deep breaths as he silently approached the side of the barn. Rip's hackles stood up down his back, his nose was twitching in the air, and his muscles were taut. Landon knew the feeling. He was wound so tight he was about to break. Landon kept his eyes on the cars, but both seemed empty.

"I think you want me to touch you, Katie girl." Landon heard Brayden say, his voice dripping with egotistical delusion. Landon bet Brayden was the kind who, when told no by a woman, thought it was just foreplay.

Landon set down the leather roll case and untied it. He pushed it open and pulled several knives from their sheaths. He tucked a couple into his back pockets and then held one in each hand. "Not until my command, okay Rip?" Landon whispered. He swore the dog nodded.

"Let her go!"

Landon froze as he heard Jordan's scream. They were touching Kate and Landon's time was up. Landon fought every instinct he had to rush headfirst into the barn. Instead, he crept to the open door and peered around to evaluate the situation. Kev's back was to him, but he could see that he had Kate hauled up against him. Brayden was smiling as he watched Kev with Kate. Landon finished scanning the area

and saw that Jordan was tied to a post trying everything he could to get free. He could take the two men. Landon wasn't worried as he began to make his move.

Suddenly Landon heard a sound that he knew all too well.

Zzzzzzppt

Kev went down hard and Landon saw the look of surprise on Kate's face as she held Sophie's taser. Brayden and Jordan stared with surprise, but Landon knew what to expect. He got the first knife ready and when Kev let out a massive fart, Landon made his move.

Kate saw him first and shouted, "Landon, he has a gun!"

Brayden turned and that was when Landon saw it. Brayden had a gun in his hand and now a small smile turned up on his lips. Landon palmed his knives. He strode closer to Kate. He had to get between her and Brayden.

"Ah, the gallant gala date to the rescue." Brayden wore a cocky grin on his face as he placed who Landon was. "I believe the last time we talked, you threatened to kill me if I touched Katie. How is your window, by the way?"

So, Brayden had busted his window, what a tough guy. Landon couldn't cut Brayden off from getting to Kate, so he had to do his best and stop him from getting any closer to her. Landon moved slightly so Brayden had to choose to either look at him or Kate.

"If I said it, I'll do it. I'm a man of my word." Landon was deadly serious in his threat, but Brayden was too arrogant to think anyone could hurt him.

"Nah, I don't think you will. I'm armed with a gun and I'll shoot your girlfriend just to watch you cry. You don't mess with me, Chef Boyardee. I'm richer, I'm smarter, and I always get my way." Brayden tapped the side of his head with the muzzle of the gun as if he were thinking. "But, I think it would be more fun if you were the one who got shot and died, knowing Katie will be under my control."

"No!" Kate's eyes were wild. "Don't hurt him. I'll do whatever you say."

Kev farted again and Brayden looked down at his friend with distaste as if he had control over his gas. “Drop the taser, Katie girl and maybe I won’t shoot your boyfriend right now.”

Kate instantly dropped the taser and Brayden swung the gun in Landon’s direction.

“You said you wouldn’t hurt him!” Kate screamed.

Brayden shrugged his shoulders as he pointed the gun at Landon. “I lied.”

“Rip, now!” Landon let the knives drop into the palms of his hands. He’d grown up shooting, but knives had always been his strong suit. Before Brayden even saw them, Landon threw them with both hands at the same time. The two knives flew through the air as Landon dove for the ground.

The sound of a gunshot and then a scream filled the barn. Landon jumped back up, reaching behind him for the second set of knives.

Brayden was on his knees and was screaming bloody murder as two knives stuck in him. One in each shoulder. Rip was standing guard between Brayden and Kate with his teeth bared, which let Landon focus all his attention on the screaming Brayden.

“It’s over, Brayden. We know what you did. We know about the betting, your separate bank accounts, and even the secret organizations you and Kev belong to. It’s over.”

“But did you know about me?” The voice behind him had Landon spinning around. Brayden’s screams had covered the sound of another arrival.

“Hello, Tripp.” Landon’s hands itched to throw his knives, but the gun leveled at him by someone who was clearly proficient with it, stopped him. “Yes, we know about you, too. Old money, new money, scholarship money. All meeting as roommates in boarding school. We know the cheating was because your dad had all your assets tied up in trusts and Brayden’s dad has clipped his wings over all his sexual harassment settlements. When Kev needed money for his clothing company, the idea to cheat the online gambling

system began. You've all done well for yourselves, but you didn't count on a coach who would say no to you, did you?"

Kev farted into the silence as if answering Landon's question.

"No, Kate wasn't what we were expecting. But now I have to clean up the mess she's made by throwing a spoke in the wheel." Tripp looked around and then smiled as if he'd gotten a great idea. "Murder suicide. Jordan and Kate were desperate to be together, but were forced to hide their relationship. We already have the videos to prove it. You got mad at being her decoy when you wanted her for yourself. You found her and Jordan here together, shot them both, and then yourself."

"How did you go from prep school boys to murdering men?" Landon asked, trying to delay as long as he could.

"We were raised from birth to get whatever we want and not let anything stop us. Just think how many in my position have killed their parents to get their fortunes. It's a Catch-22 created by society, not just the wealthy. Parents teach their kids they should have anything and everything they want. They remove all obstacles from their path so they never have to work for anything. Then we grow up and ask for some money, and are told no. We don't like being told no after a lifetime of being told yes. And I don't like you telling me no either. So, yeah, I won't have any trouble shooting you if that's what you think."

Tripp put his finger on the trigger and Landon knew it was now or never. He threw his knives as the sound of a gun firing twice boomed throughout the barn. The sound was deafening and the bullet he expected to hit him never did. Fear raced through Landon as Tripp stood still as if in shock. Had Tripp hit Kate?

"Kate!" Landon turned to see her lying on her stomach, her bound hands outstretched with a gun in them. Rip had moved to stand guard over Tripp, making sure he couldn't reach for the gun that had fallen from his hand.

"Told you I could shoot," Kate said, keeping an eye on Tripp, who was in a state of shock.

Sirens sounded in the distance as Landon fought the urge to bundle Kate up and run. Instead, he rushed over to Tripp. Landon found the gun Tripp had been ready to shoot, but it had been shot from his hand with one bullet. Tripp had been shot in the shoulder with another. One of Landon's knives stuck in the wall behind him and the other in the shoulder of Tripp's non-shooting arm. Kate had saved him.

"Landon!" Jordan shouted, drawing his attention back to find Brayden trying to run out the back of the barn.

"I got this!" Kate called out, pushing up to her feet and making a run for Brayden. Landon thought she was going to tackle him, but at the last minute she held out her arm and pressed a tube of lipstick to the back of his neck.

Zzzzpt!

Brayden dropped to a heap on the floor and farted.

Kate turned to Landon with a dazzling smile on her face. "This thing is so satisfying. I have got to thank your sister for it."

The sound of tires sliding to a stop in the gravel was accompanied by the sound of a helicopter above them. Police and FBI rushed in through the doors with guns drawn at the same time the roof of the barn shattered. People on fast ropes and armed to the teeth crashed through the roof and landed on the dirt floor with guns raised.

"Damn. We missed it," one of the hooded men who had fast-roped in said as he reached up and pulled off his helmet.

"Uncle Miles?" Landon said in surprise. Then he looked at the others. "Dad? Is that you?" Landon's father took off his helmet and Landon began to count people who had broken in through the roof. He saw his dad, Uncle Miles, and he could recognize Uncle Cy anywhere, which left Uncle Marshall as the other man in the group. Landon's eyes narrowed at the smaller figure, putting zip ties on Brayden. "Mom?"

"Mr. Davies?" Kate asked, surprised as she looked at his father.

"Yes?" came four replies.

Landon hurried to Kate's side and cut off the zip tie as Ryan began the arrests and calls for ambulances. "Is that your mom?" she asked in a whisper.

"That's my mom," Landon said with a big grin.

"She just kicked Brayden in the balls." Kate shook her head and laughed. "I really like your family."

"Now you have to go out with me so I can thank you for the rescue." Landon turned to find Cassidy cutting Jordan's bindings.

"Where did you come from?" Uncle Miles asked as Cassidy gave him the worst attempt of an innocent blink of her eyelashes Landon had ever seen.

"Who, me?" Cassidy asked as if she'd been there the whole time.

"No wonder the CIA wants you," Cy said after pulling off his helmet.

"How did you all know we were here?" Kate asked the group.

"Morgan got worried when you didn't show up at the commercial and called Landon, who hung up on her to come rescue you," Miles began to explain. "My wife doesn't like being hung up on and she called me to find out what was happening. I called Ahmed to see what he knew and he said the dudette said you were in trouble, so we all came to save you."

"Who shot this gun?" Annie asked as she picked up the gun with the bullet hole in it.

"I did," Kate said. "Got Tripp in the shoulder and then shot the gun from his hand." All faces turned to her with surprise and looked back to the gun. Kate threw her hands out in exasperation. "I told y'all I could shoot."

Annie held up a finger to prevent anyone from talking as she made a phone call. "Suck it, Tammy! I have the badassest daughter-in-law now! Plus, she knows *Die Hard* is a

Christmas movie. Game over. I win.” Landon watched his mother do a little happy dance there in the barn.

Landon hugged Kate tight to him. He never wanted to let her go. Today told him what was important in life. Love was. Kate was. His family was. “You think you want to be part of this crazy family?”

Kate looked up at him and smiled. “You think they’re crazy? Ha! You haven’t seen my dad during football playoffs. Our families are going to love each other just as much as I love you.”

Landon leaned down and kissed Kate. She was his everything. His present, his future, his hopes, and all of his dreams.

“Tammy, I gotta go” he heard his mother say. “I have to call Father Ben.”

January . . .

“Thank goodness there are elevators,” Evie said as she and Camila entered the private elevator just for suite guests at the Thoroughbreds stadium. They were both in their third trimesters and the only ones not bundled up against the cold winter air.

“It’s freezing,” Kale muttered as they let the Keeneston women take the first elevator.

“You were in Rahmi too long,” Landon teased. Kale had just gotten back from his time in the Rahmi military looking even more like Ahmed than he’d had before. He was taller than his father and had his mom’s blue eyes, but he now had a slightly dangerous edge to him.

“I’m glad to be back, even if it’s freaking freezing.” Kale looked around and frowned. “Is Cassidy going to make it?”

Landon shrugged. “I don’t know. She’s worse than our parents disappearing without a word and then showing back up as if she hadn’t been gone.”

“I guess she likes the CIA,” Kale said.

“You could find out where she is.”

Kale grinned. “I never said I didn’t know where she is. I just wondered if she was going to make it back in time.”

“I wouldn’t miss the conference championship for anything.”

Landon almost jumped at Cassidy’s voice coming from behind him. Landon turned and put an arm around his cousin. “Glad you can make it. Where’ve you been?”

“She can’t tell you, but I can. She was in Crusina. How’s Deming?” Kale asked with a smirk.

Cassidy rolled her eyes at him and didn’t answer. Instead, they were joined by Lucas and Talon. The two FBI hostage rescue teammates were completely different from each other. Lucas was from northern Alaska and his best friend was a polar bear. Talon was half-American and half-Australian. Lucas was an easy-going goofball. Talon was a mountain of seriousness with a hint of mischief.

However, both of them looked pretty serious right now. Landon smiled at them, but they didn’t smile back. “Did something happen?” Landon asked.

“Did Poppy and Zinnia turn you down for a date?” Cassidy asked, taking in their seriousness.

“Kind of,” Lucas said as his brow furrowed.

“What does that mean?” Kale asked.

“We finally asked them to the game. They said they couldn’t date anyone, no matter how badly they wanted to,” Talon answered. “I don’t get it.”

Landon frowned. He needed to talk to them. Something was definitely going on with the sisters and he wanted to help.

The elevator door opened and the group headed to the suite together. When Landon walked inside, he saw Talon and Lucas head over to Jackson, Dylan, Walker, and well, all of the military guys.

Dylan bounced a gurgling and happy Cami in the baby carrier that was strapped to his chest under Ahmed’s watchful eye. His wife, Abby, was chatting with the family and the feel of the box was one of excitement.

Landon greeted his parents who were sitting with Kate's folks. They'd become great friends since they'd first met at the exhibition game right after the business with Brayden, Tripp, and Kev. The three men were all in prison now, and instead of damaging Kate's reputation, the incident had only enhanced it.

"Jordan is having a hell of a year," Cade said to Kate's father. "And I know it's all because of Kate."

Landon moved to the giant windows overlooking the field. They'd made it to the conference championship. Jordan and Knox worked in tandem. The second Jordan came off the field, he and Knox were breaking down the plays and talking to Kate up in the box. Kate had found her groove with Trey and Samson, and they'd put together a heck of an offense. Owen had resigned from the team after it was found out Brayden used Owen as a way to get information on Kate and the team.

Kate was thriving in Kentucky. After two months of dating and realizing they spent every night together, Kate moved into his house in Keeneston. Their relationship was better than he could imagine. He supported her and she supported him. In fact, he couldn't wait to tell her the news he had got today. The top restaurant magazine in the business had awarded Landon's their coveted Golden Star Award. The second the award was announced, he sold out for the next three months. He and Bryce were going to be interviewing for more high-level chefs to help keep up with the demand.

The stadium began to rock with the intro music. Pyrotechnics went off and then the team was running onto the field. Kate ran in with the coaches, but then took a private elevator up to the box.

Before he knew it, the game was on.

Kate had never felt so focused. She saw the opponent's defense and read it like a child's picture book. Jordan, with the help from Layne, had never been stronger. He knew it was only a matter of time before his career came to an end but he'd worked with his agent, Finn Williams, to make the most of it.

Excitement coursed through her as their defense intercepted the ball. “Run!” she yelled as the whole coaches’ box was up and cheering. She watched the time tick off the clock to a minute thirty when he was finally taken down and the clock stopped.

“Jordan!” Kate was trying not to yell into the earpiece as she called the play she wanted. A shovel pass to the tight end, but if that wasn’t open, then a safe throw to Jaylen, the running back. “Burn clock. They’ll call a time out after that. You should be good to kneel and run the clock out,” Kate said, finishing off the plays that in one minute and thirty seconds would earn them the championship.

“Kate,” Trey’s voice said over the intercom. “Get your ass down here. Bring the box.”

Kate turned to her co-workers and grinned. They’d heard it, too. “Gentlemen, are we ready to storm the field?”

They took the private elevator down and Kate reached Trey on the sidelines right as the timeout the other team called was wrapping up. Jordan looked to the sidelines and Kate held up her fingers to indicate which play she wanted him to call.

The whistle blew and the countdown began. The crowd was deafening, but she still could hear her quarterback call the play. Jordan was under center, reducing the risk of a fumble, and then the snap was made. Jordan didn’t rush back into the pocket. Instead, he handed the ball to Jaylen, who was running by him in the opposite direction. A gaping hole opened up as Zach Sanders pushed the defender back and off Jaylen flew.

Kate was screaming. Knox was next to her with his hand gripping her arm. Kate looked at the clock. They were down to fifty seconds. “Down!” Kate yelled the second Jaylen ran past them up the sidelines and crossed the first down marker.

Jaylen slid to a stop and the ref blew the play dead. Jaylen got up and jumped into the arms of his team. With no more time outs, the opposing team had to watch as Jordan knelt the ball and then the game was over. Kate saw the cooler dumped over Trey and jumped out of the way.

Trey was then there, hugging her as the coaches had their own celebration for the few seconds they had before cameras were in their faces. Kate watched as Trey gave an interview. She smiled with gratitude as he mentioned her as one of the keys to their success. It was surreal watching the celebration and being a part of it. Confetti, fireworks, and the fans cheering was something she would never forget.

“Hey, Coach!” Jordan yelled and Kate turned to see him and Knox standing together with big grins on their faces. “You need a ring.”

Kate laughed. “We get our championship rings later, Jordan.”

The two men moved apart and there was Landon on one knee, holding out a ring. Kate gasped as her team surrounded her, blocking out the press as they went arm over shoulder in a tight circle. They were all smiling and it was then Kate realized not one of them was surprised.

“Kate Ellington, coach, girlfriend, taste tester of new recipes, and the woman of my dreams,” Landon said in their own bubble right in the middle of the field. “You inspire me every day with your ability to care so deeply for the people in your life.”

“Whoop! Whoop!” Jordan bellowed in agreement before the rest of the team echoed it.

Kate laughed, feeling the happy tears run down her face.

“I had to ask all the people in your life for permission,” Landon was saying again.

“Damn right!” Kate’s head snapped to the side when she heard her father’s voice. Hidden among the players were her parents and Landon’s parents. Her father and Cade were smiling. Her mother was crying, and she was pretty sure Annie was on video call with Father Ben.

Kate’s heart was full to bursting as the team responded with an echoing “Damn right!”

Landon’s smile was so brilliant that Kate felt the warmth envelope her heart. “So, I wanted to ask you, Kate, if you will

be my teammate, my coach, my best friend, and my wife? Will you marry me?"

"Yes!" Kate cried as her team cheered and her parents cried happy tears. Landon slid the ring on her finger and she saw he was shaking just as much as she was. Then he was up off his knee with her in his arms and his lips on hers.

Kate flung her arms around his neck and kissed him with all the love in her heart to the resounding cheers of the stadium. They kissed, oblivious to all the commotion surrounding them until the giant cooler of sports drink was poured over them in celebration.

"We'll celebrate more tonight," Landon whispered in her ear before setting her down. They were swooped up into one big family of hugs and congratulations.



Landon ran his thumb over Kate's bottom lip before leaning down and kissing her again.

"When you said celebrate later, you really meant it." Kate stretched out in their bed with a very satisfied smile on her face.

"I wanted to get you in a good mood before we settled on a wedding date," Landon said to her before placing another kiss on her lips. This one was slow and deep that left her breathing heavy. "I was thinking next weekend. Your parents are staying until the national championship. Plus, the whole team is here and you know they're family too. We know they'll be able to make it if we do it now."

"Next week?" Landon heard Kate's surprise and a tinge of panic to her voice. "I can't plan a wedding in a week!"

"Don't worry, dear," came a voice through a bullhorn. "We've already got it all planned!"

Landon had to press his lips together to keep from laughing.

“Is that Miss Lily?” Kate asked in a whisper.

“Now you know why we spent most of the time at your cottage when we first started dating. They turn up their hearing aids and I’m pretty sure they have spy equipment too,” Landon whispered back.

“It’s amazing what you can find online,” Miss Lily shouted back from across the street through her bullhorn.

Landon rolled over and grabbed his phone. “Ah, jamming equipment!”

“That is not funny,” Miss Lily boomed as Kate giggled.

“Next week would be good. It’s an off weekend and we were going to spend it as a team to bond. A wedding is pretty bonding,” Kate said as she rolled out of bed and put on a robe. Kate headed to the window and pushed the curtain open to look across the street. “Do you really think you can plan it in a week?”

“One second,” Miss Lily said.

Landon joined her by the window and saw the glow of a cell phone light up. Then his phone pinged with a text. Landon picked it up and saw that Miss Lily had sent out an SOS wedding planning text on the Keeneston group chat. “We better get dressed. We’re going to have company very soon.”

Even as he said it, headlights began to appear in a steady stream off in the distance.

EPILOGUE

The church in Keeneston was standing room only. Father Ben shook his head in amusement as Trey Everett made the cheerleaders put their pom-poms away and shooed the mascot out of the aisle. The entire football team, admins, and every person who worked for the Thoroughbreds was in attendance to support “our Coach Kate.”

The pews were filled with their families and friends, and every other space in the sanctuary was filled with football players. The Keeneston Belles, the former charity organization turned husband hunters, were thrilled. Suddenly the small band in the back corner of the church began to play. The doors opened and a hush fell over the crowd.

Sydney had worked nonstop to make the perfect dress for Kate. Landon hadn't seen it. In fact, this past week, Kate had moved back to her cottage so as to not spoil the surprise and he hadn't seen much of her. His sister, mother, and cousins had taken her out for a bachelorette party when Kate's mother had arrived. The acid gun of death was mentioned a lot and a video of Kate and her mother turning empty bourbon barrels to goo was being shared on the town text chain. But now she was about to be his. Landon was finally able to see Kate again.

Landon held his breath, then there she was on her father's arm. The dress was ivory satin and seemed to glow in the candlelight around the church. Kate was so beautiful she stole his breath away. As she grew near, his eyes traveled down her gown and he grinned in delight. Tiny beaded footballs lined the skirt and train.

Landon took her hand in his and the rest was a blur. Father Ben spoke and they exchanged vows, but all Landon could think about was how lucky he was this magnificent woman was marrying him. He was the luckiest man in the world.

“I now pronounce you husband and wife,” Father Ben said as Landon sealed his vows with a kiss.

The band struck up the Thoroughbreds fight song as they walked down the aisle hand in hand to the clapping and cheering of the attendees. Landon had never been happier as he stepped into their future with Kate by his side.



Cady Woodson was hosting the reception at the distillery. It was the only place large enough to fit everyone inside on this cold winter night. The champagne was flowing as well as a barrel of Cady’s very excellent bourbon.

“Ladies,” Kenna said, holding up a glass of champagne.

“One more down,” Dani said, holding up her glass.

“To Annie!” Paige said with a grin.

“To Annie!” the friends and Davies sisters-in-law toasted.

“Who is next?” Gemma asked. “Gosh, it feels good to be out.”

Annie, Bridget, and Tammy shot her the middle finger.

“Enjoy the moment, Annie. You’re down to just one. You too, Bridget,” Katelyn said, trying to be the eternal optimist. Easy when your kids are already married.

“Colton will never be ready,” Annie moaned. “But you’re right. It’s a perfect night and Landon and Kate are so happy.”

“Kale is getting closer,” Bridget said with a nod of her head. “He came back from his military service a more mature man.”

Tammy rolled her eyes. “Lucky. Cassidy is treating these CIA trips like spring break. She’s loving it. Although, I do

think she's found her passion. I am happy about that."

"Then maybe we need to turn our attention to Kale?" Kenna asked. The women all nodded. "Write it down, Dani!"

Dani opened the matchmaking notebook gifted to them by the Rose sisters and wrote down Kale's name. "What about Kale and Cassidy?" Dani asked suddenly.

Both Tammy and Bridget shook their heads. "Too much like siblings," Bridget said and Tammy agreed.

"Okay, then," Paige said with a cheery smile. "Kale is our next project. We just need to find the perfect woman for him. We can do that. Look how well we've done so far."

"To love!" Kenna called out with a toast.



"Bless their hearts," Miss Daisy said with a shake of her head at the tableful of moms. "They try."

Miss Lily clucked as she shook her head. "They aren't wrong about Kale. He's ready, but I think our help is needed elsewhere first."

"Hmm." Miss Violet wasn't happy with what she was looking at. "Those two are keeping secrets."

"We didn't push them as to why they took us up on taking over the café and the bed and breakfast. They were so young and didn't have any family to look out after them. But now I'm wondering why they uprooted everything they knew to look after three old ladies and our businesses without ever meeting us." Miss Lily looked at Poppy and Zinnia standing off to the side. They were smiling, but the smiles didn't reach their eyes.

"It's getting worse. They were so happy, but this past year something has changed," Miss Violet said with a frown.

"And look at how miserable Talon and Lucas are." Miss Daisy similarly frowned. "It's our duty as their closest relatives to find out what is happening and to fix it."

“And that fixin’ has something to do with them finding love, right?” Miss Violet asked.

“Darn tootin’.” Miss Daisy looked to her sisters. “Kale is on hold. It’s time to focus on Poppy and Zinnia. We’ve let them off the hook for far too long.”

“To Poppy and Zinnia,” Miss Lily said, holding up her champagne.



“Did the Rose sisters just say our names?” Poppy asked her older sister, Zinnia.

“Huh?” Zinnia had been watching Landon and Kate dancing while pretending not to watch Talon across the dance floor.

“I think the Rose sisters are talking about us. They can’t know anything, right?” Poppy asked quietly as fear coursed through her body.

“No. They have no idea why we came to Keeneston. You worry too much.”

“Yet you’re the one who told us we couldn’t date Talon and Lucas. Just because of what happened,” Poppy challenged. “They could help us . . . if we needed it, I mean.”

“The past is the past, but you know as well as I do why we can’t be with them. They’re law enforcement for crying out loud. And unlike Parker marrying Tilly after arresting her, we actually committed a crime.” Zinnia snapped the last words in a way that told Poppy the discussion was over.

The trouble was, the discussion hadn’t even begun. The past was coming back to haunt them and sometime very soon they were going to have to face it.



Aniyah watched the couples dancing and couldn't even manage a smile on her face. Her heart hurt. She thought for sure by changing oils she would get pregnant right away, but it hadn't happened. Jace had suggested taking it a step further and working with a fertility specialist, but Aniyah was so sure they could do it without help that she'd refused. But when she saw Dylan looking so happy as he danced by with Cami and Abby in his arms looking so happy, and Sienna teaching little Ashton how to dance, and all the other couples with their children, it hurt her heart. She loved them all, she did. But the longing in her heart for a baby of her own was sharp and painful. It was time to admit they needed to look into a specialist and consider adoption.

"Come on, sugar," DeAndre said to her. "Let me take the most beautiful woman here onto the dance floor."

Her sugarbear was her hero. He'd been by her side every moment of their fertility struggles. He somehow made sex by ovulation sexy and made her always feel like the most beautiful woman in the world even when he was hurting as well. He never said it, but she knew each negative pregnancy test was a shot to his heart as well.

"I'd love to." Aniyah placed her hand on DeAndre's arm and the room tilted. "D, something's wrong."

Aniyah clung to DeAndre's arm as he hurried her to the nearest chair. Her stomach rolled and her vision became blurry for just a moment. As if there was some doctor ESP, Jace appeared in front of her.

"What's going on, Aniyah?" Jace asked as he knelt in front of her and put his finger onto the pulse at her wrist.

"I don't know. My stomach rolled and I got a little lightheaded."

"Mind stepping out to my car?" Jace asked. "I want to draw some blood to make sure all is well."

Aniyah nodded and her sugarbear swept her up into his arms. He was smiling reassuringly at her, but she saw the worry in his eyes. They slipped out the door and Aniyah

shivered in the cold. Jace turned on his truck and DeAndre set Aniyah in front of the heater.

Jace opened his bag and Aniyah winced when he stuck the needle into her arm. In seconds, it was over. “I’ll let you know as soon as I get the results. In the meantime, if you feel like it, you can head back in and have some ginger ale and maybe some of those delicious rolls. I’ll let you know as soon as I get the results in, but I don’t think it’s anything to worry about.”

Aniyah reached out and gripped his hand. “Thank you, Dr. Jace.”

“Do you want to go home, sugar?” DeAndre asked her.

“No. Let’s see Landon and Kate leave. Then we can head out.” Aniya took DeAndre’s arm after he draped his suit coat over her shoulders and walked back toward the distillery. She didn’t notice Jace didn’t join them. Instead, he drove off toward the hospital.

They walked through an archway made of greenery and covered with fairy lights. On each side was a shadowy enclave with a bench. “Let’s sit for a minute, sugarbear. It’s so romantic.”

Aniyah took a seat on the bench. It felt as if she were in her own private wonderland. DeAndre stepped forward and something flew off his shoe and through the air, smacking her in the face. Aniyah screamed as the world went black. She was about to fall backward when DeAndre grabbed her.

“Get it off!” Aniyah yelled and then she heard her husband’s laughter as he plucked the attacker from her face. Aniyah looked up to find a pair of black silk panties dangling from DeAndre’s fingertip.

“The panty dropper has struck again.”

Aniyah rolled her eyes. “How do you not know who they are? You know everything before it happens.”

DeAndre tossed the panties into the shadows and sat down. He pulled Aniyah onto his lap and whispered, “Who said I don’t know who they are?” Then he kissed her and Aniyah forgot to ask any more questions.

“DeAndre, Aniyah,” Jace said, surprising them both in the middle of a dance. “I need a word in private.”

Aniyah’s heart dropped. It wasn’t until she saw Jace that she realized he’d been missing for a while. The smile dropped from DeAndre’s face as he slid his arm around her protectively.

They walked in silence until they reached the lobby. Aniyah’s legs were shaking so badly she took a seat on a chair made from bourbon barrels.

“What is it, doc?” DeAndre held her hand, looking stoic as they waited for the news.

“I had a hunch when you described your symptoms, so I drove the blood straight to the lab at the hospital and rushed it. I was almost back to Keeneston when they called with the results,” Jace explained as Aniyah stopped breathing.

DeAndre squeezed her hand. “Whatever it is, we’ll handle it together.”

“Yes, you will handle it as a family. You’re pregnant.”

Aniyah didn’t move. She just blinked. “What?”

DeAndre began to cry as he hugged her tightly.

Over DeAndre’s shoulder, Aniyah saw Jace smile. “You’re having a baby, Aniyah.”

Aniyah made Jace repeat it three more times. When it sank in, she didn’t cry. She simply placed her hand over her stomach and felt love like she’d never known flow through her and settle in her heart for her little sugarcub.



Kate was swept around the dance floor for one last time in her new husband’s arm. The music came to a close and Rip pranced over to them, proud in his black satin bow tie.

“Um, Landon.” Kate stared down at Rip who wagged his short tail, so proud of his prize. “Why does Rip have a pair of panties hanging from his mouth?”

“How about I show you instead of tell you,” Landon whispered as he grabbed her hand. “Come on, Kate. We have our happily ever after to see play out.”

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kathleen Brooks is a New York Times, Wall Street Journal, and USA Today bestselling author. Kathleen's stories are romantic suspense featuring strong female heroines, humor, and happily-ever-afters. Her Bluegrass Series and follow-up Bluegrass Brothers Series feature small town charm with quirky characters that have captured the hearts of readers around the world.

Kathleen is an animal lover who supports rescue organizations and other non-profit organizations such as Friends and Vets Helping Pets whose goals are to protect and save our four-legged family members.

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