



HIS TO

FIND

A LAKE POWELL FIREFIGHTER ROMANCE

JEWEL ALLEN

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To my husband, Drew, and our children, Sierra, Wesley, and Sabrina (and your spouses), for all the Lake Powell memories.

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The next book in the Lake Powell Firefighter Romance series is [*His to Shelter*](#), Coleman and Jess's marriage of convenience romance. Subscribe to Jewel's newsletter at www.jewelallen.com/subscribe to get publishing updates.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE MINUTE MAX STEEL strode into the fire station mess hall, the chattering stopped.

Five of the six firefighters who made up his platoon turned to watch him pause at the doorway, his hands loose at his side, before exchanging glances across the table. Then they pretended to be engrossed in their pancakes, prepped by the platoon's unofficially designated cook, Hunter Cross. Like the others, Hunter's glance flicked toward Max before he nodded and went back to flipping breakfast.

It just took a fraction of a second, but Max saw it.

The corner of Hunter's mouth twitched.

Great, Max thought, groaning inwardly, what's today's prank going to be?

Six months after he'd become Lake Powell Fire Station Platoon A's newest probie, and he was still everyone's butt of pranks. He glanced down at his running shoes, and caught a sparkle of pink glitter that hadn't quite washed off after that time when someone poured some on the sole, smeared with petroleum jelly.

He grunted a nod in the vague direction of his fellow firefighters, then grabbed a mug from the dish drainer. With a

little practiced twist of his wrist, he studied the rim just for a second, not seeing any traces of habañero hot sauce like another time. He poured himself a cup of coffee and walked over to the table where the others sat, slowing to a hesitant pause.

“Come and join us,” Captain Stratton Mulder urged him. “We don’t bite.”

Max caught a few titters, trying to not let this ridiculously juvenile “hazing” get to him. Before he sat down, he checked the chair for a whoopie cushion, a pile of tacks, and all sorts of other potential objects he’d come to expect every few weeks on the job. Today it was pomegranate seeds.

Hemorrhoid effect on fire station pants. Great.

“Where’d you guys even get these from?” Max asked, picking up each seed and putting them in his cupped palm.

“Not even November yet and Christmas stuff’s already out,” Weston Hawk said, chipper like he always was when talking about food.

Ransom Pike, Weston’s love/hate sidekick, jabbed him with an elbow. “You’re supposed to say, ‘What are you talking about?’”

Max walked over to the trash, chucked the seeds, which left a smear of red on his palm, making him think of fake blood, and went to spear two pancakes from a stack on the island. The food—especially Hunter’s—made this sitcom tolerable. He wasn’t about to quit this gig, not over a bunch of junior high kids. He sat himself on a chair and dug in.

Just as his cell phone ringtone played. He cut off the first bars of the Blue Danube and answered it. Normally, he let it

play out because it annoyed the others. Too “stuck up” was what they’d said. But today he picked up fast.

Everyone stopped chewing their breakfast and zoned in on him.

Max got up and faced away from the group, walking up to the window. “Hello?”

“Hi,” a woman’s voice said. “Is this Max?”

He hesitated. Sometimes he’d get an ex calling, but he didn’t recognize this voice. “Yes.”

“Oh good. I’m interested in what you have to offer.”

Max sucked his breath and frowned. “Pardon me?”

“I wish I could take them all, but for sure one.”

“Ma’am, what ‘one’?”

“A puppy. I want one puppy. A girl.”

He cocked his head. “Sorry, I think you have the wrong number.”

She sighed, sounding exasperated, as he was quickly feeling. “But you said you’re Max, right? Aren’t you a firefighter?”

“Well, yes, but I don’t have any puppies.”

“You mean that was all just a hoax?” There was a frigid silence. “I see now. You’re playing us for a fool. Listen, if you call me back, I will have the police track you down for stalking.”

The phone line went dead.

Max stared at his phone, dumbfounded.

It rang again. This time, he let the entire riff play out before answering.

“Hello?” he said cautiously.

“Hi!” Another woman, happy on this Friday morning. “I’m calling about the puppies.”

He decided he’d play along for a minute, to get to the bottom of things. “What breed are my puppies?”

“What do you mean what breed are they? They’re the same ones in the pictures, yes?”

“Which are?”

“Rotties.”

“Ah. Well, sorry to burst your bubble, but I don’t have puppies, rotten or otherwise.” He frowned. “Where’d you get my—”

But the woman had already hung up.

Behind him, some hilarity was ensuing.

Max tensed. Of course. He schooled his features, not letting on about his frustration, and turned around. The yokels were grinning among themselves.

“Hilarious,” Max said. When his phone rang, he didn’t pick up.

“Aren’t you gonna get that?” Cap asked, his gray eyes that usually were stern lightening up, to go along with that innocent-looking smile. Good ol’ Cap, in on the joke, too.

“Nah.” Max pointed at his pancakes and calmly returned to them. “Gotta get me some pancakes before they get cold.”

So he let the ringtone go on and on until Gage—served him right—stood up and said, “Either answer those calls or

silence that stuck-up phone!”

“Why don’t you answer my puppy calls for me?” Max countered.

“I will,” Ransom volunteered.

“What will Meredith say about girls calling you?” Coleman said, referring to Ransom’s wife.

“I’m not exactly trying to pick up girls,” Ransom said, but appeared like the idea had occurred to him for the first time.

“Okay, guys, that’s enough,” Cap finally had the sense to say. “Fess up now. Who set up Max for this?”

Everyone looked at each other, but no one spoke up.

Cap sighed. “I swear I’m running a circus.”

“Where’s the ad even posted?” Max asked, curious.

Gage darted a look at Weston, then back at Max, with a smug expression. Gage had been the new guy until Max came around, and Max bet he was feeling pretty good about himself. “Craigslis.”

“That website still going?” Max scoffed in disbelief.

Coleman spoke up. “Yup. There’s all sorts of good fire stuff you can find there. Wood, junk, all good stuff still!” He was always looking for stuff to use to build his newest project. His skills came in handy, especially when things broke at the station, which was often. That, and rigging pranks for probies.

“And puppies,” Weston laughed to himself.

Max’s cell phone went off again, just as the station’s alarm tones sounded overhead. A call was coming in. Relief and excitement flooded Max’s veins. He silenced his cell phone

and did a quick cleanup of his mess. The others were doing the same and hightailing it out of there.

Following them out, he poked his head back into the kitchen to thank Hunter for the pancakes.

“You’re welcome, man,” Hunter said, looking pleased. “No one ever tells me thanks around here.”

“I heard that,” Cap yelled from the hallway.

“Well, except for Cap.”

“And sometimes me,” another voice yelled out.

“We love you, Hunter!” said another.

“My food, you mean, my food.” Hunter grunted, continuing to clean the stove. “Run in there, man,” he chastised Max. “I got this.”

Max dumped a handful of balled-up napkins in the trash and followed the others into the bay area to get into his bunkers. He slipped his socked feet into his boots without thinking.

Gasping at the cold sensation of who knew what melting in his boots, he kicked and turned them upside down, sending a bunch of ice cubes skittering down the concrete floor.

“Ugh,” he said, groaning.

CHAPTER TWO

FOR ALL THE shenanigans of his bratty station-mates, Max lived for these fire calls.

He'd started as an aspiring firefighter just six months ago, walking into the fire station after his father passed. Probably not totally right in the head and not in a good place emotionally, but feeling this was the right thing for him to do.

What he would give for his father to see him in his firefighter getup. Randolph Steel, real estate magnate—a self-made billionaire who only mostly cared about growing his empire.

“When would it ever be enough?” Max had once asked his father, when they were looking at yet another houseboat upgrade at the boat show of all boat shows in Vegas.

“Never,” came his father’s unflinching answer. “You may never understand, son, since you didn’t start with absolutely nothing.”

The houseboats, the planes, the houses were never enough. Even eight wives, each one younger and greedier than the last, weren’t enough. Max was grateful for the memories of his own mother, Randolph Steel’s first wife, before Father had come into all that money. They had what could’ve been a

happy, normal life, until his mom's life was cut short by breast cancer.

Without her, Randolph threw himself into buying and selling corporations, wheeling and dealing real estate, eventually amassing a stupendous personal wealth over a mere five years, and attracting a gaggle of hangers-on and women auditioning for a newly minted billionaire's replacement wife.

Luckily or unluckily for Max, depending on how one looked at it, none of his father's wives gave him any further kids, so Max inherited everything at his death, except for some portion as gifts to everyone else. The wives couldn't contest the will, or they were threatened a pay cut to a dollar for their trouble. If Max hadn't simply wanted to move on in his life, he'd have tried to divvy up portions of the wealth among the women, but there would have been no end to that. His father's death left Max free and clear to rebuild a life that could be normal in most aspects, except now he was billions richer than he could ever dream of or want. If Max were wise in his investments, he'd never have to work a single day of his life.

Which was why he sought out a job with the Lake Powell fire crew. Everyone wanted to be needed. Everyone needed a purpose. Even billionaire heirs.

As he swung up into the fire engine's back seat next to Gage, he was sort of glad to be on the bottom rung of the totem pole. It kept him humble. Kept him from thinking that his worth was measured in money. The money was nice—don't get him wrong—but it was so absurdly colossal, he tried to shove it and its perks to the back of his mind.

The occupants of the fire engine—Ransom at the wheel, Hunter next to him in medic capacity, Gage, and Max—were

all quiet. Max wondered what everyone else thought of on the way to a call.

Max used to be a ball of worry, having the few minutes to drive down to the scene. No one obstructing their progress. All drivers—at least most—stopping and letting them pass, so there was a quick conclusion to the drive. But every second seemed to hang in balance, every minute ticked by so slowly. A fire was no respecter of persons. It waited for no one—especially the firefighters who would soon come to the scene, and often, not fast enough.

Perched up high among traffic, the street scene fell away from Max's consciousness, as though they were gliding along. Straight shot down the road, turning a corner, and then down a residential street where people were pouring out of their houses to make their way to the second-to-the-last house on a dead-end street. The road simply stopped, not stubbed into the rest of the city yet, and farm field was all around. Grasses starting to yellow for the season stood like sticks, ripe for conflagration.

The house was a two-story, white siding with dark brown trim. Not too distinct from the rest of the street's tract homes. Except this one had thick gray smoke billowing from a first-floor window.

Once the fire engine stopped, Max jumped out and waited for the commands he was starting to get used to by now. He was usually given backup duty, which meant that he mostly got to watch. Even Gage got seniority in pumping the water. Max didn't hold his breath to get that job. As juvenile as it sounded, the other guys still fought over controlling the hose, as though this were a game and people's lives didn't depend on how seriously they took their jobs.

Max relented in his observation. His comrades at the job *did* take their jobs seriously. Once push came to shove, and they were on scene, all the teasing stopped. Heads down, they were there to do their jobs. Cap checked the perimeter and gave his quick assessment.

“Open window on the right side, I’m guessing the kitchen, next to a side door. No cars in the driveway, but could be parked in a detached garage. Three-alarm fire that could spread to the field out back.” His eyes flicked to the street. A couple of police cars had arrived on the scene.

“Gage,” Cap said, “man the hose with Ransom. Coleman, trade off in a few minutes. Hunter and Weston, create access. Max, we’ll do some recon for house occupants. Fan out. Move. Now!”

Max was surprised over his assignment. Normally, he was support to Gage, but he would take it. He wanted to learn from the best. Cap wasn’t always a smiley kind of guy, but he was a good firefighter, one whom Max wanted to be like in what he hoped would be a long career.

Cap directed Max to use the axe to cut through the window frame on the side opposite of the flames. As soon as he applied the tool, the glass shattered wildly, and the heat was blistering. He could feel it even under his Nomex hood. Just a step closer made a huge difference, the heat now feeling even nearer than before, sweat pooling in Max’s suit and especially under his helmet. The smoke wasn’t as thick here as the other side, but it was starting to billow like gray clouds. Visibility changed to five percent as Max climbed into what looked like the living room. A quick visual search of the floor yielded no victims. He moved fast to check the staircase and was just looking up to navigate it when he heard a faint cry for help.

It came from the stairwell below. The cries were more distinct now, from a female voice, saying, “Help!”

Max looked around for Cap but couldn’t see him. The smoke engulfed him and he couldn’t even see past his elbow. Cap and other training officers from the fire district drilled into him about going in pairs, but someone needed him right then. Still, if he were to go in by himself, he would endanger not only himself, but the others, for a rescue.

What would Cap do?

Max could holler for help, cross the house, and find the others . . . or he could go ahead and dive into helping this person.

With his breathing apparatus sounding louder in his ears, Max descended quickly onto the basement stairs. There was no door to speak of, and it was even darker downstairs, the natural light filtered behind small basement windows. Max wanted to turn around and go back upstairs so he could get Cap’s seasoned advice, but he heard that voice again.

“Help! I’m trapped.”

He moved forward, but his boots crunched on glass. He looked down, and in the haze of darkness could make out jar upon jar of . . . bottled peaches? Through the ceiling, the smoke seemed to be getting sucked in. Max studied it for a brief moment and surmised that this female had fallen through a hole on the floor above. She may have smacked into the food storage shelves, knocking over maybe even more than one.

“Help,” the hoarse voice repeated.

Max walked around a standing shelf full of bottled fruit and flashed a light on the ground. In a pool of peaches, juice,

and broken glass, a teen girl with a tangle of long black hair lay on her side. Her dark eyes were wide with panic. And pain.

“My back,” she said, her voice rising in distress. “I think I’ve broken it.”

“Don’t move,” Max said, kneeling by her side. He pulled his comm and spoke into it. “Victim on the basement floor with hurt back, do you copy?”

No answer.

He tried again, and this time the response crackled. “Copy,” came Cap’s reply. “Steel, where are you?”

“Basement, Cap.”

“How’d you end up there, newbie?” Cap’s irritated words reached him. “Never mind. Fire has spread elsewhere in the house. Stay put.”

Max was digesting this piece of news when something hissed and exploded behind him, throwing him forward. He braced his weight so the trajectory of his fall landed on the concrete floor instead of the victim. Above him, huge chunks of debris started to rain on them.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Victoria,” she said, coughing, then sobbing. “Will I ever walk again?”

“Shhh,” he said, skirting her question. “You’re going to be okay.”

She grabbed his arm, her eyes wild. “I have to, promise me. Promise me!”

“I promise,” he lied. No one could ever promise anything.

She started to cough, and he looked around to see what was available to protect her airway. Laundry? Sheets? A blanket was folded on a nearby table and he pulled on it. Carefully, he wrapped her in the blanket with the intention of dragging her to the window. More debris fell, right into the shelf of bottled fruit. Like a domino tile, it swayed toward Victoria, falling on and pinning her. Her scream sounded muffled, but it gutted Max. Thick smoke poured through the hole on the floor, and flames licked at the opening.

Max told himself to keep calm.

Now, she wasn't just lying there with her back possibly broken—the fire was racing toward them and she was trapped. Max looked toward the stairwell. Where was Cap?

“Mayday, mayday,” he spoke into his comm radio. “We’re trapped and can’t get out.”

Through his face mask, he watched as flames grew and debris rained even harder. If he didn't get her out of here, she would die, broken back or not.

Max wrenched the shelf and heaved it off, sending it crashing the other way. He picked Victoria up in the blanket and made his way, boots crunching on glass and the canning mess, across the basement to the stairwell, but smoke was pouring there, too.

Over his left shoulder, he heard the sound of glass breaking. His crew members were hacking their way through until the window completely shattered. Behind Max, a hose team was coming down the stairs to battle the fire.

A K-12 saw whined as his teammates cut the window frame and part of the floor to make room for the Stokes basket.

It should only take them five minutes, but to Max it felt like an eternity.

The hose was making some progress, thankfully, though they were definitely not in the clear yet. Victoria's face was covered by the blanket and her eyes were shut.

"Hang on," he said. "Hang on."

When the crew finally opened the hole, Max lifted Victoria to the window into the gloved hands of his platoon. Victoria had lost consciousness. Probably from smoke inhalation, or the pain of her broken body.

But she was alive. That was all that mattered.



Max sat in Cap's office hours later, clasping and unclasping his hands on his lap.

"What do you have to say for yourself, Steel?" Cap said.

Max gave his superior a direct gaze. "I broke protocol, Cap. I will own that right now."

"You got that right," Cap said, his gray eyes boring into his. "Not to mention you nearly paralyzed that girl."

Max had nothing to say in his defense. "She okay, though?"

"If you call *maybe* eventually walking as okay."

Max frowned. "I'm sorry, but I would take living over walking any day."

Cap shoved his chair back and glared at Max. "Do you realize who you played hero to save?"

Max remembered her name as Victoria, but that was all. He shook his head.

“She just happens to be the most promising athlete in her school’s track history. She runs long distance races and she was a shoo-in on an Olympics team.”

Max let the words sink in. He was bewildered by Cap’s aggressive tone. “What exactly did I do wrong, Cap?”

“Oh, you mean other than going rogue down into the basement and then moving the victim solo?”

“What would you have done different, sir?” Max leaned forward. “Had we not gotten out when we did, we could have been killed by falling debris.”

“Settle down, newbie.”

Max leaned back, feeling his pulse race. His face had heated up. He was losing his cool, and he knew it. Max hated being out of control. He was showing his true colors to the captain, and he wasn’t going to win points.

“I could fire you from the crew,” Cap said, snapping his fingers, “just like that.”

Max closed his eyes and reopened them cautiously. Cap’s expression had hardened. So this was what it was about—Cap looking for reasons to terminate him from the job. Max deserved it, too, but certainly not for trying to help someone!

“But I won’t. Not yet.” Cap steepled his fingers and put them against his lips. “There will be an investigation involved, especially since the family is threatening a lawsuit.”

“For helping their daughter?” Max shook his head, finding the ridiculousness of this whole mess hard to believe. “Besides, she’s not paralyzed, is she?”

“No, but after the medical exam, they’ve ruled that had you not moved her the way you did, her injuries could have been minimal. As it happened, she will be in traction for a long time.”

“Regardless, she wouldn’t have been able to get back to Olympic-level competition.”

“Oh, you’d be surprised what these top athletes can do. Basically, you snuffed any chances she had.”

Max thought about the unfairness of it all. Just the same, maybe he could offer to help with her medical needs. “Cap—”

The gray eyes narrowed. “I suggest you shut it, Max. I don’t know what you’re used to in your former life, but this isn’t one you can bluster your way through. And before you get any ideas, throwing money at the situation won’t get you out of hot water.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Max lied.

“Right.” Cap rifled through his papers. “Dismissed.”

Max stared at the older man as he ignored him. “What if the station gets sued?”

“It can’t,” came Cap’s clipped words. “You’re protected under qualified immunity. You were working under the fire department’s auspices. There’s really nothing they can do.”

Max nodded, standing and feeling a little bit of the weight off his shoulders.

“Afraid you’d lose your houseboat, Steel?” Cap fired off.

A nerve in his jaw ticked. “I don’t care about my money,” Max said, his voice low. “I just want what’s best for the station. The last thing I want to happen is for you guys to suffer the brunt of my . . . desire to help.”

“That goes for me, too, Steel.” Cap clapped his desk with both hands. “I also am looking out for the team. That’s why we have rules. Be careful. Next time, you might not be so lucky.”

CHAPTER THREE

FIVE YEARS LATER, August

Kat Garcia gathered her papers, slid them into her briefcase, and clasped the latch shut. The sound gave her a satisfying frisson of pleasure. It marked some accomplishment after a brutally hard day at the law firm.

The day had started off fairly well. She met with several clients in a row whose cases she felt good about. She had outlined, with her paralegal Miriam's help, how each case would be solid and defensible, each client agreeing unequivocally to follow her advice.

But then all that goodwill dissipated after her last case of the day, where she'd won the case of a woman seeking full custody of her children. The case was open and shut, as the father had addiction problems manifesting themselves in petty theft and burglaries. No surprise, he confronted her at the court steps with a threat. The police were called and the guy was hauled off to jail with a slap to his wrist, but that whole episode had left a bad taste in her mouth.

"You okay?" Miriam asked her across her massive desk, one of Kat's few splurges in her office.

“Yes.” Kat blinked away the memory of the threat and smiled wryly. “Just thinking of Gus Allred.”

“Ah, yes,” Miriam said in a staccato. “Good ol’ Gus.” She patted Kat’s hand. “You did good getting those kids away from him.”

Miriam was ten years Kat’s senior, which made for an interesting dynamic with her paralegal, but Kat welcomed her outspokenness. Miriam didn’t mince words when it came to sizing up their clients, and her sense of right and wrong came off pretty strong. With her long black hair, exotic biracial (Chinese father and French mother) features, and a confident air, she attracted and intimidated most men. She would make a great defense lawyer, a bulldog logo fitting her perfectly.

“I know,” Kat said. “I just . . .” She shivered. “I can’t shake off what he told me. You’d think after five years at this, I’d be less shook.”

“Only if you’re a robot.” Miriam pursed her lips and gathered her things, too, slipping her briefcase strap over her shoulder. “Some days I wonder what I’m doing in this cesspool of an industry, but then I think of those kids.”

Kat laughed because only Miriam would openly diss an industry she worked for. And then she sobered.

“Yes, you’re right.” The image of the kids she’d worked to help gain a better life appeared in the back of her mind. Defenseless. The pro bono work didn’t make up a bulk of her cases, as the law firm liked to take on moneyed clients, but they were the ones she was most passionate about.

Miriam glanced at her watch and gasped. “The houseboat gala’s in two hours!”

Kat snapped out of her reverie and nodded. “It won’t take long to get ready,” she said, looking down at her pantsuit.

“Uh-uh. I know what you’re thinking. This outfit won’t do.” Miriam looked Kat up and down and maneuvered her toward the open doorway. “You need a bubble bath, lady, and make sure you shave your legs before you put on that dress.”

Kat winced. “This, coming from a woman who has said, let’s see now, “Men are guilty without having to be proven innocent?””

“That was right on the heels of my divorce last year. I still stand by it, but I think *you* need to start dating. You’re meant for a long and lasting love, unlike me.”

“Forget it,” Kat declared flatly. “I’m not interested in a relationship.”

“Then why were you checking out a dating site the other day? I happened to see your open browser.”

“You what?” Guilt heated Kat’s cheeks. She had toyed with the idea of getting a date for this gala, but the thought of spending the evening with a stranger sounded pathetic. She knew the caliber of single men out there. They often had to present themselves at the judge’s bench. “I was just casually browsing.”

Miriam’s eyes gleamed. “So it’s true.”

“I’m happy being single—really, okay?” Kat said. But her words sounded fake. How many times had she told herself that if she had someone to hang out with, she would do more at the lake?

Miriam smiled. “Whatever, boss.”

From anyone else, Kat would have gotten impatient, but Miriam never riled her that way. She meant well. Also, Miriam was right in guessing that Kat would have just as soon attended in her pantsuit. Dresses were so cumbersome and hardly comfortable. Especially the one Miriam had badgered her into buying from the boutique downtown. Page, Arizona, wasn't exactly known for its high fashion, but this gala for spinal cord injury was a big deal, and the cause was dear to her heart.

Had it not been for the spinal cord medical care Kat's younger sister had received five years before, Vicki wouldn't have recovered as far along as she had. It had been a long road for sure, and Kat had that misguided firefighter to thank. In the first few hours after the accident, she had been frothing at the mouth to get to the person who had caused her sister irreparable harm. No one wanted to provide her his name, though she eventually weaseled it out through government information laws. Max Steel. A name that still sent bitter waves of resentment through her body when she thought of what Vicki could have achieved instead of turning into a ghost of herself.

Kat walked down one hall and parted ways with Miriam, who went down another, to get to their cars at different parking lots.

"See you there," Miriam said, wagging her fingers, "in your drop-dead gorgeous dress."

Kat waved back and smiled as she exited the building. Despite the searing heat of the Arizonan desert that tightened her throat and nearly took her breath away, the thought of having this weekend to recover from the pressures of her job filled her with pleasure. Thanks to Miriam, she had gotten

caught up enough in the past weeks to not have to come in on the weekend for makeup work.

She'd given her all to this job for five years now, and she still was never sure if what she was doing was enough to please the firm's top brass in Flagstaff. Assigned in the Law Group's Page satellite office, she barely came in contact with them, so how could they even know that she was busting her guts to deliver results, day in and day out? She didn't even need accolades; just a pat on the back would sure go a long way.

For now, her successful cases, and even the not-so-successful cases, buoyed her. She was glad to be that adult in a child's corner. Vicki hadn't been so lucky. She and Kat lost their parents to a car wreck when Kat was twenty-six and Vicki, a rainbow baby after years of miscarriages, was fifteen. Compounding that grief was the fire incident a year later.

As sisters, they only had each other. But it was more than enough. Vicki could always depend on Kat to protect her. She blinked away the sad emotions that threatened to creep up whenever these memories resurfaced. Then, as she usually did at the end of the day, she dialed her sister's number.

Vicki had moved out two years ago, bent on living independently of Kat. Kat had humored her, especially since Vicki had home health care. She expected Vicki to come back. But she hadn't. Her sister carved a good life writing a self-improvement blog and parlaying an interested (Kat would almost call it obsessed) world-wide audience into lucrative publishing deals for a series of inspirational books. All things considered, Vicki's busted chances to go to the Olympics turned her lemons into lemonade. Though it hadn't always been this way.

Kat's call went straight to voicemail. "Hiya!" Vicki's voice sounded perky, all sunshine. A façade, Kat knew, for the dark days. "You know what to do."

"Whatcha doing?" Kat said, as though expecting Vicki to answer. After a beat, she said, "I was just checking on you before the gala tonight. Call me soon, please."

Kat drove through Page's moderately busy thoroughfare, noticing how many more cars seemed to add to the congestion daily. It was end of day for a small city, population 7,551, that relied on tourism. Though that summer tourist period was starting to slow down, there seemed to be more and more people moving to the area, building homes where it used to be just open range overlooking the lake.

Lake Powell formed a backdrop for the desert town, the lake's blue waters contrasting prettily with the burnished orange of the canyons. As Kat's body relaxed, she realized how much she needed to get out into nature, and soon.

Ten minutes later, Kat made it home, pulling her bronze Bronco Sport into one of two spots in her empty garage. The past five years had not allowed her much time for recreation despite being surrounded by nature's playground. She could have, had she chosen to, stocked up on paddleboards, kayaks, and canoes, like some of her neighbors did. But she never got around to it, instead borrowing equipment from friends on the rare occasion she needed them. Somehow she felt guilty when she played because she'd be excluding Vicki, so she never committed to buying toys permanently. But lately, with Vicki being more mobile, Kat was starting to see light at the end of the tunnel. For herself and for her sister.

She closed her garage door and let herself into her house. Five years since she graduated law school and bought this

house that had been in foreclosure, and she still didn't own much furniture. Reality was, she didn't care about making her house magazine-worthy. More furniture meant more things to dust. At thirty-one, she lived by herself, and she had no one to impress but herself. She'd as soon donate money she would otherwise splurge on furniture to charity.

Dating was one of those things that had gone by the wayside, too. Not just because she had no time. As a lawyer, she intimidated most, if not all, of her potential dating partners in this small town.

The house smelled like beef roast, which sent her stomach rumbling. She was in such a rush that morning, she forgot she'd be eating at the gala. Oh well. The gala would supposedly have finger foods, but she didn't like going on an empty stomach, for fear of overstuffing herself. She would snatch just a portion.

Somehow, despite how delicious the roast was, she ate only a sliver, a potato quarter, and two pieces of carrots with homestyle horseradish, and stored the rest of it in a huge leftovers container in the fridge.

As she put away the dirty dishes, she called her sister again. Still no answer. Kat frowned. At twenty-one, Vicki was an adult now, but with her limited mobility (still needing to use a cane every so often), Kat worried about her often.

This time, she didn't leave a message.

Glancing at her watch, Kat decided she had time to run a bubble bath. That would feel good after the frenetic afternoon. She ran the water and poured bubble bath in. The sweet scent of grape soon filled the air, the purple liquid turning into fun bubbles. Undressing, she slipped into the warm water, sank herself in, and groaned with pleasure, blowing a bubble or two

off her lips. She turned on some music from her voice-activated speaker and closed her eyes.

Her phone rang, but it was too far to reach. She would let the voicemail pick up. If it happened to be Vicki, she'd call her right away.

Once the water started cooling, Kat decided to get out. It was time to get ready anyway. The gala was set to start in under an hour.

Toweling herself dry, she checked her phone. The call had, indeed, been from Vicki, and she played the voicemail.

"Hi, Kat," Vicki said. "First of all, I don't want you to worry."

Kat immediately worried.

"I decided to go on this impulse hike with Benny and his friends."

Benny? Kat racked her brains. He was a friend of Vicki's from high school. He had moved away after graduation, and Kat didn't even know he was back.

"He's back in town," Vicki continued, "just for the week, and he told me about this fantastic hike he'd been planning now for weeks to Danger Bridge Canyon. And well, I'm going."

Kat's blood pressure just spiked. Vicki was going on a hike, after years of not even hardly walking? And Danger Bridge, of all places! It wasn't named Danger Bridge for nothing.

"I know what you're thinking," Vicki continued in a hurry. "You think I can't do it. Thing is, I've been building up my

walking pace, and I am sure I will be back to running. Dr. Smeath says I can't, but this will show him."

Kat heard the defiance in Vicki's voice. "Again, please don't worry. You aren't my mom, after all. I will be fine. Have fun raising money tonight. I'll call you when I have cell signal." She paused. "After the hike." The voicemail clicked off.

"Oh, Vicki," Kat said under her breath.

It wasn't fair for Vicki to throw this at Kat at the last minute. Her sister was a smart one. She knew Kat would be too caught up in getting ready for the gala, and she wouldn't be able to do much more than just worry about her.

Once again, she reminded herself that Vicki was an adult, and she could take care of herself. But with them being orphans for half a decade now, Kat was more than happy to play the role of mom. Unfortunately, Vicki was quick to remind her of her place.

Kat went over to her closet, where she plucked out her dress for the evening. It was a low-luster satin dress in a sumptuous ruby color that filled her with apprehension. Why had she picked such a loud, albeit beautiful, color? So much for blending into the woodwork. She must have been addled the day she shopped for this in the big city. But now it was too late. She didn't have very many other options in her closet. Well, she had all these neutral-colored pantsuits. Boring, Miriam would candidly say.

Stop chickening out, Kat chastised herself.

For a few minutes, she covered herself from head to toe with lotion. Then she shimmied into a full-body camisole and accepted her slender, though not perfectly flat, stomach.

Over the camisole, she slid the ruby dress. The fabric slid nicely over her curves, and already, the color complimented her brunette waves. It took some doing for her to reach and pull up the zipper along the length of the back, but she managed. Turning slowly here and there, she studied her reflection. Although she had smudges under her eyes from staying up too many nights researching cases, the color instantly gave her a lift. Like Miriam said when Kat agreed to it, the dress transformed her from a no-nonsense lawyer to a woman. Kat grinned at the memory of Miriam declaring her assessment.

Her gaze returned to her mouth, bare of makeup. She had just the right lipstick for the occasion, a plummy matte that she'd bought a long time ago, but without an occasion to use it. She put lip gloss on, applied the lipstick, and stepped back.

Her stomach roiled. She looked just like Mami did, except Mami had short hair. Papi had adored her so much, just like all of them did, in life and after her passing. Kat's parents met in Cuba at sixteen, eloped, and then immigrated to Arizona, where they had lived ever since.

Kat had thought she could replace their parents in Vicki's life. How wrong she had been. No one could ever replace Mami or Papi.

Kat allowed herself a little pinprick of worry over her younger sister, then smoothed her skirt and slung the strap of her little black purse over her shoulder. For tonight, she could pretend to be something other than what she was—some semblance of normalcy, all her failures hidden behind a put-together façade. Just like Vicki.

CHAPTER FOUR

MAX LOOKED at his reflection in the mirror and tugged down on his cuffs, his white shirt crisp and bright in the light of the houseboat's luxurious stateroom, contrasting with his bronzed African-American complexion. Afterward, he tucked the hem neatly into his black slacks.

Once again, he felt an unease hosting this gala on his houseboat. In the past, he'd never flaunted his father's wealth, now passed on to him. Never hosted parties on the Moonflower. But when the Spinal Cord Injury Board's gala venue got pulled and they were desperate for a replacement, someone had mentioned his houseboat. And he had agreed.

It was all to help research the cure.

At the gala, Max was just going to stay under the radar, but one of the board members asked him to present an award, so reluctantly, he said yes. Even his fire station crew had never seen him in a tux. They probably wouldn't recognize him. That would be good for a laugh or two. He wouldn't be surprised if someone were to shove a stuffed penguin into his locker after the weekend.

Through a galley, he accessed the stairs to the top deck of the triple-decker. In life, his father worked hard and lived it up, and the Moonflower was one of his many indulgences. Max

would never have chosen such a behemoth, and had even considered selling this, but he'd not come around to it yet. Besides, the houseboat *did* come in handy when he wanted to enjoy a quiet weekend away from everyone. At the soonest chance, however, he needed to downgrade the houseboat to something more suited to a thirty-three-year-old bachelor.

The shore started to fill with vehicles and beautiful, moneyed people making their way to the houseboat on foot. At the horizon, the moon peeked over the canyon walls like a silver dollar, as though it had been custom ordered for the night. A night promised by organizers to be “full of romance and revelry.”

At the last minute, Max considered calling one of his exes to be his guest. But he didn't want any of them to get the wrong idea. After he inherited his father's wealth, he'd had a couple of them reach out once again, so unsubtle in their interest. Dollar signs flashing in their eyes.

A woman in a red dress caught his eye, holding his interest. She had just emerged from a car and was making her way in sandals across the marina lot. She was beautiful, it was quite obvious even from afar, from the way her longish dark hair framed her face and shoulders. That dress color became her, a blaze of red among those in black on one end of the spectrum, and bright, tropical colors at the other end.

She walked abreast of a couple, with the woman linking her arm tightly around her partner's. They spoke briefly, then the couple went on.

Max wondered what he would do were she to look up. Would he smile? Wave? Watch her impassively?

She looked up.

Right at Max, her mouth falling into a little O.

He raised his hand in not quite a wave.

A tentative smile formed on her lips, and then she lowered her eyes before disappearing into the receiving line.

It was such a brief encounter, Max wondered if she even saw him. But of course she did, and how he must have looked, like some fool trying hard to look all cool in his tuxedo.

Who was she? He must find her in the crowd and know her name.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE SNUB by the wife of one of Kat's partners at her firm had stung, and she had felt suddenly alone.

And then she looked up and her eyes found the Black man in the tux on the balcony rail, raising his hand in a friendly salute. They had stared at each other, and she found herself smiling before being swallowed up in the line.

That little blip, that moment where she looked into his eyes clear across the marina parking lot, zapped Kat right to her core.

A delicious warmth snaked its way around her nape.

Two women were checking in the attendees at a table. Kat recognized one of them as the public face of the Spinal Cord Injury organization, a charming blonde woman who was clearly in her element.

"Hi," she said, introducing herself as Sophia Zellner. "Welcome to our gala. And what would be your name?"

"Kat Garcia," she said, supplying her firm's name.

"Ah, yes," Sophia said. "Here you are. Nice to meet you Kat."

"Thank you."

Kat stepped around the crowd and scoped the scene. The lower level was full of mingling guests and a live band playing jazzy music. Some people were making their way up a circular staircase. Kat wondered if that staircase led to the next one, where that intriguing man stood.

She was careful to not stare again that direction—that would have been too obvious. But a quick glance revealed that he was no longer there anyway, plunging her stomach into disappointment. At the same time, she was relieved. The last thing she wanted was some connection to a man tonight. She was here to eat, bid on the silent auction, and split.

Kat made her way through the throng of people. The biggest congestion occurred inside, in air-conditioned comfort, close to the sumptuous charcuterie boards, made up with themes from around the world. Kat grabbed a couple of Indonesian satay skewers, French macarons, and Greek baklava and Kalamata olives, then wandered away.

Outside the houseboat, the temperature was still noticeably warm but comfortable, especially with the sun down. She would stay out here. She couldn't abide by all those crowds, with everyone pressed close and waving dangerous skewers in the air.

The staircase cleared of people and Kat took the opportunity to climb it to the second floor, which wasn't as congested as the first, but still, she felt claustrophobic. So she kept moving onward and upward to the third. After a few minutes, she had to stop, as she felt dizzy from the circular movement. Her hand clutched tightly at the rail and she paused.

“Are you all right?” a deep male voice said.

She knew even without looking that it was *him*, the handsome stranger from the third level. Raising her chin, she angled her gaze so she could look right into his face. He had a smooth, dark complexion, prominent cheekbones that slanted to a chiseled and smooth jawline, a close buzzcut, and intelligent eyes watching her with obvious interest.

“I think so,” she said.

“The stairs are tricky,” he said.

“Here, let me.” He offered her his hand and she hesitated before taking it. His touch was warm and firm, in charge. He looked about her age, with an air of maturity about him. He filled that tux well, with his broad shoulders and hips tapering into a pair of slacks. That black bow tie added an elegant touch.

He pulled her by hand higher and higher up the steps, her heart pounding as she saw the water getting farther and farther from her. Finally, they reached the landing and he stopped, letting go of her hand.

The breeze blew soft and warm, ruffling her hair around her shoulders.

He stepped back and made room for her to get onto the wider balcony. “My name is Maxwell,” he said, offering his hand to shake.

“My name is Kat.” She placed her hand in his. They shook hands a little longer than what was necessary, the pads of her fingers sliding across his palm as he finally let go.

Maxwell’s eyes gleamed. “Nice to meet you, Kat.”

It was awkward, standing there in the middle of the walkway, where they might block other people, so she walked on over to the balcony rail. He followed and stood an arm’s

length from her. Close but not too close. Good. She liked that he was respectful.

“I saw you standing here earlier,” she said.

“And I saw you walking from the parking lot.”

Several people were still arriving. “Great place to people-watch.”

“Precisely.” His voice was deep, hypnotic. Like a radio announcer’s. Interestingly, he had a polished accent she couldn’t place. British?

“I wonder what the view is from the other side,” she wondered aloud.

He motioned with his head. “You want to see it?”

“Sure.”

They walked on over to the opposite rail, the sounds of the party falling away. The rising moon still cast a light on the water, but the bulk of the houseboat made the water dark. Mysterious. The canyon walls, with their seemingly endless maze, rose high and mighty into the night sky. Camps flickered with firelight and houseboats running on generators.

“This lake is amazing.”

“Isn’t it?” He studied her profile. “Are you from around here, Kat?”

“I’ve lived here about fifteen years. Moved with my parents and my younger sister, from California.”

“Quite the change?”

“Very much so.” She nodded. “Big city to small town.” She winced. “It was a good change, for the most part. My

parents wanted to take us away from the ills of a big city. Well, small towns have problems, too.”

“Yup.”

“And you?” She glanced at him curiously. “You from around here?”

“Born and raised.”

“Funny we’ve never run into each other.”

“When my mom died, my dad sent me to boarding schools in Europe.”

“Ah, that explains it.”

“What?”

“You have a faint British accent.”

“Do I, really? Still?”

“Yes.” She hedged. “Comes and goes.”

“I guess once a Page kid, always a Page kid.” His smile made her stomach flip.

“I guess.” She dragged her gaze and let it sweep over the length of the vessel. “This is quite the houseboat. I’ve never been on one with three floors.”

“It was my dad’s.”

She caught a hint of apology in his voice and she turned to observe his expression. A shadow of a wince hovered. “Was?”

“He passed five years ago.”

“I’m sorry.” For a moment, the pain of losing her parents flooded her chest again.

“Thanks.”

“I lost my parents to a car wreck about five years ago, too.”

He watched her with interest. “Really? I’m sorry, too.”

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak. And when she did, her voice cracked. “It was a hard time all around. They had just passed, and then my sister very nearly got paralyzed when she got injured in a fire.”

Maxwell got quiet all of a sudden, his eyes widening. “What is her name?”

“Victoria. She goes by Vicki.”

He opened his mouth as though to speak, but didn’t. Turning away from her, his hands gripped the railing and he leaned forward. For one brief moment, he closed his eyes as though in pain.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

He nodded, not convincing her. She hoped he wasn’t having a heart attack.

“My dad’s last name was Steel,” he said, turning a steady gaze at her.

She blinked a couple of times. That name sounded so familiar . . .

“Wait,” she said, taking a step back and studying him from head to toe. “Are you Max Steel?”

He visibly swallowed, his expression sad and apologetic.

“You’re the . . .?” She clamped her hand over her mouth, unable to continue.

“Yes.”

She closed her eyes and staggered back. Never in a million years did she think she would run into him at a fundraiser. She was even flirting with him, for heaven's sake. She turned her head vaguely in the opposite direction to escape. "Excuse me."

"Wait, Kat. Please."

Her name on his lips sounded like heresy. She put a couple more steps between them but waited.

"I know you must hate me—"

"You could have killed my sister."

He didn't answer for a long minute. "She would have died had I left her there."

"That's not the impression I got from the reports."

"What reports?"

"It doesn't matter. Do you deny that you weren't supposed to move her by yourself, but you did?"

"No." His voice was firm. "I don't."

"Your lawyers made sure we couldn't even *afford* to sue you."

"I was told I had qualified immunity."

"It was not ethical, what you got away with."

"It was my first year as a probie. I didn't know anything."

"Exactly."

She gestured to the houseboat's lower floors, at the glittering lights. Like a driver hurtling along a road, she proceeded recklessly. There would be no turning back. Bitterness rose to the surface.

“Are you hosting the gala as public penance?” she scoffed. “For a spinal cord injury organization, no less!”

His expression hardened. “They needed a venue. I had the houseboat.”

Not making the Olympics wasn't the worst thing, she wanted to say. Listening to my sister wanting to kill herself every day was. But she didn't. She didn't want him to have that kind of knowledge. That kind of power over her.

Silence descended between them, dark as the waters that the houseboat blocked from the moon.

When he spoke again, she tried not to flinch. His presence was a painful reminder of her sister's mental and emotional struggles.

“When it first happened, I tried to visit,” he said. “To apologize. But I was told the family didn't want me to.”

She remembered that chaotic time. Vicki, hooked up to all sorts of machines, stable but immobile. The hospital nurse had asked her if she would allow the firefighter to visit. She had practically screamed no.

Kat remained silent.

He whispered, “Can I . . . that is, would you let me visit her?”

“Absolutely not!”

“Okay, okay.” He held up both hands.

There was nothing more to say. Not even a goodbye. Meeting him had been all wrong. She had felt sympathetic toward him at first. Him losing his father and her losing her parents—they'd had a shared kinship. But with the revelation of his identity . . . no.

Kat backed up and turned, her head spinning as she approached the staircase.

All this time, she had imagined him brash. Cocky. Not this soft-spoken man who simply wanted to help people. But it was too late. She had spoken mean-spirited words, and she could never take them back. Why would she want to, anyway? The more distance she put between him and her, the better.

She made her way down the staircase, her heels pinging on metal, refusing to look back at him.

CHAPTER SIX

MAX STOOD THERE WINDED, as though she had punched him in the gut. All his insecurities from his first year as a firefighter came hurtling back with painful clarity. He had been brand new and eager then. Trying to still think through everything instead of following rules as he ought to have.

He hadn't heard a lot of details about the young woman he had rescued. Had he truly ruined her life as her sister depicted? Was she paralyzed? All sorts of sad scenarios flashed through his head, to try to explain away why she hated him so much.

He closed his eyes and opened them again, raising them to the desert night sky, which earlier had seemed beautiful, but now only looked bleak.

For a moment, he wished he hadn't told her his true identity. Maybe they could have progressed in their friendship. Maybe she would have given him another chance had she known his heart.

But of course he owed her the truth.

Max rubbed his nape, massaging his muscles that had tensed. He had hoped for a lovely evening where he could set aside worries from his ordinary life, and look who he had to run into. No doubt she was making her way off the houseboat and out of the area.

He had better make it downstairs, in time to start the festivities.

Halfway down the staircase, someone called his name. Sophia Zellner stood at the landing below. “There you are.”

“Here I am,” he said, flashing a smile he didn’t genuinely feel. He descended the rest of the stairs to where she stood.

“Just in time.” She brightened. “People are starting to get restless.” They passed a server with tailed shrimp in mini appetizer glasses. “Have you had this?” she said, snapping up a couple. “It’s to die for.”

He shook his head just as she plied one into his mouth. It was a ridiculously intimate gesture, flirtatious, and Sophia knew it. She winked and wiped the side of his mouth with her manicured finger.

Past the crowd, standing in the wings, not obvious if she was coming or going, stood Kat Garcia. Her face was impassive, staring his direction, and then her gaze jerked away.

She had stayed.

He felt both excited and apprehensive. Had Kat seen Sophia flirting with him? No doubt she would make false assumptions about him as the program went along. That he was full of himself. But there was nothing he could do about that. He had to be the good host. He had to do this for the kids, even though he would come across as fake or a phony.

Sophia led Max to a makeshift stage, an area that had been cordoned off for announcements like this. She parked Max to the side, and he stood feeling self-conscious as everyone’s eyes swung their direction. He faked a smile for appearance’s sake. In the middle of the pack, his fire platoon and their

significant others stood watching, plates of appetizers in hand. Weston pretended to adjust a bow tie, and the other firefighters guffawed. The beautiful Chinese-American woman beside Weston, his veterinarian wife Lacey, elbowed him, while the other ladies gave their guys a disapproving look.

“We would like to thank you all for coming tonight,” Sophia said. “Isn’t this a beautiful Lake Powell venue? Perfect for a gala.” After the murmurs of agreement, she continued. “There are so many people to thank for tonight’s success, but the biggest thanks of all go to Max Steel, for hosting us.”

There was cheering and holding up of alcoholic refreshments by a tipsy crowd. Max nodded and smiled, even though part of him wanted to disappear into the hull of the boat. Just wanting, as always, to be normal.

Sophia continued. “Not only is Max a philanthropist, but he is a firefighter.”

The crowd clapped loudly. Lake Powell Fire Platoon A pumped their fists and cheered.

Sophia launched into more thank yous of sponsors, and then she opened the silent auction. “Please be generous. We know you are all bargain hunting at these auctions, but how about if we start off with their original value and work our way up from there? Especially pay close attention to the auction item donated by our night’s host . . . a dinner and sunset cruise on this very houseboat. Single ladies, get your checkbooks out.”

Max turned to Sophia so fast, he got whiplash. She mouthed, “I was going to ask you. I hope it’s okay.”

It was most certainly not okay, but everyone was watching, so he smiled and pretended to be all happy when he was

seriously annoyed. How could Sophia just assume that? There were whistles all around, his fire crew shouting, “Yeah, Steel!” A few people left their place in the crowd and huddled around the two tables where the auction items were set up.

Sophia sidled up to him. “In just a minute, I’ll launch into the organization’s story. I am so sorry to not have given you a heads up about the houseboat dinner. Do you mind that very much?”

“I guess not really,” Max hedged. “Do I have to be part of the package? A dinner with me? Or just a catered dinner on board the houseboat?”

She cast a frank, admiring gaze at him. “With you would be preferable, I’m sure. Some people just want the cachet, if you will, of having rubbed shoulders with a billionaire.”

Max winced but managed to choke out, “Anything for the children.”

Sophia brightened. “You are amazing!” The kiss she planted on his cheek didn’t make things any less awkward, but he tolerated it, like he tolerated most of the things Sophia did because, well, that was Sophia for you.

A little presentation ensued, where Sophia played a video of the organization’s origin story. Sophia’s voice broke when she described how their celebrity founder, Neil Salinger, had been an avid horse rider. One day, he jumped an obstacle and the horse spooked. He was launched on his head, while the horse balked and stayed behind. From then on, Neil vowed to assist in the efforts for this worthwhile cause. Neil emerged from the sidelines in his state-of-the-art wheelchair to applause. Max came over, clapped Neil on the back, and the two men posed for a photo.

Afterward, Max wandered off to the auction tables, curious about the bidding on the dinner. The guys from his platoon had left their dates on the sidelines to surround the houseboat dinner auction display

Coleman Wilder, their fire-crew reserve who put in part-time hours because he had a booming carpentry business, whirled upon Max. “That’s cool. Next time, tell them I could offer carpentry services for auction.”

Ransom snickered. “A date with a stud. A wall stud, that is.”

“Very funny,” Coleman said. “Though actually, that sounds like a good pickup line . . .”

Weston leaned over the paper and gasped. “No way!”

“You thought it was, too,” Coleman accused, but Weston shushed him.

“What?” Max asked, pushing his way closer.

“I mean, man,” Weston continued. “This is unbelievable.” He held the paper just a few inches from Max’s reach, but the others crowded around, obscuring his view. They turned to Max and looked shocked as well.

Max pushed his way through and yanked the sheet from Weston’s grip. His gaze landed on the first name on the sheet and he reeled with disbelief.

Kat Garcia.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“GUESS WHAT YOU JUST DID?” Miriam asked Kat when they found each other in the crowd.

“What *I* just did?” Kat’s eyes narrowed at Miriam’s playful expression. “What did *you* do?”

Miriam lowered her voice. “You got the bidding started on the billionaire dinner.”

“Miriam!” Kat’s voice turned so sharp, a few people within hearing distance turned to watch them curiously. She grabbed her paralegal’s arm and lowered her voice. “I could fire you for this.”

“You’re a softie and you don’t have the heart,” Miriam said, but she looked worried.

“Okay, I won’t fire you,” Kat huffed, “but what you did is out of line. Don’t you know who he is?”

Miriam’s brows drew together in confusion. “The billionaire who owns this houseboat?”

Kat remembered that Miriam had just moved to Page six months before and wouldn’t have known about the controversy surrounding Max Steel.

“Never mind,” Kat muttered.

“I’m sorry, Kat. I figured that was the least I could do to help the cause . . . and help you get a date at the same time.”

“I don’t need a date,” Kat growled. “Especially with that Max Steel.”

“Oh? You mean you’d rather spend your Friday nights watching Netflix and eating ice cream out of the carton?”

“Rather than go to dinner with him? Absolutely.”

Miriam’s eyes widened. “I mean, we’re talking about a *billionaire*. Aren’t you even the least bit curious?”

“Listen.” Kat glared at Miriam, hoping the seriousness of her aversion for Max would sink in. “He did something to my family five years ago, before you came here. And I . . . I cannot forgive him.”

“Oh, hon,” Miriam said. “That bad?”

Kat nodded.

“But the guy’s a firefighter, practically a saint.”

“It *had* to do with him being a firefighter.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t follow.”

When Miriam started working at the firm, Kat told her about Vicki’s accident, but not the circumstances related to Max. Kat had hoped to purge Max from her memory.

In a terse summary, Kat filled Miriam in on the details. By the end, Miriam’s eyes were wide.

“Wow,” Miriam said. “I totally see now why you are hating on the man.”

“Good.” Telling Miriam had exhausted her, but Kat hoped this explanation would put the matter to rest.

“Some guys can be jerks, huh?” Miriam acknowledged, running her fingers through her waist-long black hair, which, unlike at work, she’d left down to her shoulders for the occasion. With her straight hair styled that way, Miriam looked younger than her forty-one years of age.

“I still can’t get over what my ex did to me,” Miriam said. “I’m pretty much resigned to a life of singlehood. You, on the other hand, need to get on this dating thing. If not with *him*, then with someone else.” She eyed the fire crew clustered around the auction table. “Maybe one of those hunks?”

Kat eyed the women she’d seen earlier with the men. “They’re with dates. Has it occurred to you that maybe I am happy being single?”

“Are you?” Miriam studied her. “I think you’re scared and not wanting to let anyone close. How exactly would a relationship get very far? You told me how on your last few blind dates, you left them in the middle of dinner to check on Vicki.”

Kat blew out a breath. “Well, I didn’t think the date was promising, and I was checking on Vicki.”

“She’s a grown woman, Kat. You need to give her independence.”

“She needs me, Miriam.”

Miriam rolled her eyes. “She needs you so bad that she’s on her way to hiking up Danger Bridge Canyon, uh-huh.”

Kat stared at her paralegal. “How’d you know that?”

Miriam hesitated. “She, um, actually talked to me and asked my advice if she should go.”

“And you told her yes?” Kat balled her fists at her hips, feeling frustrated that Vicki would confide in Miriam but not her.

“You and I know it doesn’t matter what you tell that girl; she’ll go right ahead and do it.”

“Yes, but you didn’t have to goad her into it!” Kat’s fists clenched. Was Miriam testing her limits today?

“Believe me, she didn’t need any goading. She’s in love with that boy.”

Kat stared at her. “With Benny?”

“Have you heard how she talks about him? I think she’s had the longest crush on him, since before . . . before the accident.”

Kat winced, remembering why they were even talking about Vicki. “Listen, I need to take care of this auction business.”

Miriam’s hand shot out and circled Kat’s wrist. “Has it occurred to you that maybe you need to feel needed more than she needs you?” Kat’s shoulder muscles tightened, prepared to argue, but Miriam let her go.

Still agitated by Miriam’s lecture, Kat made her way against the current to the table. Her one consolation was that no way could Miriam’s lowly bid beat anyone else who wanted to win a dinner with Max Steel.

She pictured him sitting in the intimacy of a dining room, the houseboat windows open to the sunset . . . or would he serve the dinner on the deck, al fresco, with the sun dipping in the horizon?

Not that she cared.

Shaking her head to clear it, she made the final push through the crowd and saw the table, just as volunteers snatched the papers off.

“Wait!” she said. But her shout was drowned out by the mic having a back echo.

Sophia got on the mic. “Please give us a few moments to get all the auction results put together.”

“But . . .”

Sophia frowned at Kat. Kat looked around, embarrassed that everyone was staring at her, and clamped her mouth shut.

There was no chance anyway that her bid would beat anyone’s, right?

Sophia gave Kat a brittle smile and returned to her emceeding duties. She introduced a paraplegic male singer who she said would serenade them with a few of his original songs from his wheelchair.

While his beautiful, low baritone filled the air, Kat stood to the side and listened, thinking of Vicki. Had Kat been so blind as to not see that Vicki had been in love with Benny all these years? But did he return her affection? If he didn’t, Kat would be so cut up on Vicki’s behalf.

There was a bit of a commotion going on from the backstage area. Sophia and her assistant were talking animatedly amongst themselves, and then Sophia motioned for Max to come over. Kat was trying hard to not be so obvious watching them, but they were looking her direction, so Kat got nervous. Max glanced at the sheet, nodding, and then glanced at Kat again.

What did that all mean?

Did no one else bid on the dinner date? Did Miriam bid a lot more money than she and Kat could even hope to afford?

Sophia got up on the stage, once again with that bright smile, and had everyone give the male singer another hand. “And now, for the winners of the auction.”

Kat balled her fists in suspense as Sophia slogged through the list. She started with the little items and went on to the larger ones, until she stopped dramatically.

“And the winner of the dinner date with Max Steel is . . .”

The deejay played a drumroll.

“ . . . Kat Garcia.”

Kat was sure her cheeks were burning. What had just happened? She searched the side of the stage for Max, and there he was, standing as though he were just an innocent bystander. How much money had Miriam pledged?

Looking around for her paralegal, Kat heard her before she saw her. Miriam was making her way to Kat. “Uh-oh,” she said as soon as she reached Kat.

Kat massaged her aching temple. “Miriam, how much did you bid?”

“I swear, only fifty dollars. I figured that was an amount I could afford to lose. So if you won Mr. Billionaire, then it means there are some very cheap people around here.” She scanned the room with a frown.

“Or maybe they’re all sane and stayed away from it.”

“Oh, I doubt it.” Miriam shook her head. “I saw a bunch of signatures after yours—or rather, mine. And I hadn’t touched it since I talked to you.”

Kat felt all jumbled up. “Then . . . how in the world did I win it?”

“Maybe you should ask the emcee.”

After listening to a flurry of speeches, Kat made her way to Sophia. “I’m Kat Garcia,” she reminded her.

“Oh, I know.” Sophia bobbed her head energetically. “I remember very well who you are. Especially after you won that dinner with Max. Lucky girl.”

“That’s the thing,” Kat said, trying to not scream in her impatience. “I’m afraid there’s been some mistake. I didn’t bid on it high enough.”

“You didn’t. It was already paid for by the time the auction closed.”

“It was?” Kat blinked in confusion. “I don’t understand how. I never came up to make the final bid.”

“Yes,” Sophia said, as though explaining the situation to a child, “but *he* did.”

Kat looked over her shoulder, her gaze settling on Max Steel. “He, meaning Max?”

Sophia nodded and gave Kat a speculative glance.

Max had the gall to look innocent. As though he hadn’t just done the most obnoxious thing in the world. He took his time to come over, too, while Kat stood there stewing, her arms crossing and uncrossing in front of her.

“Are you gonna explain yourself?” She gave him her best litigator stare.

He visibly swallowed. “I will admit I was surprised that your name was on the list.”

“Believe me, I was, too.”

“I’m glad you let bygones be bygones—”

“No, I mean, I didn’t put my name down.”

He gaped at her. “I’m sorry?”

“My paralegal did.”

He blinked and then clamped his lips together, looking perplexed. “So you didn’t sign up for the dinner?”

“Why ever would I?”

He rubbed his jaw, which only made Kat madder because he looked more attractive.

“When I saw your name,” he said, “I figured you wanted a dinner with me. But then when I didn’t see you bid on it again, I got worried. I mean, I could have a dinner with Kat Garcia, so why wouldn’t I try to make it happen?”

“Because Kat Garcia hates your guts?”

She wanted her words to cut him down, to make her derision clear. But the way he flinched like she’d hit him physically made her feel like a lowlife.

His dark eyes met hers. “Forget dinner. You’re off the hook. I’m sorry for the mix-up. I won’t bother you again.”

“Wait,” she said.

He turned.

She lifted her chin. “How much did you bid on this dinner date with yourself?” The question sounded as ridiculous as this situation.

“Ten thousand.”

Her mind reeled. “That’s some expensive burger.”

“I was going to make a fancier meal.”

“You can have my steak.”

“Thanks.” He looked forlorn, like a puppy dropped off at a curb. “That wasn’t the point, of course.”

Kat was irritated that Max was taking the high road in all this. “You know why I shouldn’t even entertain having this dinner with you, right?”

“Right.”

She ragged on. “I don’t owe you *anything*.”

“Nope.”

“I could just let you eat this ridiculous ten-thousand-dollar dinner by yourself.”

“You could.”

She looked away. Anywhere else but those sad and soulful eyes. Her gaze landed on his collar. “Plus, your bow tie is crooked,” she said, irritated.

He didn’t say anything for a long moment. He lifted his hand to his neck and adjusted the cloth, making it worse.

“No,” she said, “it’s—”

She reached over, but realized her mistake too late as soon as her knuckles brushed against his chin. She pulled back and moved a step away, but not before the contact sent a tingling sensation up her arm.

“I need to make a phone call,” Kat blurted out.

She ran off before he could say anything else. In her hurry, she had gone farther onto the houseboat, instead of toward the parking lot, where she could have just made her exit.

She listened to Vicki's phone ring several times before hanging up. Then she tried again. In the off-chance, she also checked Vicki's blog. But there hadn't been any activity for a couple of weeks. Walking up to the rail, she leaned over and sighed, closing her eyes. When she heard the footfall to her left, she stiffened and looked over. Max stood a few feet away.

"I was going to head out," he said. "Then I saw you . . . standing there. Are you all right?"

She drew herself up, took a deep breath, and nodded.

He looked from her to the water and back. "I hope you don't think it presumptuous, but I'll wait with you, just in case."

"I'm fine, really," she huffed. "See? I'm going now."

He stepped aside to let her by. She had gone several steps when she felt compelled to look back. He stood over at the rail, his profile pensive. Alone.

I don't owe him anything. So what if he looks lonely?

I won't eat dinner with someone just out of pity.

He harmed my sister.

But did he, really, Kat?

"¡Cállate la boca!" she whispered to herself. Shut up!

She reached the stairwell and proceeded to go down the steps, determined not to look over. But she did, and he was still standing there with that dejected air. She wondered what kind of a life he'd led, having gone to boarding schools and with a billionaire dad.

Vicki and Kat didn't grow up rich, exactly, but their parents made sure they had all the comforts they needed. On

holidays like Thanksgiving, there was always extra food for those who had nowhere to go. Anyone could simply show up and they were welcomed as honored guests.

The railing felt cool and smooth under her hand as she gripped it in indecision.

Just one meal.

It didn't have to mean anything.

She climbed the stairs once again and marched on down to where he stood. He turned at her approach.

"I'll do it," she said.

His eyes widened. "Pardon me?"

"I said I'll do it."

His smile looked uncertain. "To what do I owe this change?"

"Does there have to be a reason?" she said, exasperated.

"No, of course not. I'm . . . I'm just glad." They stood awkwardly for several seconds. "When should we do it?" he asked.

"How about tonight?" Before she chickened out.

"Tonight!" Regret crossed his face. "I had hoped that maybe I could impress you a little with a fancier meal, with a bit more lead time."

"We don't have to do it tonight. It was a dumb idea."

"Listen." He held both his hands up. "Let's do it. Nothing fancy. And then I would still owe you dinner?"

"Don't push your luck."

He smiled, then winced. “All the stores are closed, and my fridge is pathetically empty.” He brightened. “I happen to know someone who can whip up a good dinner at a moment’s notice. Hunter, from my fire crew. Let me see if he’s still around.”

“So this would be the fancy dinner?”

His gaze softened, just as she resolutely hardened her heart. “I hope not.”

He walked around, but most people had left, and apparently his crewmate had, too. Max fished out a cell phone from that tux that fit him in just the right places. “Let me make a quick call.”

Kat caught the words “please,” “beg,” and “desperate.”

He returned to her eager and flustered. “Well, the good news is, I have access to ingredients tonight.” He paused. “The bad news is, my friend Hunter isn’t available to cook. So you’ll only have me and my amateur cooking skills.”

She studied him in the light of the moon, earnest and embarrassed. She could cut him down, or be like her mom.

Well, not quite as saintly as her mom. She said, “We’ll see, shall we?”

CHAPTER EIGHT

MAX COULDN'T BELIEVE that Kat Garcia was sitting right next to him in his pickup. Like they were on a date. He hoped this would bolster her opinion of him, but he had to work at it. Including having to fix food out of Hunter's ingredients, as though he were in some cooking reality show. Only difference was, Max wasn't a great cook.

It was quiet in the cab, with just their breathing audible, and Max turned on the radio to static. He was too nervous to keep looking for the right channel. It took a lot of concentration on the dark streets of Page to do so. Especially with Kat beside him.

"Here," she said, reaching over to fiddle with the knob, and out came a country song. "You okay with that?"

"Sure," Max said. He'd already taken his tux jacket off, and still, he was sweating like a kid in middle school around his first crush.

Hunter's was a couple of houses down from the corner, a small fixer-upper that looked like a feature in one of those house magazines. The porch light was on, and a shadowy figure moved around inside, against partially closed curtains.

"Come in," Hunter shouted when Max knocked.

“Hey,” Hunter said as soon as Kat entered. He and Max exchanged glances, with Hunter giving Max a knowing smile. “Hunter,” he said, offering Kat a handshake.

“Thanks for letting us bum food off you,” Kat said.

Hunter grinned. “I’m used to it. The station guys do it all the time.”

Of all his fire crew members, Max felt most comfortable around Hunter. Hunter didn’t razz him like the others did. In fact, he was always cooking, wanting to feed Max like some mother hen. Like Max and Coleman, he was also a bachelor, so Max didn’t feel too guilty popping in on him on a Friday night.

Hunter led them to his kitchen. “I think there’s food in the fridge. I need to go shopping again.”

He opened the Maytag side-by-side and Max looked over his shoulder. There was food, all right—tons of it. Kat’s eyes took it all in.

“You might be able to find something, if you look hard enough,” Hunter said in his deadpan way. “Oh, and there’s grocery bags in the trash closet.

“I owe you one, man,” Max said.

“You better believe it.” Hunter shuffled down the hall and shut a door.

Max and Kat looked at each other and grinned, then studied the contents of the fridge. On the shelves, there was at least a week’s worth of food—not just convenience goods, but a whole spiral ham, turkey breasts, several tubs of spring greens, plus all sorts of vegetables and fruits imaginable.

“Wow. Who does he feed all this to?” Kat said.

“I have no idea. This isn’t the same stash he uses at the station. Hunter’s kind of an odd duck. Great cook and good guy, but odd.”

“He must shop next town over,” Kat said with an admiring whistle. “I haven’t seen produce that fresh in a while.”

“I wouldn’t doubt it. What looks good to you?”

Kat pointed at the ham. “I hate to open that up, since it’s just the two of us, but that looks pretty good.”

“Hunter said anything’s fair game,” Max reminded her. “And how about some cheese?”

“Sounds perfect.”

“Will you want anything else?”

“I’m good, I think.”

“How about dessert?”

“What does he have?” Kat poked her head in, bumping against Max’s arm. He looked over his shoulder at her, their gazes colliding. She gave him a stern look, and he tried to focus back to his task.

He moved a bag of oranges to reveal a white tub. “He’s got chocolate chip cookie dough.”

“Mm. Yes, please.”

“I probably won’t even cook mine, to be honest.”

“Even better.” She smiled at him, then went back to checking out the food. Dazzled, he tried to focus on the task at hand.

“Goat,” Kat murmured, as she stared at Hunter’s collection of cheeses. “Asiago. Mm, I love Asiago.”

“Go on,” Max said, “get it.”

“Seriously, where does he get all this good stuff? I haven’t seen Camembert cheese in a long time.” She turned to Max. “Wait. Do you have fancy cheeses, too?”

“No, should I?”

“I just thought since you have a billionaire’s pantry, you’d have that. Plus sparkling water.” Her eyes took on a teasing glint.

“I can’t stand that stuff. Give me real soda.”

“Me, too.” She eyed him curiously. “What do you have in your fridge, then? Don’t tell me it’s empty.”

“The one at home or the houseboat? Either way, they’re pathetically empty.”

“I’d have thought the houseboat would have all sorts of snacky food.”

“I hardly stock the houseboat with anything. Not while it’s docked. There’s no need. Everything will just go bad. I eat most of my meals at the station, and to be honest, I eat takeout when I’m off.”

“You should let out your houseboat, like an Airbnb.”

“Renters would be such a headache.” Max paused. “I mean, occasionally, I’ve had friends, or friends of friends, stay at some of my properties.”

Kat popped a grape in her mouth. “How many houses do you own around here?”

“Three.”

“Let me guess. You hire people to clean all of them.”

“A cleaning lady comes in every week, yes.” Max set the ham on the counter and looked around for a knife and chopping board.

“I can do that,” Kat offered. “I’m the official meat carver during family parties.”

“Okay,” he said, leaning against the counter. “Go for it.”

She washed her hands, unleashing a lavender scent that tantalized his senses clear over to where he stood, and dried them on a towel. Her brow furrowed with concentration, the pink tip of her tongue touching the corner of her mouth. Catching his gaze, she crinkled her nose. “What?”

He was about to say she was cute, but he intuitively masked his thoughts. It sounded like a pickup line. “You look so serious there. It’s just a ham.”

“I know.” She smiled. “But I want to get it right.”

She was so focused on what she was doing, he had the complete freedom to watch her. Her hair, mussed around her face, curled and dipped around her ears. Her lashes were long and thick. On her throat, her pulse beat under that smooth, tanned skin.

“Ta-da!” she said, presenting Max with her handiwork. She had carved the ham like a pro, the slices fanning out gracefully onto the board.

“Very good,” he said.

She washed her hands and started pulling drawers open. “Now where would I find Ziplocs around here?”

Max looked in the opposite cupboards, not finding anything. Soon, they would overlap on the same door. He reached for the knob just as she did, too.

“Sorry,” they said in unison.

She turned away and looked down. “There it is,” she said.

“What?” he asked, shaking himself mentally.

“The bags,” she said.

He gathered the rest of the stuff—the cheeses and a couple of sodas, fancy mustard and some crackers from a cupboard.

“Like a Whole Foods,” he said, chuckling.

“No kidding.”

“Hunter’s cool,” Kat said, once they were in Max’s truck. “Is he dating someone?”

Max’s hand froze on his keys. “Why, are you interested in him?”

Kat gave him an exasperated look. “No. I just think he would be a great catch for someone.”

“Ah.” Relief washed over Max. “You’d think. He’s kind of skittish. There’s this home-health nurse who’s a good friend of his who seems to like him a lot. We’ve run into her a few times in town, and she always blushes and goes loopy around him. Hunter’s kind of oblivious to her, though.”

“Mm. You guys might have to intervene sometime.”

Max was thinking how he needed help himself. With Kat.

He heard her gasp as they approached the houseboat. The moon had risen over the lake, and it hung like a perfect circle of light. Lovely and romantic.

CHAPTER NINE

WHEN KAT SAW THE MOON, she had second thoughts. She had been going swimmingly along, enjoying herself, but seeing the houseboat illuminated by the moon, and thinking of their spread, made her nervous.

This wasn't meant to be a date, but it felt like one.

Who was she kidding? It was a date.

The moon created a swatch of light across the calm waters. The houseboat sat like a penthouse on a hull, its darkened windows evoking a mysterious vibe. Max got out of his truck and opened her door. Laden with their stash from Hunter, they made their way onto the houseboat gangplank and up the deck.

“Where are we taking this?” she asked.

“Third floor,” he said, motioning for her to go ahead on the stairs.

He pushed open a door that automatically swung closed after her, shutting out the world. Motion-sensor lights turned on, revealing plush sectionals in all four corners. In the middle of the room, along the wall, was a full kitchen and a long dining table with chairs. The appliances gleamed silver in the lamplight. The counters were uncluttered.

“Has Hunter cooked in this kitchen?” she asked.

“No. I’ve never invited the crew here.”

She gazed at him curiously. “Why not?”

“Sometimes I just need space. I see them all the time.”

Wandering into the kitchen, she stopped stock still in front of an appliance. “You have a pebble-ice machine?”

“Yes.”

She set down her bag of food and rooted in it. Fishing out a can of root beer, she next hunted for a glass in the cupboards. Filling it with pebble ice, she popped the soda can open and poured it slowly to the top with a fizzing sound.

“That was very satisfying,” she declared, before skimming the foam with her mouth.

He laughed.

She licked off her root-beer mustache and giggled.

Both of them went in search of things to serve with—a large platter, plates. Knives and forks and thick disposable napkins.

“Over here,” he said, gesturing with a movement of his head and leading her out to the balcony doors.

Leaving the air-conditioning of the houseboat actually felt good. More natural. The night breeze had cooled enough, and the mosquitoes were at bay. There was a circular table with cushioned, hefty chairs. Max set down the platter of ham and cheese and pulled out her chair. Moonlight reflected on the water and the tall walls of the canyon.

“It’s so beautiful here,” she said, and he murmured his agreement.

“You okay if we just eat by moonlight?” he asked.

“Definitely.” She sat down.

He pulled up a chair beside her. “You look like a child who’s been allowed to stay up past midnight.”

“It *is* past midnight.” She picked up a piece of ham and cheese, pairing it with cotton-candy grapes, and tucked them into her mouth. “Gosh, this is so good.”

They talked as they ate. Compared notes about her childhood, his upbringing. He talked about a normal childhood with his parents before his mom passed from cancer when Max was twelve. How that drove his dad to workaholism.

“I hardly saw him,” he said quietly.

“Who took care of you?”

“When I wasn’t in boarding school, I had nannies.”

“Twelve is awfully young. My sister was fifteen when our parents died. I was twenty-six.”

“That’s quite the spread.”

“Mom miscarried between having us. I came easily, but conceiving Vicki took a longer time.”

“So you became her mom after your parents passed?”

“When she would let me. She’s very independent, and doesn’t want me hovering. She makes sure to remind me of that, every day.” As she chewed on pebble ice, she studied him. “Do you have brothers and sisters?”

“None.”

“Not even when your dad remarried? He has, hasn’t he?”

“Yes, he remarried. No, he didn’t have any kids from his other wives.” He smiled wryly. “After having me, I think he

decided he didn't like children all that much. Which was good. He wouldn't have time for more of us anyway."

"It's like having more than one dog. Easier for kids to entertain themselves."

"You grew up with dogs?" he asked.

"No. My mom didn't want to have them inside the house, so ..." She set her drink down.

"Are you and your sister close?"

She was quiet for a minute. Talking about Vicki with Max seemed taboo, and yet it felt good to acknowledge her sister with someone. Especially since Vicki left.

"I'd say we're pretty close," Kat said. "She's all I have. I'm all she has."

"You're lucky to have each other."

"You're not close to any of your stepmoms?"

"None of them stuck around long enough for me to get close to them."

"I'm sorry."

Their gazes met. Kat felt an unspooling inside, of sweet possibilities and interesting promises. She'd always prided herself on controlling her life. This felt like a freefall, exhilarating and frightening.

"I've really enjoyed our time together," he said. "You?"

"Yes," she admitted, and he smiled.

But then she thought of her sister. She couldn't possibly open her heart to him when he had been the cause of all that misery. Those few but interminable years when her sister was on suicide watch. Even Kat herself questioned why God could

be so cruel. He took not only their parents from their lives, but also Vicki's Olympic dreams.

"I should go," she said.

A light went out of his eyes. "Sure. Okay."

He stood when she did.

They carried the platters and glasses and napkins into the houseboat.

"My cleaning lady will take care of everything in the morning," he said, underscoring the difference in their financial situation. How nice would it be to be able to afford having everything done for you? On the flip side, Kat valued her independence. It would drive her crazy to have someone in her kitchen, deciding what stayed and what went.

She took great care to stay far enough away from him. He preceded her down the staircase, but she didn't take his offered hand. At the gangplank, her high heel got caught in a divot and she twisted to undo it. He knelt and pried up her foot, stilling her breath.

"Thank you," she said, not looking into his eyes when he straightened up.

"You bet."

The drive to her house didn't take long at all. She thought that maybe there were more turns, but it was pretty straightforward. Without traffic that late, the roads were empty. Even the stoplights conspired to let them through with an economy of movement. Soon, they would part. About time, right?

They reached her house and he cut the engine, the silence lengthening by the minute. She peered out the windshield at

the night sky, dominated by the moon.

She turned to him, her voice careful. Polite. “Thanks for a good time.”

“So you enjoyed yourself?”

“Yes, why do you ask?”

“We didn’t exactly get off on the right foot.” He paused. “You are welcome.”

Her hand went to the door, and he said quickly, before he lost his nerve, “Will there be a next time?”

“I won’t avoid you at the grocery store.”

“Where do you shop?”

He laughed while she smiled wryly, and then the mood turned serious once again. She looked out the window, right at her house, the moon shedding light on its facade. She moved to open her door, but he was quick to get out and help her. She didn’t take his offered hand, and instead slid as gracefully as she could onto the driveway in her heels. They walked side by side, his hands in his pockets.

When she reached the front porch, she turned around and he ran right into her.

“I’m sorry,” he said, his hands steadying her by the arms.

“Goodbye” had been on her lips. She had planned to say it with finality so that he didn’t get any misplaced notions they could have anything more between them. There would be no handshake, and definitely no good-night kiss.

The porch light was off, and she stood in Max’s shadow with the moon behind him. She should push him away, but she only stood there waiting. Her heartbeat counted out the few

seconds he lowered his head close to hers, until his breath fanned her cheek.

She sensed he was waiting, too—for permission, a sign. A signal from her to go a direction neither of them could have predicted earlier, when they discovered each other's identities.

Like the time she first came to the lake in her teens, she had to work herself up to jumping off those tall cliffs. Here was one such cliff, scary from the edge. Under that beautiful water, there could be rocks and other dangers. It was easier when she didn't think about it.

She closed off her thoughts.

His lips found hers in a gentle caress with a question mark, giving her a chance to still run if she wanted. When she didn't pull away, he lowered his mouth, capturing hers. The kiss smoldered, like a flame. Back and forth, giving and taking. Starting from a spark, it blazed brighter. She met him kiss for kiss, rising on her tiptoes and clinging to him. He buried his hands in her hair, then explored the length of her back, coaxing her to get even closer.

He pulled away with a shaky breath, resting his forehead against hers. But not for long. He claimed her mouth once again, pulling her against the length of his body, walking her back until he had her pinned, unresisting, between him and the door. She felt helpless to go against the tide that was crashing overhead in waves, the darkness making this their secret all their own.

Somehow, through the haze of their kiss, Kat returned to her senses. Hadn't she meant to say goodbye? Was this, then, a little farewell token? Their budding friendship was not enough to surmount the hurt from the past. She owed her sister her loyalty.

She pushed away and stared at him, her pulse wild and her breathing uneven. Matching his own. He had loosened his hold on her, but his hands still cradled her waist.

“Kat?” he said, the pressure of his hands increasing.

“No,” she said, and then louder, “No!” before bolting out of the circle of his arms. She scrambled to her door, opened it, and slammed it shut. Keeping Max out of her life like she should have to begin with.

CHAPTER TEN

KAT WOKE puffy-eyed from tears she'd shed all night, her pillow crusted dry. She was exhausted, physically and emotionally, spent from recriminations she'd piled on herself since she sent Max home, his crushed expression still etched in her memory.

But it was for the best, wasn't it? This was, after all, the man who had ruined her sister's life. She wouldn't have been able to look her sister in the eye and justify this alliance with someone who had driven her to the depths of misery.

She got up and padded to the bathroom, cringing at the sight of her smeared makeup. Last night, she had simply jumped in bed, too tired to clean her face. She did so now, splashing cold water on her eyes afterward. The pathetic bloating around her eyes remained.

There was no way she was going to church looking like this, so she stayed home and tried calling Vicki. There was no answer; the call went directly to her sister's voicemail. Kat tried to shelf her worries, as she knew from personal experience that the hike itself took a good two to three days.

She poured herself a bowl of cereal and turned on the news. She tuned in to the weather. The day promised to be sunny, but the next few days had a slight chance of rain.

Not a big deal, unless one was stuck in a slot canyon or on a stream bed.

She thought of Vicki and her friends and hoped they were being smart in the face of summer flash floods.

And then there was Max.

A peck goodbye would have been sufficient, not that wildfire that raged between them and had been so hard to put out. Why had she jumped into the fire? She needed to move on past that interlude. Sure, they had an intense connection, but they were both simply lonely.

It ended as quickly as it started. She wasn't going to see him again.

Kat went to the noon church service even though she didn't attend regularly. She had hoped to find comfort in the service, but ended up feeling more inadequate than before. She felt like a fake in that cavernous chapel, paying lip service to the scriptures, when one principle glared at her.

Forgiveness.

It felt good to hold on to the hurt that she perceived had been brought on by Maxwell Steel at a critical juncture of her sister's life. If she were to forgive him, the blame would fall squarely on Kat's shoulders. After their parents' deaths, she had promised to be there for Vicki, but she wasn't the day of the fire. She had chosen to stay late at the office, thinking she could get ahead. When someone finally got hold of her, Vicki was fighting for her life at the hospital. When she found out about Max's role in the accident, she transferred all her fears and worries and rage at the unfairness of it all to the rookie firefighter.

But now, this.

She wanted to continue hating him; she had for a long time. But her defenses had slipped for a night. It was not too late to right the ship.

The service was over, and people started to leave the chapel. To her shock, she saw Max getting up from one of the pews in front. In a minute, he would see her, and then . . . what? She looked around wildly for a place to hide at, and jumped at her chance, insinuating herself into a crowd of people who were leaving through the side door. She didn't look back toward Max's direction at all, not even when the crowd brought her out into the desert heat and down the steps to the wrought-iron gate entrance.

She hurried to her car, got in, and saw Max standing at the steps looking around for her. She ducked and made a U-turn so she wouldn't have to pass the church and him.

When she got home, her hands were shaking. She laughed hysterically at the lengths she was going to in order to avoid Max.

In the late afternoon, she tried Vicki's number again, expecting nothing, and true enough, not getting her sister. She did a small batch of laundry—anything to keep her hands and mind busy, and made a little dinner. For a moment, she indulged her imagination. What kind of fancy dinner could Max Steel have fixed for her?

Well, she would never know, would she?

She found some frozen crab cakes in the freezer, but they needed to thaw ahead of time, so she put that in the fridge for another day. Instead, she sautéed some freezer-burnt shrimp in butter. Her phone beeped, but it was just someone commenting on her social media post from three months ago—that was how bad she kept up on those things. Just to satisfy her

curiosity, she checked Vicki's social media. She had posted a picture of a sunset from her backyard, just a week ago. Kat studied it for any indication that she was getting restless once again, that she had even been thinking about this hike.

There were clues, all right. Kat had been so wrapped up in her own concerns that she hadn't noticed anything unusual. A quote about being better off dead than caged. A song about a girl who broke through her chains. A photo of Vicki before the accident, smiling and still with full function of her body.

Despite the fact that Vicki joined a group instead of heading out by herself, questions still ran through Kat's mind. What could her sister have meant about freedom? Why was she feeling stifled? She had been doing so well lately.

Kat wished that she could call and talk to someone. For one brief moment, she thought of Max. She imagined him to be his quiet, calm self, listening to her worries, and then at the end, he would say that everything would be okay.

Of course she didn't act on the impulse.

At the end of the day, Kat checked her phone before bed, but there weren't any messages. She left her phone charging on a bedside table instead of the bathroom, just in case.

At three, she woke with her heart thudding heavily and breaking out in sweat, panicked that she'd lost Vicki in a fog. She realized it had been a nightmare and curled up in the fetal position. The dream had felt so real. Her younger sister was just an arm's length at times, but Kat could never catch up with her.

Kat got up and stumbled into the bathroom, studying her haggard features and messy hair in the mirror. She splashed water on her face and drank half a glass, hoping that Vicki

wasn't dying from thirst, lying in a ditch with a broken leg, or . . . a million other scenarios.

She wished she had a sleeping pill, with as active as her mind was going at the moment.

Finally, at five a.m., she fell asleep. An hour later, she woke, her head and eyes aching. It was time to get ready for work. Her movements were sluggish and heavy, matching her emotional state. She checked her phone once again, and no one had tried calling her.

Walking into the two-story satellite law office with sunglasses on, she ducked her head and hoped that no one would talk to her. Luckily, no one did, as everyone else was hurrying in, too. As soon as she entered her office, however, she might as well have announced her arrival with a bullhorn. Miriam poked her head in, gesturing toward a sunny bouquet of flowers on her desk.

“I wonder who that's from,” Miriam said.

“What did the tag say?”

Miriam pouted. “I'm not that nosy. Although I have my guesses. So confirm it already.”

Kat opened the envelope, pulled out the card, and read the large, sloping handwriting. “Thanks for spending time with me – M.” It was followed by a cell phone number.

Did he get the flowers before or after seeing her at the chapel?

Did it matter? She wanted to dissect her feelings, but not in front of everyone. The flowers were a pretty gesture, coming from a billionaire.

“Well?” Miriam said, her waterfall of dark hair framing her face and shoulders as she leaned forward eagerly.

Kat set the card on the table for Miriam and the other staffers, who were just a step behind the paralegal, to ogle. They giggled among themselves, with Miriam crowing that she was right with her guess.

“That must have been some date,” Miriam said.

Kat waved them all away, but Miriam stayed. “Aren’t you going to dish on the details?”

“Sorry,” Kat said, “I need to get ready for a client.”

Miriam rolled her eyes.

“It’s true,” Kat said. “There’s nothing to say, really. We ate meat and cheese and talked on the third floor of his houseboat.”

“And . . .?”

“And . . .” Kat flicked a glance out the door to make sure no one was eavesdropping, “. . . we kissed and said goodbye.”

Miriam sighed happily, then stared at Kat. “Wait. Goodbye, goodbye?”

“Yes.”

“But why?”

“Because I don’t need him to complicate my life. Plus, I don’t trust him. He harmed my sister once. I won’t give him that same power again.”

“Seriously? Because the guy tried to help your sister—”

“Stop, Miriam. You don’t know everything, okay? You think it was like some simple injury, where she broke a bone and missed out on a medal or two, big deal?” Kat paused, and

ground out the next words. “Thanks to him wanting to play hero, her soul broke.”

Regret flashed across Miriam’s face. “Sorry. I think I get it. Just . . . have you heard of the metaphor of the acid corroding the bucket that carries it?”

“Yes,” Kat said grudgingly.

Miriam backed away to the door. “I’ll be out here when you need me.”

Kat nodded and massaged her temples. With her next appointment at nine, she needed to not only read up on the case file, but also needed to wake up. Not one to drink soda usually, she took a Dr. Pepper out of her mini-fridge. It had a bitter tang to it, but it would do for now. After downing it within a few minutes, she felt a jolt of caffeine hit her empty stomach, making her jittery. She wasn’t sure that was any better.

She stared at the bouquet of flowers. Max Steel wasn’t going to take no for an answer, was he? Was this his way of saying goodbye, or keeping the door open? The card was partially poking out, so she jiggled it to shove it back in. The cell phone number leaped out at her.

Don’t do it, Kat, she chastised herself.

She would just text him a thank you. That would be the polite thing to do.

Kat: Thanks for the flowers.

His reply came instantly.

Max: You like them?

No, they were terrible.

Kat: They are lovely.

Max: Like you.

Kat: Ugh. It's too early for flirtatious texts.

Max: Sorry, that just slipped out. It's true. I really think that.

Kat: Good. Because I would hate to think you were just lying.

Max: I would never lie to you.

Kat: That's a big promise.

Max: On things that matter, anyway.

Kat: What???

Max: I thought you'd appreciate that I am being more realistic.

Kat: Not sure I like that.

Max: If I'm punchy, I apologize. I've been on shift for twenty-four hours.

Kat: I can relate. I couldn't sleep last night.

Max: ???

Kat: Things. And getting your flowers didn't help.

Max: Sorry.

Kat: You shouldn't have sent them.

Max: I KNOW why; I don't understand why.

Kat: You text with semicolons!

Max: Is that okay?

Kat: I'm impressed. How do you do in Scrabble?

Max: Not bad. And you?

Kat: I hate losing at it.

Max: If you play with me, I'll let you win.

Kat: Thanks for patronizing me.

Max: I bet you're curious now. To see if I'm telling the truth.

Kat: You're a strange duck.

Max: How so?

Kat: You use semicolons and you're a billionaire. You text politely, in complete sentences. I expected differently from someone who is also a firefighter.

Max: Ouch. You mean I should speak Neanderthal?

Kat: Something like that. Anyway . . . I need to go and be lawyerly.

Max: Hey. Can I see you today?

Kat stared at his question and took her time answering.

Kat: Absolutely not.

Max: I thought it wouldn't hurt to ask.

Kat tossed her phone on her desk, letting it slide across the surface. She held her head between her hands and groaned. This was like being back in high school, trying to keep the inappropriate boy at arm's length. That was the kicker, though. Max Steel was one of the good guys . . . until he injured her sister in more ways than one.

And that was why she needed to resist him.

Her loyalty was with her sister, first and foremost.

At the thought of Vicki, Kat picked up her phone again and checked her messages. There weren't any calls from Vicki, but there was one from a number she didn't recognize. She pressed "voicemail" and listened.

"Hello? This is Deputy Sheriff Troy Quinlan. We had a missing person report come through for a Victoria Garcia, and we understand you are her sister? If you could please call us back . . ."

Kat's hands shook as she wrote down the phone number.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

KAT GOT out of her Honda Civic and squinted into the sunlight. At ten o'clock, the day was already sizzling, which wasn't unusual for an August day in Page. Officer Quinlan had directed her to come to the Danger Bridge Canyon trailhead, which would be their Search and Rescue, or SAR, base.

Search and rescue. The words unnerved her.

Earlier, while on her return call to Officer Quinlan, he had asked if Vicki had called home. If only she had!

Kat forced herself to keep walking on, hoping against hope that they wouldn't need her for long. Her sister was just around the corner behind a boulder, springing out to surprise them with her dark humor.

About a dozen people in matching bright yellow vests were milling around, some of them smiling, probably at a joke. The sight jarred her. How could they laugh when her sister was missing? As she came up, they sobered, nodding to her.

She approached a woman. "Where can I find Deputy Quinlan?" The woman pointed toward an RV in the midst of the parked vehicles. Kat thanked her and went up to the RV, whose door was open. From the doormat, she could see computers, radios, and other technological gadgets in this

small, cramped space. A tall man with a blond buzzcut was poring over papers, and he looked up at her knock.

His muscular bulk filled the doorway. Unsmiling, he intimidated her with his piercing blue eyes and a strong, clean-shaven jawline. “Kat Garcia?”

She nodded.

“It’s a nice day,” he said, looking past her. “If you don’t mind, let’s sit out here under a canopy?”

“All right.”

They moved to the canopy and he pointed at one of three camp chairs. “Please, have a seat.”

She sat, trying to stay calm. A bearded man with glasses came out of the RV, whom Officer Quinlan introduced as Ron Jensen, the SAR crew scribe. The two men talked for a minute while Kat fidgeted. She crossed then uncrossed her legs. Tapped her fingers on her jeans. Bracing herself for bad news.

“Would you like some bottled water?” the officer asked.

“No,” she said abruptly. “I mean”—her voice softened—“no.” She bit her lip. “I’m sorry. I guess I’m on edge. Could you please just tell me about my sister?”

He nodded, seating himself in a camp chair. That was better. When he hovered over her, he was so intimidating. Ron, holding a yellow pad and pen, took the other chair.

“We received a phone call from a young man named Benny Wolcott—”

Kat tensed at the mention of Vicki’s friend’s name.

“—who was the last person who saw her on their hike. On day two, they had gone for a hike through a maze of boulders,

and somehow, your sister got separated from the group. By the time Benny and his companions realized she wasn't with them, she was nowhere to be found. They searched the area and had to stop because it had gotten too dark by then."

A cold tremor went through Kat's body. Vicki had been missing since yesterday. "Why didn't they call you when they realized she was lost?"

His eyes flicked away, transfixed to a spot beyond her shoulder. "You can ask him yourself."

Kat followed his gaze to the very red, sunburnt face of Benny Wolcott. He had changed and matured from his younger days with Vicki. Back then, he had been small and scrawny, with braces and a face full of freckles. He still had freckles, but he had filled out like a lumberjack, with adorable curly red hair and his cheeks heightened with a perpetual blush made even redder by the sunburn. She could see why Vicki would have a crush on him. His green eyes lit up with recognition at the sight of Kat, and he approached her with quick steps.

"I'm so sorry about your sister," he said.

She wanted to scream. People lost little things like rings, cell phones, wallets. But a person? A *friend*. "How could you lose her?" she blurted out.

His smile faded, and his blush deepened. "I know, it was stupid. I totally take responsibility for it. She was being stubborn, you know her. Wanted to make her way around the boulders. I guess I got caught up trying to not fall into the gaps between the rocks, and by the time we'd reached a flatter area, that's when we noticed she wasn't hiking with us. It was getting dark. Maybe she got disoriented." He paused, looking sheepish. "I am really sorry."

Kat covered her mouth, then lifted her hand to her forehead to impatiently brush her hair back. “I’m sorry, too, for biting your head off. I’m just so worried about her. I had this bad, bad feeling that she shouldn’t have gone, and I should have acted on it.”

Officer Quinlan shifted forward in his camp chair. “As you can imagine, time is of the essence, so if you don’t mind, we have some questions for you. Your answers may be able to help us find your sister.”

“Of course.” She watched as he dismissed Benny with a little nod, and Vicki’s friend went off to join a young woman and a young man whom Kat assumed were his hiking companions. She felt bad about chewing Benny out. It wasn’t his fault that Vicki was stubborn. And the trail confused even the most experienced hiker, with its sparse signs. A wave of gratitude overcame her that Benny and his friends took the time to hike out to report Vicki’s disappearance.

Officer Quinlan asked the basic information—name, address, phone number—plus physical descriptions.

Kat swallowed before answering, as the implication of his questioning hit her hard. “She’s five one, about a hundred and sixteen pounds, twenty-one years old, skinny. She’s growing out a blonde dye job she had done six months ago. Her hair goes down to the middle of her back. Straight-as-stick hair.”

“The natural color?”

“Dark brown.”

The deputy sheriff scribbled notes and nodded for her to continue.

“She has a diamond-shaped face, like mine, and slightly less tanned skin because she doesn’t go out that much. Chews

down her nails to the nub, though sometimes, she will give herself a home manicure.”

“Does she have any scars, moles, tattoos, or piercing?”

“No piercings. Never had any interest in that. Scars . . . yeah, she has scarring on her back from surgeries five years ago, when she was in a fire.”

Officer Quinlan stared at her for a moment. “Wait. Was your sister the one who was going to go to the Olympics, but the fire department botched her rescue?”

Kat’s mouth tightened. “Yes.”

The word escaped her lips just as a familiar figure in a SAR vest emerged from a small four-wheel-drive motorhome in the trailhead lot.

Max Steel.

CHAPTER TWELVE

AT THE SIGHT OF KAT, Max's heart contracted with what was starting to be a familiar pain. He'd opened himself up emotionally to her, made himself vulnerable. A heat sizzled through him at the memory of them exchanging those kisses that left him wanting more, just for her to pull the rug from under him. And he was wanting to be with her something fierce. Especially after hearing news of her sister missing.

As a member of the Page Area SAR, he had been privy to the text that called for volunteers. The ensuing information he got regarding the victim's details brought back a sense of déjà vu. He almost recused himself from this search. Why would Kat trust him with the safe rescue of her sister? Surely she wouldn't want him anywhere near her. Plus, he wasn't sure he could take more rejection. Would she publicly shun him, or avoid him like she obviously did at church?

Then he reminded himself of his oath to SAR. That he would help those who needed help, regardless of who they were.

He took a deep breath and said a silent prayer. "Please, Lord, if it is Thy will, let this search be successful. Give all of us clarity of mind so we can know where to look. And please

bless Kat with peace of mind, that she will see her sister soon. Amen.”

He had taken a temporary leave from the fire department to join the search for as long as it might take, with Cap’s blessing. Coleman would be available to fill in for him. In his conversation with Cap, Max left out the part about him being personally involved with Kat Garcia, or his supervisor might have raised an eyebrow about his eagerness to help. The relationship was all in past tense, anyway. Kat had made sure of that. Max could truthfully say they weren’t dating or anything.

But seeing Kat once again, sitting in that camp chair next to Troy from the sheriff’s office, brought back all his insecurities. Would she welcome him? Would she allow him to give her the emotional support she needed?

Their eyes met, and time seemed to stop. Hauntingly beautiful, with her dark hair falling around her shoulders and framing her lovely features, her eyes held pain and loss. He wanted so badly to be able to take her into his arms and hug her, simply as a friend. Never mind that he also wanted to be more than that.

Kat lowered her eyes, shifting her gaze to Quinlan without acknowledging Max. Max flinched as though she’d struck him, that pain of rejection resurfacing again.

He swallowed and looked around, getting his bearings. A woman his age—early thirties—with an angled haircut, dyed red, was walking over to him.

“Hi, Max,” Diana Thomas greeted him. “How’s it going?”

They fist-bumped, with Max basking in Diana’s friendliness. “Surviving, how about you?”

“Surviving,” she mimicked before rolling her eyes. “Got you a nice RV, it looks like. I’d have thought you would show up here with one of those behemoths.”

Max could have. The salesman at the RV dealership would have been plenty happy to sell him something bigger. “I didn’t need more than this size. Maybe if I had a T. rex to take camping.”

Diana chortled. “Good one! I wish I had a rig like that to hang out in. Rub it in, why don’t you? I heard you’ve been hosting parties on your houseboat. Hardly seems you’re in survival mode.”

“Oh, but then I have to put on a party face. To this introvert, that’s surviving, all right.”

“Maybe you have a point. Did the fundraiser go well?”

“Did it go well?” he echoed to buy time. His mind went straight to a moonlit moment on the deck of his houseboat, the fragrance of a woman, and their kisses at her doorstep.

“Well?” Diana prompted.

“I think there was a lot of interest in the silent auction,” he said, shaking himself back to the present.

But Diana didn’t seem to notice that blip in his attention. “Rich and I wanted to go, but the kiddies were sick, so we canceled the babysitter and had movie night instead.”

“Believe me,” Max said, “popcorn and a movie would have been less awkward than being in a tux playing host at the party.”

“Tux, huh?” She eyed his vest collar. “Like James Bond?”

“More like a penguin,” he joked. When Diana laughed, Max noticed Kat looking over their direction, before quickly

averting her eyes.

Diana followed his gaze. “Who’s that?”

Max nodded. “The missing person’s sister.”

Diana raised an eyebrow. “You know her?”

“We actually had dinner after the fundraiser.” It felt good to tell Diana about it. Acknowledging it made it more real, like it really happened. That it wasn’t just a figment of his imagination.

Diana studied him, her eyes glimmering. “Don’t tell me you two are dating?”

“It was just a one-time thing.” He almost said, *and she doesn’t even want to see me anymore*, but that sounded like sour grapes.

“Still, Max Steel on a date?” She punched his arm. “Go, you. Sorry if this is hitting you personally.”

“Nah. I can’t even really claim that. Kat and I hardly know each other.”

It was the honest truth, and one that left him wishing that things could be different between them, but that was aiming for the moon.

Someone called Diana over, and she waved as she backed up to join the others.

Max’s gaze wandered over once again to Kat. She was back to listening intently to Quinlan. He probably wouldn’t get a chance to talk to her, not with this crowd.

And definitely not if Quinlan had a say in it. Since his arrival at Lake Powell Fire, Max quickly learned that Troy Quinlan aimed to make his fire platoon’s lives difficult. For

some reason Max didn't understand, their platoon developed a rivalry with the deputy sheriff over the years.

“Don't ever let him catch you making a mistake, or you'll never be able to live it down,” his fellow platoon member Weston had said. And boy, did Max learn that quickly. After the incident with Victoria Garcia, Quinlan had made some snide remarks. Always vague and somewhat defensible, but everyone knew who he was referring to. Max had messed up.

Max circulated among people he knew, keeping a peripheral view of Kat. Usually at SAR deployment, he simply minded his business and kept to himself, which suited him fine. Mostly to stay under the radar and not cross Quinlan. There was plenty to do at any rate—practicing knots and checking anchor systems. An hour passed. Two. He listened in on a conversation about the latest gear.

“Hey, Steel,” Quinlan shouted across the parking lot, drawing everyone's stares. “Come here, I have an assignment for you.”

Max's glance flicked from the SAR coordinator to Kat, who was watching with cool curiosity. Surely she could at least muster polite recognition? Max reminded himself why they were all gathered there, and he immediately quashed his resentment.

He walked over as casually as he could, nodding politely at Kat. At long last, she nodded back. Quinlan stood. He was a tall man, and Max had to lift his chin slightly to maintain eye contact.

“Kat,” Quinlan said. “This is Max Steel. He will be your FLO.”

Max stiffened. Quinlan sure had a sick sense of humor.

“And that means . . .?” Kat prompted.

“Family liaison officer,” Quinlan said. “He’ll help you with anything you need at Incident Command.”

Kat looked from Quinlan to Max. “I don’t understand. I thought I made it clear I would be interested in searching with your team.”

Quinlan gave her a polite smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “I’m afraid that’s not possible. Your help here at post is much more valuable to our team. If someone calls in having found your sister, wouldn’t you want to be the first to know?”

Like the distant horizon, a storm brewed in Kat’s eyes. “I would want to be there by her side.”

“In due time, you will be.” Quinlan pursed his lips. “May I be frank with you?” When she nodded, he continued.

“Our team trains year-round, just ask Max over here. We know each other’s skills, our limitations. We have earned each other’s trust. I’m afraid I can’t have you join in the team’s work. A, because of potential liability. And B, because we wouldn’t want to compromise this search by losing you, too.”

Kat’s lips tightened further. “You mean I would just sit around here while my sister is out there, needing my help?”

“You could do as other families have on other searches. Make coffee and bring cookies for the searchers.”

“Seriously?” She folded her arms across her chest. “With all due respect, although I appreciate you all here and want to thank you, I want to do more. If I refuse to stay put and head out, what then? Would you handcuff me . . . to him?” She pointed with derision at Max.

Quinlan glared at her, then gave her a fake smile. “I cannot retain you, no.” His gaze hardened. “Still, you cannot come with my teams. You can, however, go with your FLO.”

Kat darted an irritated look toward Max but said nothing.

Quinlan smiled, more genuinely this time. “In case you do decide to go off and do a search with Max, I will need you to sign a waiver.” He handed her a two-page document.

She read it, really read it, while Max and Quinlan exchanged glances.

Quinlan cleared his throat. “It’s a standard waiver. I can tell you what it says.”

“No thanks,” Kat said, barely looking up. “I can read the fine print myself.”

Quinlan put both fists on his hips and considered Kat. The size difference between her and the deputy was a good foot, but she didn’t look about ready to back down.

“You can give Ron the waiver, Kat,” Quinlan said. “I just need a word with Max.”

Max followed him into the RV, where Quinlan turned to him with a flinty expression. “I don’t care where you take her, just get her out of my way.”

“There’s only one way in,” Max pointed out.

“There’s different areas, though. Take her west. That’ll keep her busy for a while.”

“Let her at least go somewhere productive—”

“No. That’s for our crew, who are tested and trained. I will hold you fully responsible if she wreaks havoc on our search. Don’t screw up. Again.”

Max clenched his jaw.

“Is that clear?” Quinlan said.

Max masked his fury. “Yes, sir.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

KAT WATCHED THE DISTANT HORIZON, where clouds formed. They weren't the ominous kind that heralded August monsoons, though she'd learned early on that could change pretty quickly over the lake and its environs.

Inside, an emotional storm built within her. After the heated discussion with the deputy sheriff, the reality of what was about to take place hit her. Max was assigned to be her FLO. Which meant they would be spending a lot of time together.

Max came out of the command RV, his gaze settling on her before he wrenched it away with a frown. He walked over, and without looking at her, said, "Officer Quinlan will be out shortly to talk about the search and then . . . we can get going."

"I don't need your help."

Max studied her. She stared back at him, defiant.

He said, "As long as you stay at camp, I don't care what you do."

I don't care what you do.

"I am going on that hike by myself. You don't need to come."

“Kat,” Max practically growled, “were you deaf? Did you not hear what the search commander said?”

“Yes, but I also read the fine print. I take full responsibility for my actions, so you guys have nothing to worry about.”

“Listen. I am your FLO, and you are my responsibility.”

“And all I am saying, FLO or PLO or YOO, is N-O.”

Max sighed. “Why are you being so difficult, Kat?”

“Do you even have to ask?”

He rubbed his jaw. “I think I’m professional enough to conduct myself around you. You don’t have to worry about me, you know . . . asking you out . . .”

“Or flirting?” she asked archly.

The hand rubbing his stubble stilled. “Or kissing.” The corner of his mouth rose.

Lowering his hand, his gaze fell to her lips, sending a lick of heat through her.

“Especially *that*,” she said, her cheeks burning. “Anyway, this isn’t about us but my . . . my sister.”

His smile evaporated. “I’m so very sorry that she’s missing.”

She reciprocated with a teary smile. “Commander Quinlan has been suggesting that maybe Vicki was suicidal. That she would go missing on purpose—” She hugged her midriff, feeling ill.

Max grimaced. “It’s hard to hear, but that’s often a possibility.”

She closed her eyes at the surge of pain, then opened them. “I told him that she was extremely depressed, suicidal, for

several years. But she has gotten better. He said we are hoping for the best, but to brace ourselves for the worst. Couldn't he be less . . . direct?"

Max's expression filled with regret. "It's a stressful situation, I understand."

Kat took a deep breath. "I'm sorry you got stuck babysitting me," she said, half-joking, half-serious.

To her chagrin, his frustration showed plainly on his face.

"What?" she asked.

He looked away, then back at her. "Nothing."

"No." She touched his arm. "Please tell me."

His glance fell on her fingers. Every nerve in her body came alive as their skin touched, but his next words quashed her euphoria.

"It's my duty."

Kat flinched and pulled her hand away. Of course to him, she was just his duty. What was she thinking, being all nice to him once again? She just needed to put her head down and help find Vicki. Before it was too late.

She decided to stick to safer topics. Glancing at his yellow vest, she asked, "So you do search and rescue, too?"

He nodded. "Joined pretty much as soon as I got on at the fire station. We did a cross-training, and I wanted to do this, too."

Her eyes took in his muscular build under that khaki shirt and yellow vest, then forced herself to not gawk. "That's cool."

"Just trying to do my part to help."

“Thanks for joining in the search today.”

His nod was crisp and formal. “You are welcome.”

His body language was plain and clear. This was only a job, and he was just doing his part to help. Nothing more. And wasn't that what she wanted?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

MAX COULD HAVE KICKED HIMSELF. *It's my duty.*

He had meant that following SAR commands was his duty. No one but the newbies tolerated being FLO. It was, to put it bluntly, babysitting sometimes off-kilter, hysterical people who took out their frustrations upon anyone whose ear they could bend. Max had signed up for SAR to search and rescue.

After he caught Kat's pained expression, he realized he had to do some clarifying.

Or did he? She barely even acknowledged him as a friend. He was just a volunteer on this SAR team. And now they were stuck together on this useless goose chase, giving her false hope and making him vulnerable to her, once again. She had warned him to keep him at arm's length. He was a SAR professional, and he would abide by that expectation.

Despite her obviously pained expression when he said she was just his duty, he kept silent. Besides, there was no opportunity to explain. Quinlan was calling everyone into a circle for a briefing. Max gestured for Kat to precede him, and he followed. Quinlan beckoned for Kat to take her seat in the shade. She came over to stand beside the deputy, but remained standing.

Her gaze swept over the crowd, her eyes shining with gratitude. “Can I please say something?” she said in a clear voice.

“Sure,” Quinlan said, looking surprised and worried.

“I just wanted to thank you all for helping look for my sister. I am so very grateful.” Her gaze locked with Max’s for a long moment, before she looked at the rest of the group.

Heads bobbed in acknowledgment, and there were murmurs of “you’re welcome.”

“Anything else?” Quinlan said.

When she shook her head, he continued. “Our missing person is twenty-one-year-old Victoria ‘Vicki’ Garcia. She was last seen ten miles from this trailhead, about halfway to the lake. They had been navigating some rough terrain. Boulders. She went one way, and the rest went another.” He paused. “Time is of the essence, as always, but especially in light of forecasted monsoons. Also, although this young lady was able to hike out on the trail, she’s had mobility issues. That, combined with low water supply, means we have to move quickly.”

He called out names, pairing people up.

Quinlan turned to Kat. “If you do want to go on your search, you may go with Max.” He eyed her up and down. “You might want to change to something more comfortable.”

“Of course,” she said, looking down at her jeans.

Quinlan pulled his cap lower on his forehead. “If you need me, Max can radio in. I will be in the RV or somewhere in the Incident Command.”

“Thank you.”

The deputy sheriff looked at Max. “And Max, remember what I said.”

An antagonistic look passed between the two men.

A lady she’d seen earlier talking to Max when he first arrived came up to Kat. She had one of those edgy haircuts like she belonged to a post-apocalyptic movie set. She exuded self-confidence, almost feral in its intensity.

“Hi, I’m Diana,” she said, offering a handshake.

“Kat.”

“I’m sorry about your sister,” she said.

“Thank you for helping in the search.”

“Of course. Glad to help.” Diana lowered her voice. “Keep the faith.”

Kat choked back a sob. She nodded wordlessly, afraid she’d blubber if she attempted to speak.

“You need anything for your hike?” Diana hefted a backpack. “I have an extra pack with supplies.”

“I was going to get her some of mine,” Max said, “but that’s great.”

“Thank you so much.” Kat accepted Diana’s offering with a grateful smile.

Diana eyed Max. “Max can be a pain sometimes, but he’s an overall good guy. You’re in good hands.”

“Thanks, I think?” Max said, wincing.

Kat watched the interplay between the two colleagues, and for a moment, she felt a pang of envy. Not necessarily of the romantic kind. This innate trust, this bond, was rare to see. Her

law firm exemplified the opposite culture, pitting team members against each other in the name of profit.

Diana pointed at Kat's jeans. "You got a pair of athletic pants? They'll resist rubbing better."

"I do. I hadn't thought of that, and I appreciate the suggestion."

Diana looked over her shoulder at the crew that was heading down the trail. "Well, I better head out. Stay safe."

"She's nice," Kat said when Diana was out of earshot.

"You sound almost surprised."

"I am. I thought maybe . . ." She let her words trail off.

"What?"

"That she'd be catty."

Max raised an eyebrow. "Why would you think that?"

"She's edgy. Sorry, it's hard to explain."

"I think I understand."

Kat watched the crew leave. Her eyes traveled as far as they could see, where red canyon met fat white clouds in blue sky. Somewhere in this wilderness, her sister needed rescuing. "What does she do outside of SAR?"

"She's an RN."

"Makes sense."

Max looked up at the sky and Kat followed his gaze. Gray tinged the edges of the clouds. "We'd better head out," he said. "You need to grab a set of clothes?"

"Yes," she said. As she followed Max to the parking lot, she took another glance at the sky.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

WHEN KAT PULLED up at the curb of her house, Max glanced at the front porch through the car-side window. In the daylight, it looked pretty plain. At night, with a full moon, it had looked different. Romantic.

Kat turned to him. “I won’t be long. You don’t have to come in if you don’t want to.”

“I can.”

She nodded. “All righty, then.” Ever since they left the trailhead, she’d been quiet and pensive. He wondered if she was worried about the weather, too. He wished he could reassure her, but he owed her the truth. That in this area, storms could quickly turn into flooding.

In a fast clip, they walked up a cracked concrete path to the front door. She put the key in the lock and had to push the contraption open with her shoulder.

He followed her inside and closed the door after him. She headed somewhere down the hall while he waited on the living room couch. The house was simply furnished. Was her taste plain, or did she, like him, just not have the time nor interest to decorate? There were no magazines to read, no books on shelves. Just a black widescreen TV in the corner, and some exercise paraphernalia along the wall.

She came out in a pair of khaki cargo hiking pants and a ladies' cut gray shirt that flattered her figure. He tried to not stare. Even in a dressed-down state, she managed to take his breath away.

Stop it, Steel.

"I've got my water bottle," she said. "Plus Diana's backpack. What else do you recommend I bring?"

He looked inside the bag. "Looks like you have everything you need. A flashlight. Pocket knife. How about a windbreaker? Oh, and carb snacks like dates, dried bananas."

She nodded. "Good idea. What about meals?"

"I've got extra MREs, if you'd like it."

"MRE?"

"Meal, Ready-to-Eat."

"Of course. Sure, that will be great."

"The bar is low on those freeze-dried meals," he warned, "but it's better than nothing."

"I can believe it."

Their eyes met, and a little blip of happiness bubbled up inside him.

"Do you think we can find her sooner than the next meal?" Her voice lowered to a whisper.

"That's the hope." He didn't add that he was on a search once where they hiked for a good eight hours. "We'll want to take advantage of being out there while there's still light."

"Of course." Worry was etched on her face.

He wanted to go over and give her a hug, but of course that would be crossing a line. Instead, he confided, “I’ve been praying for her. For you.”

Her expression softened, and she couldn’t have looked lovelier. “I appreciate that.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I saw you at the church once.”

“I saw you, too. I tried to catch you afterward, but you had walked outside too quickly.”

She smiled wryly. “I was trying to avoid you.”

“Ah, that explains it.”

Blushing, she shrugged on the borrowed pack, but the strap was twisted. He stepped behind her to adjust it, his hands pausing. He could smell her perfume, and her hair, drawn back into a ponytail, was soft and silky as his fingers brushed against it.

She turned her head, her lashes fanning against her smooth cheek. He wanted to lean close and inhale her sweet scent, but he resisted. She untwisted the strap herself and walked away.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“WHY DO I NEED AN FLO?” Kat asked as they started the trek down the east trail.

“It’s policy. The better to keep everyone safe.”

“I’m thirty-one, you know.”

“Actually, I didn’t know.”

She stopped and gave him a speculative glance. “How old are *you*?”

“Thirty-three.”

And still a bachelor, she wanted to add, but she didn’t. She needed to keep her distance from him. It was the best thing for her emotional health. She’d had a scare at the house, when he was helping her with the backpack strap. She’d wanted to turn and circle his neck with her arms, pulling him down . . .

“Shall we keep going?” he asked, snapping her out of her daydream.

Kat moved on as he suggested, but looked wistfully the other direction. “Why don’t we just go with the others? Based on Benny’s description, we’re not on the trail they’d taken.”

“That would be pretty useless,” Max said dryly. When she opened her mouth to protest, he added, “That won’t yield

anything new.”

Kat’s breath hitched at her throat. She turned to Max. “Why don’t we just take horses to do the search?”

“We normally don’t in these areas. It’s hard to support horses here. You’d have to bring in hay and such. Mounted SAR is their own special unit, but there’s none in this area. It would take a lot to get them here.”

“A lot?”

He averted his gaze. “A high-profile missing person.”

Kat’s face fell. Then she thought of something else. “What about dogs?”

“That’s a different unit altogether. Our SAR is small, Kat. If this search goes on longer, we might be able to lean on other agencies to help us, and we could probably recruit a dog team then.”

“Helicopter?” she persisted.

“Someone told me they’d already checked and none of them were available because of a fire west of here.”

Kat threw her hands in the air out of frustration, and Max caught them. For a moment, she just stared at their linked hands, her skin coming alive at his touch. And then he put her away from him as if he could catch a disease from her, whirled, and resumed hiking.

She stared daggers at his back, and then scrambled to catch up to him. She didn’t have to see his expression to know that he had also been on edge since they left her house. He held his body in rigid, affronted lines.

“Hold up,” she said.

He stopped and whirled in on her, his face a polite mask, while an impatient glint appeared in his eyes. She was about to say that she was having to run, could he please wait, but his forbidding attitude gave her pause.

“Yes?” he asked.

“Listen, this is going to be a long day if we’re both just kind of stuck up on our side of the trail. So I declare a truce. Just for now.”

“And what exactly does a truce mean?”

As his gaze deepened, she regretted even suggesting it. “We could have a regular conversation, like normal people.”

“What do normal people talk about?” he asked with a teasing tone.

“Family. Childhood. Our first-grade teacher.”

He gave her a cute smile that made her insides all jumbled up. “Why that last one?”

“Because they’re usually the ones who got us all hooked onto reading.”

“Mine sent me to special ed for being a troublemaker,” he recalled.

Kat pictured him at boarding school, escaping in the middle of the night. “Were you one?”

“I was struggling with reading, so I would get up and mess with the shelves, just because I was so bored.”

“That must have been rough.”

“Thank goodness I had a good fourth-grade teacher who helped me with reading.” He glanced at her. “What about your first-grade teacher?”

“Her name was Miss de Leon. Everyone said she would retire all throughout my time in elementary school, she looked that old. But she was like a grandma. She just loved us kids and would even bring cookies some Fridays.”

“A great bribe.”

“I know, right? Maybe I should give you a cookie,” she joked. “Sweeten you up.”

He pointed at his muscular chest. “You think I’m a sourpuss?”

“Yes. You’ve been so grumpy since leaving my house.”

Max stared at her steadily. “Is that what I seem to you, grumpy?”

“You weren’t smiling.”

“I just have some things on my mind, okay?” He closed his eyes and darted a glance at her. “Sorry. I can’t believe I said that. You’re the one who has all these worries.”

Her mouth trembled, and she turned her head away so he couldn’t see her expression.

“Hey,” he said, gripping her arm and causing her pulse to race. “You have my word we will do our best to find her. This is one of the best SAR units in the region. I’m one of the newer ones, but I do have five years of experience.”

With her head cocked back, she felt at once vulnerable and trusting. Her bones seemed to melt as his glance brushed against her parted mouth, bringing back feelings of longing from a past moonlit night.

She managed to croak, “Thank you,” and was rewarded by his reserved smile.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

MAX SLOWED HIS STEPS, still dazed from that last encounter at the start of the trail. He had meant to freeze her with his demeanor, to signal that he was going to do this job as professionally as he could.

But the woman, heavens above.

He thought he was immune to her. He had excised her from his dreams, had given up any hope that she'd want to have anything to do with him. At least for the time being. He had been prepared to shelve his interest in pursuing a relationship with her, especially now that she was preoccupied with other, weighty matters.

Her visceral reaction to his nearness—eyes wide, breathing labored, and color heightened, as if she was remembering, too, against her better judgment—reignited his desire for her. He wanted to hold her once again with every fiber of his being. Or open his arms to comfort her. Instead, with great effort, he hid his feelings under a mask of indifference.

“Are you familiar with this canyon?” he asked.

“I’ve only been on it once or twice,” she said. “Vicki and I hiked it years ago.” She paused with a ghost of a smile. “She was a brat about it, too. Complained the entire time.”

“How old was she?”

“Eight, the first time. I dragged her again when she was twelve. She didn’t complain that time. In fact, she smoked me.”

“Well, she was a runner,” Max said.

Was.

Her expression stilled and darkened, gray as the clouds forming above them. Max could kick himself for bringing that up. To fill the awkward silence, he said, “Did you also get her running talent?”

“I had some ability, sure. But I didn’t have the interest. I found it boring to run around in laps.”

“How about cross-country?”

“I tried it one season, but it didn’t hook me enough to go through that pain every time.” She gave him a side-glance. “Did you do sports?”

He nodded. “Football. Basketball. Baseball. I think my dad agreed just to keep me busy the entire year.”

“Were you any good?”

“I was terrible,” he replied, straight-faced.

She looked him up and down. “You’re lying, too.”

He feigned wide-eyed innocence. “I would never lie.”

Pursing her lips, she stomped ahead. He chuckled and caught up with her. “Okay, my bad. I lied.”

“I knew it.” Up close, her dark eyes were fringed by thick, soft brown lashes.

“You knew . . . what?” His brain was turning to mush.

Her lashes fluttered, looking as dazed as he felt. “That you were lying.”

They went back to hiking, back to safety.

“My dad brought me home my last two years of school,” Max explained. “Which was good because I loved playing football and I couldn’t have done that in Europe. I was the starting quarterback my senior year. Then I got injured. A senseless injury, really. I stepped on someone’s water bottle on the field doing a victory dance, of all the stupid things, and twisted my knee. Had to have my ACL repaired. I sat on the bench for what felt like forever. Three months.” He blew out a breath. “And then this kid from nowhere showed me up and replaced me anyway.”

“Ouch.” She gave him a sympathetic glance.

“Yeah, you could say that.” He hesitated before adding, “It was an ouch in other ways. I got addicted to pain pills.” He avoided looking in her eyes. “I almost didn’t graduate that year. I was a mess. A big, stupid mess.”

She didn’t say anything for a long moment, and then looked away. “Vicki got hooked on pain pills, too. I didn’t know, for a long time. And by the time I did, she was in an awful place.”

He closed his eyes at the shared pain. “But she got out okay?”

“I think so.” She darted an uncertain glance at him. “I hope so. But she hasn’t confided in me much lately. She has a good home-health nurse, though, who would tell me if she noticed anything irregular.”

He nodded as they came to a gate that had been left open. There wasn’t a trailhead sign, but he knew from the trail

descriptions they needed to go this way.

“It’s a shame nothing here is marked,” she said. “Nothing much has changed from the last time I hiked here. I don’t remember how we found our way around back then.”

“Maybe you followed some rock cairns?”

“Maybe.”

About a mile later, they came to a canyon that had low bushes and shallow water in a creek bed. Silt swirled around the prints left by their boots. They both reached for their water bottles. Max noticed that she was hardly drinking anything.

“Aren’t you thirsty?” he asked, taking another guzzle.

“I’m good. I just don’t want to have to use the bush, you know?”

“Ah. Gotcha. Still . . .”

“I know, I know.” She turned her gaze the direction of the canyon. “We’re not stopping for long, are we?” She sounded anxious.

“I’m good if you are,” he said, and they kept moving, stopping at points and searching the area. They hiked for hours, stopping to rest or snack until the sun started to dip westward.

“Kat,” Max said, as they filled up their filtered water bottles at a stream. “I think we should head back.”

Kat dropped her water bottle, her face crumpling. “No. Not yet!”

“We don’t want to be caught out here in the dark. It will make our return to post harder.”

Her eyes filled with tears, but she didn't contest his words. She picked up her bottle, filled it up, and took a drink as she looked around slowly.

“Wait a minute,” she said, standing.

“What?”

“Somewhere here,” she said, “there's a cave. Maybe Vicki tried to find shelter in it?” She screwed the top of her water bottle closed and made her way up a ledge.

Max jogged after her. She looked back at him, her face brightening, before moving toward the cave once again.

“Vicki!” she called out. Her shouts echoed off the canyon walls. Within a few minutes, they reached the cave. It had a sandy floor and a low ceiling. Even with Kat being shorter at five four, she had to duck. Max had to fold his six-foot-tall frame.

Kat searched the area in the faint light. To her right, up ahead, and to her left. She gasped.

“I see something!”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

KAT MOVED to the end of the cave, which sloped even shorter than the opening, forcing her to a squatting position.

On the ground was a turquoise water bottle with a cork lid.

“Is that Vicki’s?” Max asked.

Kat swallowed her disappointment. “No, it’s not. At least, I don’t recognize it.”

“So it might be hers, though?” Max crouched beside her.

“She doesn’t like the color turquoise. She once said it’s too cliché.” Kat’s shoulders slumped.

“Well, maybe her taste has changed.”

“I doubt it, but okay.”

“Let’s search in concentric circles outside, shall we?”

Kat blinked. “What’s that?”

“It’s where you start from ground zero, if you will, and then you just keep widening your circle from there.”

“This cave is ground zero?”

“Yes. There’s a sign of life.” He pointed at the water bottle. “It *could* be her.”

She allowed herself a moment of sadness, glancing around the canyon. “I hope that wherever she is, she’ll find shelter for the night.” Biting her bottom lip, she said, “I looked up tonight’s weather. It’s expected to get down to the fifties. There’s an unusual cold front coming.”

“I know.” He nodded. “I checked the weather, too.”

As they emerged from the cave, rain pelted their faces and the wind buffeted them.

“Please don’t tell me we’ll have a flash flood,” she said, her voice rising. “I don’t care about me, but Vicki . . .”

“With any luck, the storm might just blow over.”

Kat didn’t mind the rain, but just then, a crack of lightning zigzagged along the sky. Seconds later, thunder boomed, shaking the ground. Kat covered her ears and cowered.

When it passed, she said, “What is it they say about how many seconds after lighting comes?”

Lightning slashed the sky and thunder reverberated in the gully, this time closer. She gasped and fell to a squatting position.

“Come on,” Max said, motioning for her to go in the cave. They moved quickly until they could go no farther, crouching in the deepening darkness since the cave roof sloped lower. Kat sat uncaring on the dirt and hugged her knees to her chest. Max sat close and turned a flashlight on.

Thunder rolled again, and she stared at him in terror.

“Hey, it’ll be okay.” He took off his pack and helped hers off, too, setting them to the side. “See?” He flashed the light onto the solid walls. “You’re safe.”

Her eyes darted to the mouth of the cave. “Lightning’s always bothered me, since I was a little girl. It was always hard, when I was the only kid, having to sleep alone during a thunder storm. I always got in my parents’ bed with them.”

Outside the cave, a bright flash followed by a loud crash brought her back to her childhood. That fear, that desperation. She turned to shield her face and body from the onslaught.

And fell right into Max’s arms.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“SHH,” Max whispered, as he ran his fingers through her disheveled ponytail. Her body still trembled, especially during the bouts of thunder, but her breathing seemed to have calmed. She pressed her cheek against his chest and kept her eyes shut.

Which was good, or he'd betray his feelings for her. That he was falling for her once again.

Meanwhile, his body felt anything but calm. Holding her so close drove him mad with longing. The gentleman in him was determined to not take advantage of her vulnerable state. He tortured himself further by caressing her hair and pressing his lips on the top of her head while holding her close to him.

She spoke in a whisper. “Once, I heard of a story of a man and boy who got caught in a lightning storm on the mountain and they both got struck and died.”

“That’s terrible.”

“Wasn’t it?”

“Hey, I want to show you something.” He turned the flashlight off, leaving them in darkness. When lightning flashed outside, she flinched.

“Look,” he said, “isn’t it beautiful?”

At first, her body seized up with anxiety. And then she started to relax. “Yes, yes it is.”

“Are you a praying person, Kat?” he asked.

“Not really, why?”

“I was thinking of my grandnonna’s advise when I was growing up. She told me that whenever you felt lost, you should pray.”

“You mean pray for us to find Vicki?”

He nodded.

“I guess what would it hurt, huh?” she said.

“Would you like me to offer it?” he asked.

“Please.” She continued to cling to him and shut her eyes.

Normally, he’d have gotten on his knees, and would have invited her to get on hers. But they were comfortable and the storm still hadn’t abated. He simply bowed his head.

“Dear Lord, thank you so much for blessing me today so I can help Kat find her sister. We ask that You please bless us with better weather. Rain is good, but not today or the next few days, so we can rescue Vicki. I also would like to thank you for bringing Kat into my life. I hope we can continue to deepen our friendship because . . . I care about her very much. Amen.”

He opened his eyes to Kat sniffing.

“Thank you,” she said. “That was beautiful.”

“You are welcome.” He hugged her tighter.

To his amazement, she reached up and touched the side of his face, her fingers gentle, her touch making him shiver with

pleasure. Her mouth, parted with wonder, was just inches from his. All he needed to do was to dip his head . . .

Kat suddenly sat up. “I think it’s stopped raining.”

He leaned to the side. The cave door let late-day sun rays in. He loosened his hold of her and followed her to the entrance.

“Wow,” Kat said.

In the sky, rinsed a clear, blinding blue by the brief rain, was a rainbow.



By the time they returned to Incident Command, it was dark. Kat forced herself to keep walking or she would just sit on the ground and never get up. The freeze-dried meal they’d eaten had long worn off, and she was starving again.

First things first. She was eager to get news of the search. The rest of the team was also trickling in. Kat and Max made their way to the command RV.

Quinlan emerged through the doorway. “Just the person I was looking for.”

“Did they find her?” she asked.

“Sorry, no.”

“Not even a sign of her?”

He shook his head.

Kat felt like crying, but somehow kept control of her emotions. “What will happen next?”

“We’ll plan out a search tomorrow.” The deputy sheriff looked at Max, then her. “Both of you, go get some sleep.”

Kat turned the direction of the trail. A million stars twinkled in the beautiful night sky.

“I know she’s here somewhere,” she told Max. “I can feel it.”

“I believe you.”

“See you tomorrow,” Kat said, her face wan and pale under the rising moon.



Max watched her go, his heart squeezing with what was starting to be a familiar sensation. He cared about this woman and wanted to get closer to her. He took a deep breath. It was one thing to want to be close to her physically, to want to kiss her. Physical attraction seemed manageable. But he wanted an emotional connection. Yes, he would be open to love.

If only she would allow him to love her.

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE NEXT DAY, Kat arrived at the trailhead at seven. Despite getting very little sleep, she was grateful when her bedside alarm clock finally rang. She knocked on Max's RV door and surprised him bare-chested, blinking his eyes against the rising sun.

"Hi," she said, looking everywhere but that sculpted chest. "I'm here."

"I can see that." He smiled. "I'll be out in a minute. Unless you want to come in and—"

"No!" she said. "I'll wait out here."

An hour later, they were on their way, taking a different route than the SAR crew.

Kat glanced up at the canyon walls, beautiful with their red sheen, dulled by the clouds above. The weather was an ominous reminder that time was of the essence. The rest of the area was pure wilderness, without any discernible trail. There were a million and one ways to get around here, and one could exhaust several without getting even close to the right one.

She looked up the sky. Clouds were beginning to gather again. A raindrop pelted her face, trickling down her cheek like a tear.

An overwhelming sense of sadness came over Kat. She took a deep breath to keep herself from crying. She almost turned to Max, but decided against burdening him with her problems.

Minutes turned to hours. The terrain involved a lot of up and down, and Kat could feel the effects on her body, untrained in this kind of exertion. At the law firm, she had led a largely sedentary existence, spending much of her time buried under paperwork or meeting with clients when she wasn't in the courtroom. For weeks now, she had promised herself that she would exercise more. Well, she fulfilled her goal today—all for the wrong reasons, unfortunately.

At mile marker 6.5, they came upon a campsite with picnic tables and drinking water. They stopped, breaking into their packs for snacks. Kat had brought some trail mix, and she broke it out now, eating just a handful before deciding she was too antsy to keep anything down.

A pair of hiking boots entered the periphery of her vision. She looked up from the log she was sitting on. Max was holding out a PowerBar.

“Thank you,” she said, accepting his friendly offering.

He unwrapped one and started eating it, while Kat ate hers.

“I've been meaning to ask you,” she said, “what do most people do, who are on search and rescue?”

“You mean for a living?”

She nodded.

Max thought for a minute. “Let's see. Sam's a doctor. Ron's an embalmer.”

“No kidding!”

“I’m serious.” Max nodded. “Mike’s a former Marine. You know about Diana being an RN, of course. She also used to be a schoolteacher—”

“Really? That surprises me.”

“Why?”

“A schoolteacher sounds so . . . quiet, I guess.”

“They’re some of the fiercest people I know. They take care of those kids like it’s nobody’s business. Plus, have you ever seen a kindergarten teacher take control of her classroom? It’s epic.”

Kat smiled. “I can see that.” She gave him a sideways glance. “You and Diana seem really close.”

Max popped the remainder of his PowerBar into his mouth and chewed. “She was one of the first people on SAR to make me feel welcome. Many didn’t take me seriously, so that was a refreshing change.”

“Because you’re a billionaire’s son?”

“Yes.” He slipped his wrapper in the front pocket of his backpack.

“Sometimes people can be real judgmental.”

Max smiled wryly. “You can say that.”

Kat huffed as she stood and wiped the log bark from her pants. “I can imagine everyone gossiping and being envious of you. Well, of your money.”

“Some people said I had bought my way through training as a firefighter, and as SAR.” He winced. “Which is incredibly stupid because if I’m not willing to train, I could get killed, and get others killed.”

“No kidding.”

Max’s expression lightened. “I have a joke for you.”

“Okay.”

“How do you become a millionaire overnight?”

“I have no idea,” she said.

“Start off a billionaire, then make a bunch of bad investments.”

“Ha ha, very funny.” She slapped his bicep.

Quick as lightning, he caught her wrist in his hand. “Hey, watch it. You break it, you gotta buy it.” He grinned.

She grinned back, her gaze traveling to the said bicep, then to his lips. For one long moment, neither of them moved. Catching a whiff of his musk scent, she felt light-headed. And then she extricated herself from his hand.

“I hope not,” she said. “I doubt I can afford a billionaire.”

“I won’t even charge.”

Heat crept to her cheeks. “What are we even talking about?”

He deadpanned, “You, hitting my arm. Breaking my heart.”

Their gazes collided. She tried to read into his expression. There was that teasing note in this voice, but his expression was trusting. Vulnerable. Telling her something she wasn’t quite ready for.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

A COUPLE OF HOURS LATER, Max adjusted his sunglasses on the bridge of his nose. The sun bore down hot on him, the relentless wind pausing in its onslaught, reminding him this was desert. And a deadly one, at that. In the desert, one could die of a number of things, foremost of which were drowning or dehydration.

Beside him, Kat hiked on without complaint. Since the start of the hike, not once had she stopped for shade, though occasionally she did drink some of her water. He admired her determination.

“Want a rest?” Max said.

She raised her arm to her forehead, slick with sweat. “Maybe a drink,” she conceded. They broke out their water bottles and guzzled a mouthful. She took a deep breath and released it slowly.

“Where are you, Vicki?” she asked.

Max’s eyes followed her glance to the slot canyon below them. The terrain had several trails shooting different directions. A place where someone could easily get confused and turned around.

“Max?”

He looked back at her.

The expression in her eyes had changed from despairing to downright scared. “Do you think she could have . . . committed suicide?”

He gentled his voice. “You have more insight to that than I do.”

“She had been in a good place, lately,” she said. “I find it hard to believe that she’d cave now.”

“We never truly know what’s going on with people, even ones whom we think we know.”

“Why didn’t she confide in me?” She pressed her lips together. “Maybe she needed to, and I was too busy—”

“Kat.”

The single word seemed to pull her out of the dark place. The wildness in her eyes disappeared, and she searched his eyes. “What?”

His hand reached for hers. “You did your best.”

He half-expected her to pull away, but she allowed him to keep hold of her.

She shook her head. “I could certainly have done more.”

“I meant when she needed you. You were there for her.”

“She pushed me away, continually. I think she was wanting her independence.”

Max studied her lovely face. “Is she as independent as you are?”

A ghost of a smile flitted across her lips. “More so.”

“Then she probably won’t give up the fight. She’s counting on you to not give up on her either. Remember the rainbow. It’s God’s promise that from bad, something good could come.”

Her chin trembled as her eyes glistened with tears. “I really, really want to believe you.”

He squeezed her hand, welcomed her answering squeeze, and let her go.

They came upon an area covered with boulders, devoid of a trail. Part of the area sloped to a slot canyon, which couldn’t easily be accessed without ropes.

“How was she with heights?” Max asked Kat.

“She used to climb trees like a monkey,” Kat said. A shadow flitted over her face. “Before the fire.” She surveyed the slot canyon. “I don’t see why she’d go that way. Why would she deviate from the main trail?”

“Curiosity?” Max hazarded a guess. “She wanted to see what it was like? And then she got down there and couldn’t climb out.”

Kat nodded slowly. “Benny said they didn’t realize she wasn’t with them for a long time. She could have gotten so far from the others, they weren’t able to hear her.”

Search as they tried, there were no traces of Vicki. Max crouched and hefted a handful of dirt in his hand. “The ground is damp, so there could have been rain here. I’m surprised there aren’t traces of her footsteps.”

“She could have followed the rock ledges. Easier to navigate.”

Max could sense her deepening despondency. With each minute stretching to ten, and then to a half hour, another hour, and yet another, Kat's determined expression slackened. Vicki seemed to have vanished into thin air.

Max followed Kat as she combed an area they had already gone over earlier. And then she stood stock still, her head whipping back at him. Fear gripped her features.

She appeared to be struggling with her words, fighting to get them out, while battling having to say them out loud. Her voice pitched an octave higher.

“What if someone kidnapped her?” she asked.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

ONCE THE THOUGHT of someone kidnapping Vicki got hold of Kat, she couldn't let it rest.

They returned to Incident Command, Kat in a feverish state of anxiety. She pushed off Max's arm as he tried to restrain her. She ran to the command RV and pounded on the door.

Officer Quinlan opened the door and frowned.

"What if she was kidnapped?" Kat asked.

"Give me a sec, will you?" He came out and made his way to the camp chair. "Sit down." He glanced over at Max, who had followed. "You, too."

Once Kat was seated, Officer Quinlan spoke. "We've already explored that possibility with law enforcement. There were no leads. Benny and his friends had answered questions; you were there. They never saw anyone—"

"But what if I hadn't told you everything?" Kat said.

The commander's eyes narrowed. "You have more information for us?"

"I think so. I hope it's not what I think, but . . . oh, geez." She held her head in her hands.

“Okay, just take a deep breath,” the deputy sheriff said. “And tell me everything.”

“There’s not a lot to tell,” she said. “Over the past several weeks, I defended a woman to retain custody of her child, and her ex threatened me at the court steps. He was jailed for maybe a day.”

The questions flew at her. “What is his name? Description? What city does he live in?”

Kat tried to do her best to answer questions about Gus Allred, even as doubts assailed her. When Miriam had done her research on the ex, he’d had a clean record. The divorce wasn’t amicable, but he’d given no one, not even Kat’s client, any indication that he could turn violent. Be a kidnapper. But then he did issue that threat.

“Why didn’t you tell me this sooner?” Officer Quinlan asked, his eyes narrowed with suspicion. She looked around for some sort of support, but even Max looked at her with questioning eyes.

“I don’t know!” she exploded, affronted that he would even look at her that way. She turned back to Officer Quinlan. “I certainly wasn’t just holding it back from you. I had plenty on my mind. I just wanted to find Vicki right away.”

“But this could have helped us right off. As it is, we may have to bring in other agencies.”

Good, she thought, though the prospect of this search and rescue turning into a crime scene unnerved her.

“Okay,” Officer Quinlan said, finally. “Rest up good. We’ll resume SAR tomorrow.”

“Wait,” Kat said in a panic. “Vicki could be out there with this dangerous man—”

“Perhaps.” Officer Quinlan’s eyes turned even icier. “But our search isn’t equipped for an overnigher. We will need to regroup and plan an alternate course of action . . . especially in light of what you’ve told us.”

“And if I had told you that sooner?”

“Then we wouldn’t be going solo on this search. Law enforcement would be involved.” He moved away as though their conversation was done.

“Hey,” she said, “just wait a minute!”

The deputy sheriff ignored her. Her muscles tensed as she prepared to run after him, to demand that they do one more search . . . something! A hand gripped her arm, stopping her short.

It was Max, his eyes full of sympathy. “Let it go, Kat.”

“No,” she insisted. “I will not let it go! That’s my sister we’re talking about. Or do you want to jeopardize her life, once again?”

He flinched as though she’d slapped him, and she felt smaller than small.

He let her arm go. Hurt spread across his face. “Sorry,” he said. “I thought you knew me better than that.”

Kat’s shoulders slumped. In her moment of weakness, she was ruining relationships left and right. The deputy sheriff was one thing, but Max had started to become her ally. And maybe even more than a friend.

But now, she doubted he wanted them to be *anything*.

Exhaustion seeped in Kat’s bones, but she felt a renewed sense of energy. She would go at this alone if she had to, just as she had taken care of Vicki and herself all these years, since

their parents' passing. She didn't need Max. Kat was a smart woman, and she would use everything in her power to figure out the mystery of her missing sister.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

MAX WAS SO DONE with Kat. She was under a lot of stress, he granted that. But her last cutting words to him were not just rude, but deeply hurtful. He didn't need that from her. He was ready to move on. He resolutely tried to not look her way. When their paths were about to collide, he veered the other way.

Quinlan caught up with him. "You about fed up with her, too, like I am?"

Max could have pretended to not know what he was talking about, but his true feelings rose to the surface. "Yes."

"I know." The deputy sheriff winced. "I'm almost afraid to give her updates. Nothing seems enough for her."

Max relented. Kat didn't need this kind of backbiting, not in her time of need. "Wouldn't you, if you were the family of a missing person, want everything to be done to find them?"

"She doesn't have to be a witch about it." Quinlan sobered, as though he sensed that he couldn't buddy up to Max after all. "I'll admit that I paired you two up to see if I could rattle you. You've done a good job so far." His eyes held grudging admiration.

After reeling from surprise, Max said, "Thanks."

Quinlan glanced over his shoulder. “Anyway, watch her close for me, won’t you? Don’t want her sneaking back to compromise the operation.”

“Also known as the search for her missing sister? Gotcha.”

Quinlan frowned, then left Max alone.

Eventually, Max had calmed down enough that he returned to the canopy where Kat was talking to Ron. Kat flashed Max an uncertain glance, and then looked away. They’d had their differences, but this felt different. Irreparable. Which was sad considering how far they’d come in reestablishing their relationship.

The sun was dipping in the horizon. Ordinarily, a sunset as breathtaking as the one taking place over the desert would have filled him with awe. But tonight, he felt emotionally spent, like he didn’t have much to give. He shouldn’t have let Kat mess with his psyche, but he wondered, not for the first time, what he was doing there. Did he truly belong in SAR, or was she right . . . that he wasn’t competent?

A commotion up ahead broke into his thoughts. The deputy sheriff was fielding a call, and those who stood nearby were standing stock still, listening. Max’s eyes met with Kat’s, and they moved as one closer to the circle that had gathered.

“Where?” Quinlan said. “Got it. Thank you.” He hung up and surveyed the curious crowd. And then he looked straight at Kat.

“Your sister’s wallet and personal belongings have been found.”

Kat didn’t speak for a moment. And when she did, her voice was tinged with fear, almost as if she didn’t want to hear the facts. “Where?”

“At the Burger King in Kayenta.”

She frowned. “Kayenta?”

Quinlan nodded. “From Page, it’s about a two-hour drive. From this trailhead, it’s close to four.”

“Is she okay?”

“I don’t know anything else. The Kayenta police are keeping mum about it. You can head over in the morning to talk to them.”

“Morning!” she exploded. “That’s a long time still.”

Quinlan frowned. “Well, ma’am, we need to rest our crew tonight or we won’t be much use to anyone tomorrow.”

As the crew dispersed, Max saw Kat booking it for her car. His strides were longer than hers. He easily caught up to her at the parking lot.

He grabbed her arm. “Where are you going?”

She glared at him. “To Kayenta, where else?”

“I thought we would go there in the morning.”

“Do you really expect me to stay around here when my sister’s wallet has been found? I want to see if Vicki’s in Kayenta.”

“Kat, you’ve been hiking all day. You aren’t a robot. You need your sleep.”

“I can’t sleep, not with all the questions running through my head.” She looked at his hand that still held on to her arm. “I thought I wasn’t being detained.”

“Fine!” came his gruff reply. “If you choose to go, then let me go with you.”

“Really?” Kat said, hardly able to believe her ears.

He nodded. “Give me a sec. I need to check in with the accountability officer.”

When he returned, she reminded him, “My car is over there.”

He shook his head. “We’re taking my RV.”

“No need,” she protested.

“Yes, we need it. After driving that far and back, it will be pretty late. This way, we can sleep along the way if we need to.”

He rubbed his eyes, and guilt hit Kat. The poor guy looked so exhausted.

She yawned.

Come to think of it, she was exhausted, too. But then the thought of being on Vicki’s trail gave her a second wind. She walked with Max to his RV and got in the passenger seat.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

KAT CLICKED the seat belt mechanically, faintly noticing that the seats were made of leather that still smelled brand new. Max climbed in the driver's side.

All energy had drained from her. So many questions crowded Kat's mind.

What was Vicki doing in Kayenta? Where was she now? How did she lose her belongings? Was she safe? Was she . . . alive?

Kat wished she was just going through a nightmare. That when she woke up it would all just be a bad dream. She shivered and folded her arms across her chest.

"How are you doing?" Max asked, still sounding tense, but not as angry as he was earlier.

"A little shocked, I think. Tired." She studied his profile. "Aren't you tired, too?"

He held up a Dr. Pepper.

"This whole thing feels like a nightmare." Kat watched the darkness descend on the scenery out her window. "Too bad I can't dream it away."

"What do you mean?"

“When I was a little girl,” she said, “I would have nightmares. Bad stuff. Once I even dreamed that I was thrown down a hole in a parking lot and I was just stuck there with all this slime.” She shuddered. “I shouted and shouted, but no one paid attention to me. When I woke up, my heart was racing and I felt sick. I went to my parents’ bedroom and shook Mom awake. I told her about my dream. Just remembering it all over made me want to throw up. Mom hugged me, and I cried until I couldn’t anymore. Then she kissed my hair and said, ‘It’s just a dream. Next time, if you don’t like what’s happening in your dream, just change the ending.’”

She looked over at Max, whose eyebrows were raised. “I know, right? Simple. I was like, ‘Just change the ending.’” Smiling, she blew out her breath. “It didn’t always work.”

“But it did sometimes?”

Kat nodded. “Except I wasn’t sure if I got what I wanted anyway. I would wake up and couldn’t remember half of what I dreamed.”

“I hope you can change this dream’s ending.”

“Thanks.” She cast a quick glance at his profile. “Why are you still being nice to me after my rudeness?”

“I keep asking myself that.”

“And?”

“Life’s handed you a bad hand, and friends don’t abandon friends when they’re down.”

“Are we friends, then?”

He didn’t answer right away. “I hope we can be.”

“Well, thank you.”

“For being your friend?”

She nodded. “It’s nice to not be alone.”

“I hear you.”

Kat heard the loneliness in his voice. The pang. She thought of him growing up in a boarding school away from family. “Did you ever think you’d be a billionaire’s son? Let alone a billionaire?”

“When I was in grade school, I used to dream of making millions,” he said. “Honest truth.”

“You exceeded your dreams.”

He shrugged. “I didn’t earn it, though. I inherited it—big difference.”

“Good point. I bet it’s fun having all that money.”

“You wanna know what it’s like being a billionaire? You realize there’s only so many suits you can buy before you’re like, ‘What’s the point?’” He turned pensive. “I’ve been thinking about doing something more with my inheritance.”

“I’ll gladly take it off your hands,” she teased.

He chuckled, and then turned serious. “I want to start a foundation. Like a ropes-course program for disadvantaged youth. Out on the lake. In the houseboat.”

“Wow, that’s a cool idea. Especially if you’re up for the challenge of corralling a bunch of teens.”

“It won’t be a free for all. I’ll need a good staff, of course.”

“Bouncers and such.”

“You’re making fun of me,” he accused.

“Sorry.” She turned repentant. “How exactly does a kid learn about life, though, on a luxury houseboat?”

“It could be the payoff to a week of hard work. We could start out camping and exercising survival skills on shore, and then, if they earn it, we would finish on the houseboat.”

“Carrot on a stick. Brilliant.”

“I’ll need a lawyer on staff.”

She froze and looked over at him. His gaze was directed at her, before he moved it back to the road. “I imagine you would,” she said.

“Kat, would you consider being my legal counsel?”

As they got closer to their destination, she imagined herself as a lawyer to Mr. Max Steel, watching him and his gorgeous trophy wife with their 2.2 kids, waving goodbye to their teen campers as they boarded their private jet.

He was asking her to be his lawyer, after all. Big difference than, say, his girlfriend.

Why he wouldn’t want to be romantically involved with her was obvious. She’d shown him her warts and all. Why would he want a toad for a girlfriend?

Her traitorous mind went back to that night when they kissed. She turned to the window and massaged her nape. Was it just her, or was it getting hot in the truck?

“Are you getting warm?”

She looked over at him, his finger hovering over the AC controls. “I’m good,” she said. Holy cow, did her voice have to break like some lovesick teenager?

“So?” he asked. “Legal counsel?”

“I would have to think about it.”

“Please do,” he said in a rush.

“Okay.”

He was looking at her curiously, and she turned her gaze back to the road, where the headlights’ arc showed an exit sign with the word “Kayenta” on it. Population 5,634.

Finally.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

MAX DIDN'T REALIZE how famished he was until the greasy smell of those Burger King Whoppers filled his nostrils. It was almost closing time, and he wanted one of those suckers real bad.

“Want to grab a bite to eat?” he asked Kat, who was already making a beeline to the counter.

“Later, maybe,” she said, distracted.

Max sized up the situation. Kat obviously wanted to talk to the employees right away, and he couldn't blame her. But Max wasn't needed so much in that conversation, and he was starving. He made his way to the ordering line.

He'd been to this Burger King before. It was cool how they had put up a Navajo Talkers museum, with displays from when the Navajo helped the United States Army by encoding communications in their language so the enemies couldn't decipher it. All around the restaurant were panels showing the history, and displays of ammo and weapons under glass.

“Two Whopper meals, please,” Max told the employee. As he paid for it, he looked over at Kat, where she stood talking to an obviously clueless teenage hamburger flipper. She was turned away from Max, so he couldn't watch her expression, but her gestures were animated, her voice rising.

He waited for his order while keeping tabs on Kat. When the Whopper meals came, he fished out one and started unwrapping it. He took a quick bite into the greasy and warm burger, juices dripping the side of his mouth, feeling like a kid again.

When he was young, his dad got into this Burger King kick, where he'd order Whoppers for lunch. After school, a young Max raided the fridge for cold burgers, zapping them for thirty seconds in the microwave, and then devouring them in two minutes flat.

Max didn't think he ought to intrude on the conversation, so he planted himself a couple of tables away and sat down to wait. The little group started to disperse, with Kat turning around and approaching him.

"They don't have the wallet here. They found it in the parking lot and the police have it. But the employee described it, and it matches Vicki's wallet. I guess a guy who frequents this place chucked it between cars. The employee was on smoke break and he saw him."

She looked at the burger in Max's hands, and his mouth, where he probably still had juices running. And then her expression turned bleak, distracted.

"Have a Whopper," Max said, sliding the other sandwich and container of fries onto the paper on the tray.

"But I don't need to eat your food," she said, sliding into the bench and staring at the wrapper.

"Go on, it's for you."

"That's really sweet of you," she said, a wan smile appearing on her face.

"Of course."

She started to unwrap it, took a bite, then set down the burger. "I'm too nervous to eat," she explained.

"What happens next?" he prompted.

"The kid actually remembered the name of the police officer on the case. Let me call him."

She made the call and stood to take it privately in a quiet corner of the restaurant. Except for a couple of occupied tables, they were the only ones there. When Kat returned, her eyes burned with anger.

"The police told the employee they won't search for her for twenty-four hours! They asked me if I knew if she had a credit card, and I told them I didn't know. My guess is, she did." She paused. "They agreed to question my client's disgruntled ex. They'll call me in the morning."

She twisted a napkin in her hand. "They're assuming that she left the trail and was planning to run away. So they've called off the search for now."

The burger was getting cold in the wrapper. She looked at it and took a bite.

"Did they find other stuff, like her cell phone?" Max asked.

Her face fell. "No. That's the thing. Why would she come here with just her wallet, and why would it be in the parking lot? Vicki's a lot of things, but not she's not careless that way."

Max nodded. "That is odd."

They were silent for a few minutes while Max finished his last bite of his burger. Kat made a little dent on her meal.

"This really hits the spot, by the way." She lifted her soda cup. "And I like root beer. How'd you guess?"

He smiled. "It seemed like a safe bet."

Her face blanched. "Don't look now, but there's a fellow a few seats away who's giving me the creeps."

"Behind me?" Max asked. When she nodded and lowered her eyes to her burger, he slowly and subtly turned. A man sitting a couple of tables away kept glancing at Kat.

Max balled his burger wrapper in his hand and tossed it onto their shared tray. "Do you know him?"

"No." She glanced around at the relatively empty restaurant. "Should we go?"

"Sure." Max noticed she hadn't finished her burger.

"Want the rest of it?" she asked.

"Yes, please," he said, smiling sheepishly. He polished the remainder quickly and cleared their dinner mess into the trash can. He followed her out the door of the restaurant and into the still-warm night air. Max went on alert when he heard footsteps behind them. The guy from the restaurant must have followed them out, and sure enough, it was him. Max swung around and raised his fists.

"What do you want?" he asked. He sensed Kat moving to stand behind him.

"I need to talk to the lady," he said, his eyes shifting around. The man was of medium height and thin, with an emaciated face and deep grooves on his forehead.

Kat touched Max's arm and stayed behind him. "Why?" she asked.

"You're her sister, aren't you?" the man asked, his eyes wild. "The girl whose wallet they had?"

Fear laced through her reply. “Yes.”

“I know where she is.”

“You do?” Kat stepped around Max. Max touched her arm and gave her a look of warning.

He nodded. “She was at Danger Bridge Canyon. I . . . I stole her wallet.”

Kat gasped. “What?”

His eyes shifted around. “I was just hiking through, I swear, and found her wallet. I looked around and didn’t see anyone, so I took it. It had some money and credit cards. I tossed the cards on the trail and used the cash.” He paused. “I didn’t want trouble, honest.”

Max turned to Kat. “We should tell the police.”

The guy held up his hands. “No police. I just wanted you to know, so you’re not chasing your tail around here.”

“What’s your name?” Kat called out, but the guy was already running to this beat-up sedan and peeling rubber off his tire.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

KAT CLOSED her mouth and held her head in her hands. “Did I just let that thief get away?”

“What, you wanted to tackle him or something?”

Kat blinked. “He stole my sister’s cash and threw away her credit cards!” She turned to Max, feeling energized. “She’s still there somewhere. We need to go. We need to—”

“Call the police.”

Kat slumped and let Max make the call. They waited about fifteen minutes, with Kat pacing up and down, until a police car pulled up.

“Hello, officer,” Kat greeted a guy with a stocky build, “nice to see you in person.” When he nodded, she explained, “I just got told by a stranger that he had stolen my sister’s wallet, and that she’s still out there on the trail.”

The officer blinked and took out a notepad. “What was his name?”

“I don’t know. He didn’t want to say. I guess he didn’t want to get in trouble.”

“Description?”

“White, tall, thin, longish hair to below the ears. Sunken cheeks. Middle aged.”

“What vehicle was he driving?”

Kat looked over at Max, then back at the officer. “It was dark. I’m not sure, but I think it was black . . .”

“A Pontiac LeSabre,” Max offered.

“Yes, that.”

The officer closed his notepad. “I will let our police chief know.”

“And then what?”

“Just stay close to your phone, ma’am, and we’ll call you when we have more information.”

When he left, Kat fumed. “They’re going to wait to ‘clear the deck,’ whatever that means, and then it will be all too late by then!”

“What do you want them to do?”

“I want them to do the search *now*. I know she’s out there, and time is running out.”

“With your client’s disgruntled ex?”

“Yes!”

Max grabbed her arm. “Let’s get you some sleep.”

“No!” She yanked it away from him.

They stood there staring at each other, and then she broke down into tears. He watched her weep for a few minutes, until the crying subsided and only her sobbing punctuated the night sounds. She raised her eyes to his, and she could see that lurking in her defiance was a plea for help.

He opened his arms and she walked into them, until he held her close, his hand smoothing down her hair, his lips kissing her temple.

“In the morning,” he promised, “it will be all better. You’ll see.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

TWO DAYS Later

Max woke up disoriented, blinking at the strange sight above him. There was a little square opening in the roof.

And then he remembered. He was in his trailer, parked at the Danger Bridge Canyon trailhead. He had slept on the pull-out bed in the kitchen, while Kat had slept in the bedroom. He sat up and stretched, then looked around. Prying the blinds apart with his fingers, he saw that the sky was lightening outside.

It was another day, with the prospect of finding Vicki alive bleaker and bleaker. Kat had spent all of yesterday talking to the police department.

“They said he has a solid alibi,” she said of her client’s ex. “He was at work, and security cameras show that he never left during his day shift.”

Like the night before, Max offered for her to sleep in the RV—so she could launch a search in the morning—and she reluctantly agreed. The day’s disappointments had taken a lot out of her, and she could hardly keep her eyes open to make it to bed.

Max got up and dismantled his bed, turning it back into a dining area.

“What time is it?” Kat’s voice reached him.

He looked to his left down the hall, where Kat was awake and sitting up on the bed, her hair topsy-turvy, flowing around her shoulders. She wore a plain, baggy T-shirt over bare legs. He swallowed with difficulty.

“Sunrise.” He searched for a clock and found one over the kitchen. He walked over to the open doorway to deliver the time. “Six thirty.”

Her eyes fell to his chest, and then he remembered he had slept without his shirt on. Her eyes skittered away, to a wall that seemed interesting to her at the moment.

“Did you sleep good?” he asked, unable to move away. Unwilling to cut short the conversation.

“Yes,” she said, her eyes flicking back at his torso and away. “And you?”

“Yeah.”

“Thanks again for letting me sleep here.”

“You’re welcome. Any nightmares?”

Her eyes met his. “Yes. I had to change at least two endings.”

“That’s good, I guess?”

She nodded.

“I’m going to change,” she announced. Her mouth lifted on one side. “You should, too.”

As she closed the door, he said, under his breath, “Yes, ma’am.”

She came out of the bedroom with damp tendrils around her face, dressed for the day. Max had prepared a hot breakfast of sunny-side-up eggs and bacon. He slipped a serving on a plate and set it on the table. “I should have asked you how you like your eggs.”

“That looks great. I thought you don’t cook.”

“Hunter’s rubbing off on me.”

“You wouldn’t happen to have chocolate mix?”

He found a tin in the cupboard above the sink and she made herself a cup. She gobbled breakfast up fast, then sipped her hot chocolate slowly.

“This was so good, thank you,” she said. “Calms my nerves.”

“Don’t mention it.”

“Have you seen anyone out here yet?” she asked.

“I haven’t been out.”

As she helped clear breakfast, he reminded her to leave the pans. “We can clean them later. So we can get going sooner.”

Her eyes filled with gratitude. “Thanks.”

“Now, before we go, I have something for you.”

She waited as he went down the hall to a closet and pulled out one of two bags he had stashed the night before. “It’s a search pack. It’s not official, but it’s close.” He handed it to her and she opened it up.

“Supplies to last twenty-four hours, food, gear for ropes, carabiners.”

“Wow. When did you put this together?”

“I have extra stuff at the house. I slipped out late last night, after you’d gone to bed.”

“Thank you.” Her expression was soft. Giving Max hope.

His voice turned gruff. “I didn’t want to have to share my granola bar.”

“That’s it.”

Max bit his lip. “I also asked our station captain for another day. He couldn’t grant me any more leave days past today.”

“You’ve been very kind, Max.”

“Happy to help someone I care about.”

Their eyes collided and she blushed. The moment was interrupted by sounds of vehicles driving into the parking lot. They each grabbed their pack and opened the RV door.

Outside the command RV, Quinlan was issuing instructions.

“I need to ask him a question,” Kat said. As they came out of the RV together, all eyes were on them. Diana had a smile on her face. Speculating.

The question was, what exactly were they to each other?

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

KAT WAITED for the deputy sheriff to finish his briefing before descending upon him. “Officer Quinlan, may I talk to you for a minute?”

He didn’t look particularly eager to talk to her, but nodded. “What’s up?”

“We need to find my sister. Today.”

Officer Quinlan stared at her. “We are doing our best to do so.”

“It’s not enough. She’s been lost for four days. And the weather today is predicted to be the wettest of the week.”

“You’re right,” he said, coughing politely. “After today, we wouldn’t be able to mobilize again.”

“You mean you’re going to stop?”

“You said yourself—”

“Then we definitely, positively, and certainly must find her today.”

He sighed. “We’ll send out our team—”

“We need a helicopter,” she interjected.

He avoided her gaze. “I already checked yesterday, like you asked. None of the state helicopters are available due to

that big fire west of us.”

Kat’s hopes popped like a bubble.

“Perhaps I can help.”

From behind her, Max came up and stood beside Kat.

Officer Quinlan raised an eyebrow. “And how exactly can you help?”

“I can fly *my* helicopter.”

Kat’s jaw dropped. “Of course you would have one!”

He nodded, looking at Officer Quinlan. “I’ll donate the use and fuel. SAR wouldn’t have to pay a single dime.”

She protested, “Oh, but you couldn’t—”

“Please,” Max insisted, “let me.”

“I haven’t said yes to this, Steel.” Officer Quinlan watched the two with distaste. “I doubt the sheriff will say yes to this. We’d have to assume the liability.”

“I will sign whatever waiver I need to,” Max said. “I can ask the sheriff if you’d like.”

“No need.” Officer Quinlan’s expression was smug. He punched a number from his directory and stood up. “Good morning, Sheriff.”

Kat strained to eavesdrop, but he had lowered his voice and had walked away. Kat glanced at Max. “I honestly don’t know how to thank you,” she said.

“It’s to make up for . . . a lot of things.”

“No need.”

He stared at her. “Am I forgiven?”

“You know how you encouraged me to pray? I’ve asked God to help me forgive you, and I think I am on my way there.” She reached over and squeezed his hand. He squeezed her hand back.

The deputy sheriff returned, his face as dark as the clouds forming overhead. “As long as you sign the waiver, Steel, you can use the helicopter.”

“Why did he say yes?” Kat asked in surprise.

Officer Quinlan’s mouth twisted. “It’s an election year.”



The team on the ground went ahead with their search. Max drove Kat in his RV to one of his houses on the outskirts of town. It had its own helipad.

Max helped her climb in the helicopter, and she was dazzled at the newness of the experience. She marveled that the controls on the dashboard were simpler than she expected, and how the huge windows made the interior so bright. She put her seat harness on and put on a pair of headphones that cut down the noise.

The helicopter rose, leaving Kat’s stomach on the ground. Or so she felt it. With a little dash of panic, she mimed what would happen to her. His eyes grew wide and he reached for something next to him.

Sure enough, as soon as he handed her a barf bag, she emptied the contents of her breakfast into it.

“Sorry,” she said, embarrassed as could be.

He simply smiled.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

KAT GLANCED over at Max and admired his skill. Flying in a helicopter was like going up in a Ferris wheel—an experience that always petrified her.

But then she thought of Vicki.

You can do this, Kat told herself.

She closed her eyes until another wave of nausea passed. Her fingers ached from holding on to the arms so tight. She felt a warm hand covering hers and opened her eyes to Max's.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Of course I'm not okay,” she retorted. “Does it look like I am?”

He just smiled, making her pulse race despite her airsickness.

If only he hadn't paraded around her earlier that morning without his shirt on. Did he know what he was doing to her? The feel of his hand on hers distracted her from the sensation of flight. He squeezed her hand one more time and then let go, leaning back into his seat.

The threat of motion sickness aside, riding a helicopter was exhilarating. She had enjoyed hiking the area at other times, but seeing Lake Powell's surroundings from such a

vantage point was a revelation. This was one of the few pristine areas of the region, and Kat was glad that someone fought to keep it this way into modern times.

In the far distance, Kat could make out the miles and miles of lake intersecting dozens of canyons. Somewhere there was Max's houseboat, the one that would house his youth program.

Max spoke into the mouthpiece, breaking into her thoughts. "Keep your eyes peeled. Rack your memories, Kat, about any areas that Vicki might seek shelter at."

"Okay," she said.

The helicopter dipped and seemed to be in free fall, making her stomach flip.

Oh my, oh my, oh my . . .

The words flitted through her head.

When the helicopter veered off once again, Kat edited her metaphor. This was much, much worse than a Ferris wheel ride. Still, she forced herself to keep her eyes open and watch down below for any sign of her sister.

Where are you, Vicki? Show me a sign, please!

The advantage with the desert terrain was the vegetation was practically nonexistent. Except for some stunted pines, most of the growth consisted of smaller tamarisk bushes. The landscape was a clear canvas, as far as Vicki was concerned—

Canvas!

Kat sat up, thinking back to their last hike through the area. Kat thought she knew everything back then, and lectured Vicki on what to do were they to be separated. Go to a source of water and find red sand. Then climb to a high point and paint the letters H-E-L-P. Vicki had scoffed then at her suggestion,

especially when they emerged from the hike together and unscathed.

“Max,” Kat said. “We need to make our way closer to the water.”

He raised an eyebrow. “That’s *away* from the trailhead.”

“I think she’ll try to make her way there . . . and use the wet sand to leave a message on the rocks.”

He stared at her for a minute, and then nodded. “We’ll need to get in and out quick.” He gestured to the sky, where dark clouds clustered, and the splotches of rain on the windows.

She mouthed, “Good idea.”

The helicopter made a U-turn and traversed the trail that led to the lake. Soon, the bridge that the place was named after, Danger Bridge, was in sight. The helicopter circled the bridge, then dipped to get closer to the shore, where the blue gray of the waters contrasted dramatically against the red rock.

“Try the area to the right of the bridge,” Kat suggested. They veered off to that spot, but came up empty-handed once again. Kat’s hope had started slipping when Max spoke.

“Look left,” he said.

And there, in red letters on bleached rock, were the letters H-E-L-P, quickly getting washed away by the pouring rain.

CHAPTER THIRTY

AS SOON AS the helicopter landed, Max snapped out of his harness and jumped out onto the ground. He went to the other side and helped Kat out.

By now, the rain had turned into a downpour. Max put his SAR helmet on and looked back at Kat. She was gingerly making her way across the rock that had gotten slick with the rain.

They called out Vicki's name like a chant, even as the wind seemed to fling it back with glee at them. But they were more stubborn than nature, and shouted it on repeat until it sounded like an echo.

For several minutes, nothing happened. No answering shouts. No signs. No Vicki.

Only the wind continued to howl, the rain continued to pour. Over the next hour that felt like an eternity, they worked in concentric circles, widening their search, pivoting, and then moving on to the next area.

"She should just be around here," Kat said. "You saw it yourself, she had left a message."

"I did."

“Then where is she?” Kat’s voice ended in a sharp keening note.

Max had no answer for her. His heart squeezed with sympathy as Kat appeared to fight back tears. She took a deep breath and smiled grimly. “Let’s keep going.”

This time, they followed a ridge and shouted. Kat’s voice was turning hoarse.

Suddenly, through that wind and rain, there was an answering cry. Kat and Max looked at each other and scrambled to the edge of a thirty-foot-tall cliff.

From the bottom of the narrow slot canyon, Vicki waved her arms weakly.

“Vicki!”

“Kat!”

“Can you stand and climb where we are?”

Vicki shook her head. “My legs are toast.”

“I can get her,” Max said.

Kat nodded, imprinting Vicki’s image in her mind. *She’s alive!*

Further inland, the rains pummeled the canyons. The clouds would soon converge over this area.

“We’ll need to hurry,” Max said. He surveyed the loose rock on the canyon wall. “I’ll have to rappel down and haul her up.”

Fear crossed Kat’s face, and she gripped his arm. “Max. If you get to her, please don’t hesitate.”

“Don’t hesitate?”

“To save her.”

“At any cost?”

She nodded. “Be careful, but do what you need to do.” Her hand found his and squeezed it. “I understand now what you had to do before.”

Relief flared in his eyes. He pressed a quick and fierce kiss against her lips. As he pulled back, he caressed her cheek. “I’ll take good care of her.”

Kat captured his hand in hers and kissed his palm.

He opened his pack, and within minutes, he had rigged rope onto a large boulder, lowering it along the rock wall. The descent was tricky, as there was hardly any place for Max for footholds. He lowered himself carefully but steadily, knowing that time wasn’t on their side.

The clouds got angrier by the minute. Strong winds pummeled him.

Minutes ticked by. Sweat pooled in his shirt and on his bare arms, where the loose rock scuffed them a gray mud. Just six feet from the bottom of the draw, he could no longer feel rock under his boots. There was an overhang instead. He tipped his legs up and hung horizontally, then lowered himself by the rope.

His boots thudded as they clapped the ground, and he crouched into a squat before springing up again and whirling around. He crossed the draw and came up to Vicki, whose eyes lit up with a flicker of recognition.

“Do I know you?” she asked.

“I’m Max Steel. The firefighter who helped you out of your burning house.”

“I thought you looked familiar.” She gave him a curious glance.

Max marveled at her seeming change of heart, but there wasn't time to talk about the past. It would have to wait. “Can you stand?”

“I can probably muster that much,” she said, but as she did so, her leg seemed to buckle. “I think I broke something when I landed in this slot.”

“I'll help you to get up there. Here, put your arm around my shoulder.” Supporting her weight, they limped together to a wall of broken rock.

“Max!” came a warning cry.

He turned to where Kat was pointing. Up ahead, away from the lake, whitewater was rushing right up to where he and Vicki stood.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

THIS ISN'T HAPPENING, Kat said to herself. I will wake up and this will just be a nightmare. I can change the ending.

But it wasn't a nightmare. This was reality. The waters were rushing down the canyon, right where her sister and Max were huddled together. She could only watch helplessly while Max scooped Vicki in his arms and ran with her as though she weighed nothing. His powerful strides brought them close to the rock wall.

"Put your arms around my neck," Max ordered, and Vicki did so from behind. Max gripped the rope and started hauling up it, bringing Vicki along. He climbed steadily, hand over hand.

Just as the waters rushed around the bend, pummeling everything out of the way.

The sandy bottom, the loose rock, the tamarisk starts . . . and Max and Vicki. In the midst of the swirling whitecaps, Kat was sure she had lost them. She couldn't see what was going on for several minutes. Just Max barely clinging to the rope.

"Vicki!" Kat screamed.

Kat couldn't see her, not from that angle. It seemed like the water pushed her downward and into the rocks. If she wasn't

washed away, she would certainly smash up against the wall.

Kat looked at the rope, trying to see what she could do, when she saw a pair of hands grabbing it. The hands scaled up and up until Max's dear face appeared. He swung his head back to catch a breath out of the water.

"Where's Vicki?" Kat called out, frantic.

Vicki's head bobbed out, just barely, sputtering and crying. Spitting out water as the force of the current slammed against her.

"Hold on, Vicki!" Kat shouted.

Max and Vicki didn't move for several seconds, both of them trying to keep their heads above water. The rope on the boulder seemed to creak and shift.

If it were to fall on them . . .

Kat, remembering, kept a prayer running in her mind and heart. "Please, God, save them!"

"I have another rope in my pack," Max shouted. "Grab it and secure it to a good rock."

Over the past two days, Kat had watched the SAR crew practice knots, and her unplanned training came in handy now. She didn't know which knot this was, just that it held around the rock.

Kat lowered the end into Max's grip.

Just as the boulder that had held the other rope shifted and tumbled down as though in slow motion.

"No!" Kat shouted as she willed Max and Vicki to move out of the boulder's way. It hurtled unfettered toward the two people she cared most about in the world.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

MAX BRACED himself for the impact.

But it didn't come.

As though deflected by an unseen hand, the rock bounced against another boulder and catapulted off, each time shaking loose rock over Max and Vicki. They were hunkered down, their faces close to the wall, while the rock bounced once more before springing away from the wall. It made a stupendous splash as it hit the water. The sound was deafening, making Max limp with relief.

The roar of the water resumed, and Max's body shook in delayed reaction. His arms were exhausted, trying to fight the current against his body. He wished he had worn gloves, but there hadn't been time to put them on. He reached up, only for his hand to slip on the rope.

"You've got this," Kat said, her beautiful face a beacon above them. "Come on, come on!"

Max drew strength from Kat. He took a deep breath and kept going, each movement excruciatingly slow. Handhold by handhold, he moved up the rope, closer and closer to safety. The rushing waters below him only gave out spray, no longer hitting his water-logged pants and boots, making it easier for him to climb the rest of the rope. As they reached the top, Kat

grabbed Vicki and helped her onto the ledge, where the sisters hugged. And then Kat gripped Max's arm.

Max pulled himself up to where the others sat on the ground. After he caught his breath, he unloaded the stretcher for when they could load Vicki. He checked Vicki's vitals. She was dehydrated and had a broken leg, but otherwise was okay. He wasn't sure of the extent of her spinal injuries, but Vicki reassured him that she was hurting.

"Which means my spine is working just fine," Vicki said with a grin.

"All thanks to you," Kat told Max, kissing his cheek.

"You're no longer mad at me?" Max asked in wonder.

"I've had plenty of time to think my life over," Kat said. "I promised the Lord that if we were given another chance, I wouldn't let bitterness get the best of me."

"Funny," Vicki piped up. "I've been thinking of the same thing. How much I've let doubt and discouragement get the best of me the past few years." She paused. "Oh, and also, as cute as Benny is, I can't stand the guy."

They laughed.

Vicki beamed. "Are you proud of me, Kat? I guess I was actually paying attention when you tried to teach me about how to get to safety in the canyons. Also, I'm so sick of peanut butter sandwiches! Thank goodness for them, though, as they're what kept me alive. I ate my last one yesterday, so rescuing me with your hunky boyfriend was good timing."

"He's not my boyfriend," Kat protested.

"Oh? Then why does he look like he wants to kiss you?"

Kat dismissed Vicki's observation with a wave. "I'm sure he doesn't want to do any such thing."

"I'm sure he does," Max countered.

Kat leaned in for a hug and whispered, "Later."

Max leaned his forehead against hers and held her close for one brief, heartfelt moment.

As they loaded Vicki in the helicopter, she asked Kat, "When did you and him happen?"

The couple looked at each other, then turned to Vicki.

"While you were missing," Kat said with a smile.

EPILOGUE

ONE YEAR Later

The houseboat cruised the canyon smoothly, against the backdrop of a sky streaked with sunset colors. Despite its bulk, the Moonflower moved easily, with Max gliding it around each bend. Minutes later, they reached a lake finger.

Max had deliberately chosen a less popular canyon in the hopes that they would have it all to themselves, and he had lucked out. The beaches were still empty, and they could have their pick of camp. He continued navigating the houseboat until they reached the end of the narrow canyon, where a sandy camp sheltered by a rock wall awaited them.

Outside the helm, on the balcony, Kat stood, clad in a cute yellow swimsuit and hip wrap, highlighting her delicious tan. She turned with a grin, and Max's heart skipped a beat as it often did nowadays. He couldn't believe his luck, that this wonderful woman, his best friend, loved him.

Over the past years, Max had learned the art of anchoring the houseboat all by himself, but with Kat's help, as they did of late, they would made short work of it. He pulled up to

shore and made his way from the helm to the gangplank, where Kat ran with excitement to the sand.

“Ahh,” she said, gasping with pleasure as she let her feet sink in.

Which of course made it to where Max had to walk up to her and claim a kiss before anything else. She kissed him back eagerly, and they were lost in their embrace for a long while until a bat swooped low overhead, reminding them that night would come soon. They chuckled, each of them picking up a shovel and going to work.

They only needed to do a little more, digging three holes on either side left by previous houseboaters. Once they dug the optimum depth, they dropped the anchors in and covered each one up with sand, tamping it securely.

As though on cue, the solar lights Kat had strung along the rails lit up.

“Like magic,” she said.

“Speaking of which, I want to show you something.”

“What is it?”

“It’s a surprise.”

He led her like a trusting child up the flight of stairs, from the first to the second to the third floor. As he escorted her through that floor’s cabin, he thought of the past year, where their relationship had progressed from friendship to love, bringing him more happiness than he could ever imagine.

Three months ago, when he officially formed his foundation, Kat agreed to be his legal advisor, with the caveat that she could continue to take on court cases as she was

inspired to do so. He was more than happy to support her in her career.

After Vicki's broken leg healed, she started training again. Her renewed activity did her emotional health a world of good, which she wrote about in her newest bestseller.

Max led Kat onto the balcony, where discreet staff had set up place settings for a romantic dinner.

"Close your eyes," he instructed Kat.

She closed her eyes. He led her to a chair and she sat primly, crossing her legs. He made her wait a few seconds while he lit the candles. "Okay, you can open them now."

Her eyes took in the romantic scene, which also included a vase of roses he had gotten from shore before their outing. "Beautiful," she breathed out.

"Only beautiful things for my beautiful girl."

"You spoil me," she said, sighing happily.

"You deserve every bit of it." He paused. "I have one more gift for you."

She watched him intently, her heart in her eyes. Taking a deep breath, he knelt on one knee and pulled a box out of his pocket. Her eyes widened as he opened it, revealing a diamond solitaire ring.

"Max," she whispered, joy written on her face.

He grasped her hands in his and looked into her eyes.

"I love you, Kat," Max said. "I've loved you ever since that first time you got on this houseboat. I know we had a rocky start, but it's made our love even sweeter."

Her eyes glistened with tears.

“I’m sorry that Vicki lost her way in the canyon,” Max said, “but I’m glad I could be there for you. You tried so hard to push me away—”

“That’s because you’re bossy!”

“Oh, so I’m the one who’s bossy?”

She laughed, that melodious trill a pleasure to his ears. Then she sobered. “And sweet. Supportive. Loving. My soul mate.” Her voice quavered. “Heaven-sent from God above.”

“I could say the same exact thing of you.” He kissed the back of one of her hands, and then the other. “My darling, will you make me the happiest man on earth and marry me?”

She looked from him to the ring and back. “Yes. Yes!” she said.

Max slid the ring on her finger, and Kat held it up, the solar lights twinkling on its many facets, before she threw her arms around his neck for a tight hug. The moon started to rise from behind the canyon, casting light and her blessings upon the lake and its occupants.

Kat and Max kissed, sealing their promises.

The End

Dear Reader, thanks so much for going on this emotional journey with me, and Max and Kat. What did you think of Lake Powell Fire’s newest probie? Btw, Max’s character surprised me by showing up in the last series installment. A billionaire, of all people. Which made it doubly fun.

If you enjoyed *His to Find*, I would appreciate your taking a minute to leave an honest review online. Thank you! And if

you would like to check out the next book in this series, check out Coleman and Jess's marriage of convenience romance, [*His to Shelter*](#), on Amazon.