

BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**WYNTER DANIELS**

# Must Love Cats



**Cat's Paw Cove**

Dear Reader,

Cat's Paw Cove is a magical town dreamed up by Wynter Daniels and Catherine Kean, a charming seaside paradise where cats are king, and anything is possible. We are so excited to bring you not only our own stories but also contributions from an incredibly talented group of Guest Authors. With paranormal and mystery romance, time travel, and more, there's something for everyone.

We hope you'll enjoy reading the series as much as we enjoy writing it. For more information about the Cat's Paw Cove series, please visit <http://CatsPawCoveRomance.com>.

Happy reading!

Wynter Daniels & Catherine Kean

# Must Love Cats

Welcome to Cat's Paw Cove, Florida—an enchanting seaside town and favorite tourist destination. But there's something unusual about the locals, both human and feline. The popular Shipwreck Museum might just take you back in time, and the historic Sherwood House holds secrets, old and new.

Adopt a *furever* friend at the Cove Cat Café, treat yourself to a psychic reading at Eye of Newt metaphysical shop, pick up a special trinket from Black Cat Antiquities. And don't be surprised if you find your heart in the magic of Cat's Paw Cove.

Mayor Laura Lancaster never wanted to be a single mom, but that was preferable to staying married to a swindler, and a man who hated her cats. Between a demanding job, raising her infant son, Jet, and caring for her four kitties, there's no room in Laura's life for a man. Well, except for jousting with the sheriff at work, which she enjoys way more than she should.

Sheriff RJ Higgins rarely sees eye to eye with the town's attractive mayor, even though he's spent the last dozen years carrying a torch for her. But after losing his pregnant fiancé, he has no desire for love or a kid.

Laura is Cat's Paw Cove's most powerful citizen, but when someone abducts Jet, she feels completely helpless. The fact that Jet has magical powers might put her precious baby in even more peril.

RJ is desperate to find the boy and return him to his terrified mother. Despite their differences at work, RJ and Laura must put their faith in each other to rescue a child and maybe find unexpected love in the process.

# **MUST LOVE CATS**

A Cat's Paw Cove Story

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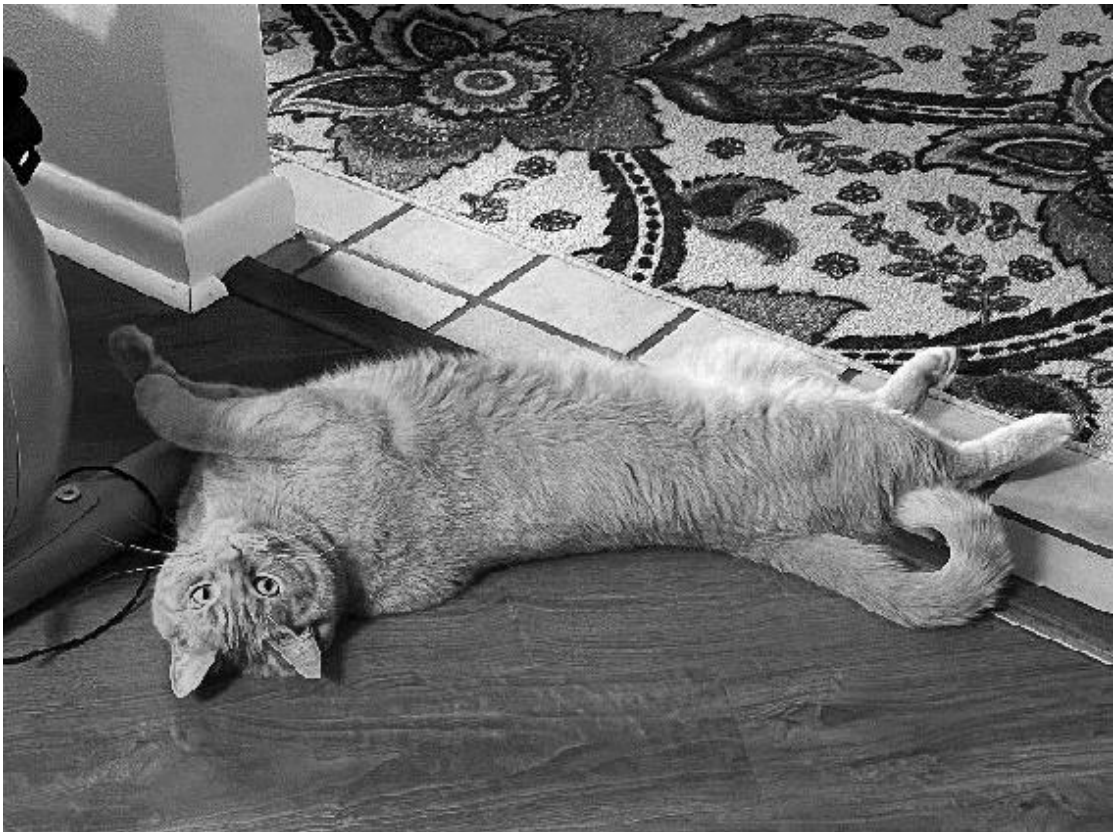
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# In Memory of Leo the Cat

2019 - 2022

We will forever miss your sweet, loving ways, how you followed me through the house all day, howled when you couldn't find me, asked me to hold you in my arms, and curled up at my feet. We'll never forget the way you launched yourself off door jambs, pounced at afternoon shadows on the wall, how you joined us for dinner every night, the way you rolled over our feet, and endlessly played with Chloe. You were the most joyful, adorable little clown! There'll always be a hole in my heart for you, my precious boy. We just hope you've found a cloud with a sliver of sunshine in which to curl up, and all the toys and treats you could ever want. Rest easy, sweet kitty.



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# Chapter One

As far back as Laura Lancaster could remember, she'd always gotten a dull ache in the pit of her stomach when something terrible was about to happen. Like right before her grandmother had died and when Jackie Lancaster—Laura's favorite aunt—had been hit by a car and nearly killed.

Rubbing her belly, she shrugged off the notion. That couldn't be the case now. Life was good. Not great, but good. And getting better every day. She had a lovely home and the most perfect, beautiful, precocious baby boy in the whole world. She'd just won her second term as mayor of Cat's Paw Cove. And in a few short weeks, her divorce from Eddie Caskill would be final, and she'd be able to move on with her life. Not that there was any other relationship on her horizon. Hell no! Not for a very long time—if ever. Her life was way too busy and full for that.

Glancing up at the clock in her kitchen, she muttered a curse under her breath. If she didn't get a move on, she'd be late for the town council meeting. Wasn't as if they'd start it without her, but she hated to keep them waiting.

Taking a quick gulp of coffee, she winced, then made a mental note to buy the organic kind next time, which was easier on her tummy.

Of course. Must be the coffee that had upset her stomach. Sure, that was it. She slipped on her navy pumps and navigated around three of her four cats, who were napping in the only sliver of morning sunlight spilling through the kitchen window onto the tile floor. Then she headed upstairs to the nursery.

Jet was usually awake by now, but he'd been quiet as a mouse so far. Inching open the door, she smiled at his sweet coo. "Good m—" She froze. Her son's toys—a stuffed whale, a xylophone, the firetruck Eddie had bought for Jet—were all suspended above the crib, swirling in thin air like some crazy floating circus.

What the hell? A gasp caught in her throat as she grabbed the doorjamb for support.

Jet raised both of his chubby arms, and the toys stopped moving for a moment. As he lowered his hands, the items began rotating again.

Could her son be controlling the surreal scene? But... how?

He opened and closed his hand, and the whale dropped into the crib.

Laura's heart raced.

"J-Jet, honey, what are you doing?"

The child smiled up at her and pointed to the firetruck. "Ga."

Laura gulped. Magic was everywhere in Cat's Paw Cove. At least a dozen of her cousins, aunts, and uncles possessed some kind of supernatural ability. But she didn't. Nor did Eddie.

Could her son have inherited this gift from the Lancasters? *Was* it a gift, though? Would this new power make other kids treat him like a freak?

Maybe it was a one-and-done thing.

*Yeah, right.* Like making his toys float around was just a fluke that would never happen again.

Taking a few shaky steps, she reached for the arms of the rocker and managed to sit.

Jet giggled, then extended his chubby arms to her.

She forced herself to stand. Lifting him from the crib, she kissed the top of her son's blond head and took him to the changing table. The toys fell onto the crib mattress with barely a sound.

He'd never done anything like this. She'd have noticed this before if he'd always been able to do it. Perhaps it was similar to other skills babies gradually learned—like crawling or rolling over.



Hugging Jet against her, she thought about what she'd tell Eddie. Her ex wasn't from Cat's Paw Cove. Outsiders didn't understand that many of the locals had certain otherworldly skills, especially if they had ancestors from one of the town's founding families, like the Bells, the Wilshires, or Laura's family, the Lancasters.

No, before she could tell her ex-husband, she had to know precisely what Jet's powers were.

One of the cats rubbed against her shin, purring. Only Bob was that soft, thanks to being part Persian. Glancing down to confirm that it was indeed Bob, she stifled a scream, so she didn't frighten Jet.

The infant pointed at the now-purple cat and giggled. "Ca," he said.

Had he turned the kitty that color? Holding her son at arm's length, she swallowed hard. "Jet, did you do that?"

The child laughed and repeated, "Ca."

"Yes, cat. *Purple* cat." Holy cow. What else could Jet do? What *would* he do?

Her phone vibrated in her pocket. Adjusting her son on her lap, she checked it out.

Eddie. Drawing a deep breath, she answered. "H-hey, what's up?"

"I need to switch weekends this month. I've got an important meeting in Atlanta on the 29<sup>th</sup>. I want to take Jet this weekend instead."

"*This* weekend?" She should tell him what Jet had done earlier. No, she wasn't yet ready to break that news. First, she needed to figure out the extent of their son's magic, and soon. Could Eddie have seen Jet do whatever the heck the baby had done a few minutes ago? Wouldn't he have told her? Shouldn't she tell him?

A pang of guilt niggled at her. Until she thought about all the crap Eddie had put her through, all the pain he'd caused not only her but her family as well.

“In fact,” he said, “I want to give you a fantastic opportunity. You can get in on this investment on the ground floor. It’s foolproof. And the yield will be three or four times your investment. But you need to let me know if you’re in by the end of the day.”

Seriously? Eddie was a swindler, and he knew that Laura was well aware of his dishonest nature. “I’ll pass.”

“Your loss. I can take Jet this weekend, though, right?”

“Um, no, sorry.” She racked her brain to come up with a reason. “It’s my dad’s sixtieth birthday. There’s a huge party. My family would never forgive me if I didn’t bring him.”

“Come on, Freckles. Just this once.”

Her jaw clenched at his use of the pet name he’d bestowed upon her when they first started dating. He’d swept her off her feet. Little had she known back then that his charm was what he used to con people—like her and anyone else from whom he wanted something. All he’d been interested in was access to some of Laura’s wealthy relatives, like her grandmother. And sure enough, he’d tried to defraud the sweet old lady out of her fortune when she’d been on her deathbed. Laura knew better now. Eddie was the worst kind of con artist. “Nope, sorry.”

“Laura, don’t be unreasonable.”

She didn’t have time for his nonsense. “I’m late for a meeting, Eddie. Gotta run.” Without waiting for his reply, she disconnected. Then she phoned her niece, Bailey, and asked her to babysit. No way could she leave Jet at daycare today. There was no telling what he might do there. She’d have to figure out a plan to learn more about Jet’s powers, but it would have to wait until later since the town council meeting was in less than an hour.

Laura thanked the sixteen-year-old for the last-minute rescue as soon as Bailey arrived. Then she hurried to her meeting. With any luck, she could leave the office early and go to speak with her aunt—a powerful witch and the family

expert on all things magical. If anyone could advise Laura, it was Aunt Jackie.

But as she drove the short distance to the town hall, her stomachache flared again. She couldn't shake that feeling of impending doom.



RJ Higgins stifled a growl. Why didn't the mayor and the town council understand how vital a budget increase was for his department? Cat's Paw Cove's population had grown so much in the past few years, and without a couple more deputies, he wouldn't be able to police the town adequately.

Mayor Lancaster's eyes met his, and for a moment, he felt that same rush of desire he used to get every time he saw her. She looked almost exactly as she had at twenty-three—the same shoulder-length glossy, brown hair with bangs that grazed her eyes; the same sprinkling of freckles on flawless porcelain skin.

But that was years ago—before she'd thrown him over for Eddie Caskill. He shook off the old wound and stood taller. “Madam Mayor, I understand that you work long hours for this town. And that's admirable. However, I can't ask my deputies to put in unpaid overtime.”

Laura huffed as she wrote something on the legal pad in front of her. Did she even care that she was tying his hands by not supporting his budget increase?

He clenched his jaw. “My officers have a life, Ms. Lancaster.” Under his breath, he added, “Unlike you.” Oh, damn. Judging by her expression, she'd obviously heard his comment.

The hurt in her chestnut-colored eyes cut straight through him, and he instantly regretted his words. He figured that she'd started working long hours a few years ago because her home life sucked. He'd confirmed his suspicions after he'd heard that she and Eddie had split up. She still spent a lot of time at the town hall, but now she often brought her baby with her, especially on the weekend. Which told him that she had nothing better to do—that she was likely lonely at home.

Laura and Eddie had broken up months ago, yet she was still single, according to her friend, Fiona, who knew every bit of local gossip. Crazy that a woman as intelligent, accomplished, and downright gorgeous as the mayor remained unattached.

The overhead fluorescent lights reflected in her shiny, brown hair. A memory of running his fingers through those silky locks flashed in his mind. No, that was a long time ago. They were both different people now.

She squared her shoulders and sat up taller in her seat.

RJ met her fiery stare and reminded himself that Laura was a force of nature. Being the mayor's adversary was usually a losing position. This time, though, he refused to give in. The safety of Cat's Paw Cove hung in the balance. "Please, Madam Mayor."

Laura folded her arms across her chest for a long moment. Then she loudly exhaled. "Fine, sheriff. We'll split the difference."

Half was better than none. "Thank you." He'd ask for another increase in a couple of months.

After she adjourned the meeting, Laura stood up. Despite her diminutive size, she'd always been a powerhouse who spoke so fast that you had to pay close attention or risk not catching something important.

Back when they'd dated, he hadn't wanted to miss a word that she said because she was the most fascinating person he'd ever met. He'd loved their conversations—her quick wit and insightful observations.

As he started upstairs to his office, he reminded himself that their romance hadn't lasted long. In hindsight, he suspected that his grief over losing Halla and their unborn baby had led him to seek solace in Laura's arms. The fact that he'd let himself fall for Laura so hard and fast and gotten a broken heart when she'd dumped him was on him, not her.

The pain he'd felt over losing Laura didn't compare to his grief over Halla's death, though. Some folks weren't meant for relationships. In recent years, he'd come to realize that he was one of those unfortunate people. Maybe Laura was, too.

Damn. He owed Laura an apology for his rude comment at the meeting. Better yet, he'd pave the road to forgiveness with something he knew was one of her weaknesses—Sugarland's carrot cake.

Changing direction, he headed outside to the parking lot. A cool breeze hit him, a welcome sign that the long, hot Florida summer—which lingered into the fall—was finally drawing to an end.

After he picked up the cake for Laura and a blondie for himself, he waved goodbye to Martha, the elderly owner of the bakery. Next time he'd bake something for Laura rather than buy it. He loved surprising people with his mad baking skills.

He crossed Whiskers Road, taking a moment to glance at several businesses—Black Cat Antiquities, Cheshire Apothecary, and Tales Bookstore.

A man dressed all in gray met his eyes for a moment, then slipped into the alley next to the jewelry store. A chill rolled over RJ's skin as he watched the guy disappear between the buildings. Shaking off the feeling, he cut across Wilshire Park on his way back to Town Hall.

“Good morning, Sheriff.”

RJ turned toward the female voice to find a blond teenage girl pushing a toddler in a baby swing at the playground, although her name escaped him. Was she a Lancaster? A second look at the baby boy, and he realized that the child was Laura's Jet. “Morning.”

Scanning the park, he continued toward Tabby Road. When he arrived back at Town Hall, he went straight to the mayor's office and stopped at her assistant's desk. "Morning, Kendrick. Can I go in?"

The young man raised a dark eyebrow. "If you dare."

With a chuckle, RJ nodded and strode to the door marked, "Mayor Laura Lancaster." He poked his head inside.

Laura had a phone to her ear. "We both know that's not true, Commissioner," she said into the phone as she waved RJ inside.

RJ sat in an overstuffed chair opposite Laura's oak desk and took in the unusually homey surroundings, which were unlike most other government offices in the building. A cozy nook near the window had a floral print sofa with two matching wingback chairs. The end tables held framed photos of people who mostly looked a lot like Laura.

"With all due respect, Conrad, those fines are unreasonable," she said into the phone. "We're talking about local citizens—our constituents—who were merely trying to host a fundraiser for an animal shelter." She shrugged toward RJ.

He waved off her apology.

"Just think about it," she said. "Let me know what you decide." Then, after hanging up, she glanced toward the bakery box in RJ's hand and smiled. "Sugarland?"

Setting the package on her desk, he nodded. "Figured I owed you an apology. I shouldn't have said what I did at the meeting this morning. It was unkind. I'm sorry."

"Siddown." Pulling the box closer, she lifted the lid, and her moss-colored eyes lit up. "Carrot cake? How'd you know?"

Had she forgotten about the time they'd polished off half a carrot cake in one sitting? It was their first date, and he'd taken her to Lighthouse Island, where they'd climbed to the top of the old building. By the time they'd returned to the mainland, they were both so exhausted and hungry that they'd

skipped real food and gone straight to Sugarland for dessert. But better than the cake was the sweet kisses they'd shared after.

RJ cleared his throat. "Just a hunch." He handed her a plastic fork.

Laura grinned as she excavated a healthy chunk of cream cheese icing and ate it. Her eyelids shut. She moaned her delight, which made RJ think of another time he'd seen that sort of pleasure on her face.

He shifted in his seat. God, he loved how Laura savored her food so unapologetically. Another memory filled his head—the two of them walking along the boardwalk, licking rapidly melting ice cream cones. Not fast enough. Their hands were sticky and wet by the time they discarded their soaked napkins in the trash. The image of Laura licking the sweet mess from her fingers still made him laugh all these years later.

"What's so funny?" she asked.

He sat up straighter. "Remember that night at Boardwalk Park?"

Her face lit up with a smile. "It was Founder's Day, right? The temperature was like a hundred degrees. Our ice cream cones didn't stand a chance."

For several seconds, their gazes locked. Until Laura's cell phone buzzed. "Excuse me. That's my niece." She answered. "Hey, Bailey. Everything okay?" Her smile faded, and she stiffened. "Are you both all right?"

RJ leaned closer. "What is it?"

"Hang on, Bailey." She rubbed the bridge of her nose. "My niece had Jet at Wilshire Park when she noticed some scary guy staring at her. He gave her the creeps, so she went home."

"Mind if I speak to her?" He extended his hand for the phone.

"Of course." She gave her cell to him.

“Hello, Bailey, this is Sheriff Higgins. Tell me what happened. What did this man look like?”

“Hi, Sheriff,” Bailey said with a shaky voice. “It was right after you passed by us. He was old, like in his fifties.”

Old? He stifled a grin. “Go on.”

“His hair was black or dark brown, and he was wearing all gray.”

Could it have been the same man RJ had seen duck into the alley? Had to be. “What did he do?”

The teen didn’t say anything for a moment. “It was just the way he looked at me. And his beady eyes. They darted all over the place. Maybe he was like on drugs or something. I had a feeling that he would like grab me. Then this woman showed up with her kids, and he sort of hid behind the clock tower.”

“And that’s when you left?”

“Yup.”

“Where are you now?”

The baby babbled in the background. “Back at Aunt Laura’s house.”

Had the man followed her? “I’d like to ask you a few more questions, Bailey. Do you mind if I come by?”

“Okay, that’s fine.”

After he disconnected, he handed Laura her phone. “I’m going to head over to your place and speak to her.”

Laura grabbed her jacket from the back of her chair. “Let’s go.”

They arrived at Laura’s Spanish-style home in the affluent Seaside Hills section of town ten minutes later. Laura ushered him through the arched entryway and large tiled foyer. “Have a seat,” she said, gesturing at the chunky carved wood and leather sofa.



But the room was way too interesting to sit in as he waited for Laura to fetch her niece. Thick wooden beams accented the high ceilings, and beautiful yellow and blue patterned pottery adorned the mantle over a stone fireplace.

Bailey followed Laura down the stairs, grasping the wrought iron railing.

“Jet just went down for his nap,” Laura told RJ.

“Just as well,” he said. He met the teenager’s stare. “It’s you I want to talk to.”

The girl sat stiffly on the edge of a chair. “I’m not sure what else I can tell you.”

“Did the man say anything?” he asked.

She shook her head and brushed a strand of hair from her cheek. “Maybe it was my imagination, but he scared me.”

RJ never blew off anyone’s hunch. “Tell me what he looked like, everything you can remember.”

Bailey described the man RJ had seen earlier to a tee.

Laura gave her niece a hug. “I’m staying home the rest of the day. Want to hang out here so you’re not alone?”

“Nah, I’ll go home,” Bailey said. “My dad’s there.”

RJ stood. “I’d like to look around the house, make sure everything’s secure. Then I’ll drive you, Bailey.”

Laura gave him a relieved smile. “I’d appreciate that.”

After checking every door and window, he returned to the living room. “Ever think about an alarm system, Laura?”

She pursed her lips. “This is the safest neighborhood in Cat’s Paw Cove.”

That was true. “Your position as mayor calls for extra security, though.”

She caught her bottom lip between her teeth in that sexy way she had. “It’s never been an issue...until now.” Shrugging, she met his stare. “What do you suggest?”

“Cameras, at the very least. I could install them around the perimeter in a couple of hours. A system with window and door sensors, plus a few motion detectors would be ideal.”

“Sounds like a lot of work. I couldn’t impose on you.”  
Was she blushing? “I mean, I’m sure I can find a handyman to do that.”

He shook his head. “That’d take too long. I can get it done this afternoon. I’ll take Bailey home, then stop at the hardware store for everything I need.”

After a moment’s hesitation, she nodded. “Thank you.”

“No problem.” But on the drive to Bailey’s house, he wondered if it was a mistake to spend more time with Laura because if he were honest with himself, even after all these years, he still had feelings for her. And getting tangled up with the mayor was the last thing he ought to do.

## Chapter Two

As soon as RJ and Bailey had left, Laura took the opportunity to phone her favorite aunt for advice.

“What a nice surprise to hear from you, dear,” her Aunt Jackie said over the phone. “I sense you’re calling for a specific reason, though.”

Laura chuckled. “I never could get anything past you.”

“Well, I am psychic, so it’s difficult to fool me.” Jackie chuckled. “What’s going on, love?”

Glancing toward Jet’s door at the top of the stairs, Laura sat on the bottom step. “Something’s up with Jet.” She told her aunt about what she’d witnessed in her son’s bedroom a few hours before.

“Sounds as if he’s just discovering his gifts,” Jackie supplied. “And with him being so young, there’s no telling what he’ll be able to do as he grows into his powers. Is the cat still purple?”

“No, thankfully. I have no idea if the baby switched it back or if it wore off.” Laura combed her fingers through her hair. Raising a child on her own would be even more challenging than she’d anticipated if Jet had magical abilities. And what about Eddie? Not being from Cat’s Paw Cove, her ex had no experience whatsoever with the supernatural. At least Laura had a bunch of magical relatives. She’d known all her life that such things existed.

Eddie had no clue. How would he cope with an exceptional child that could do things his father never dreamed possible? At least Eddie only took Jet one weekend a month, a custody arrangement he’d all-too-quickly agreed to accept. He’d made an excuse about living hours away, and the toll all of that traveling would take on his *career*, a term he used for his job as a hustler.

If only Laura could keep Jet’s newly-discovered gifts a secret from his father. But she couldn’t. It wouldn’t be fair.

“Would you mind if we came up to Tabby Hill for a visit tomorrow?” Laura asked. She hadn’t been to her family’s estate in several months. Aside from getting her aunt’s expert assessment about Jet’s new powers, the sea air at the beachside property might do her good. RJ was right about her working too much. She needed to learn how to relax.

“Pat and I would love to see you and Jet, but we’re flying to Sedona tomorrow for a mediumship seminar. We’ll be gone three days.”

Laura tamped down a kernel of disappointment. Pat, Aunt Jackie’s long-time companion, was also psychic, and the two women often traveled together to various classes and spiritual retreats. Laura was pretty sure the two women were more than friends, but since Aunt Jackie hadn’t ever seemed keen to discuss the nature of their relationship, Laura figured it was none of her business. “When you get back then?”

“Yes,” her aunt said. “That would be lovely. Shall we say next Sunday?”

“Great, yes. See you then. Give my love to Pat. And have a safe trip.” After she disconnected, she paced the floor. Until Jet’s insistent cries let her know his naptime was over. Then, easing open his door, she held her breath, unsure what she’d find.

Jet sat up and extended his arms toward her. His eyes were dry, but he still whimpered for her to take him. No toys hung in the air over the crib.

Relief seeped through her. For a brief moment, she wondered if what she’d witnessed in the nursery that morning had been some strange anomaly, a one-time glitch that had allowed Jet to suspend his toys in thin air and turn the cat purple.

Of course, that was unlikely. No, pretty much impossible.

After a diaper change and a bottle, Jet seemed content in his playpen. Watching him stack wooden blocks, Laura wondered what his future held. He could likely do things only

a handful of people in the world could. She ought to be excited for him. Yet, she couldn't squash the alarm that kept bucking through her.

The doorbell chimed, pulling her from her thoughts. Heading to the foyer, she smoothed down her hair, then pulled open the heavy wooden door.

RJ shook his head at her, his arms loaded down with two boxes. "You didn't even ask who was there. We need to work on your home security protocols, Laura."

Stepping aside to let him pass, she nodded. "You're right. I'll do better." She had to think not only about her safety but Jet's too.

RJ set the boxes on the Spanish bench by the door. "In this day and age, you've got to have a video doorbell."

"I'm not very tech-savvy," she said. "Are they complicated?"

He gave her a patient grin. "Not at all. We'll download the app on your phone, so you can see and hear whoever's there. It'll even let you speak to them. In addition, you'll be able to access the other cameras on the network, even from a remote location." He cut open one of the boxes with a pocket knife. "I also got door and window sensors. I'll have it all up and running in a couple of hours." He turned his back to her and started digging in the box.

She couldn't help but notice how nicely he filled out his uniform. Her belly tightened with long-denied desire. A tiny shard of guilt poked at her. "I appreciate you dropping everything to come and do all of this. I hope you didn't have too much going on at work."

RJ twisted around to face her and gave her that crooked grin. "If only I had more in the budget so I could hire enough staff to cover things like this when they pop up. Too bad that the mean old mayor lady is such a tightwad." He threw her a playful wink. "Kidding. It's my pleasure to be here for you."

Her mouth went dry. Which was ridiculous. He was merely helping her out because.... Well, because she was a public official, and he was the sheriff. “Perhaps this tightwad can take another look at the numbers.”

He raised an eyebrow at her. “I had no idea you were such a pushover, Madam Mayor.”

Despite herself, she laughed. “No one’s ever called me *a pushover* before. Hardass, difficult, stubborn, but never a pushover.” Her dad would be mortified at the characterization. As a retired army colonel, he’d raised Laura and her brother to be tough as nails.

“We go back a long way,” RJ said. “Nobody had better call you any names in front of me.”

Her mind wandered back through the years, remembering what it felt like to walk through town with him, arm-in-arm, safe and protected.

Their eyes met and held for several moments. The temperature in the room rose about a dozen degrees. Laura’s heart kaboomed in her chest. Was he also reminiscing about that magical summer more than a decade ago? How long had they dated? A few weeks? A month? They’d had a dozen or so hot and heavy make-out sessions in his car and his tiny apartment above the jewelry store on Whisker’s Road.

Until the day a handsome, fast-talking salesman had sat in her booth at Purry’s Diner. Laura had worked there every summer through college and grad school. Lord, she’d been so impressed with Eddie. No—blinded by his charm.

And she’d made the biggest mistake of her life—throwing over RJ for Eddie, a guy who didn’t even like cats. That should have tipped her off. If only she’d listened to her instincts.

RJ cleared his throat. “I should work on your system.”

She squared her shoulders. “Right, sure. What can I do to help?”

Before the sheriff could answer, Jet whined for her. “Mmmmaa.”

Laura picked him up and kissed the top of his blond head, then returned to the foyer. “You think that creep was targeting Bailey?”

RJ nodded as he slipped a bit into his cordless drill. “Chances are.”

Laura shuddered. “Glad my brother already has a security system at their house.”

“Me too. Now your niece will be safe *here*, too.” He stopped what he was doing and took his cell out of his pocket. “I’ll make sure the deputy assigned to that quadrant makes extra loops around your niece’s neighborhood.”

“Thank you.”

He stepped outside, and Laura could hear him speaking on the phone.

She had to admit that it was nice having him there, even if he was merely doing his job.

“Maaaa.” Jet pointed at one of the cats, which was suddenly a vivid hue of violet.

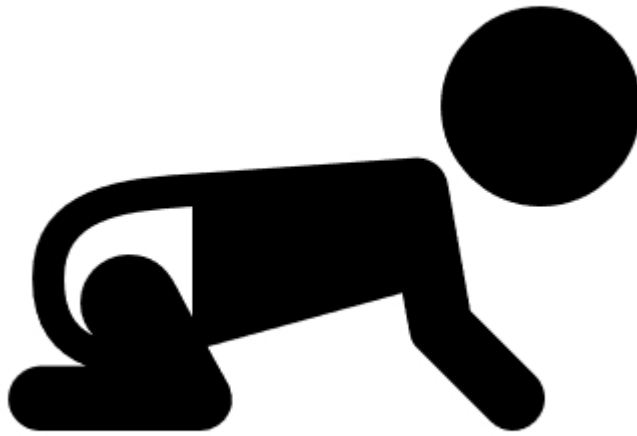
Laura gasped. “Jet! Did you make another kitty purple? You’ve got to quit doing that.”

The baby laughed, lighting up his bright blue eyes.

When the doorknob jiggled, Laura hurried to the kitchen to shake the cat treats pouch and lure the feline out of the foyer. Thankfully, the kitty complied.

Laura released the breath she’d been holding as she closed the cat in the den.

What the hell was she going to do? If anyone found out what her sweet baby could do, it would turn his and Laura’s world upside-down.



RJ finally finished installing the security system a little after seven that evening. Then he waited for Laura to put her son to bed, so he could show her how to use it.

That done, she handed him a bottle of beer and kept one for herself. “We deserve this.” She tapped hers to RJ’s before taking a sip. “At least *you* do.” She gestured toward the sofa, where her laptop was open with several file folders scattered around it. “Sit. How about I make us dinner. I’ll bet you’re starving.”

He was, but the memory of the one dinner she’d tried to cook for him when they’d dated years ago kept him from immediately taking her up on her offer. “I could go pick something up.”

Waving off his suggestion, she tipped her chin toward the kitchen. “My fridge is loaded with food that’ll go bad soon if I don’t use it.”

He stood. “I’ll help.”

“So much for relaxing on the couch, hmm?” Shrugging, she led him into the kitchen.



It didn't take long for him to convince her to let him take over. She acted as his sous chef, chopping vegetables for his quesadilla as he cooked the chicken.

The fridge door was covered with assorted magnets with cute sayings. Some held up thank you cards—one from the coach of a local little league team that Laura had sponsored and another from one of RJ's deputies, to whom she'd sent flowers after the officer had lost his mother.

He'd had no idea that Laura kept up with things like that. The fact that she did was touching.

As delicious aromas filled the room, one cat after another meandered in to sniff around. "How many do you have?" RJ asked Laura.

Her neck twitched with a swallow as she glanced around the kitchen. "Um, usually four."

Weird answer. "Usually?"

"One is...around here somewhere."

The sheriff nodded. "I used to have a Doberman. After she died, I was too broken up to get another pet." He clamped his jaw against the sadness.

Laura covered his hand with hers, only for a moment. "I'm sorry. It's easy to get attached, isn't it? Almost as difficult as losing *people* we care about."

Staring into her eyes, he shrugged. The loss of the dog had gutted him, yet it hadn't compared to the pain he'd suffered when Halla—a translator to whom he'd been engaged—had been killed by an IED in Afghanistan. The fact that she'd been pregnant with his child made the loss even more excruciating. Even after all of these years, he could barely stand to think about it.

And then there'd been Laura. After she'd broken things off with him, he'd resolved not to get emotionally involved with anyone else for a while. That 'while' had turned into years, and in that time, he'd settled into his lifestyle, which was simple and uncomplicated, just as he liked it.

He flipped one of the quesadillas in the frying pan. Then, tipping his chin at the avocados in the basket on the counter, he asked, “Are they ripe?”

Laura reached around him to get one, brushing his arm. The contact sent a shiver over his skin.

Damn, it had been too long since he’d been close to a woman. He breathed in her scent—like an entire meadow full of flowers.

“One’s ready,” she said, tossing the fruit from hand to hand. “What should I do with it?”

Before he could answer, the baby started crying from his walker.

“I should probably put him down for the night.” Shoving the avocado at RJ, she threw him an apologetic grin and then attended to her son.

RJ checked the quesadillas before turning his attention to preparing the guacamole. First, he cut open the avocados and scooped out the contents, adding them to his mixture of lemon juice, minced garlic, salt, and hot sauce. Next, he mashed the ingredients and took a small bite to ensure it was up to his usual standards.

“Delicious,” he said in the empty room.

He stilled when he heard Laura singing a lullaby upstairs. Picturing her rocking the baby, singing to him... His heart lodged in his throat.

But another sound caught his attention—nearby scratching. His cop senses sparked to life. It was too close to be anything Laura was doing. Glancing at the closed door to his right, he held his breath and inched closer.

A tiny purple furball scampered past him when he eased open the door.

What the hell?

He backed toward the counter, trying to make sense of what he was seeing. Something sharp pierced his skin. Wincing at the sting, he glanced down at his hand. Damn it.

He'd cut himself on the sharp knife he'd left next to the bowl of guacamole. Blood oozed from the wound and dripped onto the floor. The blade must have nicked a blood vessel.

The purple creature hissed and ran past him again.

Laura returned to the room. Her face fell as her gaze shifted from RJ's to the weirdly-colored kitty. "I can explain."

## Chapter Three

Now what? Laura wrung her hands, painfully aware of RJ's eyes on her. How the hell was she going to explain a purple cat?

*I was looking for a new hair color for myself and decided to try it out on one of my cats.*

*A bottle of purple paint fell on the kitty.*

No, RJ wasn't an idiot. He'd never believe any of those ridiculous explanations.

Thankfully he spoke first, which gave Laura a few more moments to think.

"I know that you're as much of an animal lover as I am," the sheriff said. "And you'd never purposely do something like this to one of your pets."

All she could do was nod. That was when she noticed the blood dripping off his hand. Gasping, she sprung into action. "You're bleeding, RJ. A lot."

He cupped his injured hand. "I...when I saw the cat, I must have grabbed onto the counter and caught the edge of the knife."

She brushed past him, opened the pantry door, and found the first aid kit she kept there for kitchen emergencies. From inside the white and red box, she retrieved antiseptic, a few assorted bandages, and a roll of medical tape. "Hold your hand over the sink. Let's get that cleaned up."

RJ did as instructed, letting her flush the wound and then dry it with a paper towel.

"Does it hurt?" she asked.

"It's fine." Typical guy answer.

Holding the paper tightly against his skin, she waited until the bleeding had mostly stopped. Then she fitted a bandage to the cut and taped it on. "I'm glad you don't need any stitches." Being this close to him, she could feel the heat

of his body, and smell his woodsy scent. A spark of desire flared to life.

Her heart pounded. But when she looked up into his eyes, instead of the attraction she'd somehow expected, she found only suspicion.

Swallowing hard, she backed away.

“Are you going to tell me what happened to...” He tipped his chin toward Bob the cat.

RJ had lived in Cat's Paw Cove a long time. As sheriff of a town full of magical beings, he must have seen a whole bunch of things that would qualify as crazy anywhere else. By now, he had to know that the supernatural world was real. Or did he?

She recalled a conversation she'd had with Luna, who owned Cove Cat Café and knew pretty much everyone in town's business.

Luna was explaining that her new employee, Jordan, could converse with most animals. That was when RJ walked into the café. Luna zipped her lips tightly as she winked at Laura. “I'll tell you about it another time,” Luna had said.

Which probably meant that the sheriff wasn't aware of all the supernatural goings-on in the town.

Laura shifted from foot to foot, trying to concoct a believable story. “It happened yesterday,” she said.

“Okay,” he said.

“I was...dyeing some clothes for a Halloween costume.” Yes, this could work. “I'm going to be a hippie, so I need a tie-dyed T-shirt.”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “Halloween is more than a month away.”

“I'm nothing if not a planny pants.” Her laugh sounded false even to her ears.

His dark eyes sparkled with amusement. He seemed to be buying her explanation. Thank goodness.

“Let’s discuss it over dinner.” She gestured toward the dining room. “I’ll get us drinks.”

Crossing to the bar, she poured two small glasses of sherry, then took a healthy swallow before returning to the table where RJ had already brought over the platter of quesadillas and small bowls of both guacamole and sour cream.

“Here you go.” She handed him one of the drinks and then sat next to him.

After he’d taken a sip, he brushed a lock of her hair from her cheek, sending a zing of awareness through her entire body.

He served her one of the yummy-looking wedges then tipped his chin toward the accompaniments. “You were saying...about how the cat came to be purple.”

“Oh, right.” She fanned her suddenly-warm face. “So, I accidentally spilled a little of the dye onto Bob while I was making my shirt.”

“The cat’s name is Bob?” He bit into his dinner.

She nodded. “I have four: Bob, Emily, Carol, and Howard.” Laura dipped the quesadilla into the guacamole and took a bite. Wow, the food was amazing—better than her favorite local Tex-Mex restaurant.

RJ used a cloth napkin to wipe his mouth. “Why do I know those names...as a group?”

“Remember The Bob Newhart Show? My dad used to watch reruns when I was a kid. My brother and I fell in love with the show and the main characters—Bob and Emily, Carol the secretary, and Howard, the neighbor.”

“Okay, now I remember.” After a sip of his drink, he sat up taller in his seat. “Continue your crafting-gone-wrong story.”

She couldn’t help but chuckle. “Well, I couldn’t let the poor cat have some random purple fur, so I dyed the rest of him.”

“Sure. I mean, you wouldn’t want any of Bob’s feline buddies to laugh at him.”

Now he was making fun of her. Which she’d take any day over having to explain to the sheriff that at least half the town’s residents possessed some sort of magical abilities.

RJ pinned her with a curious stare.

Did he believe her? Or think she was a lunatic? Or worse? Laura wished he’d say something—anything.

Howard leaped onto the table, swiped a cheesy wedge of quesadilla from RJ’s plate, then ran off with it and raced from the room.

Laura gasped. “I’m so sorry. He’s never done that before.” Her cheeks burned. “I promise, my cats are normally so well-behaved.”

Thankfully, RJ laughed. “I’ve never met a well-behaved cat in my life. Only ones that do whatever they want.”

Her shoulders relaxed a bit. “Yeah, that’s true.”

The tension of the moment evaporated, and she managed a smile. As they ate, Laura reflected upon their long-ago dates. She’d been so crazy about RJ. So why had she let Eddie sweep her off her feet?

RJ had been so handsome in his military uniform.

Of course, that was it. The fact that RJ had been a Marine and that he’d still been on active duty then. She hadn’t wanted to deal with the prospect of falling for a guy who was away most of the time and potentially in dangerous situations.

Eddie—the charmer—had seemed the safer choice. He’d talked a good game, taken her to expensive restaurants. One night, he’d surprised her with a helicopter flight over the coast. And so impressed that he’d flown it himself. It had been one of the most romantic nights of her life. Little had she imagined that Eddie would turn out to be such a jerk. She should have known it wouldn’t turn out well when she learned that he didn’t like cats.

RJ's cell phone buzzed. "Excuse me," he said as he checked it. "I have to take this." Then, getting up from the table, he answered the call. "What's up, Robin?"

Laura recognized the name. Robin was the sheriff's lieutenant, the second in command.

"In Nautilus Heights?" Laura heard the sheriff ask.

That was where her brother and his family lived... where Bailey lived. She held her breath and listened.

"Which street?" RJ asked. "Mmm-hm. Okay. Let me know more when you hear." He stashed his phone in his back pocket and met Laura's stare.

She swallowed hard. "What is it?"

"Nothing to worry about."

Was his smile genuine, or was he wearing it for her benefit? "Please tell me."

Returning to the table, he picked up his plate and started toward the kitchen. "It's probably nothing."

She hooked his free arm. "RJ?"

Bristling, he tucked her hair behind her ear. "There was a possible break-in."

Laura's heart pounded. "On Bell Lane?"

He pursed his lips. "It wasn't your niece's house."

Drawing a relieved breath, she picked up her plate and cup and went ahead of him into the kitchen.

RJ took the dishes from her. "I cook, I clean up."

She tried to beat him to the sink, but they got there at the same moment and bumped into each other. Neither moved as heat ricocheted between them. Their eyes met and held.

Damn, he smelled great, like an entire pine forest.

He set down the dishes and stepped closer to her.

How long had it been since she'd felt the scratch of a man's cheek against her skin? Her fingers itched to touch him,



to feel the granite-hard muscles of his back and shoulders. The air between them crackled with electricity.

Recalling the kisses they'd shared so long ago, she ached to press her lips to his.

He stroked his thumb along her jaw, turning her into a puddle of a woman. Grasping onto the edge of the counter, she steadied herself.

“Would it be okay if I kiss you?” His voice was a lusty mix of gravel and honey.

Rather than speak, she parted her lips and skated her fingers over his rock-hard arms. Then his mouth was on hers, both gentle and demanding. He tasted like sherry and desire, and she couldn't get enough.

All too quickly, RJ backed away. “I should get these dishes done. It's getting late, and I'm sure that Jet doesn't let you sleep in.”

“That's true.” Had he just blown her off? If he hadn't wanted to kiss her, why did he? Geez, she was just as clueless about men as she'd been when she was twenty.



RJ finished loading Laura's dishwasher then gave the house a final check. Everything was locked up tight, including Laura.

Arms folded across her chest, she gave him a tight smile. “I guess I'll see you tomorrow then... at work.”

“Absolutely.” He hurried out the door, then waited to hear the lock engage before heading to his car. Then, behind the wheel, he drew a deep breath. He'd always liked Laura as far back as he could remember, but something about her

frightened him. No, it wasn't her specifically. The notion of falling for any woman made him want to head for the hills. And Laura was definitely someone he could fall for—hard.

He turned into his driveway and shut off the engine. Dating the mayor was probably a terrible idea. She wasn't exactly his boss, but they did have to work together, and that working relationship had historically been on the bumpy side.

Besides, she had a child—someone else's kid. Plus, she'd already dumped him once. Did he really want to go down that road again?

Inside the house, he switched on the lights in the great room. A comforting calm settled over him as he took in the familiar surroundings—the oversize leather sofa and his favorite recliner next to it. Between the two pieces, a single coaster and the remote for the sixty-five-inch TV were on the end table. Just as he'd left everything.

He liked it like that. Peace and quiet, and no one to mess with his things or his head. Grabbing a beer from the fridge, he checked the time. The basketball game would still be on. Settling into his chair, he turned on the television and tried to concentrate on the action.

But his thoughts kept going back to Laura, to that kiss. Why couldn't he get her out of his head? He was hardly sex-starved. Jane or Jenny or Jean—a waitress at Chalet Le Chat—had practically thrown herself at him a couple of months back. And he was a red-blooded guy. So he hadn't turned her down.

Laura was different, though. She didn't fit into his no-strings flings box. Laura meant something to him, and kissing her had opened a can of worms that he should have kept tightly sealed up.

He'd met her five or six months after Halla's death when he'd been on leave visiting relatives in Cat's Paw Cove. Those months had been the darkest time in his life as he'd mourned Halla and their unborn baby. Well, not exactly mourned. All he'd wanted to do was to forget Halla, to purge the memories of the love they'd shared.

Laura had been like sunshine breaking through his gloom. Despite his fears of being hurt again, he'd let himself care about her, probably faster than he should have. She'd hurt him, but in all fairness, the pain of the break-up was so much worse since it had come so soon after Halla. And he hadn't told Laura about that loss until after she'd already ended things.

He replayed that long-ago conversation in his head.

*"I've met someone else," Laura said. "I hope you can forgive me." She took RJ's hand. "This has been fun, but you're leaving soon."*

*Fun? He'd already started to fall for her. "I wish you'd explained that to me from the start," he said. "My fiancé died in Afghanistan four months ago. The last thing I needed was to be your plaything."*

*"My plaything?" Tears filled her eyes. "That's not what this... Never mind. I'm so sorry, RJ. I had no idea."*

*He hadn't stayed to listen to more.*

The following year, after his discharge, he'd accepted a position as a deputy in the town. Much to his disappointment, Laura and Eddie were still together when he returned.

A whistle blew on the TV, yanking him out of his thoughts. Why was he rehashing old wounds?

*Because I never stopped caring about Laura.*

Nope, he refused to go down that road with her again. Or with anyone, for that matter.

His doorbell startled him. Checking the app for his video doorbell, he found his neighbor, Belinda standing on his porch holding a casserole dish.

"Just me again," she trilled.

Rolling his eyes, he tried to keep the irritation from his voice. "Be right there." He reminded himself that she was merely being neighborly. But as he opened the door to her, he took in her spike heels, skin-tight leggings, and lowcut shirt. Yeah, he knew a come-on when he saw it—or in this case,

when it slapped him in the face. “Evening, Belinda. You headed out to a club or something?” He couldn’t resist.

The blonde let out an exaggerated chuckle. “Oh, you. I made my favorite lawman a tuna casserole. I know how much you love it.”

Ugh, not again. He’d taken one bite of it last time and nearly gotten sick. Not thinking, he’d returned the empty dish to her the next day. And she’d interpreted that as him having devoured the casserole in one sitting. Pressing his hand to his belly, he smiled. “I’m so full, but thanks for thinking of me.”

She refused to back down. Rather, she brushed past him and strode right into his kitchen. “I’ll just leave this in the fridge. You can have it tomorrow.”

He didn’t want to be rude. “I appreciate that.” He started toward the door in hopes that she’d follow.

No such luck. Belinda headed to the living room. “Ooh, I love hockey.”

“That’s basketball.” Again, he gestured toward the front door.

She sat on the sofa and patted the seat beside her. “You don’t mind if I join you, do you?”

“Actually, I was just heading to bed.” The moment the words left his mouth, he realized he shouldn’t have said it.

A coy smile settled on her electric pink lips. “I’m awfully good at bedtime stories.” Her wink left no doubt about her intentions.

Time to put the kibosh on this. “Belinda, I’ve got an early morning.”

Huffing loudly, she stood. “I don’t get turned down often, Sheriff. But that’s okay. I can spot a man who’s taken by some other girl. All you had to say was that you weren’t single.”

For a moment, he considered setting her straight. Nah, it was easier to take that out. “Goodnight, Belinda.”

“Night, RJ.” She strode past him, waving over her shoulder. “Whoever she is, she’s a lucky lady.”

Returning to the game, he replayed his neighbor’s parting words. He had to admit—if only to himself—that he wished he were taken. But, deep in his heart, he pined for a very complicated woman, one who’d long ago thrown him over for someone else.

## Chapter Four

Saturday morning Laura finished feeding Jet his rice cereal and then changed his diaper, all the while observing him for any signs of the magical powers he'd exhibited a few days before. To her relief, she didn't notice him do anything strange.

After setting him up in his gated play area in the living room, she settled into the sofa to do some work on her laptop. Next thing she knew, the cuckoo clock in the foyer struck twelve. She glanced over at her son and found him fast asleep on his teddy bear pillow. The toy had been a gift from Bailey. Which reminded Laura that she ought to check on the teenager.

Bailey answered her phone on the first ring. "Wassup?"

Laura held back a chuckle at the girl's greeting. "Just checking on my favorite niece."

"I'm your *only* niece," the girl retorted. "But I'm fine. Better than fine."

Hmm. Bailey's response piqued Laura's curiosity. "Sounds awesome. Want to tell me why your day sounds so much better than mine?"

She sighed. "Just this boy at school. I think he likes me."

Ugh. Laura wanted her niece to feel comfortable discussing her personal life, but she trembled at the notion of Bailey dating. The girl was way too young. Although the more Laura thought about it, she realized that Bailey was the same age Laura was when she started having serious crushes on boys.

"Tell me about him," Laura coaxed. "What's his name?"

"Alexander," the teen sang.

Laura wanted to know everything: Who was this boy? Did he make good grades? Was he an athlete, a thespian, a

chess club nerd? But all she said was, “I hope he’s nice.”

“Aunt Laura, please don’t tell my parents.”

Laura glanced over at her sleeping baby and thought about what kind of teenager Jet would become. Would he be difficult? Rebellious? Would he ask people in his life to keep information about his relationships a secret? She cringed.

“Please?” Bailey persisted.

“Fine. But promise me that you’ll keep me in the loop about Alexander.”

After a long beat, Bailey huffed. “Okay, I will.”

“Thank you.” A small measure of the tension in Laura’s shoulders eased. “About the incident at the park the other day—”

“OMG,” the girl interrupted. “Did you ask that cop to keep driving past my house? I mean, that was totally bogus. Way to freak me out.”

“That was Sheriff Higgins’ idea, not mine.” Although Laura was glad that RJ had suggested it.

“I don’t like it. Just for the record. But I haven’t seen a cop car today, so I guess it’s all good.”

Laura grinned. Bailey had no idea how fortunate she was to be related to the town’s mayor.

“Did you need me to babysit today? I’m saving up for these hot boots I saw at the mall in Daytona Beach.”

Laura considered the offer. She still had to read through the rest of the budget proposal for the fire department and that of the local utility commission. Doing the work in her office was always easier. “That would be great.”

Two hours later, as Laura sat at her desk surrounded by files, a calculator, and a tablet, RJ entered her office carrying a bouquet of wildflowers.

The sheriff set the glass vase on the edge of her desk.

“For me?” Warmth suffused her whole body. It had been ages since anyone had brought her flowers.

RJ nodded. “They’re from my garden.”

Leaning over the bouquet, she breathed in their sweet scent. “They’re beautiful. Thank you.”

His shrug brought her back a decade. RJ had been so young and handsome and just a little shy. Not that he was any less attractive now. In fact, he was even better looking with a few more years on him.

His smile made her long to kiss him and more. But along with her desire, there was also fear. She’d made such poor choices when it came to romantic relationships. And now, she had more than just herself to consider. Anything she did also affected her son. Sitting back in her seat, she laced her fingers together. “What brings you into the office today?”

He chuckled. “I could ask the same of you, Madam Mayor.”

“Touche. I’m working on some departmental budgets.”

Lifting one eyebrow, he said, “Maybe you could tweak the one for the sheriff’s office.” He disarmed her with a sexy grin.

Reluctantly, she pulled her gaze from his and straightened up her already-neat desk. “You didn’t answer my question. What are you doing here on your day off?”

Instead of answering, he sank into one of her wingback chairs and released a deep breath. Finally, he met her stare. His smile didn’t reach his eyes. “We have a lot in common, Laura. I’m also a workaholic. Plus, I have this neighbor, a woman. She’s driving me a little nuts. I needed to get out of the house so she wouldn’t bring me yet another casserole or batch of homemade cookies.”

Was she pretty? Young? Had RJ slept with her?

*Oh, for heaven’s sake. Am I seriously jealous?*

She couldn’t resist asking him about the neighbor. “Someone you’re seeing?”



His laugh told her all she needed to know. “Not in this lifetime. It’s like living next door to Mrs. Kravitz.”

“Yikes.” That was a relief.

When RJ’s cell buzzed, he checked the display, and his smile faded. Then, with a worried glance at Laura, he answered. “Sheriff Higgins.”

Laura’s heart beat faster. She waited, listened.

He turned away from her. Was he purposely hiding his reactions from her?

She swallowed hard as she listened to his conversation.

“Where are you now?” he asked the person on the other end. “Okay, I’ll be there in a few minutes. Check that the doors are locked. It’ll be all right.” His chest expanded with a breath before he spun around to face Laura. “That was Bailey.”

Laura’s breath locked in her chest.

“She and Jet are fine. But she thinks she heard someone jiggle the front door, and then the back.” He gestured toward the door.

Grabbing her jacket, she headed toward her office door. “Let’s go.”

They made it to Laura’s house from the town hall in record time. RJ checked the security footage on Laura’s phone then showed her. Sure enough, they saw a man in dark clothing lurking around. Too bad the images were murky.

“I’m sending this to a colleague in Orlando who does forensic photography,” he said. “Maybe she can get a clearer image.”

“You think that’s the same guy from the park?” she asked him.

He nodded solemnly.

“Perhaps a predator stalking my niece?”

His lips flattened. “Maybe. Or it could be someone who has a beef with *you*. Unfortunately, that does sometimes happen to elected officials.”

She shrugged off the suggestion. As a first-term mayor, she was popular with the town. The *Cat’s Paw Cove Courier* had called her “perfectly moderate.” Her door was always open to constituents. So if anyone had a problem with her, she’d know it, wouldn’t she?

“Has anyone threatened you or seemed hostile to you?” he asked.

“No, no one.” Although, now that she thought about it, a few irate citizens had been at the council meeting last month. “I did receive a half dozen angry letters over recent zoning changes to the business district and some others complaining about the new stoplight near the high school. But those weren’t stalk-the-mayor’s-house issues. No, this was likely some pervert aiming to get a pretty teenager’s attention.” The notion made her skin crawl. “This is probably about my niece. And this guy might know where she lives.”

RJ shrugged. “That’s possible. But I’d like to see those letters.”

“Of course. I’ll have my assistant, get them to you. Kendrick takes his computer home on the weekend, so he should be able to email them to you today.” She fished her cell out of her purse. “I’m going to see if my brother can take Bailey over to my aunt’s place for a few days.”

“While you do that, I’m going to look around outside.”

Minutes later, after a brief conversation with her very concerned brother, she’d arranged for him to take Bailey to the Lancaster family estate fifteen miles up the coast. Then she phoned her assistant and instructed him to send any angry letters Laura had received to RJ.

After she’d hung up the phone, she drew a relieved breath. RJ came in through the back door.

“Her dad will be by in an hour to pick up Bailey,” she told him. “They’ll take his girlfriend’s car, just in case that

man's been watching Bailey's house."

RJ nodded, but Laura noticed that those lines crossing his forehead hadn't yet smoothed out. "What's wrong?" she asked him. "Did you find something outside?"

"No, nothing." His brows angled. "Your plan is good. I'm just not convinced that this guy is after your niece."

Laura waved off his worry. "We'll know if he stops showing up here, right?"

Another shrug.

Her stomach growled. "Think I'll heat the leftovers from that delicious dinner you made the other night. Interested?"

His eyes lit up with a smile. "I'll set the table."

As she got out the leftovers, she couldn't help but enjoy the little slice of domesticity. Not that any of it was more than a temporary perk, but it felt so comfortable and warm.

She, RJ, and Bailey munched on quesadillas and guacamole while Jet played with a set of toy keys in his highchair.

Her brother showed up soon after they'd eaten and took Bailey with him. Glancing at her son, Laura noticed the telltale signs that he was tired. He rubbed his eyes and tugged at his ear.

She took him upstairs and put him down for his nap. Then, she went downstairs to find her kitchen all cleaned. She shook her finger at RJ, who was wiping down the counter. "You should have left this for me."

"Just kissing up to the boss." He threw her a wink that immediately flooded her with heat. She must have set the thermostat too high.

But that didn't explain why her heart kaboomed in her chest.

RJ held her stare for a long moment. Then he cleared his throat. "Are you finished with work for the day?"

The question snapped her back into mayor mode. “Um, no. I still have a bunch to do. What about you? I’m sorry that I’ve kept you for so long.”

“Just doing my job.”

*Ouch.* Was that all she was to RJ? She swallowed hard. “We’re fine. I’m sure you’ve got better things to do with your weekend.”

“I don’t, actually.” His warm chuckle diffused her hurt. “I’m not the workaholic you are.”

She sank onto the sofa. “I do work too much. That’s all I know.” She rubbed away the beginning of a headache at her temples. “My folks put a ton of pressure on my brother and me to excel at school. I guess that ethic has stuck with me.”

RJ sat next to her. “Nothing wrong with hard work, as long as you make room for other things in your life. Like fun.”

She thought back to her marriage to Eddie. “My ex-husband was always searching for a get-rich-quick scheme. He never had a real job the entire time we were married. That left me to earn everything we needed. It wasn’t much of a partnership.”

At the mention of Eddie, she noticed RJ’s expression harden. The scar she’d left him was plain to see. The back of her eyes burned. “I was an idiot to leave you for him. I’m so sorry that I hurt you.” Setting her hand on his knee, she felt him stiffen, so she let go.

Bob ran through the room, now back to his original tan color. RJ narrowed his eyes at the feline. “Wasn’t that the cat —”

“The dye wears off quickly.” She tipped her chin at Emily, grooming herself atop the cat tree in the corner. “You know cats. They clean themselves constantly.”

“Hmm.”

*Nuts.* *I should have said it was a different cat, which would have been more believable.* Change the subject.

Laura folded her hands on her lap. “So, what do you do for fun?” At his puzzled expression, she elaborated. “You said that it’s okay to work hard as long as you do fun stuff as well. Do you have hobbies or other interests?”

One side of his mouth lifted in a sexy grin. “You could say that I’ve got *other interests*.”

Did that mean a woman? Or perhaps multiple women? Her mood clunked at the notion.

“I compete in several marksmanship contests every year.” He dropped her gaze. “And also in baking competitions at fairs around the state.”

She held back a chuckle as she imagined RJ with a bunch of little old ladies at a bake-off. “So you shoot, and you bake. You sound like the perfect man.”

That earned her a laugh. “You think so?” His stare held a new intensity.

Her mouth went dry. Desire curled through her senses. But all too soon, the familiar fear crept in. She didn’t trust herself around RJ. She bolted off the sofa. “Now that Bailey’s left town for a while, Jet and I should be safe. So, I won’t keep you any longer. You’ve already given us so much of your time.”

When RJ made no move to leave, she folded her arms over her chest.

After several beats, he cleared his throat and then stood. “I guess that’s my cue to leave.”

She gave him a tight smile and waited as he started toward the foyer. Watching him leave, she mentally kicked herself. Damn. What was wrong with her? A hot, available man was clearly interested in her, but she didn’t even have the courage to kiss him.

At least she wouldn’t end up with a broken heart, or worse—hurting a sweet guy who deserved so much more.

## Chapter Five

RJ set his gun-cleaning kit on the workbench in his garage Sunday evening. He dropped the magazine from his Glock 45 and worked the slide twice to ensure the weapon was unloaded. Then he removed the barrel and slide and began to clean the parts.

He couldn't stop thinking about Laura. Had she set the security system? Made sure every door was locked?

For God's sake, Laura was a brilliant woman. Of course, she'd taken every precaution. He couldn't be every town resident's savior. However, Laura was hardly the average Cat's Paw Cove citizen. She was the mayor, the highest elected official in the city.

It was more than that, though. He cared about Laura, and she might be in danger.

His thoughts drifted back in time to Afghanistan. *The Taliban had just launched a major offensive on government buildings in Kandahar. He'd begged Halla to leave the city, to return to her family's home in the Baluchi Valley region. But she'd refused.*

*"My work is too important, my love," she'd said. "I am one of only three translators still here. I'll be fine. We'll be together soon. I promise."*

It had been their last conversation. His jaw tightened. If only he'd acted upon that gut feeling he'd had about Halla.

Those instincts had helped him be a better cop after leaving the military. And now they were needling him, pushing him to go and check up on Laura.

He reassembled the Glock and noted the time. Would she still be awake? Hell, she was likely working, knowing Laura. But, just in case, he texted her.

"Are you doing all right?" he wrote.

The reply came so fast, assuring him he hadn't awakened her. "Fine. Watching a stupid reality TV show."

He shook his head. “Madame Mayor, I never pegged you as that type.” He finished with a smiley face emoji.

“And I never pegged you as the emoji type,” she responded.

“Touche!” He was about to return his phone to his pocket until he saw that she was writing something back.

“I think reality shows are incredibly idiotic. I hoped that this one would cure my insomnia. No luck, though.”

“Have you tried counting sheep?” he texted back. “Or warm milk?” He was hardly an expert when it came to insomnia. The instant his head hit the pillow, he was asleep.

“Done and done.”

At least he now knew that she was safe. Still, he couldn’t shake his apprehension. So, he put away the gun-cleaning supplies and then headed inside for a quick shower. Half an hour later, he headed over to Seaside Hills and parked across the street from Laura’s house with a large cold brew coffee and a few of his homemade apple turnovers to keep him company.

He reclined the seat and scanned the sky for the moon, which was barely a sliver tonight.

Movement on the other side of the street caught his eye—a dark-clad figure moving slowly around the side of Laura’s house. Quietly, he left his car and headed after the person. As he closed the distance between them, RJ stepped behind an oak tree and watched the other man climb through Laura’s hedges.

RJ turned on his flashlight and trained it on the intruder. “Hold it right there, pal.”

The man gasped as he stood.

As RJ approached him, he studied the man’s face—and it was familiar. It was that retired baseball star. “Heath?”

Heath shielded his eyes. “Yes, is that you, Sheriff?”

“What are you doing out here at this hour?”

“This is the only time I have to run,” he replied. “With two kids under three, we don’t get much sleep, let alone time to exercise. I take it where I can find it.”

RJ scratched his head. “Thought I saw you climbing through the hedges.”

Heath chuckled. “One of my earbuds fell out. I was hoping to find it.”

RJ relaxed his shoulders and let go of the breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. “Have you seen anyone else out tonight?”

“Just you, brother. Why are you out here at this time of night? Something happen in the neighborhood?”

RJ hesitated a moment, then decided that it wouldn’t hurt to tell Heath his reason for being there. “We saw a prowler at the mayor’s house last week.”

Heath’s brow knitted. “Is she okay?”

Nodding, he glanced at Laura’s house. “Thankfully, the guy didn’t get in. I’m sure the perpetrator is long gone. I’m just following up, erring on the side of caution.”

“We all appreciate your dedication, Sheriff.”

RJ clapped the other man on the shoulder. “Give Tori my best.”

Heath waved as he started jogging away. “Will do. Let me know if you find a black earbud.”

He returned to his car and settled in. The sweet aroma of apple turnovers called to him. He ate two, then considered the third, but if he had to give chase any time soon, another pastry would slow him down to a crawl. So, he zipped the plastic bag and shoved it back into his soft-sided lunchbox.

When his eyelids grew heavy, he turned up the radio and played Disco music to help him stay alert. But even with the blaring beat, his body kept trying to trick him into sleep.

Banging on his passenger side window roused RJ out of his catnap. So much for watching Laura’s house all night.



At least it was still dark outside, so he hadn't slept until morning.

She stood next to his car bearing a plate of...maybe cookies. Upon closer examination, RJ found the treats to be brownies.

"What are you doing out here, RJ?" Laura passed him the treats.

He scrubbed a hand over his face and stifled a yawn. "Would you believe that I was out for an evening drive and got tired?"

She raised a skeptical eyebrow. "Try again."

"Are those for me?" He stuffed it in his mouth, which afforded him a few moments to think up another excuse. God, they were awful. She must have doubled or tripled the baking soda. And the texture was off—like way off. Parts were super soft, and others were powdery.

Choking down the rest of the piece of brownie, he wiped his mouth.

Laura folded her arms over her chest. "I'm waiting. Are you going to tell me why you're camped out on my street?"

Pushing back against the headrest, he bristled. "I was worried about you, and I know you wouldn't have agreed to let one of my deputies surveil your place."

"Right you are about that." She narrowed her eyes at him. "So, you figured you'd do it yourself, which would be easier for me to accept?"

"No, my thinking was that you'd be sleeping, and you'd never know."

She let out a laugh. "Well, thanks for your honesty at least." Bending down, she leaned on his car door. "I have an alarm system now, remember?" She stepped back and crooked her finger at him. "Come on. Get out."

Confused, he hesitated. Then he opened his door and climbed out of his car.

Laura stepped closer, hooked her hand around his neck, pulled him down, and gave him a peck on the cheek. “I appreciate you checking up on...my house. It’s very sweet, but not necessary.”

He was too stunned by her kiss to say anything. And if he were honest with himself, more than a little turned on. Which was nuts because it was merely a chaste kiss. Laura was just expressing her gratitude, wasn’t she? Or had it meant more?

She rubbed her hand over his arm. “You’re clearly too tired to drive since I discovered you fast asleep.”

He lived less than ten minutes away and knew he could make it there if he wanted to, but who was he to refuse such an invitation? “You’re sure?”

She rolled her eyes. “Just to be clear, I’m offering you my guest room for a nap.”

“Right, of course.” He followed her inside and then upstairs to a small room with a daybed, a television, and a small dresser.

Walking past him to the closet, she pulled open the louver doors and reached up to the shelf, but the blanket was just out of her range. RJ closed the distance between them and brushed past her to get it. When she tried to move out of the way, she instead lost her balance and fell against his chest.

They both stilled, their bodies touching. His heart pounded. Laura’s lips parted as she stared up into his eyes.

Something came over him—lust, need, loneliness—and he cupped her face in his hand, stroking his thumb over her silky skin. A sweet moan broke from her lips, and he couldn’t resist, not anymore. He pressed a kiss to her mouth, and when she softened against him, he deepened that kiss, tasting and exploring.

Laura ran her hands over his shoulders, and together, they inched their way toward the bed until he sat on it, pulling her onto his lap, facing him. A decade had passed since the last time he’d kissed her, but she was even prettier now, with

some years on her. Now, she was accomplished and smart and savvy—a force to be reckoned with.

And that was damn sexy.

But just as his libido was roaring to life, so was the fear. Laura wasn't some booty call. She meant something to him, and that was the part that could get him into trouble—that part where his feelings entered into it.

Before he had a chance to unpack those feelings, she climbed off of him and took several steps away. She cleared her throat. “Sorry, that was probably my fault.”

“I'm at least as guilty as you.”

The desire he'd found on her face only moments before was gone as if a curtain had closed on her emotions.

Standing in the doorway, she tipped her chin to her left. “There's a bathroom next door. If you need anything, I'll be downstairs in my home office.”

RJ combed his fingers through his hair and sat up straighter. “Do you ever sleep?”

She shrugged. “I've never needed much.” With that, she disappeared.

RJ breathed in the scent she'd left in her wake, like fresh berries and cream. He had to keep her and Jet safe, and better to do that from inside the house than outside.

He kicked off his boots then stretched out on the bed and turned on the TV, keeping the volume low. Somehow, he managed to stay awake for an entire episode of a competitive baking show. A string bean of a woman won with her Rapunzel cake—a tall tower with the long-haired maiden draping her golden locks almost to the base. RJ had to admit—that was the most impressive, and way beyond his skills.

One-by-one. Laura's cats had slipped in and made themselves at home. The two striped tabbies curled up together at the foot of the bed, while the other two sat on opposite sides of the room.

A little while after sunrise, he got up and tiptoed downstairs. Noticing light spilling from a doorway off the living room, he peeked inside and found Laura asleep at her desk. The big chair seemed to swallow her tiny frame.

She let out the sweetest sigh. A little needle of guilt poked at him as he stood there watching her, yet his feet refused to move. He ached to run his fingers through her hair, to stroke her smooth skin.

The baby's gentle cries pulled his attention from the mother. Quietly as he could, he left the room and headed back upstairs. The nursery door was open just a crack. Praying that he wouldn't frighten the infant, he took a step inside.

Jet widened his eyes at RJ, then thankfully, gave him a tentative smile.

“Good morning, little guy.”

Jet cooed and reached out his arms to RJ.

Something inside him softened as he lifted the child out of his crib and carried him to the changing table. He scanned the set-up—a hanging tent sort of thing that held clean diapers; a tub of baby wipes; and a cylindrical contraption that he guessed was for the soiled ones. How hard could this be? After all, RJ ran a police force. He'd personally solved hundreds of cases.

But this *was* hard. It took him what seemed like forever to unsnap Jet's pajamas and get him into a fresh diaper. When he started to put the baby's clothes back on, the diaper fell open. He scratched his head. “I don't suppose you can tell me how this works, huh, kid?”

The boy just stared up at him with big, innocent blue eyes.

*I will not get attached to this child.*

RJ tightened the Velcro closures, but the damn thing popped open again.

“How about you leave that to me.”

Laura's voice drew his attention to the doorway. Even the remnants of black make-up under her eyes didn't detract from her natural prettiness.

RJ backed up a step and lifted his arms in surrender. "It's all yours."

He watched as Laura fastened the diaper tightly around the baby's belly, then grabbed a one-piece outfit from a lower shelf and deftly dressed her son in a matter of seconds. "That was impressive," he said.

Laura laughed. "If you say so." She took the baby into her arms and met RJ's stare. "How do you take your coffee?"

Waving away her offer, he took a step toward the hallway. "I appreciate it, but I've got to run home and grab a shower. I'll see you at town hall later."

Her smile slipped a little. "Yeah, see you there. Oh, Kendrick messaged me. He's gathered a file of letters and emails from a few disgruntled citizens."

RJ nodded. "Thanks, I'd like to have a look at those."

As he left her house, he glanced around the neighborhood. A middle-aged woman strode past in a jogging suit, and an elderly man watered his lawn across the street. Thankfully, everything looked copacetic and safe.

On his drive home, he thought about Laura, about that hot kiss. He'd screwed up years ago by not fighting for Laura. He'd merely let Eddie steal her away from him.

Only now did he realize how much he'd lost. Letting her walk away had been the biggest mistake of his life.

## Chapter Six

Laura left Jet at her uncle Paul's house, which was a veritable fortress. Paul had retired from the Orlando Police Department just last year and had moved back to Cat's Paw Cove to be closer to family.

His wife, Aunt Joanie, shooed Laura out the door. "Jet will be fine, sweetheart. Your brother called this morning and told us all about what's been going on. Bailey is already itching to come back to town, but he wants to keep her there through the week."

"Good idea."

A few minutes later, she pulled into the Employees Only lot behind the town hall and parked her car in the spot marked, "Mayor." She smiled to herself when she noticed RJ's vehicle was already there. Knowing she'd be seeing him soon, she felt giddy.

For heaven's sake. She wasn't some middle school girl with a crush. Squaring her shoulders, she marched inside and headed upstairs to her office. "Good morning," she said to her assistant as she strode past his desk. "I hope you had a good weekend."

"Thanks," Kendrick replied. "I did. Oh, and I've got those letters you wanted. Shall I bring them in?"

"Yes, and a cup of coffee, please."

Her phone dinged as she stashed her purse in the bottom drawer. She took it out and saw a notification from her home security system app. Swallowing hard, she opened the link. A video of her back door popped up. A man jiggled the doorknob, then tried the window next to it. In the next frame, he disappeared from view.

A chill slid down her spine. She texted RJ.

"Would you please come to my office ASAP?"

Less than a minute later, he practically ran in. "Are you okay?"

Turning her phone to him, she played the clip.

He scrubbed a hand over his face. “Is Jet at the house?”

“Thankfully, no. And the alarm is on. Apparently, this guy wasn’t able to get in.”

RJ took out his cell and punched a few numbers. “Robin, get an unmarked unit over to the mayor’s house. Have them look for signs of an attempted break-in.”

Kendrick came in and set a file folder on Laura’s desk. “Here are those letters you asked for.”

“Did you read through them?” she asked her assistant.

Kendrick nodded. “Only five of them are on the hostile side. I’ve put those in the front. They’re worthy of a look.”

Laura opened the file and scanned the notes. Two were rants about downtown traffic, which was amusing since the local roads stayed clear every day except during the Christmas parade. The next one she read referred to her as a bitch due to her part in the town council’s refusal to grant a building permit for a hot dog restaurant directly on the beach.

The last two letters were more concerning than the others. Both took hostile tones, attacking her for various longstanding policies that her predecessors had put into place. One was typed, and the other handwritten. And neither was signed. She handed them to RJ.

“Do we have the envelopes these came in?” she asked Kendrick.

He shook his head. “Sorry, boss.”

Darn it. “What about a date? Any idea how long ago we received these?”

“Yes, all correspondence is logged when it arrives. The two the sheriff is holding both came a couple of months ago.”

“Hmm. You think they’re from the same person?”

“I’d bet on it,” RJ replied. He held his fist to his mouth for several beats. “We have everyone who attends town council meetings sign in, right?”

She shrugged. “Maybe. Yes, I think we do.” She glanced at Kendrick, who nodded.

“Would you pull up the meeting minutes from the April and May meetings, Kendrick?” the sheriff asked. “It was one of those months when a middle-aged man got pretty agitated. One of my deputies had to escort him out.”

“I’m on it.” Kendrick hurried from the room. “This will probably take an hour or two,” he called from the outer office.

Her stomach growled at her. Darn it. She’d forgotten to eat breakfast. “I’m starving. You want anything from Purry’s Diner?” she asked RJ.

He gestured toward the door. “Let’s go.”

In truth, she hadn’t considered eating at the diner, but that was a better idea than take-out, especially if he’d join her. She grabbed her laptop. “I’ll drive.” Normally she’d have opted to walk, but today, she didn’t want to take the time.

When they got to the parking lot, she clicked her fob to unlock the doors.

RJ went to the passenger side and bent down to look at something.

“Did you drop something?” she asked.

“Come here, Laura.”

His tone gave her pause. He pointed to some scratches along the top of the passenger door. “Is this new?”

She gulped. “I think it is.”

“Looks like someone tried to get into your car, someone who hasn’t got a lot of experience at it. Or they could have been in a hurry.”

Shuddering, she hugged her arms around her body. Fear wasn’t an emotion she cared for. Nor was it something she was accustomed to in her life.

RJ pulled her against him. “I’m not going to let anything happen to you. Or to Jet. I promise.”



Despite priding herself on being a strong, independent woman, RJ's embrace felt good and safe. But she refused to allow herself to get too comfortable in his arms for long. After a moment, she backed away and stood up taller. "I'm all right."

RJ took out his phone and made a call. "Robin, the mayor's car is parked behind the building. Looks like someone tried to break into Laura Lancaster's silver Outback. Would you get someone down here to take prints off of it? Thanks."

He squeezed her shoulder. "Come on. We'll eat something while my guys work on this." Leading her to his car, he set a comforting hand on the small of her back, which felt nice.

When he turned into the parking lot at Purry's a few minutes later, Laura huffed. "I'm not sure I can eat now. My stomach's tied up in knots."

RJ shut off the motor and swiveled to face her. "We're going to figure this out, Laura. In the meantime, I'm going to keep you safe. You've got nothing to worry about. Trust me."

She wished she were the trusting type. "You know, when I was a kid, my mom got very sick—breast cancer. My dad kept telling my brother and me that Mom would recover, that everything was going to be all right." Her eyes filled at the memory of her mom. "Only it wasn't. She died a couple of months later. Things don't always work out the way you think."

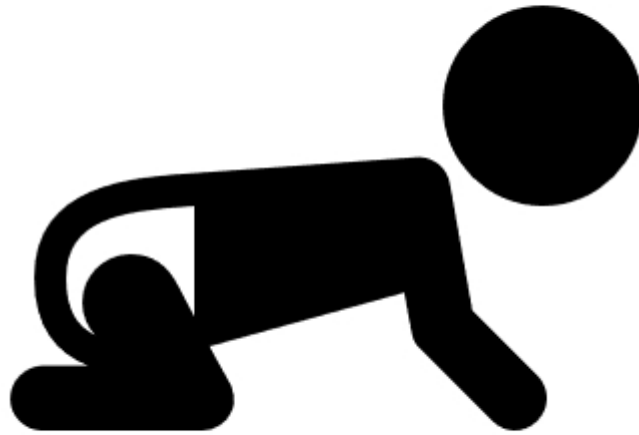
He cupped her face in his hands. "This is different. We have more control of this situation."

Their eyes met. He reeled her in for a slow, sultry kiss. Desire curled through her, wrapping around her senses. She breathed in his masculine scent, felt the scratch of his cheek against her skin.

When was the last time she'd wanted a man so badly? But as much as she yearned to be with RJ, was this a good idea? They worked together. And in truth, when it came to her

love life, she had a history of making terrible decisions. Perhaps this was another.

Centering a hand on his ridiculously muscular chest, reluctantly, she nudged him away. “We can’t do this, RJ.”



RJ let go of her. Did she feel as though he was taking advantage of her vulnerable state? Or was she just not into him? Maybe the timing was all wrong. He recalled how he’d felt when she’d broken up with him years ago. Whatever her reason for pulling away now, he had no desire to relive that pain he’d felt in the past.

Hell, she had a kid now. What was he thinking? Much as he’d grown to like Jet recently, kids complicated things.

Once upon a time, he’d been sure he wanted children. When Halla had told him that she was pregnant, the prospect of becoming a father had caught him off guard. He’d been young and they were living in a war zone. As the weeks had passed, he’d grown more and more excited. He couldn’t wait to take Halla out of Afghanistan, to get her to safety. They’d just begun to make those plans when she’d been killed. But he hadn’t just lost Halla—he’d lost their child, too. That loss was just as devastating as Halla’s death.

Shaking off the brutal memories, he shuddered.

The tension in the car had grown thick. He pushed open his door and got out. “I want a big, juicy burger. What about you?”

Laura sat there for several beats before joining him. “Something sweet, I think.”

They took a booth in the back of the diner that gave RJ a good view of the front door. His favorite waitress, Charlene, came over bearing menus.

“Afternoon, Sheriff, madam mayor.” The brunette gave them both a smile.

Neither he nor Laura opened a menu.

“Just a slice of pecan pie for me, please,” Laura told Charlene. “And a tuxedo milkshake.”

Wow, she wasn’t kidding about wanting something sweet.

“What I’d give for your fast metabolism,” the waitress commented.

“I’ll have a cheeseburger and fries. And a tuxedo milkshake sounds good, too.” He handed Charlene the menus.

When they were alone, Laura let out an audible breath. “So, what do we do when we find out who wrote me those letters?”

He sat up straighter. “*We* don’t do anything. I’ll go and speak to them.”

Laura huffed.

“I’m the law in this town.”

She made a show of rolling her slim shoulders, trying—but failing—to appear tough. “I didn’t mean to step on your toes, Mr. Sheriff.”

Reaching across the table, he covered her hand with his. “It’s my job to keep you safe.”

“I know.” She gave him a sweet smile before taking back her hand. “And I appreciate it.” Exhaling loudly, she leaned her head back against the sparkly red vinyl booth.

“What is it?” he asked.

“I was thinking that I should probably let my ex know what’s going on.”

The mention of Eddie was like a splash of icy water. “I guess.”

“What?” she asked. “You don’t agree.”

RJ shrugged. “If you think this could affect his child, then you should say something.

Even if Eddie was a jerk.

Picking up her cell, she winced. “Kendrick sent me something.” She monkeyed with her phone for a moment before showing it to him.

RJ made the image larger. “Must be the sign-in sheet from one of the town council meetings.” He read aloud the two names Kendrick had circled. “Roger Smith, and Leonard Hillman. Would you ask Kendrick to forward this to Robin? I’ll have her see if we can find addresses for these guys.”

While Laura called her assistant, RJ phoned Robin. Their food arrived as they finished their respective conversations.

“Don’t be surprised, or disappointed if this doesn’t lead anywhere,” he told the mayor.

Laura nodded.

RJ took a bite of his burger, but it wasn’t nearly as exciting as watching Laura dig into her pecan pie. She shut her eyes and moaned her delight. Then she licked her lips, and he couldn’t help but follow every slow, sensual swipe of her tongue.

When she caught him staring, a sexy grin lifted one corner of her mouth. Closing her lips around her straw, she

glanced up at him over her milkshake and waggled her eyebrows.

They'd had such a strong attraction years ago when they'd dated, which they clearly still had. So why had Laura thrown him over for Eddie? The question had bothered him for years. Absently, he toyed with his straw.

"RJ?" Laura's voice drew him out of his reflection. "Hmm?"

"What's on your mind? You seem lost in thought."

*Just ask her.*

Clearing his throat, he met her stare. "I've been wondering..."

"What?" She forked up a little bite of pie and ate it.

"Why'd you choose Eddie?" There, he'd said it.

She dropped his gaze and her lips bunched to one side for several moments. "I've asked myself that question a lot lately."

Good. She'd obviously been thinking about him.

"Eddie has this gift of making himself into whatever someone wants to see. He can be incredibly charming...when he wants to be. And this is going to sound really silly, but we have the exact same birthmark." She pushed aside her blouse and showed him a small red diamond-shaped birthmark over her collarbone. "Eddie's is on his shoulder. I'd never seen another one just like mine. I guess I took that as some kind of divine sign."

RJ smirked. "Seriously?"

"I know, I know. I told you it sounds stupid now. But I was young." Lines fanned out from the corners of her eyes. "And..." She exhaled loudly. "You were still in the Marines then. I was afraid to get too attached to someone who was leaving. I lost my mom when I was a teenager. I didn't want to take the chance that I'd lose someone else I loved...or could have loved."

“I wish you’d shared those thoughts with me back then.”

Her eyes glistened. “Me too. Eddie was a huge mistake. I should have known.”

“You were young.”

She nodded. “I saw signs early on. I mean, Eddie didn’t like my cat. That alone should have warned me away.”

They both smiled.

“I’m glad that you’re back in my life.” She sipped her milkshake.

What exactly had she meant by that? Before he could ask, his phone rang. Clearing his throat, he answered. “Yeah?”

“Hey, Sheriff,” Robin said on the other end of the line. “One name was a dead end, but I’ve got an address for you on the other. Want me to dispatch a deputy out there?”

“Text it to me,” he told her before disconnecting. “We need to go,” he told Laura.

Eyes wide, Laura quickly ate another bite of her pie. “What is it?”

“I’ll go talk to this person after I get you back to your office.” Grabbing a fry, he took out his wallet and set twenty-five dollars on the table. Then he stood and waved over the waitress. “Thanks, Charlene. Duty calls.”

“Come on, RJ, your money’s no good here,” she said.

As he always did, he insisted on paying for their meal over the waitress’s protestations.

When they got back to Town Hall, he took Laura to his office rather than hers.

Robin—sporting a new silver hair color, looked up at him from her desk. “Hey.” Then she gave Laura a tight smile. “Mayor Lancaster, nice to see you.”

“You, too, Captain,” Laura replied.

“I’ve got an address on Leonard Hillman.” Robin gestured at her computer screen. “But Roger Smith, well, the address he gave is non-existent.”

RJ frowned. “Name’s likely fake as well.”

“Want me to come with you?” Robin stood up.

“I’m coming, too,” Laura chimed in.

He shook his head. “Absolutely not. You’re staying right here.” To Robin, he said, “Who can we assign to the mayor?”

“Deputy Monroe is here.” Robin picked up her phone.

Laura folded her arms over her chest and huffed. “Do I even have a say in this?”

“No, ma’am.” He met her stare. “With all due respect, this is a law enforcement matter, and I’m the lawman in charge here.”

“But RJ—”

“No buts, Laura,” he cut her off. “You’re the mayor, and it’s my job to keep you safe for this town, and for your son.”

That shut her up.

After he’d explained to Deputy Monroe what was going on, he took Robin with him and headed out to find Leonard Hillman. They drove along Sherwood Boulevard to the outskirts of town.

“There’s the street.” Robin pointed to the right.

RJ turned and followed the road past a few dilapidated trailers and empty lots to the end.

“This must be it.” He parked next to a small ranch-style home that had seen better days. Two overflowing trashcans sat in the back of the carport behind an ancient Toyota with flat tires. Next to the car, there was an old, but probably functional Honda motorcycle.

As he got out of his car, he gestured for Robin to check around the back. RJ knocked on the front door, but no one answered. “Mr. Hillman, are you here?” RJ called.

No answer. He waited, then tried again with no response.

Robin came around the side of the building. “There’s something back here you ought to take a look at, Sheriff.”

Following her to the backyard, he made note of the desolation of the spot. The next house was a quarter of a mile back. If you wanted to isolate yourself, this was the place.

“Here.” Robin tipped her chin at a window. “Take a look.”

Cupping his hands over the dingy glass, he peered inside. The first thing he saw was a photo of Laura taped to the wall. Several newspaper articles were taped up nearby, as well as other pictures he couldn’t quite make out.

His jaw automatically tightened.

“Looks like probable cause to me,” Robin said. “Considering that someone might be stalking the mayor.”

“Yeah, let’s go inside.”

She pointed around the corner. “There’s a flimsy door over there.”

It only took them a moment to break through the back door. The place was overrun with cockroaches and stunk of rotten food.

“Did you find anything out about Leonard?” he asked Robin.

She shrugged. “Only an expired Texas driver’s license. Nothing in the last five years.”

“Do you have the photo on your phone?”

Robin stopped and pulled up an email message. She showed him the picture. “This is him.”



Tall, thin, dark hair and eyes. Could be the same guy, but it was hard to tell. "Thanks."

They quickly found the room they'd seen from the outside. One wall was covered with newspaper articles about local politics and politicians. Laura seemed to be the guy's favorite subject. He stepped closer and noticed something he hadn't through the window.

The largest photo of Laura had small, vertical slits in it as if someone had repeatedly stabbed it with a knife.

His blood ran cold.

## Chapter Seven

“Absolutely not.” Laura folded her arms over her chest. She was the town’s mayor for heaven’s sake, and she refused to hide away in fear.

RJ leaned against her desk, frowning at her. “Please, Laura. We have no idea where this guy is. He could show up at any time and do who knows what?”

She paced the floor of her office. “Staying at a safe house sends the message to my constituents that I’m afraid.” Which would make her appear weak and vulnerable. No, she wouldn’t do it.

“No one will know.” He hooked her arm, stopping her from moving. “The point of a safe house is that no one knows your whereabouts. It’s not as if we’d announce that the mayor is in a safe house.”

She shook her head. “I promised to be accessible to everyone in this town, and I plan to keep doing that.”

RJ lifted an eyebrow. “And *I* promised to protect you. You need to let me do my job. Until we can find this guy, this Leonard Hillman, I can’t guarantee that he won’t try to hurt you.”

Shuddering, she leaned against him and found comfort in his strength. “I won’t run away and hide. That’s letting fear win.”

He ground out a curse. “Then I’m putting an officer on you, twenty-four-seven.”

“RJ—”

He touched a finger to her lips. “No argument. Look at this.” Holding up his phone, he showed her a picture of a newspaper photo of her hanging on a wall. “This was inside Hillman’s house. I think he stabbed it.”

Laura gulped. “My photo?”

“Yup. I don’t want to scare you, but you’ve got to take this seriously.”

Huffing, she nodded. “Fine.”

When his cell buzzed, he answered. “Hey, Robin. ... Damn it. Who do we have?” He nodded. “No, let’s assign Monroe to watch Hillman’s place.” Glancing at Laura, he said, “I’ll handle that myself.” He returned his cell to his pocket. “I’ve got four deputies out with the flu. Looks like you’re stuck with me as your bodyguard.”

Despite herself, warm relief settled over her. And maybe a smidge of excitement. “So, what does that mean?”

He sat on the sofa and propped up his feet on the coffee table. “It means that we’re now roomies.” A big grin lifted one side of his mouth. “I’ll have Robin stay outside your office the rest of the afternoon while I work on locating Hillman. Then we’ll pick up Jet from your uncle and head home...to your place.”

Her stomach did a tiny flip. “I suppose I can live with that. Just until we find Mr. Hillman.”

As soon as RJ left her office, she picked up the phone and called Eddie. It was about time she let him know what was going on. He didn’t pick up so she left him a message to call her. Then she focused on tackling the growing pile of work on her desk.

A knock on her door drew her attention. “Yes?”

RJ came in. “Ready to go?”

She glanced up at the clock on the wall. Geez, she’d been at it for more than three hours. Gathering the papers on her desk, she straightened them. “Sure. Did you find out anything?”

His frown answered her question. “He’ll turn up. And when he does, we’ll grab him.”

“You’re sure he’s the one?”

“No, but he’s the best suspect at this point.” Gesturing toward the door, he waited.

They headed to her house, with a stop on the way at her uncle’s place to pick up Jet.

Uncle Paul pulled Laura aside in the kitchen. “Jet was doing some strange things today, Laura.”

She gulped as she hooked his arm and ushered him into the pantry. “Like what?” she asked her uncle.

Paul raised an eyebrow. “Kid’s got a lot of Lancaster in him. I’d lay odds that he moved all of his toys around when I left the room for about three seconds. I’m talking like fifteen toys.”

That was pretty mild, at least. “Anything else?”

Her uncle scratched his head. “I could have sworn that his stuffed octopus was dancing for a few moments.”

“Yikes.”

Paul squeezed Laura’s shoulder. “So he’s done this kind of thing before?”

She nodded mutely.

He tipped his chin at RJ, who was in the dining room holding Jet, talking to Laura’s aunt. “Does your boyfriend know?”

“No, to both. RJ and I are just friends.”

Uncle Paul snickered. “Sure you are, sweetheart.”

What if Jet did something in front of RJ? Laura rubbed the bridge of her nose.

“You’re worrying for nothing,” Paul said. “Half the folks in this town have one magical gift or another. And if their name is Lancaster, the number is more like seventy percent. The sheriff must’ve run into that before.”

“You think?”

He shrugged. “And if he hasn’t, well, then he’ll learn something new.”

That was one way to look at it. She only wished she could be as nonchallant about it as her uncle.

RJ carried Jet in his car seat, then strapped him into the backseat as if he’d been doing it for years. When they arrived

at Laura's house, he took the baby inside, talking to him, and stopping to toss Jet in the air every few steps.

Seeing RJ's softer side touched something deep inside her. He was wonderful with Jet and sweet, a natural.

Inside, Laura set down her laptop and her briefcase on the coffee table. "How about I make us some dinner?"

RJ froze. "Please, no."

"No?" She took the baby from him.

He cleared his throat. "I mean, I'd like to cook. Or we can order something."

She waved off his offer. "You cooked last time. It's my turn."

RJ closed the distance between them and rubbed her arm. "It's been a long week, and not an easy one for you. Let me order a couple of dishes from Medici."

"Medici?" How did he know it was her favorite Italian restaurant? "I do love their Chicken Piccata."

"And those garlic knots." He rubbed his flat belly. "My stomach is growling at the thought." Bending down, he picked up Carol, who purred and nuzzled his face.

"You're becoming very popular with my cats." She thought back to how Eddie was with her pets. He'd barely tolerated them, and she'd suspected that he'd been mean to them on more than one occasion since two of the cats hid every time Eddie came anywhere near them.

"I like all animals." Emily rubbed against his shin. "And they usually like me, too."

"I see that." A spot of green in Jet's blond hair caught her eye. She sniffed it and detected the green bean baby food she'd sent with him to her aunt and uncle's place that morning. "If you don't mind ordering the food, I'm going to give Jet a bath." She kicked off her pumps, then headed upstairs with the baby.

After she'd run water in the tub, she dumped in Jet's favorite bath toys—a rubber duck, a turtle, and a fish. Then she set the baby in his bath seat ring and began washing him.

Jet laughed as Laura gently splashed him. She rinsed the baby shampoo from his hair and reached for a soft towel. But when she started to get him out of the baby bath, she noticed that his trio of toys danced in a circle on the surface of the water.

*Here we go again.*

Keeping her voice down, she implored her son to stop animating his toys. “The duck, fish, and turtle are sleepy, Jet. Can we let them rest now?” Just until RJ left. The last thing she wanted to do right now was to explain to a muggle that her child was magical.

Jet apparently lost interest in the dancing toys after a few minutes. Thank goodness! Laura wrapped him in a towel and dressed him in pajamas.

RJ poked his head into the nursery. “Food will be here any minute. Do you need any help?”

“I'll set the table.” Laura was about to put Jet in his playpen when the baby reached out for RJ.

“Let me,” he said, taking the infant from her.

Laura was surprised to see her son ask for anyone other than her. Jet was such a momma's boy since Eddie had hardly been around him. “I just have to put him in his pajamas.”

“I can do it.”

Hesitantly, she eyed the two of them. Jet seemed so comfortable with RJ. “Um, okay. I'll just be a minute. Let me know if you need help.”

“We'll be fine. Won't we?” he asked Jet.

The baby giggled and squirmed.

“Pajamas are in the second drawer,” she told RJ.

As Laura set the table, she kept waiting for RJ to call out to her, but he never did. When she'd finished, she went

upstairs and peeked into the nursery.

Jet snuggled into RJ's lap as RJ read him a Dr. Seuss book.

"Guu," the baby said as he pointed to the book.

Howard the cat jumped onto the back of the chair and made himself comfortable on RJ's shoulder. Undeterred, RJ continued reading.

Laura's chest constricted. She stood there for several minutes, just watching, enjoying the sweet scene.

When RJ finished reading the book, Laura took the baby from him. Pressing a kiss on Jet's blond head, she laid him in the crib, then quietly ushered both RJ and the cat from the room with her.

"Dinner's in the oven," she told RJ as they descended the stairs.

"In the oven?"

"I can't leave anything out where the cats can get it, or they will," she explained.

In the kitchen, RJ retrieved the takeout bag and brought it to the table while Laura poured them each a glass of burgundy.

Over dinner, they talked about everything and nothing. He told her about the Afghan translator who'd stolen his heart, and how she'd been killed by an IED. Laura's heart ached for his loss.

When he asked her why she'd left Eddie, she was honest and explained how he'd tried to bilk her dying grandmother out of a fortune.

"He was the biggest mistake I ever made," she admitted. "But I can't say I regret him, because...well because I have Jet. And he's the most wonderful thing that ever happened to me."

RJ tapped his glass to hers, but only drank a tiny sip. "I'd have to agree with you on that."

She poured herself another glass of wine. “Want more?”

He covered his glass with his hand. “I’m technically on duty.”

She nodded. “Any word on Hillman?”

“He’s not returned to his house yet.”

Gulping, she glanced at the picture window.

RJ covered her hand with his. “I’ve got you.”

Despite the potential danger, she felt completely safe. RJ was here with her. He captured her stare and held it. Sparks ricocheted between them. Heart pounding, she got up and closed the distance between them. Standing over him, she smoothed her hands over his hair.

He guided her onto his lap and kissed her, hard and demanding. Estrogen flooded her senses and heightened her need. She yearned to trust him, to believe that he wouldn’t hurt her as all the previous men in her life had. No, not all. RJ had been the one guy who hadn’t hurt her. She’d rejected him all those years ago. Had she ever really stopped caring about him? Wanting him?

It had been too long since she’d let someone hold her; since she’d allowed herself to take pleasure in a man. What was the harm in indulging, just for tonight? When this whole stalker thing was finished, they could go back to being coworkers and friends.

Tonight she needed him to be her lover.



“Let’s go upstairs,” Laura murmured against his ear.



He wanted her so badly, but this was more than lust. Plenty of women had satisfied his carnal needs over the years—women he'd kept at arm's reach. The others had been completely unsuitable by design. Last thing he needed was to fall in love and get his heart smashed to bits. Nope. Been there, done that. Never again.

Laura was different, though. Keeping his feelings out of it—as he did with the others—would be a lot more difficult. Because he'd always had feelings for her. He'd done a pretty good job of keeping those emotions in check, acting as if they were coworkers and nothing more. Denying—even to himself—that she meant more to him.

But, oh, she was tempting him tonight. She wriggled on his lap and kissed his neck. Need quickened his blood. His fingers itched to touch her. His mouth watered to taste her.

For more than a decade he'd suppressed his longing for her. When she started rocking against him, he couldn't resist anymore. He kissed her neck, her throat, her lips, her shoulder.

Laura disengaged herself and eased herself off of his lap. Slowly, seductively, she unbuttoned her blouse and dropped it on the sofa. Then she shimmied out of her skirt and stood before him in a peach-colored lace bra and matching panties.

Extending her hand, she raised her brow in an unspoken, undeniable invitation. He was helpless to resist. All he had to do was to keep from falling for her.

When they reached her bedroom, he took off his clothes and set them on an overstuffed chair.

Laura lit a candle on her nightstand, illuminating the space in a romantic glow.

Then he joined her on the four-poster bed. It smelled like her, intoxicating. Later, there'd be time for slow and tender. Passion took over.

She slid across the soft comforter, and finally, after wanting her for so long, he made love to her with abandon.

Hours later, she slept beside him, their limbs tangled together, as he stroked her silky hair. He hadn't meant to feel this way, but he was already starting to fall.

Soft morning light filtered through the curtains. The sound of Jet's whimpers alerted him to the fact that the infant was awake.

Laura didn't stir. The baby's cries grew louder, but still, Laura slept. Which was understandable. They'd made love three times.

Gently, he moved her leg off of him and slipped out of bed. After he dressed, he headed down the hall to the nursery and found Jet sitting up in his crib. The baby widened his eyes for a moment, then gave RJ an adorable smile that melted his heart.

"Ba," the infant said.

RJ lifted him from the crib and sniffed. Smelled like Jet needed a clean diaper. Glancing at the changing table, RJ gulped. He was out of his element, but hell, how hard could changing a diaper be? Finding a stack of fresh ones on the lower shelf, he examined one. "I wish you could tell me how this thing works, little one."

"Ba."

Taking off the soiled diaper provided the answers. He used the wet wipes to clean the baby's bottom, then managed to fasten the new diaper.

Jet grasped RJ's finger with his tiny hand and RJ's chest constricted. The kid's mother had already shot an arrow into RJ's heart, and now the baby was trying to do the same.

"Ba," Jet said again. Only this time, he rolled onto his side and extended his right arm toward the nearby shelf of books.

To RJ's astonishment, five or six books flew off the shelf. Gasping, he picked up the baby and hugged him to his chest. "Did you...no, there's no way."

Jet squirmed and wiggled. "Ba."

More books fell from the shelf.

RJ returned Jet to his crib then went to the shelf to investigate. No strings, no fan blowing on the spot, no reason for the books to fall other than... magic?

RJ had seen some pretty crazy things during his time as sheriff of Cat's Paw Cove, but this topped them all. Jet had definitely made those books fall—twice.

He recalled a case a couple of years ago. Jordan Vaughn told him that a dog had spoken to her and that it had given her details about the case that she couldn't possibly have known. He'd brushed off Jordan's explanation, yet it had bothered him ever since. Now, Jordan worked at Cove Cat Café, matching cats with prospective owners, and he'd overheard more than one person say that she actually spoke to the cats.

It couldn't be true, could it?

He'd heard about other weird things as well—like people traveling through time, and potions from Fiona Bell's shop that actually worked magic.

“Ba ba ba,” Jet said. The baby lifted both arms and the remaining books fell to the floor. Suddenly, one of the books on the floor slowly flew across the room and into the crib, right into Jet's waiting hands.

RJ's legs just about gave out. He practically fell into the rocking chair. Head spinning, he stood up and lifted the infant out of the crib. Then he sat back down and started reading the book.

Jet giggled and tried to bite one of the cardboard pages. RJ continued with the story. He'd almost finished when his cell buzzed.

Straightening, he tried to shake himself from the weird haze he'd been in since witnessing the baby's strange power. He answered the phone. “This is Sheriff Higgins,” he said.

“Sheriff, it's Robin,” she said. “We've got Leonard Hillman.”

## Chapter Eight

Laura woke up, alone in her bed feeling sore and stretched out in all the right ways. Wadding up a handful of the sheet in her hand, she sniffed and smelled RJ's cologne. And the memories from the night before flooded her senses—the feel of his rock-hard muscles, the taste of his tongue, the sight of his face at his moment of bliss.

But where was he? She glanced at the clock on the nightstand. Jet was always awake by now. Throwing back the covers, she sat up and shook herself fully awake. Then she grabbed a silky robe from her closet and headed to the nursery.

What she saw there stopped her in her tracks. RJ had Jet on his lap and was reading to him. Her son cooed and smiled.

Despite her reservations, Laura stood there for several moments, heart lodged in her throat at the endearing scene.

RJ glanced over at her and smiled. "Good morning."

As soon as Jet heard her voice, he reached out his tiny arms for her to take him. Crossing the room to the rocking chair, she picked up Jet and pressed a kiss on top of his blond head. "You should have gotten me up," she told RJ.

Shrugging, he closed the book. "I'm sure you don't get many opportunities to sleep in. It was no biggie." He scrubbed a hand over his face. "We need to talk."

Her pulse leaped. Was he going to dump her? Already? Tell her that he didn't want to get involved with a woman who had a kid, or some other excuse? She swallowed hard. "I'll start a pot of coffee."

RJ followed her to the kitchen and waited as she fixed a bottle for the baby, and turned on the coffee maker. After she'd set Jet in his play yard, she faced RJ. "So, what's up?"

He folded his arms over his chest. "We picked up Hillman early this morning."

She let out a sigh, and with it, a ton of the tension she'd been carrying around. "That's great."

RJ poured them each a cup of coffee, then handed one to Laura. "He's still drunk, but I'm going to question him as soon as he sobers up."

So why wasn't he more excited about this? "That's good news, right?"

Nodding, he sipped his drink. "Absolutely. Great news." But that wasn't what his eyes told her.

She sat at the table. "What's wrong, RJ?"

He stayed where he was. "We need to talk."

*Here it comes, the inevitable see-you-later talk.*

She should beat him to the punch, tell him that her life was too busy, too full for a relationship. Say that it had been fun, but it couldn't happen again.

"Jet did something this morning."

She froze, her mug inches from her mouth. Did he know what her baby could do? Had RJ witnessed it? Her stomach churned as she set down the drink.

RJ eyed her as if she were a suspect under interrogation.

*Stall.*

"Thank you so much for getting the baby up, and for changing his diaper," she gushed. "It felt so decadent to sleep so late. I hope he didn't wake you. Were you already awake when you heard him? Usually, he starts out with a tentative little whimper then works himself up into full-blown crying before I can make it in there." God, she was blathering.

RJ remained stonefaced, unmoved. "I think you know what I'm talking about."

Hanging her head, she huffed. Before she could say anything, Jet started crying. "Oh, goodness. I forgot to give him the bottle I made." She picked up Jet, grabbed the bottle from the counter, then settled into a chair to feed him.

“Your son is a special child.” RJ came over and smoothed Jet’s hair. “But you already know that, don’t you?”

Staring into her son’s innocent eyes, she nodded. “The most wonderful baby in the world.” Her own eyes filled. “I just want to protect him.”

“As you should.”

“What did he do?” she ventured.

After he’d explained how Jet had emptied his bookshelf, he shrugged. “Looks as if he’ll be an avid reader.”

Laura had to laugh at that. “Let’s hope.” She wiped formula from Jet’s chin.

“Tell me something,” RJ began as he sat opposite Laura.

“Okay.”

“I’ve heard things over the years in this town, stuff that sounds impossible.”

Laura met his stare. “Most of what you’ve heard is probably true.”

“It’s crazy things, people with incredible powers—supernatural gifts. Most of the fortunetellers and potion peddlers and such are for real.”

She shrugged. “I know it sounds incredible, but those things exist, especially here. There are other concentrations of magical people in certain towns around the world.”

He bolted out of his chair and paced the room. “It’s a lot to wrap my head around.” Stopping, he looked at her. “What about you? What kind of magic do you do?”

“None. But I have some gifted family members. Most of the founding families are that way.”

Emily jumped up onto the table.

Laura shooed the kitty off. “You know better,” she told the feline. “This is really going to blow your mind, but a lot of

the local cats are magical, the ones that descended from the ship carrying the founding families.”

“Are you serious?” He held his head in his hands.

“You’ve heard of the Sherwood breed? Most of those have mad magical skills.”

His phone buzzed. When he checked it, his expression morphed from fascination to stony. “Hillman’s awake. I should go.”

“Can I come? I want to hear what he’s got to say.”

He smirked. “Absolutely not. Remember to turn on the security system after I leave.”

“You’ll fill me in as soon as you know something?”

“Of course.”

Now that he no longer needed to protect her, when would she see him again? Would it be business as usual, or did he want to continue exploring what they’d begun last night? “RJ?” she ventured.

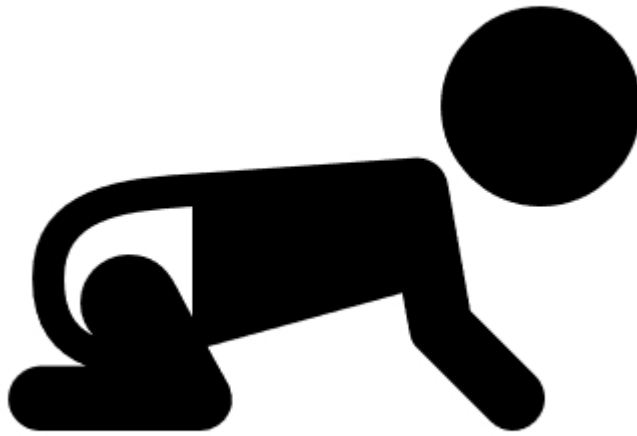
“Hmm?”

“I like to take Jet to the farmer’s market on the Boardwalk Saturday mornings. Do you want to join us?”

His hesitation squashed her hopes. But after a few beats, he said, “I’d love that.” Then he closed the distance between them and pressed a kiss to her lips—and not a chaste one. “Mind if I come by tonight? I’ll bring dinner.”

A sweet ache settled low in her belly. “That’d be nice.”

Everything was going to be fine now, better than it had been in a very long time.



Saturday morning, RJ woke to the aroma of fresh coffee.

Laura set a steaming mug on the night table then climbed into her bed. “Good morning,” she murmured as she snuggled against him. “Did you sleep well?”

“Sleep?” He chuckled. “We didn’t do much of that, did we?” Although they had spent a fair amount of time in her bed.

“Good point.”

RJ pulled her closer and skimmed his fingers over the lacy trim of her nightgown.

Kissing his shoulder, she moaned softly. All too soon, she moved out of his reach. “I wish I could stay here with you, but Jet’s awake. I peeked in on him and he was playing in his crib, but that won’t last long.”

“Need help?” RJ sat up.

She threw him a sweet smile. “I’ve got it, thanks. Are you still up for the farmers’ market?”

“Can’t wait.”



After she left the room, he took a few sips of coffee and got dressed. He was looking forward to spending the day with Laura. Now that Hillman was in custody, RJ could take a day off and relax a little. He only wished that Hillman had been more cooperative. The man was clearly delusional, and as yet, RJ's only detective in the department had been unable to get anything out of him other than the fact that he hated Laura and almost every other public official in town.

Today, they had a psychologist coming from Jacksonville to evaluate the suspect. Hopefully, after the doctor got Hillman on the right meds, RJ would be able to get some answers.

Downstairs, he found Laura packing a diaper bag with what seemed like enough baby supplies to last a week. Jet, wearing a nautical-themed outfit, reached his little arms out to RJ from the high chair.

How could he resist? He had to admit that the little guy was starting to work his way into RJ's heart. RJ unhooked the baby and picked him up. "Good morning to you, too, Jet."

The infant cooed, endearing him even more to RJ.

Since Laura's house was only a few blocks from Boardwalk Park, they walked over. As he pushed the stroller, RJ glanced at Laura.

She gave him a big smile and hooked his arm.

Damn, this felt good. Breathing in the salty air, he thought about a future with Laura and Jet. After Halla, he'd been so sure that he never wanted a family. But that would have been letting the pain win.

As they entered the park, he waved to Tori and Heath Castillo.

Tori patted her very pregnant belly. "Nice to see you, Sheriff. And you, too, Laura." She winked in Laura's direction. "Call me," she mouthed to Laura.

Laura nodded. "Have a good day."

Dozens of vendors' tents lined the boardwalk and the grassy area close to the beach.

"Aunt Laura," a female voice called from nearby.

Bailey came over and hugged Laura. "Morning, Sheriff."

"When did you get back in town?" Laura asked the teenager.

"Last night. Dad told me you called with the news that the creepy guy was caught." She looked at RJ. "Will he go to prison?"

"At this point, he's just a suspect," RJ cautioned.

The teen frowned. "But it's him, right?"

"More than likely." Laura hugged her niece.

"Can I take Jet to meet my friends?" Bailey tipped her chin toward a group of teenagers clustered around one of the vendor tents.

Laura hesitated a moment, then acquiesced. "Just for a few minutes, okay?"

"Of course." The girl slipped between RJ and the stroller and headed away.

"Interested in the best empanadas in the state?" Laura pointed to a booth just ahead of them.

As long as Laura hadn't cooked them, they were probably good. "Absolutely. I worked up an appetite during the night." He wagged his brow at her.

"And you'll need more sustenance for later." Elbowing him, she gave him a sultry grin. Stepping up to the food vendor, she said, "*Buenos dias, Sr. Rojas. Dos empanadas de pollo por favor.*"

The elderly man handed her a paper tray with the fried turnovers. Laura paid him before RJ could.

She gestured at a nearby park bench, and they sat down to eat.

With his first bite, he had to agree with Laura. “This is amazing.” The pastry was crisp but not greasy, and the cheesy chicken filling was pure heaven.

“Told you.”

A commotion nearby caught his attention. Looking around the area, he noticed the group of teenagers suddenly dispersing. His cop senses told him to investigate. Something was wrong. “I’ll be back.” Without waiting for Laura to reply, he ran over to the teens.

“Sheriff Higgins,” Bailey shouted. “I just turned my back for a second.” She burst into tears.

*Jet!* RJ’s blood ran cold. Heart pounding, he scanned the perimeter, desperately searching for the black stroller, but it had disappeared. Grabbing his cell, he called the dispatch center and ordered them to send every deputy to the park along with firefighters and paramedics.

He’d been wrong. Hillman was in custody, so he couldn’t have snatched the infant.

“Tell me exactly what happened,” he told Bailey.

The teen looked past him and burst into tears.

Instinctively, he knew Laura was approaching. Steeling himself, he faced her, took her hands.

The sheer terror in her eyes cut straight through him. “It’s Jet. But we’ll find him, Laura. I’ve got help on the way. They’ll be here any moment.”

Crumbling into him, she wept. Her cries were the most gut-wrenching he’d ever heard.

“I need to look for him,” RJ managed.

She nodded mutely as he returned his attention to her niece. “Talk to me, Bailey.”

“I turned my back for like a minute,” the girl said.

“It was my fault, Sheriff,” a teenage boy said.

RJ narrowed his eyes at him. “Why is that?”

The kid dropped his gaze. “I kissed her, and I guess we...I got carried away. We were so caught up in the moment that...”

“That you forgot about the baby in Bailey’s care,” RJ supplied. But he didn’t have time to reprimand horny teenagers.

Sirens approached. Grabbing Laura’s hand, he pulled her with him to the arriving patrol cars. “Open a recent photo of Jet on your phone and text it to me.”

He directed the deputies to search the entire area for the baby, then he sent the picture to the police network. Leaving a deputy with Laura and Bailey, he set off to join the search.

Twenty minutes later, a firefighter discovered the stroller abandoned in a restroom. No one RJ spoke to recalled seeing someone carrying a blond infant.

RJ fisted his hands as he watched Laura weep. Damn it. For the second time in his life, he’d failed to protect a woman and baby that he cared deeply for.

No, this wasn’t a hopeless situation like it had been with Halla. Jet was alive, and RJ had to find him. If it was the last thing he did, he was going to get that baby back and put him in Laura’s arms.

## Chapter Nine

Laura glanced out her front window for the ninth or tenth time in what seemed like hours. Her baby had been gone for two hours and twenty-nine minutes. She'd never felt so terrified, or helpless.

When the phone rang, she shuddered. She'd left a message for Eddie to call her immediately, and she'd texted him as well. But she dreaded saying the words aloud. Somehow, that would make it more real.

RJ grasped her shoulders. "Want me to get it?"

She squeezed his hand. "I should." Steeling herself, she picked up her cell from the coffee table and glanced at the display before she answered. "Eddie," she said.

"What the hell is going on?" he shouted. "This had better be important."

She shut her eyes and summoned all of her strength. "Someone's taken Jet."

"What are you talking about? Taken him from where?"

Without going into detail, she told him about the attempted break-in, the stalker, and thinking it had been over.

"If anything happens to my son..." Eddie groaned. "How could you have let this happen?"

Her body started shaking. She'd been blaming herself since Jet's abduction. Hearing Eddie voice the sentiment only galvanized her guilt. "We thought the person responsible had been caught."

Tiny muscles around RJ's jaw ticked. "Let me speak to him, please."

She didn't have the energy to continue the conversation with Eddie, so she handed over her phone to RJ.

RJ put her cell on speaker. "This is Sheriff Higgins," he said.

“Oh, great,” Eddie replied. “Put my wife back on the line.”

“*Ex-wife*,” Laura said. “I’m right here, Eddie. Can we please just concentrate on getting our son back?”

But Eddie kept on. “How could you have been so irresponsible?”

She collapsed into a chair, still trembling.

“It wasn’t her fault,” RJ told Eddie.

Despite knowing that on an intellectual level, in her heart, she blamed herself.

“She told you, Eddie. We thought we had Laura’s stalker in custody.” RJ rubbed her arm. “Laura’s niece walked away with Jet just for a few minutes. She turned her back and the baby was gone.”

“Were you with her?” Eddie laughed without mirth. “I should’ve figured you’d step in as soon as I was out of the picture. Still carrying a torch for her after all these years?”

RJ fisted his hands for a moment then drew a deep breath. “Look, we’ll let you know anything and everything that’s going on.”

“Fine,” Eddie replied.

“Will you be coming down?” Laura asked her ex.

After several moments of silence, he said, “I can’t. Mom’s got a bad case of shingles, and I’m taking care of her. She doesn’t have anyone else.”

It was so unlike Eddie to care for anyone. During Laura’s pregnancy, he’d told her to suck it up when she’d had morning sickness. “Okay.”

Then the line went dead.

“That went well,” she deadpanned.

“Still as much of a jerk as he ever was.”

Laura couldn’t argue that.

When RJ's cell buzzed, he left the room to take it. Returning a couple of minutes later, he sat opposite her and took her hands in his.

Laura's heart pounded. "What is it?"

"Nothing," he assured her. "I should let you know that the FBI will be here soon."

She gulped. "The FBI?"

RJ moved closer. "Standard protocol. It's more hands on deck, and that's a good thing."

When her landline rang, she startled. Picking up the handset, she glanced at the caller ID, which flashed 'Unknown Number,' then showed it to RJ.

"Answer it." He moved closer to listen.

"Your son is safe, for now," the caller said in an unnatural-sounding voice.

"What do you want?" she cried. "Don't you dare hurt my baby!"

"Five million dollars," he replied. "Tomorrow. We'll call again with instructions." Then he hung up.

"Wait," she shouted. "Damn it."

"Five million?" She hung her head. "I couldn't even get my hands on a tenth of that."

RJ took the handset from her. "The FBI will be here in a few minutes. An agent just texted me. We'll know where the call came from very soon." He pulled Laura into his arms and kissed the top of her head. "You're being so strong. We're going to get Jet back."

"You can't know that."

Holding her at arms' length, he tipped her chin up so she couldn't avoid his gaze. "Do you trust me?"

Trust him? Hell, she didn't trust anyone, not completely. Her father had cheated on her mom, and her college roommate had stolen Laura's boyfriend. When she'd

run for mayor, her campaign manager stole money from political contributions. And then there was Eddie, who'd lied to her and let her down countless times. Every person she'd put her faith in had let her down. Dropping RJ's gaze, she shrugged.

"Laura," he pressed. "We're going to bring Jet home.

She prayed with all of her heart that he was right.



RJ listened as FBI Agent Carl Leeds asked Laura all the standard questions.

The other agent, named Carlisle—a fifty-ish redhead took RJ into the foyer. "We traced the ransom call to a burner phone," the woman told him. "It pinged off of a tower north of Cat's Paw Cove."

"So, they haven't gone far. Good."

The agent nodded. "We'll let you know when we have more." She headed back to the living room.

RJ paced the floor. So many questions swirled in his mind. Like, why would the kidnappers ask Laura for such a high ransom when she clearly wasn't that wealthy? Could they have targeted her for another reason? Laura held a lot of power in Cat's Paw Cove, but RJ's instincts told him this had nothing to do with politics. Maybe the kidnappers specifically targeted Jet. But for what reason? Could someone know about his magical abilities? Wasn't as if RJ could just tell the FBI that the baby was magic. They'd think he was crazy. Hell, if someone came to him and said that, he'd send them for a psych evaluation.

"Where is your ex-husband now?" Agent Carlisle asked Laura.



“He lives near Jacksonville,” Laura replied.

The two agents exchanged a glance. RJ was pretty sure he knew what they were thinking—since Eddie lived only a couple of hours away, why wasn’t he here, or at least on the way? It was a question RJ too wanted to be answered. Sick mother or not, Eddie should be here.

“Sheriff,” Leeds began, “Do you have CCTV footage from the park?”

“Already checked it.” RJ opened the clip Robin had texted him and showed it to the agent. “We don’t have cameras right where the baby was taken, but there is a quick glimpse of the guy pushing the stroller toward the restroom.”

“I’m going to forward this to our field office,” Leeds said. “Maybe they can enhance the view of the guy.”

“Can I get anyone coffee?” Laura offered.

Both agents nodded. When Laura headed to the kitchen, RJ followed her.

When they were alone, he took her arm. “Does anyone else know about Jet’s...powers?”

She shook her head. “Well, yes. My eighty-year-old aunt.”

“No one else?”

She took out two mugs and filled them with coffee. “No, she’s the only one I’ve told.”

“So Eddie doesn’t know?”

Her lips bunched to one side. “As far as I know, he has no idea. I mean, he’d have mentioned it to me if he’d noticed anything.”

“You didn’t mention it to him.”

“I’d intended to speak to him about it,” she said. “That’s something I’d planned to do in person.”

RJ knew little of Laura’s ex, and what he’d seen hadn’t impressed him. “And you said that Eddie tried to rip off your

grandmother for a bunch of money, right?”

Lines fanned out from the corners of her eyes. “While she was literally on her deathbed.”

“Was she very wealthy?”

“What are you getting at?”

He leaned against the edge of the counter. “Would Eddie have suspected that you could get your hands on millions of dollars?”

She visibly stiffened. “Eddie is Jet’s father. What kind of horrible person would kidnap their own kid? I mean, I know he’s a jerk, but he loves his son.” Picking up one of the mugs, she shook her head. “Seriously, RJ. And there’s no way that the guy on CCTV could be Eddie. The kidnapper was way shorter than Eddie.”

Didn’t mean that Eddie couldn’t have recruited help.

Laura poked a finger at him. “I can see the wheels in your head turning, but you’re wrong. Eddie is a lot of things, but he’d never hurt Jet.”

RJ held up his hands in surrender. “Okay, I got it.” He’d investigate the possibility. He just wouldn’t tell Laura that he was.

Minutes later, he pulled Agent Carlisle aside and shared his suspicions with her.

Carlisle nodded. “We have someone en route to the ex-husband’s place. Don’t worry, Sheriff. We’re checking every angle.”

RJ’s cop senses told him that Eddie was involved. Even if the FBI was investigating the possibility, RJ needed to work on the case for himself. He wouldn’t rest until Laura had her son back home.

# Chapter Ten

Laura swallowed a couple of Tylenol capsules for her headache. Glancing at the clock on the mantle, she calculated that Jet had now been gone for three hours and seventeen minutes.

RJ was speaking on the phone from the foyer, but she couldn't make out what he was saying.

"Can you take a look at this, Ms. Lancaster?" Agent Leeds gestured at his laptop's screen. "Our people enhanced the CCTV images."

She studied the murky picture of a dark-haired man who might have been in his forties, fifties, or even sixties. His hair could be brown, black, or salt-and-pepper. Heck, he might even be a she. "I have no idea who that is."

The agent nodded and stuffed a donut into his mouth. The sweet smell turned Laura's stomach.

RJ squeezed her shoulder, which offered some degree of comfort.

Agent Carlisle shook her head. "I was hoping we'd get a clearer picture. But let's shift gears for a moment." She gestured toward the sofa then took a seat.

Laura joined her. "Yes?"

The redhead clasped her hands on her lap and didn't say anything for several moments. "Ms. Lancaster," she began.

"Laura."

The woman smiled warmly. "Laura, in a case like this, we have to consider all possibilities. Sheriff Higgins has given us the list your assistant compiled of...shall we say, unhappy constituents. So far, we haven't noticed any red flags there, other than the man who's already in custody. And as you know, he was in jail at the time of your son's abduction."

"The sheriff and his people already did that." Frustration roiled her gut.

Carlisle nodded. “Redundancy never hurts.”

Her headache flared again. “Unless it wastes time.”

The agent’s smile faded. “We agree with Sheriff Higgins that it’s...a little suspicious that your ex-husband didn’t come here when he heard of the kidnapping.”

Huffing, she glanced toward the foyer but didn’t see RJ. Had he told the FBI that she’d thrown him over for Eddie? Probably not. She considered telling the agent herself, but she didn’t have the mental energy to go into it. “Eddie is lazy, and he can be a jerk, but he would never do something like this.”

Carlisle didn’t look convinced. “So he’s a lazy jerk, but he’s caring for his sick mother?”

Well darn. When she put it that way...

She thought about Eddie—charming and handsome, a fast talker who could size someone up within minutes of meeting them. He was a born salesman who was too lazy to actually try to sell a legitimate product or service. And she hadn’t realized that about him until after they were married.

She’d been so afraid to commit to RJ years ago because he’d been in the military. Fear of losing him to a woman in a faraway land, or worse—to death or injury—had led her to choose Eddie over RJ.

At first, she’d bought into Eddie’s lies. She’d believed that he had all sorts of successful business ventures under his belt. None of it had been true. In retrospect, she realized that even back then, he’d likely been planning to gain access to some of Laura’s wealthier relatives.

Eddie had never been stable. RJ had been and still was. Her instincts were flawed. Yet she couldn’t wrap her head around the idea that Eddie would put his own son in harm’s way.

Agent Carlisle leaned toward her. “I have an idea, just to be sure that Eddie is where he says, doing what he claims.”

“Yes?”

“Would you call his mother for us?”

Laura thought about it. The only time she'd ever met the woman was when Barbara Caskill had come to the wedding. Laura had caught her peeking into every gift bag and holding the envelopes up to the light, probably looking for cash.

*Like mother, like son.*

"I don't have her number," she said.

Carlisle patted Laura's hand. "We can get it."



RJ stood behind Laura as she called Eddie's mother. The two FBI agents sat on either side of her.

After several rings, a woman with a cigarette-stained voice answered. "Madame Mayor," she said with obvious disdain. "What do *you* want?"

"Hello, Barbara." Laura glanced down at the script Agent Leeds had written for her. "I was just wondering how you were feeling."

Silence.

"Are you there?" Laura asked.

"Yeah, I'm here. If you're looking for Eddie, he ain't here. And if he owes you money, then get it from him."

"I thought he might be there, with you."

Barbara laughed, which turned into a coughing fit. When she recovered, she said, "I ain't seen him for months."

"If you hear from him—"

But the line went dead.

Laura shook her head and dropped the cell onto the coffee table. "She sounds just as lovely as ever. And

apparently, Eddie lied about being with her. Or else she did.”

RJ muttered a curse under his breath. Every minute that ticked past lessened their chances of bringing Jet home safe and sound.

Agent Leeds picked up the phone and handed it to Laura. “Let’s try phoning your ex-husband again.”

When she tried the number, the call went to voicemail.

Agent Carlisle raised an eyebrow at her partner and then went to the desk where they’d set up the laptop.

“What?” Laura said. “What do you think that means?”

RJ sat next to her and faced her. “He knows that his son has been abducted, yet he isn’t answering your calls. That qualifies as suspicious.”

When the other agent stepped away, Laura moved closer to RJ and kept her voice low. “I want to call my aunt over. Jackie is a gifted psychic.”

Why the hell not? Psychic or not, a trusted family member might be a comfort to Laura. “Go ahead and call her.”

While Laura phoned her aunt, RJ spoke to Carlisle and Leeds. “Have you located Caskill’s phone?”

“Working on it,” Leeds replied. “Looks like it’s off now, but two hours ago, it was near Jacksonville.”

The only reason Eddie would shut off his phone at a time like this would be to evade location tracking. RJ stepped out the back door and called Robin.

“How’s it going there, boss?” she asked.

“Could be better. Listen, I need you to do something for me. Look up Eddie Caskill’s license plate and get that info out to our people and the highway patrol.”

“How do you want them to proceed if they spot him?” she asked.

“Cautiously. We don’t want Eddie doing anything rash.”

When he went back inside, he heard the doorbell. Must be Laura's aunt.

Agent Carlisle gestured for Laura to stay put. "Let me get it."

RJ followed the officer to the foyer. When she opened the door, instead of the elderly woman RJ had expected, Eddie Caskill stood there.

Eddie narrowed his eyes at the agent, then looked past her and glared at RJ. He started inside until Carlisle held up her hand, stopping him. "Who are you?"

Eddie squared his shoulders. "Who the hell are *you*?"

She pointed to the badge hanging around her neck. "FBI."

"Uh... okay." His Adam's apple slid up and down his throat. "I'm Eddie, Jet's father."

Leeds came over and waved Eddie inside.

RJ wanted nothing more than to slam Caskill to the Mexican tile floor, but getting him inside was more important.

"I've been so worried about Jet. Please tell me that you've got some leads." Eddie followed Leeds into the living room.

Agent Carlisle elbowed RJ and kept his voice down. "I guess it isn't the ex after all."

RJ couldn't believe his ears. Eddie was playing some kind of game, he was sure of it. "Don't discount him as a suspect."

She smirked. "Sheriff, I'm sure you haven't dealt with many of these cases in this little town of yours, but we do. Kidnapping suspects don't show up at the victim's home. And I'm guessing that there's some bad blood between you and Caskill, yes? You can't let your personal feelings cloud your judgment, Sheriff. Let's keep it professional." Then she headed after her partner and Eddie.

RJ gritted his teeth. He took a moment to swallow back his anger. When he went into the living room, the two agents were showing Eddie the CCTV images. What the hell? How had they eliminated Eddie as a suspect so quickly, especially since they knew he'd lied about taking care of his 'sick' mother.

The doorbell chimed again. RJ headed back to the foyer, eager to escape the newly chummy trio who were chatting in the living room.

Laura answered the door, and pulled a tiny gray-haired woman inside, hugging her tightly. "Aunt Jackie, I'm so glad you're here."

Laura introduced her aunt to RJ.

"Thank you for being here for Laura," the woman said as she shook his hand. "And for all that you do for Cat's Paw Cove."

"I appreciate that ma'am," RJ said.

She lowered herself onto the bench, rubbing her thigh. "Forgive me, but since my car accident a few years back, I can't stand for very long without this leg bothering me."

Suddenly, her demeanor morphed from sweet to frightened. She grabbed Laura's arm. "I need to smudge this place. Right away. The energy is terrible."

"Smudge?" RJ asked.

"Sage, for you muggles." She reached into her purse, which was half as big as she, pulled out a small bundle of dried, grayish-green leaves, and lit it. Then she blew on it and extinguished the flame, leaving the bundle to smolder. "This will get rid of the negative energy in here."

Smoke filled the foyer.

RJ coughed and tried to wave away the thick smoke.

"That'll get rid of anything that breathes," Laura choked out.

A blaring alarm sounded.



“The smoke alarm!” Laura shouted.

The agents rushed into the foyer.

“What’s going on?” Carlisle asked.

Laura pointed to the alarm, high above the window.

“I’m so sorry, dear,” Aunt Jackie shouted.

Leeds climbed onto the bench, but that didn’t put him high enough to reach.

RJ pushed a table to the spot and climbed on top of it, which allowed him to get to the alarm and remove the battery. Finally, the ringing ceased.

Jackie grasped Laura’s arm. “Someone here has evil intentions.”

RJ glanced past them into the living room, which was empty. His gut tightened. “Where the hell is Eddie?”

“Using the bathroom,” Leeds supplied. “Calm down.”

Stunned, RJ ran toward the guest bath. The door was locked. He remembered that the room connected to the lanai.

“Cover the front,” he called to the agents as he rushed toward the kitchen door. Outside, he scanned the property, but Eddie was gone. RJ circled around the house, but there was no sign of Caskill.

Heading back inside, he phoned Robin and told her that he needed every officer out looking for Eddie.

Leeds and Carlisle were in the living room standing over the laptop.

“I told you to cover the front,” he shouted at them.

Leeds poked a finger at him. “You need to calm down, Sheriff. The kidnapper just called. Said he’ll call back in an hour with instructions.”

“The kidnapper just got away, you incompetent idiots!” He hadn’t meant to call them names, but he’d never been so pissed off.

Carlisle stepped between the men. “You are off this case, Sheriff Higgins.”

Fisting his hands, he stepped back. “You’ve got to go after him.”

“You can leave now, Sheriff.” Leeds turned his back to him.

That was exactly what he needed to do. He started toward the door.

“RJ?” Laura’s eyes glistened with tears.

Taking both her hands in his, he captured her stare. “I’ll get him, Laura. I promise I will.”

He prayed that he’d make good on the vow.

He had to.

## Chapter Eleven

Laura shook with anger. “How could you?” she shouted at Leeds and Carlisle and she paced the floor.

“Ms. Lancaster,” Leeds began, “it’s highly irregular for a suspect to show up as your ex-husband did. To us, that seemed to exonerate him.”

“We also suspected that the sheriff’s personal beef with Caskill may have clouded his professional judgment.”

Laura froze, trying to comprehend how he could be so clueless. Drawing a deep breath, she shut her eyes for a moment and tried to calm herself. But how could she? Their actions may well have put Jet’s life in danger. “Your assumptions just sent my son’s kidnapper on the run.”

“Now hold on a minute.” Carlisle set her hands on her hips. “Earlier, you were positive that Caskill couldn’t possibly have taken your son.”

Laura’s throat thickened with regret. “And I’ll have to live with that. But I’m not a trained law enforcement officer.” She clung to the hope that Eddie would never hurt Jet. Although she had been so sure that he’d have never kidnapped him, either.

Leeds stepped around his partner. “I’m very sorry. We’re doing everything we can to find him now.”

Laura couldn’t hold back a laugh. “Seriously? If Sheriff Higgins hadn’t been here to call out his officers, there’d be no one going after Eddie right now.”

“We’d have asked local law enforcement to do that,” Carlisle said. “The sheriff beat us to it.”

Aunt Jackie hooked Laura’s arm. “Let me make you a cup of tea, dear.”

Laura was about to say no, but when her aunt tipped her chin toward the kitchen, Laura realized that Jackie wanted to speak to her privately. “Okay.”

In the kitchen, they sat at the bistro table. Jackie held Laura's hand. "I had a vision of a bird. It was black and silver. You need to tell the sheriff."

Laura took her phone out of her jeans pocket, but what was she supposed to say to RJ? "What does it mean?"

Her aunt squeezed her eyes shut and inhaled deeply. "It's sitting on the ground. And I see the words..." Her voice trailed off and she furrowed her brow. "It's just out of reach." She clutched Laura's hand. "I...n...t... Intercoastal. That's the word."

Intercoastal, a black and silver bird. Laura wracked her brain. "Intercoastal Airport! It's a small private airstrip." Her heart sank when she remembered that Eddie knew how to fly helicopters. He'd learned as part of some failed get-rich-quick scheme months before they'd met.

"Yes, that sounds right."

Laura called RJ. The instant he answered, she said, "Eddie's on his way to Intercoastal Airport. Aunt Jackie saw it in a vision. Look for a helicopter."

"I'm turning around," he said. "I'm not far from there. Call Robin and let her know." He hung up.

Laura did as RJ instructed.

Robin assured her that every cop in the county would get to the airstrip ASAP.

Aunt Jackie made them each a cup of camomile tea, but Laura was too nervous to drink it.

Jackie sipped her tea. "You know, dear, my spirit guide is telling me that you're afraid to open yourself to a new love."

Glancing out the window, Laura sighed. "I can't think about that now, Aunt Jackie."

"Why not? Worrying never solved anything."

Laura smiled at her aunt. "I guess you're right."

"Of course I am. So listen to me."

Why not? She needed a distraction. “Okay.”

“You’re going to have to learn to trust again. He’s been hurt, too. Way more deeply than you have.”

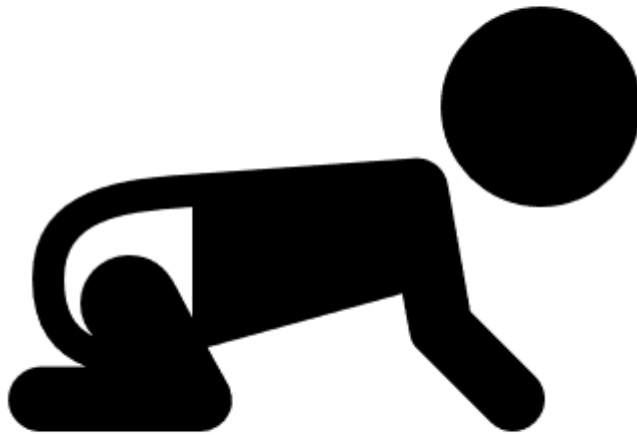
She knew that was true.

“And you’ll have to make room in your life for him. Set aside your work when you leave the office.”

Laura rolled her eyes and nodded. “Yes, I should.”

“Try not to worry. Have faith in the sheriff. He won’t let you down.”

She prayed that her aunt was right.



RJ pulled up to the small security hut at the airport. “Open the gate,” he commanded the elderly guard.

“Yes, sir, officer.” The man pressed a button and the gate started lifting.

“Did a blond man in his late thirties come through here?” he asked the man. “Probably driving a black Impala.”

The guard shook his head. “Only two men entered this afternoon. One in a Honda Civic, and the other driving an

SUV, blue, I think. And both of them had dark hair.” The guy scratched his head. “I think they did. Now that you mention it, both of them wore hats and dark glasses. I couldn’t tell you what either looked like.”

So, they were in disguise. “Which way?”

The man pointed toward a hangar straight ahead. “Around Hangar One and to the right.”

RJ floored the gas. No way could he let that bastard fly away with Laura’s son.

As he rounded the hangar, the two vehicles came into view. A helicopter sat on the tarmac, its motor revving up.

A man exited the Honda carrying a large bundle and headed toward the aircraft.

Glimpsing Eddie inside the helicopter, RJ sped over to it and bolted out of his car. He drew his weapon, aiming it at Eddie.

“Hurry up, Roscoe,” Eddie shouted at the man.

The propellers roared to life. What if Jet were inside with Eddie? He couldn’t risk shooting.

The guy with the bag slowed down when he noticed RJ. Sirens blared in the distance, louder and louder.

Drawing his gun, RJ shouted for the man to stop, but his voice was drowned out.

Laying the bundle on the ground, the guy lifted his hands in the air. The sack at his feet moved.

*Please, let that be Jet, and let him be okay.* Heart pounding, RJ gestured for him to step away from the bag. As he moved closer, three other deputies drove up and surrounded the suspect on the tarmac.

“The other suspect is in the helicopter,” RJ shouted to the officers. Then he raced to the sack and unzipped it.

Jet’s tear-stained face greeted him. Relief flooded his system. He hugged the crying baby to his chest. “Sh, it’s okay, buddy. I’ve got you.”

The helicopter took off. RJ considered ordering his men to shoot, but if the bird came down, they could all be hurt. “Hold your fire,” he called to his men.

Eddie gave him the finger as he flew away.

RJ had faith that eventually, they’d capture Eddie. The important thing was Jet, and he appeared to be frightened, but unharmed.

After he made sure that the baby was indeed all right, he phoned Laura.

She couldn’t stop crying, and the emotion in her voice touched RJ so deeply that he too, shed some tears—tears of relief that Jet was okay and that Laura would get her baby back. Despite his reluctance to care about them both, he did care. The fact that they were okay meant more to him than anything else.

## Chapter Twelve

The notification that popped up on Laura's phone caught her off guard. She immediately deleted the reminder message that Eddie would be picking up Jet at 3:00 pm. He wouldn't.

Her ex had been apprehended at Miami International Airport as he'd tried to board a flight to Aruba under an assumed name. He'd cracked like cheap pottery, and admitted to a scheme to exploit Jet's powers for profit. His own son.

Laura shuddered at the thought.

Eddie was in jail, and when all was said and done, he'd likely be going to prison for a long time. And she, Jet, and RJ were safe at her house.

"We're supposed to have our phones silenced," RJ whispered in her ear.

"Right, sorry." She turned off the sound and then returned her attention to Fiona Bell, who was teaching the private gourmet cooking class for which RJ had signed them up.

Laura thought about how dramatically her life had changed for the better in the three weeks since the kidnapping. Not only did she now have sole custody of Jet, but she'd also stopped bringing work home from the office. Plus, she now had a wonderful, caring man in her life. And he seemed to want to spend more and more time with her. He took her on the most fun dates—like a picnic to view a nighttime rocket launch from the space center, a boat ride around the harbor, and tonight, this cooking class.

RJ now spent several nights a week with her, and they'd gone to several official town events together. The Cat's Paw Cove Courier had even run a story about the new romance between the mayor and the sheriff.

"While the quiche is in the oven, we'll start working on the pear and lavender strudel." Fiona handed Laura a peeler and gestured toward the pears on the cutting board.



RJ stuffed a leftover chunk of Swiss cheese into his mouth as Laura began peeling.

Although cooking together seemed like a romantic endeavor, she was pretty sure that he'd continue making the lion's share of the meals when they were together. She knew she was a lousy cook, and that he was a great one. And being his sous chef was actually fun.

In fact, sharing the kitchen had already led to some hot evenings. And she had a feeling that tonight would be no exception.

After Fiona left, and they'd eaten the delicious dinner that Laura had actually enjoyed cooking, Laura stripped off her apron and lifted Jet out of his highchair.

"I have an idea." He extended his arms toward the baby. "Let me get him into his pajamas."

She hesitated a moment. "Are you sure?" Although RJ had been so helpful with Jet's care lately, he always seemed a bit hesitant to do anything on his own with the baby.

RJ held the infant against his chest. "I am. Besides, that gets me a pass on dishwashing duty, right?"

She laughed, something she'd been doing a lot more lately. "That's a deal."

Half an hour later, she dried the last pan and closed the dishwasher. Then she headed into the living room.

Jet sat on RJ's lap wearing his cloud pajamas as RJ read *Goodnight Moon* to him. The baby's hair was damp and combed, and both of them appeared to be thoroughly content. About halfway through the book, Jet's eyelids gently closed.

Laura's heart fluttered in her chest. She took the book and set it aside while RJ stood up, and the three of them headed upstairs to the nursery.

RJ carefully put Jet down in the crib. Laura pressed a kiss to her son's head, inhaling the sweet scent of baby shampoo.

As they left the room, RJ shut the door, but then opened it a crack—just enough for the cats to come and go during the night, as they always did.

Downstairs, Laura poured them each a glass of port. “You’re really getting the hang of this.” She handed him his wine. “You’re a natural.”

Sitting on the sofa, his expression turned dark for a moment. “For a long time, I was sure that I’d never have anything like this.” He swept his arm through the air. “But here I am.” A smile lit up his eyes. “The future is brighter than ever, and it’s all because of you.”

She took his hand. “You’re just as much to blame as I am.”

He set down his glass on the end table and gave her a slow, tasting kiss.

Her heart was fuller than she’d imagined it could be.

Emily the cat climbed onto the sofa and nestled between them. RJ smoothed the kitty’s fur.

“I know it’s a lot,” she said. “Me, my crazy job, the baby, four cats...”

“This is everything I’ve ever wanted, Laura.”

She’d wasted years with the wrong man, but finally, she had the right one, and she couldn’t wait to see what their future together held.

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## Also By Wynter Daniels

**Charming the Skeptic – Cat’s Paw Cove:  
Publisher: CPC Publishing, 08/2020**

**Reimagining Mr. Right – Cat’s Paw Cove:  
Publisher: CPC Publishing, 01/2020**

**Gambling on the Artist – Cat’s Paw Cove:  
Publisher: CPC Publishing, 10/2019**

**Her Homerun Hottie – Cat’s Paw Cove:  
Publisher: CPC Publishing, 9/2019**

**A Witch in Time – Cat’s Paw Cove: (with  
Catherine Kean) Publisher: CPC Publishing, 9/2019**

**Courting the Cat Whisperer: Publisher: Sugar  
Skull Books, 9/2018**

**Beauty and the Bigfoot Hunter: Publisher: Sugar  
Skull Books, 6/2018**

**The Yin to His Yang: Publisher: Sugar Skull  
Books, 2/2018**

**The Genie’s Double Trouble: Publisher: Sugar  
Skull Books, 9/2017**

**The Best Man’s Proposal: Publisher: Entangled  
Publishing, 9/2017**

**The Fortunisteller’s Folly: Publisher: Sugar Skull  
Books, 5/2017**

**Chasing the Stag: Publisher: W. Daniels, 11/2016**

**Emerald Intrigue: Publisher: W. Daniels, 11/2015**

**Shades of Sexy, Box Set: Publisher: W. Daniels,  
01/2015**

**The Surrogate Husband: Publisher: Entangled  
Publishing, 12/2014**

**The Witches of Freedom Moon, Box Set: Publisher:  
W. Daniels, 04/2014**

**Dream Magic - The Witches of Freedom Moon,  
Book Three: Publisher: W. Daniels, 04/2014**

**Killer Magic - The Witches of Freedom Moon, Book  
Two: Publisher: W. Daniels, 10/2013**

**Hidden Magic - The Witches of Freedom Moon,  
Book One: Publisher: W. Daniels, 10/2013**

**Burning Touch & Tropic of Trouble: Publisher: W.  
Daniels, 4/2014**

**Protective Custody: Publisher: Carina Press,  
05/2011 (ebook & audio book)**

**Employee Relations: Publisher: W. Daniels, 04/2011  
(ebook and print)**

**Game of Smoke and Mirrors: Publisher: W.  
Daniels, 03/2011**

# About The Author

## Wynter Daniels



Wynter Daniels has authored more than three dozen romances, including contemporary, romantic suspense, and paranormal romance books for several publishers including Entangled Publishing and Carina Press, as well as for Kristen Painter's Nocturne Falls Universe. Along with author Catherine Kean, she launched the Cat's Paw Cove series in 2019. She lives in sunny Florida with her family and two spoiled cats. After careers in marketing and the salon industry, Wynter's wicked prose begged to be set free. You can find her on the web on Facebook, Twitter, and her website.

Sign up for her Newsletter to keep up with upcoming releases and events.

Want more Cat's Paw Cove? Check out our website, [www.CatsPawCoveRomance.com](http://www.CatsPawCoveRomance.com) and Facebook page for upcoming releases.