

# Kat's *Last* Chance

Also by Collette Scott

*Hannah's Blessing*

*Forever Sunshine*

*If We Dare to Dream (The Evans Family, Book One)*

*Through Winter Skies (The Evans Family, Book Two)*

*Eyes on Tango (The Evans Family, Book Three)*

# Kat's *Last* Chance

By

Collette Scott

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## **Dedication**

To old friends and new - this book is for to you. For Terri and Aaron, whose names I've borrowed, and Kathy and Rich: I'm so grateful to have you in my life. Happy birthday, Kathy! Another special thank you goes to Elissa Ambrose for being there for me when times were tough. Thank you!

I've also been blessed to have met so many wonderful readers, via my website and especially my Facebook page. They have been a tremendous help in keeping me motivated, and I really enjoy interacting with such wonderful people. Thank you for shouting at me to keep those books coming!

While we writers spend a lot of time obtaining reviewers to comment on our books, I opted to take a word from the reading public directly. After all, it's the reader that counts the most, and their honest opinions mean more to me than any others. So, I also must send a giant thank you to my dear reader friends, who have volunteered to put an honest word in about how my writing makes them feel.

“Collette is on the top of my authors list. I so look forward to “me-time” with her. She continues to produce energy, excitement, true-life details, and feeling in her work. The stories are as if I am actually there. I just love her books.”

- C. Cooper

“Every book draws you in, and you get very involved with the characters. I love the Evans Family Collection as each book goes into detail on separate members and keep you gripped from page one.”

- Su Warren

“Eloquently written with cleverly crafted plots, Collette Scott's imaginative romance novels immediately engage the reader. Believable characters, skillfully portrayed as knowledgeable, gutsy, fun-loving persons of integrity or devious bullies and dangerous aberrants, people her stories. Collette Scott writes with passion and depth as she weaves the intricacies of good and evil juxtaposed with each other into her tender romances.”

- J. Wheeler

## *Prologue*

“Black Escalade exiting the 101,” a grainy voice said over the wireless microphone.

The team inside the spacious mansion moved like ghosts. Black-clad men worked methodically, efficiently placing minute cameras and listening equipment in obscure, well-hidden places. Like a scene from a movie, these men slithered gracefully through the house. Not a trace would be left behind; no one would suspect they had been there.

At a silent signal, the men began wrapping up their operation quickly. One man reached in his pocket and withdrew a small bag. Holding his breath, he sprinkled a small amount of dust on the spot where his palm had rested while he placed the wiretap in the corner of the desk. He straightened when it looked perfect and nodded in the direction of another man adjusting a lamp shade.

“Done?”

“Just about.”

“We’ve stalled him at the scene of a felony stop,” the grainy voice said with a hint of satisfaction. “You’ll have another five minutes or so.”

The two black-clad men shared a smile of approval before turning to the man overseeing their actions. He nodded as his dark gaze spread over the rest of the FBI Tactical Operations team. “Almost time.”

“One more to go.”

They finished placing the bugs and hurried out into the marble-tiled hallway. The other men in black joined the rest of the team, and the overseer did a quick check to ensure everything remained in place. He bent to remove a piece of tape that marked where the leg of a table rested, adjusted the table properly and pocketed the tape in one smooth move.

“Everything in place?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Clear the residence.”

With a suave skill and graceful silence, the team reset the house alarm system and eased outside. A neighbor walking his dog did not notice the men stealthily weave between the blooming bougainvillea’s

shadows and disappear into the raw desert beyond the North Scottsdale compound. A woman checking her mailbox did not notice the black government vehicle pass slowly down the dirt road and disappear into the evening.

It was as if they were never there, just as planned.

Mission completed.

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Two miles away, Nathan Medina impatiently slammed his palm against the steering wheel.

“Hurry up,” he muttered under his breath.

Everything had gone to hell, was still falling down around his ears. He had to sever his remaining ties with JW and go clean. Now. Yesterday. No later than tomorrow. They were closing in, and all he had left was a final deal, one last shipment and then he would be free and clear of the remaining cartel traces in America.

Watching the driver of the black Mercedes touch his fingers to the tip of his nose would have been amusing if the multiple flashing lights did not remind him of the trouble he would be facing if he did not separate himself from JW and his group. Time was short.

After the events of the summer and the death of his sister, they were on to him. That damn FBI agent and his creepy girlfriend had started it all. If 2Tuff had not been so incompetent, none of this would be happening now. Of course, it did not help matters that his sister and Rocky Alvarez had to go and mess with that undercover DEA agent. Now all the feds thought that had been his doing. His house in Los Angeles, the mansion in Malibu, even the airfield where he kept his jet had been visited by the one of the four agencies investigating him. He had to clean up his act or face the loss of more than his freedom. Everything he worked for was at risk, and he would be damned if he would give it up without a fight.

He was not going to go down because of some dumb cop and minor gang member. There was no way in hell he was giving up everything he had worked for. He was leaving the country, and JW could stay and take the fall.

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Three cars behind Medina, FBI Special Agent Zachary Evans heard the team clear the residence, and their safe exit was relayed to the police. Smiling triumphantly, Zach began to whistle under his breath. He watched the driver receive his license back and the officer nod in approval before heading back to his cruiser to speak to the other officer on the scene. One less drunk driver on the road to worry about, Zach thought with a wry grin and shake of his head.

Their decoy worked beautifully – as expected. The Tactical Operations Team was excellent at what they did, and he doubted Medina would have any idea that his last safe haven had been as neatly bugged as his other residences. The amount of information he was gathering on his worst nemesis was priceless. No US Attorney would shut him down when he laid out the case in his report.

What started with the tragic death of a SWAT member serving a warrant sent a ball rolling that reached the highest levels of government. Had Sergeant Brandon Nicholson still been alive, he would have been proud to know his death had brought about an intense investigation to take a hefty bite out of the Arizona illegals trade. Zach and his team were on the verge of knocking out one of the largest drug and smuggling cartels in the United States.

Medina was in the center of it all, and Zach had been sure to handle that slippery SOB by the book. He would not be able to weasel out of the charges coming down the line once Zach finished compiling his case against him.

After apprehending Rocky Alvarez that summer – a government man Medina had corrupted – the former DEA Special Agent had spilled all in order to avoid the death penalty. What he told Zach sent shivers of disgust and relief down his spine. To know how close the man had come to Emery was enough for Zach to want to snap his neck with his bare hands. But he had enough restraint to do his job and allow the courts to settle it for him.

Medina's crimes were almost as legendary as Alvarez's. While doing his background check, Zach had found some financial inconsistencies that sent him digging deeper. While true Medina had inherited his stake in the hospitality business, Medina went a step further. Setting up his own idea of a timeshare business, he offered the use of his mansion in Beverly Hills complete with chauffeur-driven Bentley, his private jet and climate-controlled garage of exquisite vehicles for rotating ownership with a yearly membership fee. He was granting these men the appearance of wealth without the cost to maintain, and his membership dues were netting Medina a fortune, which he reinvested by hosting fantastic invite-only parties where he seduced new members with the lure of great wealth, great sex and great drugs. Supplying them with a weekend in his luxurious mansion on the beach in Malibu filled with beautiful escorts willing to do what these men's wives would not and his drug of choice, cocaine, smuggled directly in from the contacts Alvarez and Micaela had cultivated for the man named JW, these men had little chance of refusing his lures. It was one of those parties that had convinced Alvarez, a once-decorated agent, into changing sides.

But it was all coming to an end soon. The Ghosts were in place, and Medina had no idea that he was under constant surveillance. Zach had almost all the pieces put together now, and all he needed was JW. With wiretaps in all of Medina's properties, he knew the elusive leader's identity was coming. Medina was sweating, and his actions warned Zach that he was preparing to take off overseas. Though he kept a close eye on the funds shifting accounts, Zach knew he did not have much time left. The taps would be on that evening, and he was more than ready to take action as soon as he could.

As traffic began to move again, Zach focused in on Medina's low-slung, red Ferrari FF. His eyes narrowed as he watched Medina whip into the right lane to pass a car before shooting forward at a high rate of speed.

"Your days are numbered," he whispered in the silence of his unmarked sedan. He continued to watch the red blur until it disappeared around a corner while he followed at a more sedate pace. "Enjoy your freedom while you can. The net's about to close."

## *Chapter 1*

"So... what do you think?"

Still hovering by the front door and feeling like a bull in a china shop, Ian Evans stared beyond the racks of tulle and chiffon, beyond the island of white commitment that made his heart race painfully and his mouth go dry, to finally locate his sister Jamie. She stood in front of a wall of mirrors, her mahogany hair swept into a messy bun, freshly changed out of jeans ripped at the knee and a nondescript pullover sweater into a gown that transformed her casual appearance into one of an angel. Ian blinked and focused on her. Then he blinked

again as she turned slowly for effect.

“Well...?”

The three women that stood off to the side sighed dramatically, but Jamie remained fixated on Ian and his response. Shifting uncomfortably, he swallowed and licked his lips. What was the appropriate response anyway?

“Um, you look good, Jame.”

Jamie rolled her eyes. “That’s it? That’s all you can come up with?”

“It’s pretty,” he replied with a shrug. Then he snapped his fingers as the light bulb lit up over his head. “You look pretty.”

The three women turned to stare at him. Though he was unconcerned with the seamstress and the salesgirl, he knew he was in trouble when Marissa glared at him.

“Ian, come in here so you can see your sister. They do sell tuxes here too. It’s not like you’ll lose your man card or anything.”

He frowned and returned her glare. “Trust me, my man card is platinum, baby.”

Jamie’s laughter broke the increasing tension, but Ian suspected it was his forward steps deeper into the store that drew Marissa’s attention away. She had achieved her goal; Ian was complying. He gritted his teeth as he passed a mannequin beautifully arranged in an ivory sheath wedding gown. Just being in the store forced him to think unhappy thoughts, and he could think of multiple different places he would rather be than playing chauffeur for his sister and her best friend. Lunch had been tolerable. All he had to do was focus on his food while they chatted about the wedding, but he was ready to sink into the floor now that they were in the bridal shop.

He hated this.

“But do you like it?” Jamie asked hopefully.

Ian stopped several feet away and scanned his sister from head to toe. While he had no clue about materials and colors and what their meanings were, his sister was beautiful. Tall and lean like all the Evans children, Jamie was resplendent in the strapless ivory gown with the mocha strap. It cinched her narrow waist and draped down the front of the voluminous - what had they called it - satin skirt. A matching tie laced up her back, and the short train spread out around her like a diaphanous white cloud that he wanted to steer clear from lest he step on it and tear the hem.

Nodding, he cleared his throat. “Of course I do. I’m sure Andrew will too.”

Apparently he had given her the right answer, for she beamed back at him. “Good, because this is it. I can’t go back now.”

“It fits like a glove,” the seamstress said as she dropped to her knees and smoothed out the length.

Ian glanced at the ceiling, shifting from right leg to left. Marissa caught his fidgeting and patted the cushion beside her. “Come and sit. You’re twitching like Hayden and driving me crazy with your pacing.”

Ian crossed his arms over his chest and scowled at Marissa. “Next time I go watch the fights, I’m bringing you.”

She laughed and tossed her dark hair over her shoulder. “Sorry, but my crush on you ended sophomore year.”

Ian laughed. “You’re just afraid to admit you still secretly care.”

“Um, I have a husband,” she replied saucily.

“Afraid Mike won’t let you out of the house with a guy as handsome as me?” Ian teased as he sank to the small velvet couch beside her.

She waved her hand. “Are you kidding? He’d tell you ‘take her and good luck’.”

“I’m surprised it took him that long to figure out.”

“Hey!” Marissa playfully slapped his upper arm, causing Ian to duck dramatically out of the way. “Be nice.”

He shrugged. “I’ve known you a lot longer than he has. I guess I should cut him a little slack.”



“What about me? You should be cutting me some slack.”

Ian pursed his lips together before shaking his head. “Nah, can’t do that. You’re more than capable of taking care of yourself.”

She snorted. “I’m going to spin my tires next time you hang out around the school.”

“I’ll write you a massive ticket *and* show up for the court date,” he responded cheerfully.

“You would not,” she accused.

“Try it and see.”

Marissa was glaring at him again, but Ian merely smiled. In his eyes, Marissa was like another sister. From high school on, Marissa and Rae were Jamie’s closest friends until his sister moved to Las Vegas for a few years. Since Ian and Jamie were only a year apart, they all grew up together. Of course, once the other two girls married and began having children they drifted apart, but Marissa was still a major part of Jamie’s life. Having known her in some form or another for almost twenty years, Ian no longer feared Marissa’s threats. The sassy ex-cheerleader-turned-high-school-math-teacher was all bluster where he was concerned.

Having lost their attention long enough, Jamie suddenly called out. “Can you two stop bickering and check this out?”

Marissa shot to her feet in guilt, but Ian was slow to turn his head. This was uncomfortable enough without having to be bored too. Crossing his feet at the ankles, he leaned back on the sofa and watched Marissa and Jamie as they arranged the short veil on her head. Again his mouth went dry. This was it. The wedding of his baby sister was just a few weeks away.

“Oh, Jamie, you look so beautiful,” Marissa was saying.

Ian looked at Jamie, who was staring in the mirror. Through her reflection, he could see her biting her lip. Whether she was suddenly shy or having second thoughts, he was not sure, but he knew he better stem the rising emotion on his sister’s face quickly.

“Andrew won’t know what hit him,” he agreed.

Jamie met his stare through the glass, her eyes suddenly welling. “Do you really think so?”

Oh good God, he thought miserably. *This* was not what he wanted to see. Fighting the urge to flee, he searched his brain for something to say that would calm his sister. “C’mon, Jame, you should know better. The man worships the ground you walk on.”

“I don’t want him to be disappointed,” she replied staring down at herself.

Ian began fidgeting again.

Marissa glanced at him and rolled her eyes. “Like he could ever be disappointed in you, Jamie, please... Don’t pay her any mind, Ian, she’s just having an attack of nerves.”

“It’s normal,” the seamstress said with a friendly smile.

“A lot of brides get emotional during their last fitting. It’s like it’s suddenly real,” the salesgirl added.

Gaze shifting between his tearful sister and her exasperated friend, Ian was not sure how to respond. Thankfully the jingle of the bell over the door drew the women’s attention back to the doorway. Breathing a sigh of relief, he rested his head against the back of the sofa and closed his eyes. It would be over soon enough. The dress fit, now they needed to bag it up and go home.

The salesgirl excused herself and joined the newcomers while Jamie hurriedly recomposed herself. Since they were no longer alone in the shop, Ian was hoping his sister would finish quicker. Already his phone had vibrated several times, with both Hayden and Zach teasing him for hanging out with the women. Maybe Marissa was wrong when she said he was not in danger of losing his man card. It seemed to him that the other bachelors in his family were having a great time mocking him, and he would definitely be paying for accompanying Jamie for quite some time.

Go figure, he was truly the only bachelor, with Zach and Hayden pretty much wearing a woman-chain around their neck. He had not worn that necklace since... well - nope, he was not going to go there.

“Yes...We’re looking for something conservative and elegant. Nothing flashy or modern, mind you. This is a *nicer* wedding.”

The voice cutting over Jamie and Marissa's soft murmurings immediately tensed Ian's shoulders. What a demanding and cold battle ax, he thought grumpily. Unfortunately, his initial appraisal was proven further correct when she cut off the salesgirl's patient direction.

"No, we're not interested in discounted or discontinued dresses. The wedding will occur just before the election, so we need to see the most current, high-end dresses for next year."

The salesgirl's response remained tolerant, but when he cracked an eye he noticed Jamie and Marissa had disappeared into a dressing room. Apparently they wanted to finish up and escape. Good, he thought.

"Well, if you can't help us here, then maybe we should try another store."

A quiet but firm voice reached his ears in answer, so low that he could barely make out the words. It prickled in his memory as though he had heard that voice before but remained too low for him to place. "I'd much rather try here, Myra. It's more convenient."

The scandalized gasp made his lips curl upwards. Apparently the battle ax just got her feathers in a ruffle. "More convenient?"

"Well, yes. The house isn't far from here."

"I would think that Curtis' convenience would be your first priority. Looking good for him is of upmost importance."

With a wall of gowns separating him from the newcomers, Ian could not hear the muffled response, but the women moved deeper into the shop and closer to him. He immediately came to his feet, having no interest in listening to an overbearing woman torment a young bride. Easing closer to the dressing room door, he cleared his throat meaningfully.

"You done, Jame?"

"Just a minute... Almost there."

Ian wondered what his mother would have been like when Jamie was married. Having lost both parents to cancer just a few years apart when he and Jamie were still in high school, Ian remembered enough to know she would have enjoyed the commotion of watching her youngest and only daughter tie the knot. She would never have been overbearing and rude to anyone, let alone Jamie.

He felt a twinge of pity for the young bride still being dominated by the woman with the sharp tongue. Though they had gone down to the end of an aisle to view a catalog, he could still hear her sharp voice. Poor girl.

The vibrating of his mobile phone soon drew his attention away, and he reached into his pocket to check the latest text. He suspected it was Hayden yet again, playfully taunting him about his afternoon activities while he was enjoying an afternoon of golf. Ian frowned at the phone as he opened the message, wondering how Hayden found the nerve to tease him when it was common knowledge that he would be next to take a walk down the aisle. He typed a response pretty much summing up his thoughts and had just begun to surf the net when a sudden gasp caught his attention.

Glancing up at Jamie in question, he found her staring beyond him with her brown eyes wide and mouth open in astonishment. Shifting his gaze to Marissa, her outspoken friend sported a similar look of shock. The hair on the back of his neck prickled with awareness, but Ian's movements slowed as he turned to follow the direction of their amazed gaze.

The pale face and startled blue eyes that met his made him immediately wish he had continued to fiddle with his phone. But no, he had to go and allow his curiosity to get the better of him, and now he felt his stomach clench into tight knots. Standing just a few feet away was the face from the past that he had spent two years trying to forget. In the blink of an eye, his day went from bad to a helluva lot worse.

Her soft, clear voice broke the silence, sounding as friendly and hopeful as the look in her eyes. "Hi Ian."

While he was busy blinking away his shock, she turned to his companions with the same smile. "How are you, Jamie and Marissa?"

Now Ian knew why the voice sounded so familiar. Standing before him was Kathleen Woods, his high school sweetheart and first true love - until she had dumped him to attend college back east. Their attraction

had been so strong that they had reunited after college, but two years ago she had bolted again in search of greener pastures, breaking his heart in the process. Judging by her appearance in a bridal shop, he concluded that she had reached her goal of landing a wealthy husband.

His jaw clenched even as his eyes literally seemed to drink in the sight of her hungrily. Still trim and petite, she had cut her long blond hair to a fashionable and sophisticated pixie with a fringe that not only suited her elegant, cream-colored sundress but also her striking face, with the oval, china-blue eyes and full pink lips resting under a small, straight nose. Despite the trendy designer look, she had not changed much since he had last seen her two years ago.

Running home after a failed relationship, she had returned to the one person she knew would never deny her. And he hadn't. Almost immediately he had fallen back in love with her, but their final encounter overshadowed the good memories. Harshly spoken words on his part and unhappy tears on hers seemed to overtake the love they had shared since they were teens. He still regretted that morning and the things he said in anger, even though she apparently had moved on and was obviously doing well for herself.

The heavy silence was finally broken by Jamie brushing past Ian and hurrying to Kathleen with a wide smile. "Kat! It's been ages. How are you?"

Ian and Marissa exchanged disbelieving glances, though he privately hoped Jamie was only making an attempt to be polite for his sake. He knew he was wrong when Jamie bent and hugged Kat, and he scowled when Kat's arms went around his sister and hugged her back so tightly her knuckles turned white.

"It's been too long," Kat agreed softly.

Ian stared at the two women, conflicting emotions running through his head as he watched his sister hugging this glamorous stranger. It was not right. To add insult to injury, Marissa stepped forward and stood with the two, although not joining in the hug fest. He was left standing alone and feeling betrayed.

Marissa cocked her head to the side. "What are you doing here? I thought you were in DC."

Kat broke away from Jamie and glanced briefly at him before she turned to Marissa. He remained rooted to the spot, still sporting an unfriendly scowl. "I recently moved back. I live in Red Mountain now."

"Wonderful," Jamie gushed. Ian felt his fists clench when his sister spoke next. "We'll have to get together and catch up."

"I'd like that," Kat said with that same hopeful expression Ian glimpsed when she greeted him. This time he noticed she did not look his way. She had gotten the message loud and clear that he was not interested in joining.

"Me too," Jamie agreed with a smile. "So what are you doing here?"

Kat refused to look his way. "I just started dress shopping."

"Oh, so that was you over there?" Marissa asked bluntly.

Kat blushed, and she glanced down at her hands. Almost unconsciously, she began twisting the large diamond hanging heavily on her dainty finger. "I have Curtis' mother with me."

"Who's Curtis?" Marissa pressed. Ian saw Jamie elbow her as surreptitiously as possible, but Marissa ignored her.

"Curtis Reich," Kat said as she finally raised her head. "The state senator."

Marissa shrugged. "I don't keep track of them."

"He's running for a federal spot next year."

Ian swallowed the rage that was rising in his throat. While he was unsure why it bothered him that Kat had moved on, he admitted that he was jealous. It was not as though he had not had his share of relationships after her, but he was realistic enough to understand that there had always been something about her. They had shared something special that had yet to be replaced with any of the women he had dated. None compared to the petite woman standing a few feet away, filling his nostrils with her fresh scent and sending his emotions on a whirlwind ranging from desire to fury. How could she stand there looking so cool and collected when he felt ready to explode?

"Good for him," Jamie said before Marissa could make another blunt comment. "Congratulations are in

order, I guess.”

Kat's smile was faint, but she nodded. “Thank you. I see you're wearing a ring too. When's your big day?”

“Yes, and you'll definitely have to come,” Jamie exclaimed. “I'm sure everyone would love to see you.”

Ian's eyes went wide at his sister's senseless treachery. Having had enough, he stepped forward with a warning look at Kat. “It's too late to add two more guests.”

Marissa sent him a triumphant smile, but Jamie and Kat turned to him wearing matching frowns. He suddenly regretted not keeping his mouth shut. He hated the way Kat stared at him with her wide blue eyes so eagerly, as if she wanted to be his friend. Yeah, right, he thought furiously.

“Brianna's in Europe, Ian. They can take her and Cooper's seats,” Jamie said meaningfully.

He had just been told to shut up and deal, he realized with irritation. In an attempt to hide his anger, he shrugged, crossed his arms over his chest and compressed his lips together in his best intimidating cop stance.

“I wouldn't want to intrude,” Kat said hastily with a nervous glance at him. At least she had not moved on so far that she no longer remembered his temper, he thought. Albeit rare, it was something to behold.

“Nonsense,” Jamie began.

“Kathleen! Where are you?”

The sound of the battle ax's voice caught all of them off guard. Ian's brows rose when the abrasive woman rounded the rack of dresses and stopped when she spotted Kat and the three of them. Her dyed-black brows drew together over her sun-weathered face, and her pale-blue eyes narrowed in irritation.

“What on earth are you doing?”

Kat's eyes drifted closed briefly before she turned to face the imposing woman behind her. She was at least six inches taller than Kat, but Kat lifted her chin stubbornly when she addressed her. “Myra, I just ran into some old friends. May I introduce you to Jamie and Ian Evans and Marissa,” she paused and frowned. “I'm sorry, I know you're married, but I don't know your new last name.”

“Rodgers,” Marissa answered disinterestedly.

Though Myra was still glaring at them, Jamie stepped forward and held out her hand. “Hello, Mrs. Reichs.”

Myra just stared, her mouth a thin line of glaring red lipstick. With a haughty glance at Jamie's hand, she lifted her chin before turning back to Kat. “You do understand that Curtis is having dinner at home tonight? We don't have all afternoon to catch up with,” she pinned Ian with her hawkish stare, “old friends.”

Marissa whistled low under her breath, but Ian remained unmoved. One brow cocked sarcastically, and he stared back at her until the old hag looked away uneasily.

With a huff, she reached for Kat's arm and gripped it tightly. Jamie, still stunned at the rude snub, made a move to step forward, but Kat's eyes shifted to her with a slight shake of her head. “You're right, Myra. Let's get going,” she said in her soft voice.

Ian watched as she allowed herself to be led away. The rigid line of her back remained stiff, as though she knew damn well that they were watching the older woman manhandle her as if she were a naughty toddler.

No sooner had they rounded the corner than Marissa was staring open-mouthed at Jamie. “Did you see that? Of all the rude people...and you just invited her to your wedding?”

“She was a friend, Issa,” Jamie said impatiently.

“Who turned her back on all of us for greener pastures. Did you see her Donna Karan dress and accessories? Her handbag alone cost at least half my monthly salary. Appears she doing well now.”

Ian's scowl deepened. “I'm leaving.”

Jamie glanced at him, finally reading his tension and barely disguised fury. Throwing her arms in the air, Jamie cocked her head at him. “Not you, too?”

The look he gave her spoke volumes.

“You're not still bearing a grudge, are you?”

“Grudge? Grudge for what?” Marissa asked as she gathered up Jamie's bagged dress.

“Ian, it’s been two years now,” Jamie admonished gently.

Marissa stared at Ian curiously. “Two years for what?”

“Nothing,” Ian said in a dangerously low voice. Turning to his sister, he spoke through tightly clenched teeth in warning. “Jamie, let it go.”

Jamie shook her head and turned back to Marissa. “When Ian finally asked her to marry him, she took off back east again.”

“Jamie,” he growled.

Jamie reached for Ian’s hand and gave it a squeeze. “I’m sorry, I didn’t realize it was still a sore spot for you until just now. I mean, you have dated...”

“So you’re still hung up on her?” Marissa asked, loud enough for Ian to cringe.

“No,” he said emphatically, the rushing in his ears warning him that he was about to punch something if he did not leave soon. “She was pretty clear when she left last time that I wasn’t good enough for her, so why the hell would I want to be anywhere near her?”

With that, he spun on his heel and stormed out the door, not caring if they followed. Refusing to look back, he strode past the shiny Mercedes SUV and slid behind the wheel of Jamie’s Volvo. His fingers gripped the steering wheel to prevent himself from punching it, and he took several deep breaths to calm the racing of his heart. What a nightmare this day had turned into. It was bad enough having to sit there and watch his sister grow emotional about her upcoming nuptials, but to have the only woman Ian had ever asked to marry appear out of the blue in the same store searching for a dress to marry another man was just too much. He needed to get home and punch something, and he needed to do it quick.

The fury radiating from him was both unwelcome and unusual, and he feared he would do something drastic if they did not appear soon. Clenching the steering wheel tighter, Ian glared at the dashboard, knowing if he looked into the store he just might go back in and create a scene.

Had he looked up, he would have seen the stricken china-blue eyes wide and glistening with tears, watching him through the window. He would have known that his words had been overheard and had done an excellent job of striking her straight in the heart.

## *Chapter 2*

Kathleen Woods dropped her handbag on the marble table in the bright and open foyer and placed her keys in the Flora Danica soup bowl on display beside it. Sighing wearily, she ran her hands through her newly-cut blond hair, not caring if the short strands spiked up with her jerky movements. In fact, after her afternoon with Myra, she was feeling rebellious enough to make it worse.

With a slight smile, she ran both hands over the strands furiously, using her perfectly manicured nails to mess up her flawless hairdo until she was satisfied.

What a day, she thought miserably. It was not even over yet.

Leaving her hair mussed, Kat wandered to Curtis' study, although she knew even before she knocked that he was not home. The house was quiet, with no hint of his boisterous voice coming from anywhere in the vicinity. When her knock returned no answer, she sighed in relief and returned to the foyer, mounting the curving staircase with heavy legs. Maybe she could lie down and gather her thoughts before facing everyone at dinner.

Still feeling the aftereffects of Myra's domineering, Kat climbed the stairs with a heavy heart. It did not help matters that she had seen Ian. Though she knew moving back to her home town would make it a possibility, she had hoped she would not run into him. After all, Mesa was a city of over 400,000 people. Of course, she knew she had moved into the same neighborhood as Ian and his family, but who would have thought she would run into him in a bridal shop? The irony was almost comedic, and she would have laughed had her heart not ached so painfully.

Kat blinked away the tears that had threatened all afternoon. Ian's parting words had cut her more deeply than his aloof demeanor. Though they had not parted on good terms after she hurt him so terribly, she still loved him with all her heart. Maybe she was foolish, but she had survived the years thinking he would always feel at least some fondness for her. The bond of love they shared always seemed too strong to break.

She learned that day that apparently it had. Ian had gazed at her with nothing short of disgust.

Kat wanted to sink to the floor and grieve the loss of the one person she held in the highest esteem, the only person that had truly known her. He was the only person who had seen the real Kathleen Woods, and he had loved her for her. Now apparently he viewed her as nothing more than a pathetic puppet belonging to her parents.

She could no longer deny that painful yet accurate accusation of his.

Throwing herself across the California king bed with the grey silk duvet, Kat kicked off her pumps and allowed them to fall in a messy heap that would surely irritate Curtis. Lying prone with her forehead resting on her forearms, she stifled a frustrated groan into the pale grey material. In what was surely a childish display of temper, she vented some of her torment by kicking her feet into the side of the bed and shouting furiously into the covers. Why was life so unfair?

"Kathleen! What in God's name are you doing?"

It was not the silence of the approach that caused her to startle violently, it was the harshness of the tone. Immediately freezing, Kat raised her head and met her fiancé, Curtis Reichs', horrified stare. He stood in the doorway of her bedroom, still dressed in his golf attire and appearing as immaculate and as well-groomed as always.

A full decade older than her, Curtis was a debonair man, handsome and charming, with looks that made up for his shallow and less than brilliant intelligence. With just the right hint of curly gray around his temples and the right amount of laughter lines around his mother's pale-blue eyes, he knew how to work a crowd. But that was where the pleasantness ended. Behind closed doors, Curtis was difficult, sullen and spoiled, and presently it appeared as though something had set him off. He glared at her, his face flushed with anger and his lips nearly white with fury. Shooting up off the bed, she smoothed her sundress over her hips and straightened her hair.

"I'm sorry, Curtis. I didn't hear you get home."

"Evidently." He scanned her from head to toe with the hint of a sneer. "Your behavior's as ridiculous as your appearance. Stand like a lady."

"I was just, uh, I had a bit of a headache, and knew I had to change for dinner."

"Screaming and kicking like a spoiled child helps your headache?"

He continued scowling at her as he entered the room, his pale blue eyes focused on her intently. She swallowed hard. This would not be good.

"I was frustrated that I wasn't feeling well."

"It wouldn't have anything to do with those rednecks you spoke to today, would it?"

He came to stop before her, his hands balled tightly by his side. Kat felt a flash of irritation. She had hoped she could have spoken to Curtis before Myra caught his ear. Clenching her jaw, she spoke through stiff lips.

"I saw some childhood friends. We only spoke briefly."

"Mother said you appeared very interested in meeting with them again."

Though his voice was controlled, he still spoke sharply. Kat knew she had to appease him quickly before his anger turned into an all-out tantrum. She shrugged. "I was being polite. My old friend is getting married in a few weeks. She asked us to join her at her wedding."

"Certainly you did not agree to that," he sputtered.

"It would be a good way to start promoting your plans."

Hand unclenching, he reached out and grasped her upper arms in much the same manner as Myra had earlier that day. Stiffening, Kat's eyes flew upwards to meet Curtis' furious glare.

"Since when do you schedule my social calendar?"

"I wasn't trying to -"

"All you had to do today is find a gown that would look good enough on you to make you presentable at my wedding. You can't even do that right? What's the matter with you anyway? Mother told me how difficult you were today."

He shook her slightly as he spoke and then abruptly released her. She stumbled and fell backwards onto the bed. Hovering over her, he glowered down, and Kat flinched when she felt a moment of fear. Memories of her father standing over her, his fists, his belts, anything he could get his hands on... No, stop, she thought, squeezing her eyes shut. Curtis was not her father.

"You've embarrassed me in front of my mother," he said, placing his hands on his hips. "You acted childish. I chose you out of all those other women because you were agreeable, Kathleen, certainly not because I wanted you to think for me with your simple mind."

The truth was that he had chosen her at her father's insistence. Curtis had his hands so deep in her father's pockets that he would have sat up and begged had her father told him to. Kat's lips thinned to prevent her comment and lay before him with what she hoped appeared meekness on her part. In all her years of dealing with her father, she learned that was the best way to cool his anger – at least in most cases.

"I'm sorry your mother didn't have a nice time today. Perhaps dress shopping isn't her thing."

"Apparently it's not yours."

True, she thought.

She opened her mouth to deny his sullen accusation, but Curtis suddenly turned and stormed from the room. She watched him go, wryly shaking her head. He reproached her for acting like a child?

Sighing, she came to her feet and hurried after him. Dinner would not go well if he continued to sulk. She would have to calm him down before her father arrived. Rushing down the stairs, she caught up with him just before he closed the door to his office.

"Curtis," she said soothingly. "Wait."

He was still scowling, but she noticed he did not slam the door in her face. Holding a hand out in case he did, she entered the room behind him and placed her fingers on his back. His lean muscles were coiled tight with tension, so she spread her hand out and rested her cheek between his shoulder blades, silently hoping his sullen mood would improve by dinnertime.

"Don't be angry," she said softly.

He remained unmoved.

"It wasn't as bad as your mother said. She wanted to see next year's dresses, and all they had was a catalog. While she was glancing through it, I wandered the aisles to get some ideas and bumped into some old friends. That's all."

His sigh was heavy. "She said you were uncooperative."

"No, she didn't like the shop I chose." As soon as she spoke, she bit her lip, wondering if she had gone too

far by voicing her true opinion. But Curtis relaxed slightly. "She said it was full of common styles."

Rolling her eyes, Kat wondered where Myra had found the gall to make such a judgment. She was nothing but a poor widow without her son's power and influence.

"But it's close, and they can order the dress I decide on."

"I think you should take her advice and visit a more exclusive boutique."

"My mother and I had planned to visit other shops."

"Do it," he ordered sharply.

Moving away from her, he went to sit on the plush suede reading chair. He was still pouting, and Kat's earlier twinge of fear rose again. She attempted a smile, but it was weak and trembling. If her father heard of today's activities, it would not end well for her. "I'll see what I can arrange."

"Choosing a dress doesn't take much intelligence, Kathleen. Just get it done before I have to."

Stung, Kat took a step away. She opened her mouth to object, but he had already turned away from her, dismissing her. It was useless, she thought in despair.

"I'm going to dress for dinner," she said abruptly.

He did not acknowledge her.

Striding back out the way she came, Kat froze when Curtis left her with one last parting comment. "Make sure you fix your hair. You look like a common slut."

She met the eyes of their newly-hired maid Carolina, who was standing just down the hall with a feather duster in her hand. The stout woman with the friendly eyes and easy smile stared back at Kat with a look of horror combined with unease. Her weathered face reddened slightly as she glanced away hastily, but not before Kat saw the pity reflected in her eyes.

Her own face flushing in embarrassment, Kat hurried past with a mumbled greeting and ran up the stairs. Could this day get any worse?

It was a question she should not have asked. When she finally returned downstairs dressed in a draped, one shouldered, pearl-covered gown to greet her parents, Curtis gave her an approving nod before dropping a new bombshell on her shoulders.

"Your sister's missing."

He stood by the front door waiting for her parents to exit their car and make their way up the walk. Holding a mixed cocktail in his hand and dressed in a tailored designer suit and pearl tie, he appeared as unconcerned as if he had just told her he had planned a vacation.

Stunned, Kat blinked up at him. "Pardon me?"

"Your sister. You know, Terri?" Curtis glanced down at her with one brow arched. "She took off over the weekend, and your parents don't know where she's gone."

"How do you know this?"

"Your father called. There's been a change of plans, and *her son* is coming tonight," he said with a scowl.

"Aaron?" Kat's brow creased in a frown. Terri would never take off and leave Aaron behind. "Where did she go?"

"If your parents knew, she wouldn't be missing. Goodness, Kathleen, can't you ever use your brain?" He sighed as he reached for the door and pulled it wide. However, despite his disgust with her, his smile was charming and filled with pleasure.

Over the sudden rushing in her ears, Kat could hear her parent's voices outside. Placing her hand on his arm, Kat tried to stop him from heading out the door. "Wait. You can't just walk away. Tell me what happened."

Brushing her hand away from his arm as though she was a pesky ant, Curtis frowned. "Not now. I'm sure they'll tell you what they think you need to know." He strode out the door, meeting her parents midway down the paved walk. "Good evening, John and Claudine. Come in and see the new house."

Kat moved obediently to stand by the door, but she was still reeling by this latest twist in her day. Doing her best to wipe the frown from her face, she plastered a small smile for her parents and looked beyond them



to see her nephew trailing behind them. Her concern grew.

Terri was three years younger than Kat. Though they had grown up together and played as well as any children of the same age difference, they had grown apart as they aged. Their father did not approve of closeness, for that stemmed collaboration, and neither girl had proven brave enough to go against his wishes. Over time, they had become virtual strangers, and the rift had cracked when Kat had followed her father's directives and left Ian Evans that second time. Terri had been very vocal about her feelings that Kat had been a fool, and since then the two girls had barely spoken.

Though Kat knew Terri had been right, she was the obedient daughter who did her best to appease her father while Terri was the rebellious one that set him off. Her rebellion had reached its peak when she announced that she was pregnant when she was twenty-years-old. Not only was she an unmarried sophomore in college, but the child she delivered bore the distinct appearance of having an African American father. Though Kat adored her nephew, the remaining family had been too shocked to consider bonding with him.

Aaron walked behind his grandparents quietly, appearing as uncomfortable to be there as her parents were to have him. Unable to resist, Kat crouched down and held out her arms in welcome.

"Aaron! So nice to see you."

The relief on his eight-year-old face was evident in the way his face crinkled into a smile. With the speed of a typical child, he rushed at her and embraced her in a tight hug, despite the gasps of protest from her mother and Curtis.

"Aaron, careful," John hissed.

Kat ignored everyone and gripped him tight in return. She may not have made very many people happy with her on that day, but she was determined to put her nephew at ease. That was her goal, one she achieved when Aaron held on to her desperately.

A hand snaked around her upper arm and squeezed tightly. "Kathleen! Get off the ground," Curtis ordered firmly.

Holding Aaron at arm's length, Kat ignored the throb radiating up her arm and smiled at the boy. "I haven't had a chance to see you since you got to Arizona, and you look like you've grown another inch. How are you?"

Curtis followed up his order by jerking her away and pinching the soft flesh under her arm. She reluctantly let go of Aaron but continued to smile at him.

"It was hot when we first got here, but I like it."

"Where's your mom?" Another pinch made her gasp.

Her father turned to her slowly, the cold fury in his eyes holding her trapped. Kat shivered, troubled by how the mention of Terri made him angry.

"Kathleen," he said in a tone she was all too familiar with and that turned her blood to ice water. "Let go of the boy and say hello to your mother."

Kat obediently turned away from Aaron but held her hand out for him. He gripped it while she hugged her mother and turned reluctantly to her father. Their embrace was as brief and awkward as always, and Kat moved away quickly as her stomach churned with increasing unease. The sting from Curtis' pinches still remained, and the anger burning in both his and her father's eyes told her to tread even more lightly than ever.

Leading Aaron into the house behind her parents and Curtis, Kat bent and whispered in his ear. "Are you okay, buddy?"

He shook his head. "I don't think they like me."

"Nonsense," she whispered, although she knew in her heart he spoke the truth. "They're just not very good at showing it."

He cocked his head to the side warily. "I'm glad you're here."

Unfortunately, Kat could not say the same about him. She worried that he was staying with her parents. Terri would never have left him with them willingly.

She sat Aaron beside her at the table, allowing her parents to dominate Curtis' attention during the meal. Myra glanced once at Aaron and busied herself making snide comments about Terri's lack of appreciation for family values while Kat bit the inside of her cheek and continued to distract Aaron from the discussion. One ear remained tuned in to them, for it never failed to irritate her how hypocritical they all were. Even her normally standoffish mother piped in, advising Curtis how wonderful she thought it was that they were saving themselves until after their wedding. At that point, Kat nearly choked on her wine. If only her mother knew, she thought resignedly.

In Claudine Woods' eyes, Curtis was nothing short of perfect. John had worked hard to bag the ambitious politician and backed him publicly, using his wealth and influence to pave the way for Curtis' advancement. Kat was the glue to cement their relationship, and Claudine basked in the attention her daughter's fiancé brought to her social circle. Fleetingly she wondered what her life would have been like if she had not turned Ian down and broken his heart. She would have been happy, she thought as she idly twirled her wine in her glass, but the tyranny her father would have brought down on his family made her sacrifice all the more important.

The discussion around family values brought to mind how happy the Evans' family was. Despite losing their parents when Ian and Jamie were in high school, their oldest brother Ford had returned to America from Italy and took the role their father had vacated. He ensured that Grady and Hayden completed college and steered Jamie and Ian through the remainder of high school and beyond. Each of the kids had become successful in their own right, making choices that were best for them.

Kat sighed. If only she had done the same.

However, her time of standing up for herself was long over. Ian viewed her with disgust and wanted nothing to do with her, while Terri had abandoned her to pursue her own life away from the family. Right now she only had Aaron, and Kat intended that he not suffer the way she had.

The conversation had steered to her nephew by the time Kat re-focused on them. John and Myra were discussing children and how much of a nuisance they were, unmindful of the fact that Aaron had fallen silent and began pushing his asparagus around his plate in silence. Reaching out for his hand, she winked at him when he glanced up.

"I have an idea, Dad. Why don't Curtis and I keep Aaron here for a while?"

John turned to her slowly, his eyes burning with unspoken warning. The tightness around his thinned lips sent warning bells clanging in her ears, and the tingle in the skin of her upper arm returned as a reminder of the pain he was known to inflict. She knew firsthand how much worse it could be than Curtis' pinch.

For several long moments, the tension at the table was thick enough to cut with one of the outrageously-expensive Shun steak knives as all eyes came to land on her. Not one pair was warm or welcoming. One of the firm rules at John Woods' table was not to speak unless spoken to, but his scowl slowly eased as he processed her offer. Myra gasped and glanced at Aaron with distaste, but John suddenly grinned. His reaction alone prevented Curtis from speaking up, and for that Kat was grateful when she noticed Aaron's eagerly hopeful smile.

"You don't have anything going on this week from what I've seen of your schedule. That's not a bad idea."

Curtis' lips compressed, but he continued to hold his tongue.

"And Curtis will be travelling quite a bit this month. It may be good for you to have some company to keep you busy until your sister gets back."

Kat could not resist expressing her worry. "Where is Terri?"

"She'll be back. She's... gone on a trip," John replied abruptly.

Kat opened her mouth to question him further, even though the flash of fury in his eyes and the tightening of his fingers around the stem of his wine glass warned her to let the matter drop.

Curtis replaced his wine glass on the table and glared at her. "I think you've eaten enough, Kat."

Kat's brows rose as she glanced at the half-eaten portion of her meal, making a mental note of the way he changed the subject.

“Yes, you need to watch what you eat so you don’t get any chubbier before the wedding,” Myra announced.

“I wasn’t aware my weight was a concern.” Kat glanced around the table, ignoring the sting their comments caused. “I thought we were talking about Aaron staying with us until Terri comes back.”

Myra scowled. “If that boy stays here, I’m leaving. I refuse to stay in the same house as this child. I’m going with Curtis.”

Kat bit her lips to stop the sudden smile from rising on her lips. She would be alone in the house, she thought excitedly, a brief respite from the insults, stress and tension.

“It’s settled then,” John said triumphantly.

Across the table, Curtis swallowed hard, his eyes promising a discussion later. She smiled back, although she knew he was angry. Their eyes locked, his holding promise of what was to come, but she felt his irritation with her beat her father’s anger hands down. At least Aaron would be safe.

With John’s mood greatly improved, the remainder of dinner passed peacefully. They left early, and Kat was able to slip away and give her nephew a brief tour of the house. After tucking him into the bedroom closest to her suite, she prepared herself for the inevitable visit from Curtis.

Though they did not share a bedroom, Curtis lived under the somewhat-false pretense of abstinence. With his mother in the casita on the first floor, he preferred to visit Kat’s room under cover of darkness, sneaking in like a thief in the night for sexual favors that did not extend to intercourse. He obtained the release he required without caring for her needs, all the while claiming to live a chaste life. In Kat’s eyes, it was just one more demeaning thing she tolerated to keep her father happy.

Arrive he did, no more than ten minutes after she had turned off her light. Knowing him as well as she did, she had her response all ready for him when he appeared. Rather than complain, she did not move when she felt his hand on her shoulder.

The sound of his robe dropping to the ground was followed by a blast of cool air when he pulled back the coverlet and climbed in beside her. His hand enveloped hers and drew it beneath the covers. When she complied, she noticed he was already aroused. Still battling the shock of seeing Ian and his cold reaction, Kat grimaced but accepted Curtis when he pushed her head down. In days past, she had always been able to close her eyes and imagine it was Ian’s hand entwined in her hair. However, this evening when she closed her eyes all she could conjure was Ian’s shuttered expression and angry glare. She went through the motions, hoping it would be over quickly. There was no way she could allow Curtis to see her tears.

Luckily she did her duty well. Stifling a groan, Curtis stiffened and gripped her hair tightly. Though she winced, she did not make a sound. His rough grip was better than the reprimand she knew was coming soon.

It was not long before he caught his breath and lifted her away from him. Without a word, he climbed from the bed and picked up his robe. She watched as he pulled it closed. In the darkness of her room, she could not read his expression, but the cold encounter left her feeling more hollow than usual.

He sighed. “You shouldn’t have offered to take that boy here.”

“It’ll be good for you,” she replied automatically. “With my father more relaxed, he’ll be much more agreeable.”

After a moment of silence, she saw Curtis’ head incline. “You have no right making decisions about my welfare without consulting me. You should know better.”

But she knew her father better than he did, she wanted to shout.

Without another word, Curtis turned and strode away, closing her door with a soft click behind him. Once he was gone, Kat rolled to her side and buried her face in her pillow. In the darkness of the fall evening, she allowed the silk pillowcase to capture the hot tears that streamed silently down her face.

The tears were not for her and her regrets. They were for Ian and the pain she had caused him, and they were for Aaron for the family he had been born into. Helpless to do anything else, she cried her sorrow until late in the night.

### *Chapter 3*

Although he wanted nothing more than to chug the beer in front of him, Ian nursed the bottle slowly and methodically. He was aware of Hayden's gaze on him, but he kept his attention fixed on the television hanging from the wall. Their favorite hangout had recently been updated, with new upholstery on the semi-circle tables and large, flat-screen televisions lining the rim around the bar. Currently they were displaying football on those new televisions, and Ian pretended to be caught up in the game. But he knew his older brother was not buying it. Hayden's normally dancing brown eyes were almost as somber as Ian's.

"So I guess I can't tease you anymore about going to the fitting with Jamie yesterday?"

"Not if you value your life," Ian responded mildly.

Hayden chuckled, but he flexed his hand almost subconsciously. It was the same hand that had been broken during a very close brush with death just a few short months ago.

Ian swung his head to stare at his brother. "Still bother you?"

Glancing down as though just noticing what he was doing, Hayden grinned. "Actually, no. The reminder that if not for Dani I'd be dead does."

"Yeah, you were pretty lucky to have her there."

Hayden reached for his beer and turned to look at the screen. An injury on the field soon sent them to commercial and drew his attention back. "I was. She's a great girl."

"She is," Ian agreed soberly.

"So you're still upset that Kat's back in town?"

"What makes you think that?"

"Your charming personality, of course," Hayden replied lightly.

"Maybe it was playing father of the bride for Jamie that set me off."

Hayden laughed out loud. "Just think of all the complaining time you've banked. You can hold that against us for the next year or so until I'm married."

As soon as he spoke, Hayden paused, and his eyes went wide. It was Ian's turn to laugh, and he did so until his sides ached. It felt good to let out a loud bout of laughter that overpowered the steady hum of the crowd. Several patrons glanced over at them, but he barely noticed. "Are you kidding me?"

Shifting uncomfortably, Hayden avoided looking at him, but his cheeks began to flush. His perpetual grin was replaced with an irritated scowl. "All right, enough."

"You're getting married?" Ian asked incredulously.

"If she says yes." At Ian's meaningful stare, he sighed and gave in. "We're going to San Diego to move the rest of her stuff next week. I was planning on asking her then. Of course, between dinner with Brianna and

Cooper and that wedding she's dragging me to, who knows if I'll have time. But I'm going to try."

"I can't believe it."

He was stunned that Hayden had finally decided to settle down. Though he was only a year older than Ian's thirty-three years, Hayden was the perpetual free spirit, the middle child that stood apart from the rest of them. His leap out of character after meeting Dr. Danielle Ryan while on vacation in Mexico had taken them all by surprise, but this new twist really set Ian back on his heels. It almost made him forget Kat's sad blue eyes and hopeful smile.

"Listen," Hayden said quickly. "Don't say anything yet. I haven't had a chance to ask her. I don't need anyone calling to congratulate her."

"Or warn her away," Ian teased.

"Exactly," Hayden agreed reluctantly.

The rapid tattoo of Hayden's foot against the floor and the way he continued to avoid his gaze told Ian's trained eye that his brother was nervous about the whole thing. He chuckled again. "She won't say no, you know that. She *loves* you, man."

"Kat loves you and look at what happened." Almost immediately, his brother blinked as though stunned that he had slipped, and he hastily tried to take his words back. "Shit, I'm sorry. That's not what I meant."

Feeling the blood drain from his face, Ian reached for his beer and downed the rest in two long gulps. Hayden watched, his lips compressed tightly, while Ian replaced the bottle roughly and waved to the waitress to get him another one. She nodded and moved off, intimidated by his harsh countenance.

"That was pretty low," he muttered.

"It slipped," Hayden said softly. "I'm sorry."

Still irritated, Ian glared at Hayden with narrowed eyes. "Why do you keep bringing it up?"

Shrugging, Hayden glanced down at his own beer. "Jamie saw her this morning at the grocery store. They exchanged numbers and made plans for dinner this week. Did you know she's two streets over from Ford? You're neighbors now."

"Great," Ian mumbled, making a mental note to change his jogging routine to an area *away* from Ford's.

"She's on the opposite end of the ranch as you. She's actually across the green from Jamie's."

"And you're telling me this why?" Ian snapped.

Hayden watched as the waitress arrived with Ian's new beer. "I thought I should warn you."

"Why?"

"I know you well enough to know you're pretty angry at Jamie right now. I figured I should give you a head's up so you can avoid her a bit longer."

Ian drank again, knowing that if he kept it up he would have to get a ride home. It would not do for a cop to be pulled over under the influence.

"I am sorry," Hayden said with a shrug. "You forget that I was there last time."

Which was true. It was Hayden who had watched Ian drink himself into oblivion for several weeks before he stepped in and drew Ian out by making him laugh. It was not easy, but Hayden was nothing if not persistent. Ian smiled now at the memory of Hayden showing up at his house dressed in drag with a dozen red roses.

"I had to answer questions from my neighbors for months after that, you know."

Living in a small cul-de-sac not nearly as spread out as his older brother Ford's custom home, Ian lacked much of the privacy his brother was afforded. It did not help that his neighbors were all friendly, including him in many of their block parties and holiday get-togethers. They were a tight knit group that missed little. He shook his head when Hayden laughed.

"They liked that, huh?"

"Um, first they thought I was gay. Then, when I told them you were my brother, they thought I was incestuous and gay."

"I better not join any of your block parties."

“Not until after you’re married at least.”

Hayden sighed. “Hopefully.”

Ian waved his hand. “It was a long time ago. Chances are good they’ve forgotten.”

Hayden looked at Ian skeptically. “Ian, something as crazy as that will *never* be forgotten.”

“Then I guess I’ll be the eccentric one on the block.”

“Hold on, I gotta take a leak,” Hayden said as he slid out of their booth.

Ian watched him go and considered Hayden’s words. No one had ever mentioned Hayden’s behavior after the initial questions. They seemed to have accepted his explanation, as brief as it was. Besides, it had been a long time since that episode, and he and his neighbors had celebrated many times in the meantime.

Yes, he thought sourly, it had been a long time. Too long for him to still be moping about Kat. How many women had he dated since? He had even begun to grow serious with a woman a year ago that had fallen through when she told him it was marriage or nothing. Ian sighed. The reason he had not offered marriage was, once again, Kat. He had never come close to envisioning a life with any woman other than her. It bothered him that she was just the opposite.

Damn her.

How could she just up and marry another man? Happily give herself away to a lifetime of droll daily routines and endless political pandering? It made no sense to him. He knew her. He knew Kathleen Woods better than she even knew herself.

Or at least he did. She could have completed that transformation into a hollow and shallow soul that she had begun the road to when they last shared words.

“Sorry about that. When you gotta go...” Hayden’s voice trailed off when he caught Ian staring moodily into his beer. Sliding back into their table, Hayden nudged him with his elbow. “Have you talked to Zach?”

“Actually yeah,” Ian said, somewhat brightening. “He’s finally getting the goods on Medina.”

“I wish I was still working so I could feed you more info, but I’m out completely now.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

Hayden shrugged. “I’m not. I’ll be making bank now that I’m flying fulltime.”

“You got the girl and the plane. You’re a lucky guy, Hayden.”

“Only because you and Zach saved my ass.”

“We have to finish this up. I don’t want our cartel here blowing up like it has in Texas. Mexico’s drug war is trickling over the border almost daily. We start seeing that here, and I’m finding a new job.”

“You’d never do that.”

Ian sent him a sidelong glance. “Maybe... I want this done. I want that widow to have her closure, and I want these guys put behind bars. We have 2Tuff, and his gang is flailing; we have Alvarez, so Medina no longer has a good assassin. Next will be Medina and his financial backer.”

Hayden nodded in agreement, but he appeared thoughtful all the same. “If Zach gets what he needs from Medina and puts him away, there will be others to take his place. You know that.”

“Probably. But these guys are growing bolder with their violence. We had that beheading a couple of years ago, five burned bodies just outside Phoenix last summer and now Border Patrol. What next? The press? Us? I want to nip it, cut off the funding here so their network breaks. It may not stop them, but it’ll cripple them for a while, and when they rebuild I’ll be there to cut it again.”

“You have the passion, Ian,” Hayden said with approval. “But you also need a life.”

“What does that mean?”

“Our waitress has been staring at you all night. Why don’t you just ask her for her number? Take her home and forget about seeing Kat, the fact that you’re still alone, and - most of all - forget about work.”

He had realized that his voice had grown tighter with tension as he spoke, but he knew Hayden understood despite his rapid change of subject. Still preoccupied with his gloomy thoughts, Ian glanced up and confirmed Hayden’s assessment. The cute blonde offered him a friendly smile and tossed her head once before sashaying over to another table.

Ian grimaced. "I think I'll just go home."

"She's hot. Just what you need to get your mind off things," Hayden encouraged.

Ian shook his head. "I'm not in the mood."

Reaching for his wallet, he tossed some bills across the table at his brother, but Hayden shook his head adamantly. "Put them away."

Ian left them where they were. "Whatever."

Sliding from the booth, his eyes swept Hayden from head to toe. "Are you going to hang here for a while?"

Hayden shrugged. "'Til the end of the game, I suppose."

"You good to drive?"

His grin was cocky. "Naturally."

Shaking his head, Ian returned his smile. "Sometimes I worry about you."

"You worry too much."

"I did almost lose you once," Ian reminded him.

"I never doubted you'd be there for me," Hayden said with a dismissive wave of his hand.

Ian wondered what would have happened if he had not made it in time. It was a stroke of pure luck that he arrived at the airport when the vehicles kidnapping Hayden and Dani were leaving. But Hayden never looked at things that way. Every day was glorious in his mind. Maybe that was why he remained unaffected by the torture he had endured. In his mind, he had found the love of his life rather than a near brush with a painful death.

Ian did not understand, but he did love his brother for it.

"All right, but call me if you need a ride. I don't care what time it is."

"Sure you won't stay?"

Ian shook his head. "I'm just not feeling it."

"I'll talk to Jamie. I'm certain she has no clue."

"No," Ian said quickly. "Her wedding's in three weeks, and I don't want to add guilt to her huge 'things to stress about' list."

"If she doesn't know, how will you manage to avoid Kat?"

"I'll figure something out," he said distractedly.

"If you change your mind, let me know."

"I will," Ian said. Knocking his knuckles on the table twice for effect, he smiled at Hayden. "Drive safe."

"You too," Hayden replied. As Ian began to stride away, Hayden leaned out of the booth one last time. "Hey, forget about it all. You've got enough to keep you busy. Just keep working on your new ventures."

Ian nodded. That was true. In addition to his job on the police force, he had taken up the hobby of carpentry to occupy his free time and distract him from thoughts of Kat. He made custom pieces, and Ford's clientele was eagerly requesting his services. His name and reputation were becoming well known, and Ford had a long list of orders waiting for him to pick up. Between the case and side work, he suspected he would have enough to keep his mind off Kat.

But as Ian dropped heavily into bed that night, he still saw her china blue eyes staring up at him hopefully and her pixie hair cut surrounding her elfin features. He dreamed that night of their times together filled with laughter and love and awoke so anxious that he instantly jumped out of bed and donned some jogging clothes. There was only one real way to get her out of his mind. He needed to run.

It was a cool morning, and Ian set off away from the northern part of his development. It would not do to bump into her driving along the main road in search of a latte. Sticking to the main roads was not his idea of fun, especially during rush hour, but anything was preferable than having to see Kat again.

Still burning with frustration, he pushed himself hard. The air rushed into his chest through his nose and out through his mouth, and he paced the sound of his feet hitting the pavement with each breath. Focusing on his body this way eased the burn in his head, and soon he was enjoying the workout. It felt good to feel his

muscles warm up and grow more limber. The energy boost also cheered him. He was feeling better when he turned back into the development and began to head home.

As he neared the country club, Ian spotted a lone child walking to school. It was a bit late for walkers to be out, so Ian slowed his steps as he approached, wondering why the boy, who could not have been more than in the 3rd grade, was out alone.

The backpack he wore appeared heavy, and it was so large that the child's head could just barely be seen above the black handle at the top. Long, skinny legs were walking hurriedly, propelling the rest of the body forward. Ian's frown deepened as he approached. Buses were available for these young kids. Why was he not on one?

Just beyond the community pool, the kid made a sudden left turn on the sidewalk. As Ian suspected, the child was rushing to school alone. The boy disappeared amidst the branches of a Palo Verde tree, but reappeared a moment later in a flash of black backpack and rapidly moving legs. He watched as another commuter, driving far too quickly for the community's main road, barreled around the corner, straight for the boy who suddenly shot into the road.

"Wait," he shouted.

He reacted without hesitation, lunging into the street. Ignoring the white grill of the large SUV that was suddenly frighteningly close, he scooped the kid under his arm, dove out of the way and landed with a grunt in the gravel on the opposite side of the road while the SUV slammed on its breaks. Elbows stinging from where he tried to shield the boy, Ian rolled over and sat up to take stock of the injuries.

The SUV pulled over and parked on the road, hazard lights on. Immediately, a woman emerged, wringing her hands and looking distressed as she took in the scene. He scowled when he saw her. Unsurprisingly, she was wearing a power suit, and her hair was swept into a professional twist atop her head, proving she was rushing off to work. But her deep brown eyes were terrified as she glanced at them, and her voice trembled when she finally found her voice.

"Are you okay?"

Though his elbows stung, and he could feel warmth where they were most likely bleeding, Ian glanced at the boy. He had rolled over too and was currently staring at Ian with huge and very striking pale-blue eyes.

"You okay?" Ian asked him.

The boy nodded his head jerkily.

"We're okay," Ian told the woman. "But slow down. You were going too fast."

"I'm so sorry," she said with a shaky laugh. "It's Monday."

As if that explained everything.

Ian watched as she hurried back to her car and grudgingly gave her a little bit of credit. At least she stopped to make sure they were unharmed. A lot of people would have kept driving or angrily honked their horn at the kid as they passed.

Ian turned back to the boy and studied him. As he had guessed, he appeared to be no more than nine – too young to be making his own way to school. With curling black hair neatly trimmed close to his head and designer clothing, he did not appear to be maltreated.

Ian frowned. "You sure you're okay?"

He nodded again.

"Then let's get you on your feet."

Lithely standing, Ian ignored the twinge of pain in his knee, where another scrape was making its presence known, and reached down for the boy's hands. Though still frightened, the boy allowed Ian to pull him up. A quick once-over showed that he was fine, with only a bit of gravel stuck to his basketball shorts which he brushed away impatiently.

"Thanks," he whispered shakily.

Still breathing raggedly from his hard run, Ian bent over and placed his hands on his thighs. As he did so, the kid's eyes went wide.



"You're bleeding," he gasped.

Ian shrugged. "Better me than you. That driver would have squashed you."

"Are you hurting?"

Ian's gaze followed the direction of the boy's, and he shrugged again. "I'm sure it'll be fine."

"You need a Band-Aid."

The innocence of the child's comment brought to mind his earlier concern that this boy was walking unattended. He glanced up and met his luminous blue eyes. "Where are you off to in such a rush?"

"I'm going to school." His eyes widened, and he suddenly jerked away. "Oh no, I'm going to be late."

Ian reached out and touched his shoulder lightly. "Slow down, buddy. No sense in getting hurt again."

"But I'm going to be late."

There were times when Ian was not sure why he did what he did, and this was surely one of them. He shook his head. "I'll walk the rest of the way with you and tell the ladies in the office what happened. You'll be fine."

The boy's eyes narrowed suspiciously. At least he had that right, Ian thought grimly.

"It's okay if you don't want to, but I do know the ladies in the office, and I don't really like seeing you out here alone. Why are you alone? Did you miss your bus?"

The boy shook his head, but he began walking alongside Ian. "No. I'm staying with my aunt and uncle, and my uncle had to go to a tennis match. He parked there and told me to walk the rest of the way."

Ian scowled. "Why couldn't he drop you off at school first?"

The boy shrugged. "He didn't want to get in the traffic."

He almost asked who his uncle was so he could search him out and give him an earful, but he held his tongue. Assuming he was just another jerk in a long line of jerks, Ian focused on the boy instead. "You shouldn't be walking to school by yourself."

"That's what my aunt said, but my uncle thought it would be fine."

At least the aunt had a lick of sense.

"Well, I'm not going to hurt you, and I'm not going to kidnap you, if that's what you were thinking."

The boy glanced up at him with a wide grin. "I was hoping you wouldn't."

Ian grinned back. "I actually live in the opposite direction, so if I was I would've grabbed you already."

The boy snorted. "I'm glad you didn't."

Liking the kid's wry sense of humor, Ian chuckled. "And I'm glad you're not hurt. Don't walk to school anymore, okay?"

"Okay."

They completed the final distance to the elementary school in silence. Ian was becoming more aware of the stinging in his elbows and knees, and the boy was busy throwing him surreptitious awe-filled glances. Doing his best to maintain a straight face, Ian ignored the reverent glances and strode up to the office. Pulling the door open, he held it for the boy and followed behind him.

Photos lined the wall of the office employees, and the announcements were blaring over the PA system. However, it was not as busy as Ian had feared. The secretary glanced up first, and the smile she bestowed upon him was wide and friendly.

"Officer Evans, how nice to see you," she exclaimed.

Her announcement brought the other ladies over to the counter, and Ian felt the boy's stare even heavier. His gasp was loud. "You're a cop?"

Ian glanced at him quickly. "Yes, I am."

"He's a police officer, Aaron. He comes and visits us all the time," the secretary corrected gently.

Attempting to be his most charming, Ian smiled again at the growing group. "Good morning, ladies."

Their greetings were just as enthusiastic, but they all managed to glance between him and the boy he now knew as Aaron. Feeling he had better explain himself quickly, he stepped up to the counter.

"Aaron had a bit of an accident on his way to school this morning."

Gasps from all around. "He did?"

Ian nodded. "I was out running and saw him almost get hit by a car. I told him I'd walk him the rest of the way and explain."

The attendance lady frowned. "Why weren't you on your bus, Aaron?"

Aaron shrugged. "I'm staying at my aunt and uncle's house. We weren't sure when the bus got there."

"They didn't just drive you?"

"My aunt wanted to, but my uncle told her no. He dropped me off on his way to tennis."

The women all exchanged glances, and Ian wondered how they knew so much about this boy.

Shaking her head in what Ian assumed was irritation, yet for all outward appearances looked like sympathy, the secretary reached out and covered the boy's hand with her own. "When do you go back to your grandparent's house?"

Aaron glanced down at the ground. "I'd rather stay with my aunt."

"Then you need to tell her to get you on the bus or do parent drop-off and pick-up, okay?"

Feeling as though his good deed of the day was done, Ian turned to the boy. "You sure you're all right, Aaron?"

Returning his attention to Ian, Aaron nodded and smiled at him. "Thank you very much."

Ian nodded. "My pleasure. Just no more running across the street."

"I promise."

Ian nodded his farewell to the ladies and turned to the door, but Aaron called him back. "Maybe you should go see the nurse for some Band-Aids?"

Ian shook his head with a bemused smile. "I'll do it at home. Hey, maybe I'll see you around."

"I hope so," he called back.

Ian walked out into the bright morning sunlight and pulled his T-shirt away from his chest. As he debated whether or not to run the rest of the way home, he made a final glance to the boy. His teeth flashed white in his dark face as he waved frantically at Ian. Unable to help himself, he waved back. It was a nice way to start his morning, knowing he had brought a smile to one person's face. If only the boy knew how unwarranted his hero worship was.

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