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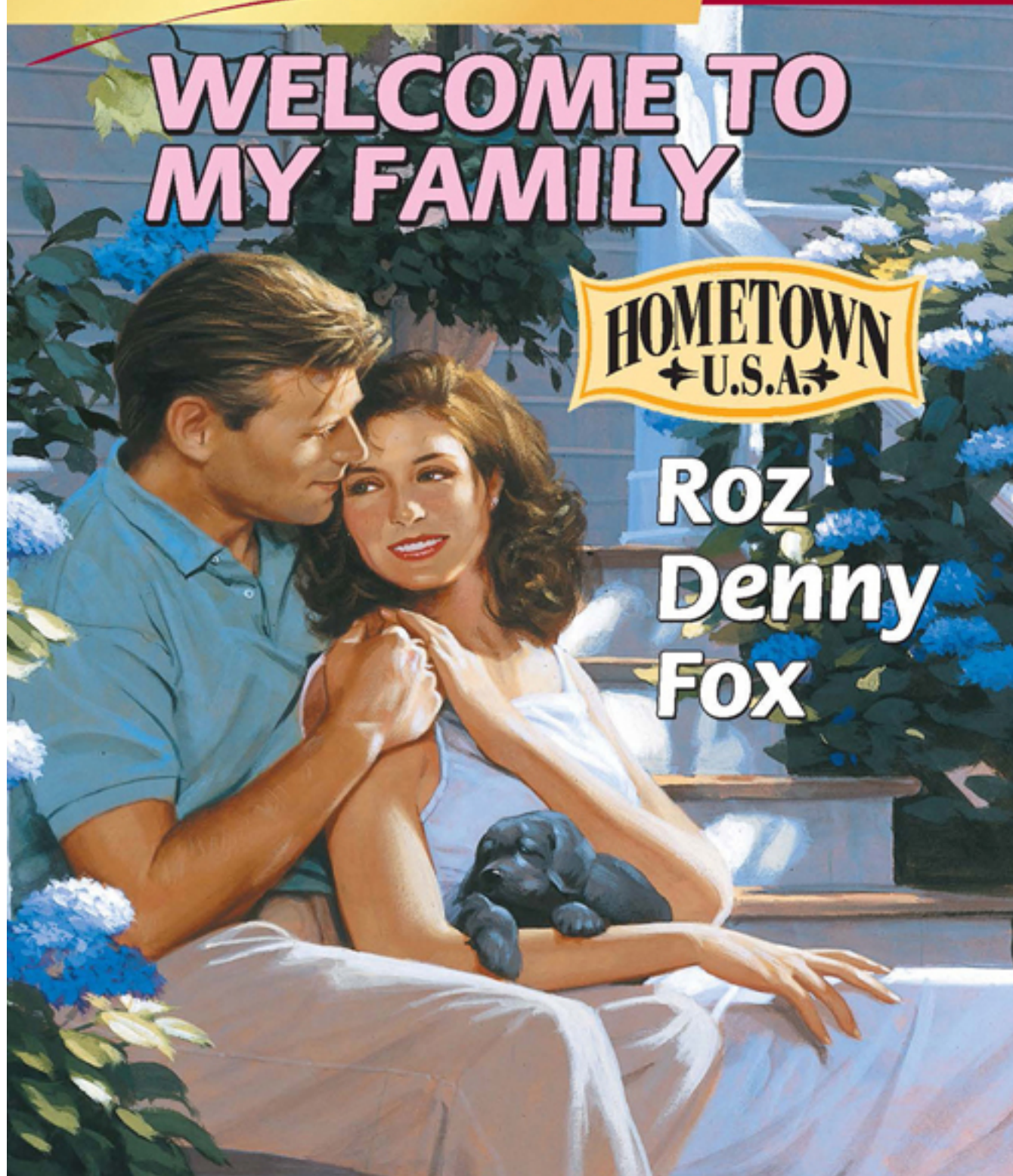
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WELCOME TO MY FAMILY

HOMETOWN
+U.S.A.+

**Roz
Denny
Fox**



Roz Fox

Welcome To My Family

«HarperCollins»

Fox R. D.

Welcome To My Family / R. D. Fox — «HarperCollins»,

FLINTRIDGE, MICHIGAN. It's Kathleen O'Halloran's hometown. It's also Slater Kowalski's. And it's a town divided. Kat and her exuberant family live in the part of Flintridge known as the Hill; Slater is from the Ridge. Slater is the president of Flintridge Motors; Kat's family works for his rival. Ridge and Hill have always functioned as almost separate communities, but the boundaries start to blur when Kat goes to work for Slater's company—and even more when she falls in love with him. Still, the course of love is far from smooth. Slater's exciting new project is being sabotaged. From within or without? He needs to know, and so does Kat. Then there's the strange behavior of Kat's father and Slater's dad, who have unexpectedly become allies. And what about Kat's brothers, who are determined not to welcome Slater to the family? Sabotage and secrets, old rivalries and new hopes. Can two people in love create one town...and one family?

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“Heard you were out on the street making a spectacle of yourself.”

That was Matt’s opinion. But Kat’s other two brothers, Josh and Mark, were nodding in agreement.

“‘Spectacle’ is a pretty strong word,” Kat said. Or maybe not... She remembered Slater’s kiss. Oh, boy, did she remember it! While she debated whether or not to defend her right to kiss whomever she chose, Matt got into the act again.

“Slater Kowalski’s after more than kisses, and we all know that. He wants to pilfer Pop’s engineering secrets, so he’s hitting on Kathleen. I say it’s time we teach that Ridge jerk to keep his hands off Hill women.”

The noise level rose as all three brothers and their wives entered into the argument. Kat finally declared enough. Pulling an umpire’s whistle from her pocket, she blew as hard as she could.

Having gained their notice, Kat crossed her arms. “As you’re all so free with your opinions, listen to mine. Little Kathleen is all grown up, in case you hadn’t noticed. And Slater Kowalski is not a jerk.” Kat glared around at the stunned faces. “I’m going out with him on Saturday night. A real date, unconnected to work. And it’s none of your business. So kindly butt out.”

Dear Reader,

I don’t come from a large boisterous family. But I always wanted one. I love the dynamics and the interaction, the warmth and the caring. So I’ve given my heroine such a family. If you’ve read my previous books, you know I like ordinary people who live in close-knit communities and work at everyday jobs. Therefore I was delighted when my editor asked me to write a story for the new HOMETOWN U.S.A. promotion in Superromance.

Slater Kowalski and Kathleen O’Halloran could live next door to you or me. Because those of us who come from small towns and work at ordinary jobs sometimes think our lives are boring, I’ve allowed this couple quite an adventure...filled with kites and clouds, kayaks and automobiles. But also romance and mystery! I hope you steal away with Kat and Slater for a while to share their exploits, meet their families and experience their love.

Roz Denny Fox

P.S. I love hearing from readers. Write me at P.O. Box 17480-101, Tucson, Arizona 85731

Books by Roz Denny Fox

SUPERROMANCE

649—MAJOR ATTRACTION

672—CHRISTMAS STAR

686—THE WATER BABY

716—TROUBLE AT LONE SPUR

746—SWEET TIBBY MACK

776—ANYTHING YOU CAN DO...

800—HAVING IT ALL

821—MAD ABOUT THE MAJOR

847— “Silver Anniversary” in THE LYON LEGACY

859—FAMILY FORTUNE

Welcome to My Family

Roz Denny Fox



www.millsandboon.co.uk

To Bernie Sadowski and his lovely wife, Rita.

For their wonderfully positive outlook on life.

For Bernie's stories about his old hometown, and about his dad and the men who made automobiles. They inspired me.

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CHAPTER ONE

THUNDER RUMBLED OVERHEAD. In the distance, lightning cut a jagged swath across the Michigan night sky. Kathleen O'Halloran smoothed a hand over the soft coat of the dog beside her—a young black Labrador retriever who'd just begun to whine. The continual downpour made it difficult to see the road, especially through the waterfall cascading from the tips of two kayaks she had lashed to the top of her aging Isuzu Trooper.

"We picked a beaut of a night to come home, didn't we, Poseidon?" Kat murmured, kicking her lights up to high beam. She slowed to a crawl. Storms worried the dog. Made him restless. Not surprising. Kat had rescued him from a half-submerged log during a bad squall six months back. Hard to say how long he'd been riding the waves. She'd run advertisements in her San Juan Island newspaper and posted numerous handbills around the resort where she'd worked as recreational director. No one had come forward to claim the beautiful dog. He and she had become fast friends. Kat's long trek home from Washington State through the March wind and rain would have been far less tolerable without him.

Certainly she'd enjoyed her freedom out West—who in her place wouldn't if they'd had her bad luck of being the youngest and only girl in a long progression of know-it-all engineers? She often threatened to call herself a recreational engineer just to get recognition in the family. But, the truth was, this past year Kat had grown increasingly more homesick in spite of Poseidon's company.

Her fingers tightened in the animal's fur. Perhaps her sister-in-law Mary was right when she'd argued last month that blood took precedence over independence. Pop had the whole family in such a tizzy, at least maybe now Kat's brothers wouldn't have time to mess with her love life—assuming any love interest popped out of the woodwork. Kat's family had made sure to keep her apprised of her classmates' weddings. She disliked thinking of herself shelved at twenty-six. But her mother and brothers sure seemed to believe it.

"Uh-oh. Looks like a stranded motorist up ahead." Kat touched her brakes and held her breath against the slight shiver of the precariously balanced kayaks. "Take it easy, Horatio." Her pet name for the vehicle slipped out as she concentrated on her driving. She hadn't seen another car since entering this shortcut. Three years ago, when she'd left Flintridge, only locals used this road. Had that changed?

The car parked on the right shoulder was big and dark. Its hood was raised. As Kat cruised past, her headlights outlined a man wearing light gray slacks and a white shirt plastered to his body by the driving rain. The wind whipped a narrow tie over his left shoulder.

She pulled over a hundred yards down the road and stopped, chewing her lower lip. All the dire warnings aimed at women travelers flashed through her mind. Mama, especially, was big on passing along such dangers whenever she phoned. Of course, the rapes and murders Maureen O'Halloran recounted weren't even close to Flintridge. Nevertheless, there was always a first, and it might be awaiting Kat this very minute.

She backed up slowly, trying to gain a better look at the motorist in her rearview mirror. After all, she wasn't stupid. Few rapists looked the part.

About then, the man straightened and braced himself against the wind. Kat noted that the deluge had flattened blond hair in what was probably a fifty-dollar haircut across his forehead. From what she could see, he was moderately good-looking. Not a pretty-boy with that stubborn jaw. But clean-cut enough to pass her mother's inspection. Kat set her brake and slid the gearshift into park.

That was when she noticed the car's dealer license plates. Automobile salesman, no doubt. She knew the type. Dandies who worked out in health clubs and dressed for success to give themselves an edge with the ladies. By the time Kat decided to offer help, she had the driver of the stalled car pegged right down to his Cole-Haan loafers and the snowy handkerchief he used to scrub grease off his fingers.

“This one seems harmless enough, Poseidon,” she murmured, reassuring herself more than the dog. Flipping on her four-way flashers, Kat shrugged into a bright yellow rain slicker she kept in the car. “Stay, boy,” she commanded, opening the door. But for an animal who cowered from storms, this one exhibited uncharacteristic behavior and suddenly bolted into the midst of it. Barking wildly, he splashed through a series of dirty puddles, then took a flying leap at the stranger.

“Poseidon, no!” Kat shouted. “Oh, my Lord.” She dashed after her pet and caught him moments after he’d muddied the man’s white shirt. It took considerable muscle to force the dog down. Amid garbled apologies, she dragged him back to her vehicle and stuffed him inside. “Shame on you. Bad dog.”

The dog nearly escaped again as Kat leaned in to straighten the blanket that covered her seats. Following another stern reminder to behave, he flopped down, looking guilty. His tail drooped. Kat heaved a sigh, rubbed his ears, then closed the door firmly.

“Hey, I’m really sorry,” she said, returning to the motorist. “Did he bite you?”

The man settled unfocused blue eyes on her, frowning as if she were an apparition, and definitely an unwelcome one.

Kat winced at his expression—and the muddy paw prints. “I’ll pay to have your shirt laundered. My dog isn’t...fond of men.”

“Not fond of them? Damned animal almost licked me to death. I hope you don’t think he’s a guard dog.”

Partly in deference to her mother’s advice, and partly because of his attitude, Kat bristled. “No telling what that animal would do if I was in danger. Kill, maybe. So you’d better not try any funny business. Are you out of gas or something?” she asked, nodding at his car.

Slater Kowalski gaped at the dark-haired, dark-eyed pixie, who, for all he knew, could be telling the truth about her dog’s potential to kill on command. But why was she acting snippy? He was the victim here. He hadn’t flagged her down.

Then, because the woman and her ill-mannered mutt were the last straw at the end of a rotten week, Slater turned and kicked his car’s front tire. Not feeling any better, he smacked a hand on the sleek, wet fender. A fender representing the aerodynamic pinnacle of the future. On a car of his own design. So why couldn’t his team of engineers make the damn thing run?

His anger drained as it occurred to Slater that the woman was probably questioning his sanity. “I’m not out of gas,” he said wearily. “She doesn’t even use conventional gas.”

“Ah.” Kat wiped the rain from her eyes. “I see. Diesel,” she stated flatly. “They can be cantankerous if you get water in the fuel lines. All this rain.” She shrugged expansively. “I suppose I can give you a lift into town. Poseidon won’t bite...unless I’m threatened,” she added for good measure.

Was she kidding? Leave his million-dollar baby? Walk away from his precious prototype on which the future of Flintridge Motors rested? “Uh...no thanks.” Slater knew his refusal sounded stiff. “It’s not diesel, either. But I really can’t leave her out here.”

Kat couldn’t believe anyone in his predicament would be so stubborn. “I’m sure she represents a hunk of cash to your employer,” she said, using the feminine pronoun as he had—the way her dad and brothers all did when discussing automobiles.

“Be reasonable,” Kat continued, glancing pointedly up and down the road. “This isn’t exactly a thoroughfare. She’ll be safe here until you can round up a tow truck.”

The man continued to shake his head, and Kat watched his transparent shirt move like a second skin against lean muscles. Quite suddenly she found it difficult to breathe. Darn, she’d always been a sucker for the well-toned look of a runner. And this guy had it all—except brains, obviously. Exasperated, Kat deliberately stuck her head beneath the black car’s hood. “I’ve got a pretty decent toolbox with me. What are her symptoms? If you’re not using gas or diesel, then what? Methanol?

She looks too heavy for meth. Are you getting spark from the ignition? Have you tried starting her again? Could be vapor lock, you know.”

The thirty-one-year-old CEO of Flintridge Motors almost smiled at that. “So, what? Are you a mechanic?” Slater found the possibility intrigued him as he dipped his head and joined her under the hood, out of the rain for a moment.

Kat laughed. “Not by trade. But I’m fair with a socket set. Actually, I grew up near here in a family that eats, sleeps and breathes automobiles. Most are engineers. Combustion, electronic, structural. You name it. One of my brothers builds headers for dragsters in his spare time. If I do say so myself, I’m pretty savvy when it comes to cars.”

Slater found himself backing away. After all, his engine was still in the test phase. “You don’t say?” He glanced toward her vehicle. “If you’re so savvy...why are you driving foreign-built in this town?”

Kat straightened and cracked her head on the hood. Her Trooper—and before that, her Toyota—had been a bone of contention with her brothers, too. “Look, bud, which one of us is stranded by the side of the road? Not me, thank you very much. Ask yourself who built this hunk of junk.” She tapped the front grill. “Nobody willing to put their name on it, that I can see.”

Nudging her out from under the Special’s hood, Slater slammed it closed. “Who’d you say your family works for?” he queried coolly, thinking this woman might be just a little too savvy to suit him.

“I didn’t.”

“What’s under those tarps? Hijacked car parts?”

Kat couldn’t believe she was standing in raindrops as big as hippos, talking to this insensitive lout who didn’t have sense enough to get out of the weather. “Do you want help,” she asked tersely, “or do you intend to stand around all night kicking your tires?”

Slater felt a flush creep up his cheeks. He’d been keeping this design under wraps for two years. He had a federal government General Services Administration contract to replace ten thousand agency cars, to be shipped in the not-too-distant future—which meant nothing unless he rolled them off the line on schedule. If not, the company founded by his family might well go belly-up, throwing hundreds of local men and women out of work. The last thing he needed to top off a bad week was some tomboy grease monkey psychoanalyzing him.

Except...that wasn’t entirely true; he did need her to deliver a message.

“Look, sorry to sound ungrateful,” he said contritely, flashing her a smile calculated to bring her around. “If I give you the name and phone number of my mechanic, would you mind calling him when you hit town?”

Unimpressed, Kat raised a brow. “You have a mechanic on tap at ten o’clock at night? My, my. Yet you don’t carry a cell phone? Aren’t you lucky I stopped?”

Slater yanked open his car door and dug around in the center console until he found a notepad and a pen. If he answered her sass the way he’d like to, he’d be stuck here forever. He’d been so anxious to test the latest attempt to correct the car’s fuel-line problem, he’d dashed out without a jacket, never mind a cell phone. Slater ignored the water dripping from his hair, even though it slid off the hand-stitched leather bucket seats and soaked into the Special’s plush gray carpet.

At a glance Kat took in the car’s rich interior and the man’s obviously expensive gold pen. She scooted in for a closer look and whistled softly between her teeth. Test driver, maybe? They tended to be arrogant, and possessive of their new toys.

Silently Kat accepted the note he ripped out and handed her as he rudely backed her away and shut the car’s door in her face. Local phone number, she saw. She hitched up her yellow slicker and stuffed the paper into her back pants pocket. “Who shall I say is demanding this mechanic’s lowly presence way out here on such a ghastly night?”

Slater let his gaze travel up a slender denim-covered leg that peeked out from beneath her oilskin slicker. Damned well-shaped for such a small woman, he thought, taking an unexpected jolt to

the stomach. Tearing his gaze away, Slater reminded himself she was too smart-mouthed for his taste, even supposing he liked women with boyish haircuts—which he didn't. "Name's Slater. Tell Dempsey I'm stalled south of the twelve-mile marker out on the proving grounds with the Flintridge Special."

Kat felt a sudden flicker of interest. He worked for Flintridge Motors? Come Monday, she'd be starting there as recreation specialist. It was a new position, and the personnel director had hired her from a resume and phone interview. The job had given her a legitimate reason for coming home. Kat was grateful to her sister-in-law for sending her the newspaper ad. Pop was no dummy. Without this job, he'd have known right away that she'd been called home to deal with what the family referred to as his childish post-retirement behavior.

"Was there something else?" Slater asked with a faint air of exasperation as he clicked his ballpoint pen.

"What? Oh, no." Blushing, Kat turned and trotted off. "I'll phone this guy the minute I hit town," she promised over her shoulder. Then, because she thought it might be nice to know by name at least one person from work, she paused with her hand on her vehicle's door and called out, "O'Halloran. My name is Kathleen O'Halloran. It's such a small world, I'm sure we'll see each other around."

Before Slater could recover from the shock of hearing a name that stuck in his craw, she'd climbed in her Trooper and tootled off.

Coincidence or fate? Not that it mattered, Slater decided, sliding into the Special to strip off his soggy tie as the truck's taillights disappeared in the sluicing rain. He wouldn't go out of his way to see anyone with that last name. He had enough trouble these days. A revolutionary natural gas engine—great in theory but less so in practice. Employees hounding him to provide recreation opportunities because his competitor across town did. And now his dad's sudden passion for playing the ponies. Ponies and poker. He had an Irish rabble-rouser to blame for that particular problem. One O'Halloran. Timothy O'Halloran.

Disgusted, Slater tried wringing water out of his shirt, then gave up and settled back to wait. The most he could hope now was that Miss Fix-it had more integrity than Tim of the same last name.

AS GOOD AS HER WORD, Kat stopped at the first convenience store on the outskirts of Flintridge and delivered Mr. Slater's message to Gordon Dempsey. The mechanic swore, then apologized and offered a simple thank-you. He disconnected so fast, Kat couldn't decide if it was the news itself or the name of the person needing his services that had made Dempsey swear. However, she gave only cursory thought to the man she'd left out on the highway. Everything soon took second place to the excitement of coming home.

The big old house with the full front porch where Toby Flanigan had given Kat her first kiss looked exactly as she remembered. And Kat knew before she went inside that in spite of the late hour, her mother's kitchen would smell of coffee and her own favorite raisin-oatmeal cookies. Pop was the only one in the family not expecting her. Kat wondered what excuse they'd made for this evening's gathering of the clan.

Heart filled with joy in anticipation of seeing everyone again, she hauled Poseidon out of the Trooper and burst through the front door.

Her brothers Matt, Mark and Josh—good biblical names as solid as the men themselves—hoisted her off the floor and tossed her from one to the other. She'd always loved this when she was a kid. She hugged each man in turn.

Her poor dog barked and jumped at them until Kat's mother demanded order.

Mary, Kat's most thoughtful sister-in-law, Joshua's wife, relieved her of the wet slicker and thrust a mug of hot coffee into Kat's chilly hands. The other two women, Erin and Shannon, were married to Mark and Matt respectively. All talking at once, the women exclaimed over Kat's new, shorter haircut and how trim she looked. Preliminaries over, the family settled down to ask about her trip.

“Long and boring,” Kat replied. “Uneventful outside of a flat tire in Montana. Where’s Pop? Did he go to bed?” Kat knew how much flak she’d take if she mentioned her attempted roadside rescue. So she didn’t bring it up.

Still, her mom acted uneasy, and Mark scowled as he turned away to pick up the coffeepot.

“It’s poker night at Spud Mallory’s,” Josh explained.

“Ah,” Kat nodded. “Well, that’s okay, isn’t it? Pop and Spud go back a long way. I can remember begging them to teach me how to play poker.”

“They never played for money before,” Mrs. O’Halloran said, digging for a tissue to hide a sniffle. “I tell you, Katie, your father has taken leave of his senses.”

“How much money’s involved?” Kat asked warily. “Not high stakes.” She looked to her brothers for answers.

Matt squeezed her shoulder as he led her to the table and pulled out a chair for her. “Mom can’t get a handle on how much. Pop’s gotten secretive about money since he retired. Before, she took care of all the finances. Now he races her to the mailbox for his retirement check and does the banking. Claims he finally has the time to deal with it...”

Kat studied the grain in the old oak table. It had been in the O’Halloran family for generations and had a feeling of permanence. “So, have any of you asked Pop outright what all this means?”

“You know Pop,” Josh answered. “He’s closemouthed as a clam, unless he wants you to know something. No one in the family had an inkling he planned to retire early. We had to read it in the *Motorman’s News*, for crying out loud.”

Erin tugged the lid off the cookie canister and passed it around. “It’s that Louie Kowalski. He’s to blame for everything.”

“I know that’s what you said when you phoned,” Kat acknowledged around a big bite of cookie, “but who is he? Where did he come from? That’s an important name on the ridge. Is he a car man?”

Mrs. O’Halloran patted Kat’s hand. “Apparently. We didn’t want to worry you, Katie. About a year ago, Dr. Shelby told Tim his cholesterol and blood pressure were up—in the danger range for another heart attack—and that he needed to lose weight. Doc suggested an exercise program over at the health club. That’s where he met Louie, who was apparently recovering from a recent heart attack.”

Matt broke in. “For weeks we heard Louie quotes. You know, Louie this, Louie that—then next thing we know, Pop and Louie both up and retire. Before the ‘good life’ passed them by was what Pop claimed.”

Shannon patted Kat’s hand. “It was like a whole male club followed suit. Buzz Moran, Luke Sheehan, Spud Mallory. They’ve all lost their marbles, if you ask me.”

“Well, maybe it’s a phase,” Kat said, glancing around at the worried faces of her family. “Have any of you run it by the psychologist at work? Maybe it’s a syndrome or something. I mean if they all worked at Motorhill...” She stopped as they exchanged sharp glances. “What now?”

Mark, the eldest son, a Rhodes scholar—a man Kat was convinced knew all there was to know about chemical combustion but often let the real world pass by without notice—tilted back his chair and frowned. “Louie worked at Flintridge Motors. Frankly, sis, that’s something else that worries us, Pop’s fraternizing with the competition.”

“Great. So, tell me why Mary sent me a Flintridge job ad and an application. I thought the old animosity between the two companies had died.”

Josh leaned forward. “We got to talking one night. Pop’s a whale of an electrical engineer. Retirement doesn’t change what he carries in his head, if you know what I mean. Rumor has it Flintridge is having problems with a new prototype. Big problems.”

“Come on, Josh. You think Flintridge is trying to appropriate some of Motorhill’s technical data? Before I left town, Motorhill tooled down to make only compact cars. Flintridge does luxury

stuff, right?” An image of the sleek car she’d seen out on the road flashed briefly through Kat’s mind. That car definitely had problems.

“Electronics is electronics,” Matt said, polishing off the last cookie. “We’ve been working on some futuristic stuff at Motorhill. Dad was involved.”

“Well, Matt, you moonlight out in the community building headers for the race car set. Do you actually think Flintridge would resort to stealing Motorhill’s information?”

“Dragsters tend not to know what day it is, sis.”

Mark turned serious eyes toward Kat. “We may be shooting in the dark, kitten. I hope so. But Pop’s behavior’s shaken us. With you working at Flintridge, keeping your eyes and ears open, you might be able to assess them. We spend so much time cooped up in laboratories, we’re like three blind mice.”

Mrs. O’Halloran wagged a finger. “Grandbabies. That would keep Pop home. But no. You’re all too busy building better mousetraps or whatever to have babies.”

All the younger family members grimaced. It was an old, ongoing argument and one that went unheeded as usual.

Kat laughed. “Everything sounds exactly the same around here. Did you ever stop to think you’re reading too much into Pop’s actions? Flintridge and Motorhill have coexisted for generations. Why steal each other’s ideas at this late date?”

Matt laced his hands behind his head. “As Mark said, we stay in our cocoons on the hill. For the record, I wasn’t in favor of sending you that job application. But Josh and Mark convinced me that the way Louie’s hanging out with Pop is more than a coincidence. And about the time they met, according to the newspaper, there was a change in management at Flintridge. Transfer of power from rich daddy to privileged son. Truth is, we don’t know much about folks from the Ridge.”

Kat sipped her coffee. She thought back to high school—to the fierce competition between the Ridgers and the Hillites. The Ridge was largely Polish in origin, and the Hill mostly Irish. The city’s business center and a river divided the two communities. Both sides were predominately Catholic, but they maintained separate churches, schools and social activities. Kat wondered why that had never made an impression on her before. In essence they were like two towns in one. Their estrangement was aided and abetted in large part by the two major employers, Motorhill and Flintridge Motors.

Monday, she would cross the bridge and start a new job in foreign territory. The way things sounded, she didn’t know whether to consider herself a pioneer or a sacrificial lamb.

“Kathleen looks tired,” Shannon said, rising. “Perhaps we shouldn’t burden her with everything tonight.”

“There’s more?” Kat stood as the others began to collect jackets in preparation for leaving. Poseidon perked up his ears. Kat told him to stay. He did, but kept everyone in sight all the same.

Mary pulled Kat aside. “Something I didn’t tell you, Kat. It’s rumored that there’s worker unrest at Flintridge. The job you’re taking is a direct result of pressure put on the new CEO. We hear he’s opposed to an on-site recreation program.”

“G-r-r-reat!”

Josh kissed his mother’s still-smooth cheek, then turned and enfolded his little sister in a bear hug. “If anyone gives you a hard time, kid...quit. We’ll put our heads together and figure out some other way to get our questions answered. I hope you know we’re damn glad to have you home.”

Tears sprang to Kat’s eyes. She hadn’t realized how much she’d missed her brothers until now. Especially as they were also the reason she’d left home. Largely the reason, anyway. “This job sounds like a piece of cake compared to the mess you almost got me into with the infamous Daniel O’Brien,” she said, punching her brother lightly on the arm.

The exodus toward the door stopped. Erin snapped her fingers. “I told you birdbrains to quit shoving Danny down Kat’s throat. He was too slick to suit me.”

Mark dropped a kiss on his wife's nose. "Lord, but she's impossible to live with when she's right." He cleared his throat. "We, uh...do owe you an apology, kitten. Danny-boy is doing hard time now. I think it's safe to say...when you bag a husband, you're on your own."

Kat grinned. "Hallelujah! You know, this family can be...well...intense is a good word. I forgive you for the Danny fiasco. Just remember it, though, before any of you go overboard with this thing regarding Pop. I know you mean well, but—"

Everyone chimed in with opinions at once, the way they always did. Mark caught her chin and shushed the others. "Believe me Kat, not even the people who worked with Danny knew he had light fingers. And as far as Pop's concerned...he's acting funny. You'll see."

"All I'm saying," she urged, "is let's not jump to conclusions."

Her mother stiffened. "Whose side are you on, Katie?"

"I'm not on any side." She opened the door for her brothers and their wives. After another round of goodbyes, Kat was left alone with her mother. Reluctant to continue the subject they'd been discussing, Kat fed Poseidon, then busied herself fixing another pot of coffee. When her mother's silence seemed too overpowering, Kat finally said, "I love you, Mama, and I love Pop. I can't believe the man I remember, pillar of the family, church and community, would jeopardize everything he's worked his whole life for. I'd like some time to make my own assessments."

Maureen O'Halloran dabbed at her watery eyes. "Tim and I began dating in eighth grade. We married the day after he received his engineering degree. I don't know where the years have gone. But lately, I'm not sure I even know him."

"How's that?" Kat asked.

"I thought we were growing old together. All this sudden youthful energy of his...well, Sheila Murphy suggested he may be seeing a younger woman." Her tears spilled over and followed the faint lines that bracketed her mouth.

Kat bristled. "Sheila Murphy is a busybody who loves to stir up trouble. Pop's not like that. And you're not old. You're still beautiful, Mama."

"Oh, I'm so glad you're home, Katie. I love your brothers' wives, but I couldn't have confided in them. They're so...so...organized. They don't seem to believe that women should be allowed human weaknesses."

"Thanks, I think." Kat chuckled.

Suddenly there was a rattle at the back door. Poseidon raced to the screened porch and started barking.

"What the devil?" A man's deep voice came through the screen. "Maureen, where did this mongrel come from?" Timothy O'Halloran's voice was loud enough to shake the rafters.

Kat ran to the door and threw herself into his arms. He smelled faintly of cigar smoke, Irish whiskey and rain, which brought her comforting memories. Kat smiled through a shimmer of tears. "He's not a mongrel. And he's mine, Pop. Didn't you see my rig parked out front?"

"Kathleen!" he said with a lilt as he pried her arms loose, stepped back and stared. Eyes misting, he stammered, "How? Wh-when? I came up the back road. Lordy, girl, are you a sight for tired eyes." He caught her close in a bone-crushing hug. "Maureen," he bellowed, "this calls for a celebration. How long are you going to be home, kitten?" Releasing her, he held her at arm's length, obviously impatient for an answer.

"You, may not be so excited when you hear this, Pop. I'm home lock, stock and barrel. In fact, I'm starting a new job on Monday."

"Nobody tells me anything," he accused, glaring at his slender wife.

"If you'd spend more time at home, Timothy O'Halloran, you might pick up some of the news."

Although it was typical of the heated discussions Kat had grown accustomed to when she lived at home, she didn't want her parents arguing on her first night back. "It's my fault, Pop. I wanted to surprise you."

His gaze softened. “Just tonight I was telling the boys I’d like to check out that great fishing you always bragged about up in the San Juans.”

“Really?” Kat wrinkled her nose. “First urge in three years? I distinctly remember begging you and Mama to come after you retired. I could go back, I suppose.”

He looked chagrined. “You’ve been on my mind a lot lately, girl. I’m the only one in my group with a daughter. The guys don’t understand when I tell them a son is a son till he takes a wife, but a daughter’s a daughter the rest of her life.” He shook his shaggy head and a thick strand of still-dark hair fell over his brow. “I’ll always worry about you, kitten.”

“Sentimental, Pop? Not you—Mr. Logic, himself,” she teased, falling into a brogue the way he did when he got excited. “So tell me about this group. Is fishing what you guys do?” She looped an arm through his and led him to the table, shooting her mother a sly wink. Maybe she could clear things up tonight.

“You don’t want to hear about the antics of a few hasbeens, girl. Tell me about this new job. Has Josh finally badgered you into joining the secretarial pool at Motorhill?”

“Pop...the job’s in my field. I’m not sure you’ll approve, though. Flintridge Motors opened up a spot for a recreational specialist. Well, you’re, uh, looking at her.”

“Flintridge, huh? I used to think that crew was phony baloney—until I met Louie. He’s retired from there. Worked for ’em all his life, same as I did Motorhill.” Timothy suddenly beamed. “Say, Louie’s son still works there. Tell you what, kitten...Sunday, when we go to the track, I’ll ask Louie if he’ll have the lad show you around.”

Kat felt a wave of apprehension. “I don’t know. What does he do there?”

“I don’t know that Louie’s ever said.”

Kat reached down absently and stroked Poseidon’s soft coat. She wasn’t interested in getting entangled with a man, especially not anyone from the Ridge, so she didn’t want to encourage her father along those lines. “I hate to cut this homecoming short, but I’m really bushed. Will you help me unload tomorrow, Pop? You’ll never believe how much stuff I’ve accumulated in three years.”

He stood and shifted his weight to one hip and placed an arm around his wife. “That’s why your mother and I never moved. I’m a packrat and she hasn’t the heart to throw anything out. We always said we were just going to will this mess to all of you kids.” The two exchanged soft smiles.

Kat’s heart swelled. This was the father she remembered. Handsome, charming, loving. Maybe he was missing his old routines. In time, he’d create new ones, she thought. New routines and new satisfactions.

“You two linger awhile and drink your coffee,” she said brightly. “I’m going to bed. And as far as the house goes, you can leave me out of the will. I love this place, but I want to live near the water. Wait’ll you see my new double kayaks, Pop. You’ll be begging me for lessons.”

“And where did you learn to kayak if not on our river, young lady?”

“Yeah, yeah.” Kat kissed them each and left them, their arms linked, hands entwined. Not altogether happy at being disturbed again, Poseidon padded obediently after her. He objected to being forced out into the rain, however briefly. Yet once they were upstairs, he claimed a spot on the braided rug beside her bed and the next thing Kat knew, he was snoring.

If she’d counted on her childhood bed to bring instant sleep, she was sadly mistaken. She lay awake staring at the gold and silver glitter she’d talked Pop into spraying on the ceiling when he remodeled her room for her twelfth birthday. Kat remembered crying buckets until he’d promised to add the sparkles. Now it was horribly outdated. Time, she thought, did indeed bring change.

Like her going to work for Flintridge. If anyone had ever suggested she’d take a job with Motorhill’s rival one day, she would’ve vehemently denied it. Frankly, she still wasn’t sure about doing this. After the initial interview, she’d been excited to find a local company eager to use her degree and her skills. Mary hadn’t made it sound so great, though. At least not as far as the company’s CEO went. Apparently the rank and file would welcome her.

That thought made Kat feel better. It'd probably be months before a busy CEO found time to meet her. By then, she'd be able to impress him with a fully operating program.

Yawning, she closed her eyes and muttered, "Plenty of time."

Meanwhile, maybe she'd bump into the sexy test jockey she'd met earlier. Her pulse skipped a bit before it steadied. Why she'd want to meet His Surliness again was beyond her. Sitting up, Kat thumped her pillow into shape. Speaking of men...She really wasn't looking forward to the prospect of Louie Kowalski's son tracking her down. But suppose he did? There was nothing to say she had to welcome him to the family or anything.

Kat whacked her pillow again. Relieved to have a few things decided, she snuggled into freshly laundered linens that smelled of security and home.

CHAPTER TWO

THE WEEKEND FLEW BY so fast, Kat wasn't certain there'd been one when her alarm sounded Monday morning. Groaning, she rolled over, grabbed for it, but knocked the clock to the floor. Poseidon bounded across the room and dragged it, still buzzing, out of her reach. "Now you've done it, dog." Kat crawled slowly out from under the covers. Her body ached from the physical labor of unloading her belongings.

After she'd retrieved and silenced the alarm, she warmed up for the air force exercises she'd done religiously since junior high. Back then she'd had a terrible crush on Ryan Kelley, who'd declared himself academy-bound. As it turned out, he'd become a podiatrist and married a gourmet cook. Last time Kat saw him, Ryan was overweight. Yet she owed him for making exercise and good health her life's passion.

The routine didn't take long. Soon she'd showered and dressed for her first day on the new job.

Breakfast was a quiet affair. Just Kat, her mother and Poseidon. Pop hadn't come in from the races until after 2:00 a.m., Kat knew. But because her stomach was in such a turmoil with first-day jitters, she purposely didn't mention that to her mother.

Leaving an unhappy dog behind, Kat drove the route she'd mapped out. Worried about losing her vehicle in the mammoth parking lot, she checked coordinates, then smoothed her suit skirt before falling in with a throng heading through the main gate. Ordinarily she wouldn't wear a skirt to work, but yesterday all three sisters-in-law had badgered her. Seeing the women here dressed in what she'd term church dress, Kat was glad she'd taken Shannon, Mary and Erin's advice.

Outside the personnel office, Kat hauled in a deep breath. A lone occupant in the room glanced up, then away as she entered. Kat figured it was just as well she hadn't expected the red-carpet treatment. She approached the woman with her best smile. "I'm Kathleen O'Halloran reporting for work as the new recreation specialist."

The woman's smoothly penciled eyebrows shot up. "I expected a person with your athletic background to be more...robust." The cool gaze flicked over Kat again as the woman walked toward her. "I'm Wendolyn Nelson, director of Personnel."

Kat made her own survey of the statuesque blonde, who wore cascades of gold chains as if they'd been minted for her. The gleaming chains draped an expensive green silk dress that matched the cold eyes. Kat thought the woman resembled a fishpond and she felt disappointed by Ms. Nelson's cold demeanor. During the phone interview, she'd sounded nice. "Athletics is a matter of muscle tone," Kat murmured. "I assure you, I'm much stronger than I look."

"Yes. Well, we may never know the full extent of your prowess. The position may be only temporary."

"But...your advertisement said the job was permanent."

The director seemed faintly disconcerted. "Maybe you'd rather not take the job? Our CEO sees no need to mix recreation with work, and frankly, I agree."

"Well, perhaps I'll have to change his mind," Kat said, with a smile she hoped conveyed the message that she didn't care what this woman thought.

"I sincerely doubt that, Ms. O'Halloran." The blonde pursed her lips. "Anyhow, at the moment you have paperwork to complete. From then, until he decides the program's fate, you'll report directly to our CEO."

Kat gave a low whistle.

"I know it's irregular." Ms. Nelson might have said more, but the door opened then and several women trooped in, chatting and laughing until they glanced up and saw the director eying them in a faintly disapproving fashion. They quickly melted into the seats at various workstations.

“Late again, ladies?” Ms. Nelson made a production of checking her watch. “This gives new employees a bad impression of Flintridge. Lucy...” She singled out a thin brunette. “Start Ms. O’Halloran on these forms.” She tossed out a folder, marched into an inner office and slammed the door.

Although Kat was sure she wasn’t intended to see the look shared by the four secretaries, it was hard to miss. She wondered if anyone had ever quit Flintridge on the first day. Technically, before the first day. The notion surfaced again before Kat had completed the endless forms. She was favorably impressed by the company’s generous insurance benefits and profit-sharing package.

The video she’d been required to see was wasted time. Except that it gave her a rough idea why the workers here needed a recreational program. As in most industrial-line jobs, the work was repetitious and boring. Otherwise, Flintridge appeared to run a tight ship. Watching the company video, she observed little or no camaraderie among the workers as they assembled the big luxury cars.

“I’m finished, Lucy,” Kat said when the brunette poked her head back into the room. Checking her watch, Kat was surprised to see the orientation had taken more than three hours.

Lucy led the way to the director’s office, where she tapped on the door. “Ms. O’Halloran is finished,” she said. “Shall I escort her upstairs?”

“Certainly not.” Ms. Nelson hurried to the door and snatched the folder right out of Lucy’s hand. “Mr. Kowalski is expecting me to deliver Ms. O’Halloran. That will be all.” She dismissed the young woman with a wave.

Kat shook her head. Had the director said Kowalski? Perhaps it was a common Polish name, like Murphy in her community. Kat might have asked, except she barely managed to keep with Ms. Nelson’s brisk stride up nine flights of stairs. Eschewing the elevator was obviously how Ms. Nelson got her exercise. No wonder she didn’t feel the company needed a recreation program! By the time the director stopped, Kat found herself standing ankle-deep in mauve carpet before a desk labeled Executive Secretary to the President.

“Mrs. Carmichael, I’d like a word with Mr. Kowalski before you send this employee in.” Ms. Nelson’s tone bordered on brusque.

Kat watched a smile fade from the face of the attractive silver-haired woman who turned from her computer. “Is that necessary, Wendy? He’s very busy, and not in the best of moods.”

Getting the feeling her presence would add to the boss’s bad mood, Kat drifted out of earshot to where she could study a large painting gracing the far wall. Suddenly the door beside her, one marked Private, flew open and a man in a dark suit almost bowled her over. “Hazel, get me the stats —” The man stopped and refocused. “You!” he exclaimed, staring at Kat.

Any air stored in her lungs lodged there as Kathleen faced the driver from the stranded car. “Mr. Sl-Slater,” she stammered. Kat quickly thrust out a hand, then withdrew it when he made no move to take it. A niggling suspicion began to emerge. Today her test jockey looked top-drawer in a navy blue pinstriped suit, white shirt with button-down collar and a striped tie with just a dash of burgundy. A matching handkerchief peeked from his breast pocket, along with a familiar gold pen.

Kat decided she’d underestimated the cost of his haircut the other day. Those precision layers, graduating from tarnished gold to sun-bleached white, were more like fifty bucks a whack.

A person who often laughed when she was nervous, Kat couldn’t prevent a giggle from surfacing now. She imagined how he’d glower if he knew how she’d labeled him the other day. Salesman... or test driver. She giggled again.

Stung by her laughter, Slater felt his blood begin to heat. “Slater’s my first name,” he said tersely. “You never asked for a last, but it’s Kowalski.” He enunciated each syllable as he stalked toward his secretary’s desk.

Kat’s jocularit y died and she practically swallowed her tongue.

“You two have met?” exclaimed his personnel director and executive secretary in unison. The former recovered first. “But...you said you didn’t know anyone with a degree in kinesiology,” Ms. Nelson accused her boss. “This is the new recreation specialist I hired.”

“What?” Slater whirled, raking Kat from head to toe with a horrified look. “She’s our what?” he repeated.

“Honestly, Slater,” his secretary chided. “If you’re not careful, you’ll end up with a bad heart like your father. Wendy asked do you or don’t you know Ms. O’Halloran?”

“Yes,” he bit out, then as quickly denied it, “I mean, no...I don’t.” Brandishing the clipboard, Slater advanced on Kat. “When we met, it was raining cats and dogs. One of whom left muddy paw prints all down a new linen shirt. Where is Brutus?” he asked, deliberately peering behind Kat.

His audience looked baffled, except for Kat. “Linen,” she murmured. “It figures. Poseidon’s at home. But I thought you said he only licked you. I did offer to pay the cleaning bill.” Smiling sweetly, she added, “Are you thinking of throwing that clipboard in another one of your tantrums? If so, maybe I’ll quit now.”

“I think not.” Slater flung his free arm toward his personnel director. “Ms. O’Halloran’s folder, please.” His stormy gaze never left Kat’s.

Wendolyn Nelson hugged the manila folder to her breast. “My second choice for the job was a nice young man from Purdue. He’ll have his master’s degree in three months. Of course, he wanted more money, and he can’t start until July.”

“Just give me the damn folder. If I don’t have a recreation specialist on the premises today, we can expect an employee riot.”

“But sir...Perhaps we should go through the list of possibilities again.” Ms. Nelson still clung to Kat’s folder.

This time Kat deemed it prudent not to smile.

“That’s not necessary, Wendy,” Slater snapped. “I’ll take over from here.” He pried the folder out of the woman’s hand and motioned Kat into his office with it.

“What stats did you want?” his secretary called seconds before Slater stalked inside after his unwelcome guest.

He stopped, his eyes clearly puzzled.

Kat enjoyed seeing his blank expression. It proved him human.

“I’ll, uh, get back with you on that, Hazel. At the moment, will you send out a staff memo letting everyone know Ms. O’Halloran is on board?”

Kat took the opportunity to give his office a thorough once-over. Three upholstered wing chairs faced a massive mahogany desk. She didn’t know whether or not she should sit or remain standing. After finishing with his secretary, he paced back and forth in front of the desk, flipping through her file. This room was okay, Kat decided, but it wasn’t him. There was none of Kowalski’s restless energy in the muted plaids of the furniture, the hunter-green walls or the pale gray carpets. He needed vibrant colors. Reds, purples, yellows.

But, she thought, pulling herself up short, his office decor wasn’t her business. Instead, she drifted over to look out the bank of windows. My, but he had a beautiful view. Gazing at the complex, Kat realized it was a veritable park. Low, angular buildings nestled discreetly among tall trees. Broad walkways would be perfect for jogging. Maybe he did jog. Perhaps that was what kept him fit. She sneaked a peek at his lithe, narrow-hipped profile. Nice. Yummy. Feeling her blood sing in her veins, Kat spun away to explore yet another wall—this one filled with awards.

“So,” he suddenly challenged from behind her. “Your father is Timothy O’Halloran. Damn. I just knew it.”

Kat whipped around. “What does my pop have to do with this job?”

“Nothing. You’ve listed him as next of kin.” Slater sat in the swivel chair and picked up a pencil. Gripping both ends at once, he stared at her; she felt like a bug being studied. “You did phone

Dempsey the other night. That's commendable. Frankly, I can't help wondering which of your father's bad traits you've inherited."

Kat's initial sizzle of interest gave way to anger that burned a path to her cheeks. "Now, wait a darn minute! If you're in any way related to Louie Kowalski, you have some nerve bringing up bad traits. My pop was a respected electrical engineer at Motorhill up until he met Louie."

"Louie?" Slater's face matched hers shade for shade. "My father is called Lou at the country club, L.J. in board of directors meetings and 'Sir' when he strolls around this complex. Never Louie. Or not until he ran afoul of Tim O'Halloran, that is."

This information set Kat back on her heels. Somehow, it wasn't what she'd expected to hear. Now she didn't wait for an invitation but plopped down in one of Slater's wing chairs. "Your father's on the board here?" she whispered.

"He stepped down from the presidency last January." Slater shrugged impatiently. "He's board chairman, just like his father was before him. What isn't like my grandfather is the irresponsible way L.J.'s behaved since he met Tim O'Halloran and his hoodlum pals. Instead of good works, he spends his spare time on poker or at the track."

"Seems to be a lot of that going around," Kat said, shaking her head. "If it's any consolation, it's not normal behavior for my pop, either."

Slater drummed his fingers on her manila file. "Regarding the job. I take it you're aware of how I feel about instituting this position in my company?"

"One would have to be the village idiot not to pick up on that." Kat looked away and caught her lip between her teeth. "So..." She worked to get a grip on her cartwheeling emotions. "Did you ever figure out what was wrong with your car?"

Slater straightened. Once again she'd thrown him off balance. Damn, but he couldn't stop looking at her lips.... The CEO in him beat a hasty retreat. As he stared at her, he saw that concern darkened her huge eyes, tugging on his sympathy. Plus, Slater noticed an appealing smatter of freckles across the bridge of her nose. "This is not a social chat we're having, Ms. O'Halloran," he said, attempting to regain control. "Nothing about that car concerns you. Got it?"

Kat scooted forward in her chair but felt her skirt catch. It was a curse of being short; her feet never quite touched the floor when she sat in big, roomy chairs. "Got it," she repeated, her reply sounding a trifle breathless, which might have been partly because his eyes followed the tug of her hands on a ridiculously short skirt. "I work here, but I don't ask questions about the product." She returned his frown. "Makes no sense to me."

"Speaking of your job. Is that your normal work attire?" Almost before the remark was out of Slater's mouth, he cursed himself for saying a word.

Kat laughed. She couldn't help it. The family had coerced her into wearing a suit and he didn't like their choice. "At the resort, I generally wore sweats. Weather permitting, shorts."

"No shorts," Slater sputtered. "This whole notion of play at work is ridiculous. I don't know what possessed the other automakers. It only lengthens the overall workday when you give longer lunches and extra breaks to accommodate recreation. Don't workers want to get home to see their wives and kids anymore?"

"Have you talked to staff at Motorhill? Or plant managers in Detroit? Absence goes down and productivity up where they have recreation programs. I interned at a facility where they started a new program. I can personally vouch that it did make a difference."

Slater declined comment. He leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers against his lips. "What equipment would you need to get something minimal going?"

Kat was extremely glad she'd climbed out of bed last night to draw up a list. She extracted it from her purse and pushed it across his desk.

As Slater perused it, his straight brows almost met over his nose.

Kat chewed her lower lip again and waited for him to throw the list in his wastebasket.

But when he spoke, Slater sounded calm enough. “Space isn’t an issue. I’ve got an empty warehouse and plenty of ground to grade for a ball field. Equipment is something else. I think it’s only fair to tell you, Ms. O’Halloran, I have an attorney checking for loopholes in the proposal our workers presented to the board. The minute he finds one, your program is history. Surely you understand my reluctance to invest in equipment.”

Kat steepled her fingers in a gesture exactly like his. “Do you work out?” she asked bluntly, knowing he had to in order to remain so lean and trim.

“Every day.” He glanced up. “I’d go crazy if I didn’t. I don’t, however, exercise during work hours. I belong to a twenty-four-hour gym.”

“Which costs you two thousand bucks a year. Right?”

He shrugged. “More or less.”

“More would be my guess. However, the men and women who work here probably didn’t hatch from a long line of CEOs. Surveys show blue collar workers eat too much bread and too few fruits and vegetables. Heading in this morning I passed a score of people who were overweight. Exercise lengthens life. That, Kowalski, is fact. Exercise also sharpens mental acuity.”

“I’m not disputing the merits of exercise. I just have more important things to worry about. Like if we don’t produce cars around here, those same people won’t even have bread on the table.”

“Then Flintridge is in a financial bind.”

“Who told you that?” He catapulted from his chair, smacking both hands flat on the desk.

Kat shrank back into the oversize chair. “I heard there’s a rumor to that effect floating around Motorhill.”

“Dammit,” he swore, slamming her folder closed. “Squelch it,” he ordered.

“Me?” She leaned toward him. “I’ll admit I have family working at Motorhill. But they didn’t start the rumor. And I sure didn’t.”

He eyed her coldly in what became a fierce glaring match that lasted until his intercom buzzed. Shifting his attention to a console on his desk, Slater flipped a switch. “Yes, Hazel, what is it?”

“Have you forgotten you were meeting... someone for lunch?”

He spared a glance at a wafer-thin watch. “Yes. Is she on the phone?”

The response was affirmative.

“Extend my apologies and tell her to order our salads. I’ll have a chicken Caesar.” He severed the connection with the confidence of a man assured that whatever he commanded would be done.

Kat stood. It would be a cold day in hell before she ordered any man a salad via secretarial request. Or if she did, he’d be wearing it when he did manage to show up. “Does this conclude our discussion?” she asked. “Or shall I return after lunch?” She led the way to the door.

“Let’s resume at three. Meanwhile, I’ll have Hazel show you the office I’ve assigned you. It’s directly below on level nine.” He opened the door and beckoned his secretary.

“If you ask me,” Kat muttered, “you take darn long lunch hours for someone who doesn’t approve of recreating on company time.”

Hazel Carmichael rushed up to meet them just then, so Kat missed the crimson tide that flowed up Kowalski’s neck.

“Take Ms. O’Halloran to room 910 before I get into trouble with the employees for firing her, Hazel. I want her back at three, so please clear my calendar.”

“Very good, sir. Enjoy your lunch with Ms. Bellamy.”

Ms. Bellamy. Kat wondered what she did for a living since she had time to lunch all afternoon. The notion of him dallying with some do-nothing socialite while she twiddled her thumbs, sitting around waiting for his instructions, stuck in Kat’s craw. Then, disgusted to think she cared what he did and with whom, she swept all images of her arrogant boss aside and dutifully followed his secretary. She didn’t envy Mrs. Carmichael having to choreograph Kowalski’s love life. It seemed a demeaning task.

“Here we are, dear.” Mrs. Carmichael unlocked a door. “I didn’t know precisely what supplies a recreation specialist might require, so I ordered the usual pens, pencils, tape and such.”

Kat stepped inside. “At the resort, I had a fourth of this space, a host of kayaks, paddles, five bags of assorted sports balls, a desk and two file cabinets.”

The secretary looked horrified. “No one mentioned sports equipment, Ms. O’Halloran. I’m afraid nothing’s been ordered.”

“Call me Kat. And don’t worry. Kowalski has my equipment list. I would like a roster of personnel, broken out into shifts with lunch and break times, if possible.”

“I’ll call Wendy after lunch and tell her you need it first thing in the morning.” Slater’s secretary jotted herself a note.

“Lovely,” Kat murmured. Just what she needed, another visit with the company fashion plate. Especially since she’d be wearing sweats tomorrow.

Mrs. Carmichael homed in on Kat’s remark. “If Wendy gives you trouble, call me. I’ll collect the list for you.”

Kat smiled. So she hadn’t imagined the friction between those two.

The woman suddenly checked a watch hanging from a slender neck chain. “It’s our lunchtime, too, Ms....er, Kat. If you haven’t got any plans, you’re welcome to join me in the cafeteria.”

“Thank you, I’d love to join you for lunch. Let me stow this packet in the desk and I’ll be set to go. Will I need to wear my badge?”

“No need. Oh, I almost forgot, these are your office and building keys. Slater will show you the warehouse and give you that key, I’m sure.”

Kat tucked the key ring in her purse, and tossed the badge into a drawer. The badge that Ms. Nelson considered simply a waste—as she’d announced in a snide voice loud enough for all in her office to hear—because it was only temporary.

“By the way,” Kat asked as they left the room. “If it’s not telling tales out of school...how stable do you think my position is?”

Mrs. Carmichael cast a glance up and down the hall. When it appeared they were alone, she said, “Tool-and-die workers have asked for it every year since Motorhill developed their program. They offered to take it in lieu of a raise. But maybe you aren’t aware that Flintridge is family-owned except for a small amount of common stock. Benefits and wages are board decisions. L.J. was scrupulous about keeping up with union salaries, as was his father. But neither was big on frills. I don’t know why everyone assumed Slater would be less conservative.”

“He’s not?”

Kat’s companion rang for the elevator. “Product-wise, no.” The elevator arrived, but it was full. Giving a shake of her head, Hazel fell silent and headed for the stairs.

Kat didn’t want to pressure her, but she was sharp enough to recognize when a plum had been dropped into her lap. She might never lunch with the president’s secretary again and there were things she wanted to know.

As they left the building by the back door and started down a tree-lined walkway, Kat murmured, “The landscaping here is beautiful. One of the Kowalskis must have had an appreciation for gardening.”

“All of them,” Mrs. Carmichael said. “At least, the three I’ve worked for.”

“You worked for Slater’s grandfather? You don’t look that old.”

The woman blushed. “Not as executive secretary. I came here in my twenties. The company was smaller then. That Slater was a people person. He got down in the trenches with his employees. He retired soon after I began.”

“Ah. So your boss is named for his grandfather, but isn’t like him?”

“Excuse me...but I had the impression you knew Slater already.”

Kat glanced up and caught the curiosity in the secretary's gaze. Mrs. Carmichael was doing some digging, too. Kat grinned. "Don't tell him I ratted." She explained how they met, finishing the tale before they reached the cafeteria line. Talk shifted as they selected lunch salads and found seats away from the crowd.

Mrs. Carmichael smiled. "Cars," she said abruptly. "The car vision is something all the Kowalski men are born with. Slater's grandfather was obsessed by the Ridgemont. L.J. poured heart and soul into the Ridgecrest. And now Slater slaves day and night on his dream car. Makes for a poor life, if you ask me. Although no one does."

"Those first two cars were wildly successful," Kat allowed. "But when you say obsessed, where does that leave family? Wives, for instance?"

Mrs. Carmichael didn't say anything for a moment. At last she said, with a twinkle in her eye, "Slater isn't married. Every unattached female employed here envisions herself the next Mrs. Kowalski. The most persistent is Wendy Nelson."

Suddenly Kat saw things more clearly. "Well, you now have one employee who doesn't see herself married to the boss," Kat announced. "But what's wrong with your rumor mill? Don't these ladies know he takes three-hour lunches with Ms. Bellamy?"

"Goodness," Mrs. Carmichael exclaimed, "she is Slater's great-aunt. She's eighty. I call her the dowager CEO. If she had her way, she'd still be chairman of the board. Her father started Flintridge Motors. Bless Slater's heart, the boy lunches with her faithfully once a month. L.J. avoids her at all costs."

Kat pretended interest in her food. She didn't want to hear anything redeeming about the current president of Flintridge Motors.

"Is something wrong?" her lunch partner inquired. "I shouldn't be talking out of turn like this. I don't, usually. You needn't worry that Slater will chase you around the desk. He's a gentleman."

"I'm not interested in his personal traits. I grew up in a family of men obsessed with automobiles. They work for Motorhill." Kat shrugged. "If and when I marry, you'd better believe the man will have hobbies. And he'll have time for me."

"Motorhill?" Kat's companion looked confused. "I heard you'd come to us all the way from the West Coast."

Kat wrinkled her nose. "I did. From Washington State, where I went to escape being pushed down the aisle with a Motorhill accountant. As it turns out, his financing was a little too creative and he now resides in a...shall we say, state-owned facility. After that disaster, my family wisely decided to let me find my own husband." Kat didn't see any reason to mention that she'd been called home because of Louie Kowalski. It would only muddy the waters.

"O'Halloran. You're of Irish extraction? That explains your beautiful creamy skin."

Kat blushed. "Carmichael. Is it possible you're from the Hill?"

"No." The secretary's eyes filled with tears. "My husband was a fuel scientist at Motorhill. He was killed in a laboratory explosion long ago—before our second anniversary. His parents weren't fond of me. So after he died, I applied for a job here and moved back to this side of the river. I've never returned to the Hill. Too many bad memories."

"I'm sorry," Kat said sincerely. Rivalry between the car companies often extended into private families. "Do you have children?"

The woman shook her head, blew her nose and began to gather her things.

Kat realized lunch was over, as was her informal chat with Slater's secretary. She felt there was more sadness in Hazel Carmichael's life than had been explored, but very likely the woman would keep it locked inside forever.

"Thanks for taking me under your wing," Kat said on the walk back to the administration building. "The first day is the hardest. I believe I'll go familiarize myself with the policy and procedures manual. See you at three."

“It’s been my pleasure,” Hazel said. “You’re a refreshing young woman, Kathleen—if I may call you that. In my estimation, Kat doesn’t fit you.”

Kat blushed again. Another curse of her fair complexion. “Pop called me kitten. My brothers switched to Kat because of the way I fought them when I was a kid. See you at three,” she murmured, hopping out of the lumbering elevator on the ninth floor. As the door closed and Hazel rode on up, Kat recalled that the president at Motorhill had a private lift. His secretary had her own electronic card to operate it. The no-frills policy extended here across the board.

The company’s three-inch manual was fairly standard. Kat leafed through it, read certain chapters. When she grew tired of that, she prowled her office and inspected the view from her two windows. Her corner office sat directly below Slater’s, so she had a similar view. But her other window faced the river. Kat hadn’t realized the river flowed through this industrial park. Her mind flashed to her kayaks. What a good inexpensive way to add to her program.

She made a mental note to look up depth, grade and regulations for running the river at this point. To kill more time, she studied the map of the complex Hazel had given her. Even then, Kat still had an hour on her hands. It wasn’t her nature to sit idle. Having gone beyond the shock of discovering that her boss and Louie Kowalski’s son were one and the same, Kat was ready to just get on with the job.

By two-thirty she was so bored, she actually resorted to reading the yellow pages in the phone book. Perhaps she’d price some equipment on her own. From what Mary had said the other night, Kat expected to have to fight for space, but it seemed Kowalski was going to be decent about that, at least.

At five minutes to three, she again stood in front of Hazel’s desk.

The woman glanced up. “Hello, Kathleen. My goodness. Is it that late already? The boss is meeting with his chief engineer. I’ll tell him you’re here.”

“Thank you,” Kat said. “Maybe I’ll look at your rogues’ gallery, if you don’t mind.”

“Do. Down that hall, you’ll find portraits of our current board members. They were just mounted last week and look very nice.”

Kat spent some time studying Adelaide Bellamy and Louis J. Kowalski. Both had kind eyes. She observed that Slater’s dad looked almost mischievous, which dragged a reluctant smile from Kat. Somehow, she felt like a traitor to her family. Considering this, she wandered into the reception area again. She had backtracked to very near Slater’s office when suddenly his door was thrown open and out burst an energetic man about her own age. His shirtsleeves were rolled above his elbows, exposing muscular forearms. Unable to halt his forward motion, he ran right into Kat. The armload of blueprints he carried went flying.

“Excuse me,” she gasped, bending at once to help retrieve the scrolls. “I’m so sorry,” she said, even though he was the one who hadn’t been paying attention.

“My fault,” he declared, ending with a low-wolf whistle. “And who might you be?” he murmured, slicking a hand through nut-brown hair. “I don’t believe we’ve met.”

Straightening, her arms filled with his blueprints, Kat blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

Casually, the man leaned against Slater’s door frame.

Almost immediately, Slater appeared behind him. He, too, was in shirtsleeves, and he frowned as his engineer said, “I think I’m in love. Somebody introduce me to this woman.”

“Seems to me you have enough woman trouble, Scott, without looking for more,” Slater said emphatically. In an obvious move, he stepped between Kat and his engineering chief.

The man holding the blueprints widened his eyes. “Why didn’t you say she was private stock, old buddy?” He backed away, but his eyes remained curious.

Kat sucked in an audible breath. “I’m no one’s stock. I’m the new recreation specialist at Flintridge,” she said firmly, stepping around Slater to shove the blueprints she’d rescued into Scott’s arms.

“Why were you lurking outside my door?” Slater demanded, again insinuating himself between the two.

“I wasn’t lurking.” Kat was quick to defend herself. “I was looking at pictures. This man—uh, Scott, flew out the door and...and...” She realized her voice had risen and a group that stepped off the elevator had ears perked. She clamped down on the O’Halloran temper.

Slater dismissed his engineer with a word. He ushered Kat inside his office and forcefully shut the door. “I knew hiring you would be trouble,” he said, pushing down his shirtsleeves, fumbling to replace gold cuff links lying loose in a tray on his desk.

Kat fumed silently over the unfair assessment, watching him take his suit jacket off the back of the chair and shrug into it.

“I did nothing,” she said tightly. “And your...that poor engineer was just indulging in a bit of harmless flirting. Which, I might add, I would have handled without your help.”

“Scott Wishynski is neither poor nor harmless. I pay him top dollar, which he spends on a wife and miscellaneous girlfriends scattered throughout the complex.” Slater’s eyes roamed over her. “Frankly, I wouldn’t have considered you his type.”

Kat leaned on his desk and yelled, “Whatever type that is, I’m definitely not it!”

“That’s what I said. Scott and I generally agree on looks. Redheads, mostly. The difference is... I don’t condone cheating or dating anyone on staff. In your position, where you’ll be dealing with a lot of men, I suggest you adopt my policy, Ms. O’Halloran. Now, shall we get started on your tour?”

His lecture fueled a blaze of temper Kat found hard to control. She longed to wipe that smirk right off his face. Except that he really hadn’t said anything she could dispute. Still, he needn’t think he could dictate how she conducted her personal life. “You’re the boss at work. But I’ll do as I please on my time,” she said, stepping aside to let him pass. Then she had to run to keep up. Slater’s longer legs carried him quickly through the corridors, when they’d left the elevator, along the walkway. Kat was definitely not used to shoes with heels.

“I have some bad news,” he said when they arrived at an open arena mounded with mud. “That last storm soaked the ground. My grader got stuck today. We won’t be able to clear this field for your ball diamond. Not for a few weeks.”

“More than one ball diamond, right?” Kat asked.

“Isn’t one enough?”

“You employ both men and women.”

“I didn’t realize ball fields were like rest rooms, where codes require his and hers.”

Kat arched a brow. “I assumed you’d want to run women’s teams and men’s teams simultaneously, like they do at Motorhill.”

Slater thrust his hands in his pants pockets and ignored her jab. “The warehouse I earmarked for your use is there.” He pointed to a flat-roofed building out in the middle of nowhere.

“I’d hoped for a more central site.”

“Look, it’s empty. Take it or leave it.”

“You’re being deliberately difficult, Mr. Kowalski,” Kat said. “People who work in the south end of the complex, which I might point out is most of your staff, couldn’t get here in time to use the facility on a regular break.” She pulled a creased map of the sprawling complex out of her pocket and unfolded it. “What about this building?” She pointed to one in the very center. “I understand it’s also empty.”

“At the moment, yes. It’s also surrounded by restricted design labs. Would you mind telling me how you knew it was vacant?”

The wary expression on his face reminded Kat of what her brother had said about Louie Kowalski maybe tapping Pop’s brain. Were they testing Motorhill’s techniques in one of those labs? Was that why Slater wanted her out of reach? Well, Kat sure wasn’t going to tell him Hazel had suggested that building. “Are you making some areas off limits to me?” she asked aggressively.

He frowned down into her eyes without answering. The low-hanging clouds suddenly started to spit rain, and Slater gripped her elbow to guide her back to the path. “I wasn’t aware until today that my new recreation specialist had so many family ties at Motorhill. I do expect loyalty from my employees.”

“Loyalty or blind obedience?” Kat asked. “There is a difference.”

“Loyalty...” A whistle blared three short blasts just then, cutting off whatever else he might have said.

“Loyalty is earned, Mr. Kowalski. I assume that whistle means it’s quitting time. Will that be all, or am I now officially on overtime?”

Slater dismissed her with a curt nod.

Kat spun and marched off toward the parking lot.

In a foul mood now, Slater strode in the opposite direction through intensifying rain. It seemed he was destined to get his suits soaked when dealing with that woman. And yet, he thought nastily, a cloudburst was minor compared to all the other things he found irritating about his newest employee. Her sassy mouth, pixie grin and legs far too long for a woman who couldn’t be over five foot two... Those complaints headed a list that ended with the fact that her name was O’Halloran.

CHAPTER THREE

“WHAT IN BLAZES do you think you’re doing now?” a deep voice bellowed.

Kat went rigid at a sound that had plagued her all week. Her perch at the top of a twelve-foot ladder was precarious enough without her nuisance of a boss shaking the metal frame. “Don’t come up,” she warned. “I only have one bolt connected so far. Do you want this backboard to fall?”

“To hell with the backboard! I don’t want you to fall. I’ll ask once more—what are you doing? I pay maintenance men to handle chores like this.”

Kat ignored him, drilled a second hole and inserted a long screw that would help hold the board steady.

“Well?” he demanded.

“They’re backlogged,” she said patiently. “By the time I submitted a request in triplicate and it went through the process, I’d have my teams practicing already.”

“If you don’t kill yourself first. Get down here.” His tone did not invite refusal.

The drill squealed again. Leaning away from the ladder, Kat shoved a Molly screw through the last hole, then wrenched it tight.

“Now!” Slater roared. “I want to see your feet on this floor.”

Kat rolled her eyes. “Brother,” she muttered under her breath, although she did move down a couple of steps. “Shouldn’t you be bugging a team of combustion engineers or something, instead of me?” she asked, carefully drilling two holes in succession along the bottom edge, effectively blocking out his retort.

“What’s that?” she called as she set the last two screws. “You say they’ve solved the fuel-injection problem on the Special? Wonderful!”

“I said get your carcass down here ASAP or I’m coming after you.” He placed one foot on the lowest rung.

Kat gave the board a final shake and determined it was solid. She glanced down, then deliberately dropped the small drill, guiding the cord through her hands until it dangled about six inches from the floor. “Oops,” she said as Slater dodged off the ladder. “Sorr-ee,” she called, tongue in cheek. She knew exactly how far it came to striking him. Not even close.

“Give me that thing, and be careful.” He snatched the drill at the same time, bending to unplug the cord. “You’re dangerous, Ms. O’Halloran.”

Kat pocketed the last screws and started down.

Slater began wrapping the cord around the handle, never taking his eyes from the faded denim stretched tight across her nicely rounded derriere. He held his breath, fearing the fabric might split from the rhythmic sway of her descent. As she drew closer he observed a small hole under her right back pocket. At eye level, it offered him a tantalizing glimpse of red. Silk, he thought. A shiver ricocheted through Slater’s body and slammed into his abdomen with the force of jet propulsion. It didn’t help his overloaded circuits that she took the last two steps in a single leap and landed, grinning at him over her shoulder through impish eyes.

Slater grappled with his self-control. “Did you know you have a hole in those jeans?”

“Hey, don’t break the drill cord, Kowalski.” She ripped the drill out of his hands and loosened the cord, missing the way his jaw tightened.

“The boards look great, don’t they?” She tilted her head back and surveyed her handiwork. “You play basketball?”

Having forced himself to concentrate on the short, feathery haircut, which he had the worst urge to touch, Slater was slower to track her gaze to the boards. “Which brings up another point,” he said. “I don’t recall having authorized the purchase of any equipment.”

Kat laughed, a pleasant ripple echoing from the rafters in the big empty warehouse. “You didn’t. They were donated.”

“Donated? By whom?”

Bending, Kat returned the drill to its case. “Actually, if you must know, I midnight-requisitioned one from my folks’ courtyard. No one uses it since my brothers moved out. Spud Mallory came by while I was dismantling it and said I could have the one attached to his garage. His boys are grown, too.”

“Are we talking Spud Mallory as in the cigar-smoking gambler who fleeces my father weekly in those ridiculous poker games?”

“My Pop and Spud played poker for years,” she said angrily, “and never bet a dime until Louie came on the scene and upped the ante.”

Slater loosely bracketed his hips with his hands. “I told you not to call my father Louie. And how did you come by the preposterous notion that it was his idea to play for money? Especially as he’s so incredibly inept that he always loses.”

“A lot you know.” Kat matched his stance. “Spud told me Louie always wins.”

Slater digested this tidbit. Stepping back, he massaged his neck and worried his upper lip with his bottom teeth. “I’m getting my information from our housekeeper. Helen’s like family. Why would she lie?”

“Why would Spud? He’s known me since I was in diapers.”

“Maybe he’s protecting your dad. How did the subject come up?”

Kat stared at him for several seconds before she turned and gave her attention to collapsing the ladder. It wouldn’t do to let him know her family was worried.

He stepped up to help. “There’s a possibility I’m right, isn’t there? You’re not sure of your facts, are you? Furthermore, I don’t think you’re any happier about the situation than I am.”

Kat’s fingers curled around the cool metal of the ladder. “You’ve got that right. My pop didn’t do any wacky things before he met yours. I intend to find out exactly what’s going on.” She grabbed the drill case, shouldered the ladder and started for the door.

“How do you plan to get at the truth?” Hurrying to catch up, Slater relieved her of both items. Outside, he fell into step beside her.

“Spud’s garage has an attic, which is accessible from a huge hawthorn tree. My brothers and the Mallory boys used to sneak up there to drink beer. I’ll just check out their next poker party myself.”

“Tell me when and where.”

“I prefer to go alone,” Kat informed him primly. “I’ll let you know what I discover.”

“What makes you think I’d believe your version any more than I believe Mallory’s?”

Kat yanked the ladder from his hands, and the drill. Her eyes glittered. “Would it surprise you to hear that I don’t give a tinker’s damn what you think? Why don’t you go play with your cars, and take Louie with you?” Having vented the frustration he caused simply by hanging around, Kat stalked off toward Maintenance.

Three young men dashed from the maintenance building. They vied good-naturedly for the right to help Kat. The minute they spied Slater, all three stopped dead.

Conscious of his position, Slater clamped down the urge to order them back to work. He should be the one to help her, dammit. Then again, she probably wouldn’t welcome his help. She barely tolerated him in her vicinity. Resigned to this circumstance, Slater gave his men curt nods and strode with purpose into an adjacent lab—as if his intent had been to visit his engineers all along.

Kathleen O’Halloran annoyed him. What did he care that she had big eyes and wore red silk beneath those tomboy clothes? And just what the hell made her think he needed her permission to check out that poker party? He was perfectly capable of finding Spud Mallory’s house on his own.

THE WEEK WAS EXHAUSTING for Kat. All day Friday, she dreamed of doing nothing more strenuous than going home to soak in a hot bathtub. Tuesday, she’d set up teams and started

basketball practice, calling on dormant muscles in the process. Then, because the weather hadn't improved and the rain kept them inside, she also borrowed her brothers' old boxing gloves and set up a ring at one end of the warehouse.

Kat had no doubt the men were testing her when they demanded instruction in using the gloves. She had little choice but to comply. It was one of the few times Kowalski hadn't shown up to bug her from the sidelines. Too bad. She was a fair boxer and wouldn't have minded going a few rounds with him. Especially after Wednesday, when a group of women apparently complained to him that she was doing more for the men. He jumped right on that accusation with both feet, insisting she provide something for the women pronto.

A volleyball net was the one piece of equipment he'd authorized her to buy. But there wasn't one to be found in Flintridge. Kat had scrounged the neighborhood for another donation. After finding one, she spent late nights mending it, installing it and working out schedules fair to everyone.

By the time the five o'clock whistle blew signaling the end of her week, Kat's entire body hurt from physical exertion and her neck ached from the stress of dealing with Slater Kowalski. Oh, he was clever, Kat would give him that. He popped into the warehouse at odd hours, smiling that crooked little smile, asking the employees in his sneaky, subtle way if they thought she was doing a good job. Or at least that was the way it sounded to Kat.

The single women out in the ranks soon discovered that complaining about her was a surefire way to get a few minutes alone with their handsome boss. Each time one of them cried on his shoulder, Slater made a point of suggesting Kat put forth more effort to get along. She wanted to scream, or hit him.

She should make the effort! Really! On the drive home Friday, Kat entertained visions of subjecting him to all manner of medieval tortures.

At dinner Pop mentioned that he'd be leaving soon for his poker party at Spud's; until then, it had completely slipped Kat's mind that she'd planned to spy on the group. "Why don't you cancel?" she implored. "We haven't had a moment to discuss my new job. Maybe later we could rent a video and make popcorn like old times."

Her father paused with his fork halfway to his mouth. "I can't do that, kitten. Friday night is poker night."

Mrs. O'Halloran rose abruptly and started banging dishes around near the sink.

Kat sighed, kissing her dream of a soothing bath goodbye. "I haven't played poker since I left here. Maybe I'll tag along. How much money does a person need to crash this game?" She sent her dad a smile. The kind of smile that had always worked with him before.

He looked uncomfortable. Kat knew perfectly well he wasn't in the habit of refusing her anything. She'd begun to taste triumph when he muttered, "Stay home and keep your mother company, kitten. The game is just for regulars. Besides, you should spend your money on pretty dresses that'll attract a husband. Not on cards."

His wife snorted. "Shouldn't we all."

"Since when haven't you been able to go out and buy clothing anytime you wanted, Maureen?" Timothy clambered to his feet and threw down his napkin. Digging a wallet out of his back pocket, he peeled off several bills and dropped them on the table. "You ladies go shopping. Be my guest. Don't wait up, I'll be late tonight."

The moment the door closed on his heels, Kat's mother burst into tears. Kat was so mad at Pop, she wanted to shake him. "Mom, call Dodie Moran. Take Pop up on his offer. Buy yourself a new dress. It'll make you feel better."

The sniffles slowed. "And just where would I be wearin' a new dress, Katie? When Timothy only goes out with the men?"

"To church, Mama. You and Pop still go to church together."

That seemed to give her mother pause for thought. “Will you come shopping, Katie? He left enough money for two dresses.”

Kat glanced away. She hated lying. “I’m really bushed, Mama. First week on a new job and all. Call Dodie. Frankly, I need an evening alone to unwind.”

“Well, if you’re sure...” Maureen O’Halloran reached for the telephone. Soon, she was preparing to meet her friend at the mall.

Kat escorted her to the door. “Shop till you drop, Mama. Then you and Dodie treat yourselves to a relaxing glass of wine at O’Toole’s.”

“Oh, we couldn’t. It wouldn’t be seemly.”

Kat delivered a swift hug. “Sauce for the gander is sauce for the goose. This is a new millennium, Mama. Live a little. I don’t want to see you home until eleven. Do you hear?”

A small frown etched her mother’s forehead, but she nodded. Kat shut the door and slumped against it. She figured that gave her until ten, at least, to check out this poker game. Kat knew her mother well. She’d never sit in a bar, not even a high-class place like O’Toole’s, for more than one glass of wine. Two, max, if Dodie was persuasive.

Kat hurried to load the dishwasher, then went upstairs to dress in black jeans and a black turtleneck. She didn’t want any neighbors to see her climbing that tree and call the cops. On her way past the bathroom, she gave the tub a last, longing look.

She parked her Trooper in the lot at the corner grocery store and walked the few blocks to Spud’s. Her vehicle still had Washington plates and was pretty distinctive. Typical of her recent luck, halfway to his house it started to rain. Cursing men in general, she hunched her shoulders and jogged the last few blocks. Kat huddled beneath a dripping tree across from the Mallory home and checked out the cars lining the drive. Bridie Mallory’s new little Motorhill compact was gone. Kat knew Mrs. Mallory’s car because when she’d come by the other day to pick up the backboard, Spud had bragged about the engine he’d help design.

Buzz Moran still had the same car he’d driven three years ago, and Kat recognized Luke Sheehan’s sports car. He’d picked her father up for the races on Sunday. Kat had listened to her mother expound for twenty minutes on how those men were all going to hell for patronizing the track on Sundays. That left only the black sedan parked parallel to the house unaccounted for. It didn’t take a detective to figure out the luxury car belonged to Louie Kowalski.

As Kat slipped around back and gazed up at the spreading branches of Mallory’s old hawthorn tree, she felt more like a small-time hood than a righteous daughter. She considered canceling her plans—until she recalled her mother’s tears. Before her courage gave way, Kat jumped to catch the lowest branch. She stifled a groan at the effort it cost her already-aching arms to swing herself aloft and straddle the branch as her brothers had done when they were kids.

“Ouch,” she yelped without thinking as a thorny branch snagged her arm. “Damn and blast.” It felt as if she’d drawn blood. Kat scrambled to a thicker limb and stopped to check. There was a gaping hole in the sleeve of her favorite sweater. She shouldn’t have yelled so loudly, but it had hurt as well as surprised her.

Josh had never mentioned the tree had three-inch thorns. Obviously one reason it served so effectively as a smuggling route. What parent would figure a kid was dumb enough to risk getting stabbed for a snatched beer or two?

Since no one roared out of the garage to investigate the noise, Kat edged up several levels toward a bough that scraped the house. The windowsill was within her grasp when a second thorn gouged her cheek. This time she swore roundly, trusting her voice would be muffled.

No one was more shocked than Kat when an arm snaked out of the attic window, grasped her by the belt of her jeans and jerked her into a black hole. Her assailant immediately clamped a hand over her mouth, cutting off not only Kat’s muffled cry but her breath, as well.

She flailed her arms and kicked backward, twice connecting with solid flesh.

“Oof. Stop it, you little spitfire,” a low voice hissed in her ear.

Kat went stiff as a board. She knew that voice. Slater Kowalski. How humiliating. Identifiable now in the faint light seeping in around a trapdoor that led to the garage, he dangled her a foot off a rough plank floor.

Kat jammed an elbow sharply in Slater’s ribs, doing her level best to bite his fingers.

“Ugh!” His breath exploded in a hiss, causing him to release her so fast she hit the floor like a sack of flour. “Shh,” he muttered, dropping down on his knees beside her. “Do you want them to hear you?”

“Me? What are you doing here, Kowalski?” she demanded with as much force as she could convey in a whisper, considering that they were both trying to be quiet. “Where do you get off manhandling me?”

He silenced her by pressing a finger to her lips, then he nodded his head toward the square door that sat propped ajar.

Only then did Kat register how loud the music and male laughter was that drifted up from the converted garage.

Abruptly, Slater moved his fingers to her chin and angled her face into the flicker of light. “You’re bleeding. What happened?” His voice was rough. His fingers gentle.

Kat jerked her head aside to keep him from seeing. There he sat in his Polo coordinates—bone-dry and not a mark on him—while she was wet and looked, no doubt, like she’d come out last in a cat fight.

Slater tried again to see her face.

“Mind your own business,” she said, dodging his fingers.

He would have insisted, but all at once there was a lull in the Sinatra song and he heard his father say, “Timothy, you’re unusually quiet tonight.”

Kat’s father answered in a lower tone that sent the two eavesdroppers crawling close to the trapdoor. “I had a hard time getting out of the house,” Timothy said. “It took a chunk of my stash to throw Maureen offtrack. I sent her shopping.”

Buzz Moran snorted. “Since this whole scheme was your bright idea, Timmy, ’tis a fine thing, you shelling out our profits in an attack of conscience.”

Lying side-by-side on the floor above the poker players, Slater felt Kat pull away. He started to nudge her, to claim victory...before he saw the quiver in her lower lip.

A huge tear slipped to the curve of her cheek and she quickly brushed it away.

Slater didn’t know which affected him more, witnessing the demise of the fierce faith she held in her old man, or the realization that he was the last person she’d want to see her crumble.

For some reason, he was moved by her attempt to keep a stiff upper lip. Without a word, he cupped a palm around the back of her head and gently guided her face into the protective curve of his shoulder. For one strained heartbeat, he waited for her backlash. When it didn’t come, Slater began to massage the nape of her neck. Her skin felt soft and cool. Her perfume wafted up and tickled his nose.

Instinct told Kat to resist overtures from a man who belonged to the enemy camp. But darn it all, this had been such a miserable day. So had the whole week, for that matter. She’d give him this much; he had tranquilizing hands. Warm hands...She hadn’t thought anything could chase away her bone-deep chill.

Perhaps her suddenly rapid heartbeat was just a belated reaction to being yanked into Mallory’s attic, Kat told herself. Perhaps it had nothing to do with the man...or with her father. She’d embrace any excuse to keep from admitting that the father she’d placed on a pedestal for twenty-six years had just tumbled.

It made her shudder to think about the number of people counting on her to put the pieces back together. Her brothers. Their wives. Most of all, her mother.

Slater felt her tremble. His fingers flexed in her soft curls. Why had he ever thought her hair lacked feminine qualities? Damp, those charcoal locks clung to his palm, reminding him of satin. He murmured something unintelligible near her ear and trailed soothing kisses along the curve of her cheek. "It'll be all right, kitten."

Kat pushed him away. Eyes wide, she crawled out of his reach. "Who gave you permission to call me that?" She shook her head and scraped back clinging strands of hair still warm from his touch. Closing her eyes, Kat regretted showing him any chink in her armor.

Slater frowned. Had he called her kitten? Maybe he had. Come to think of it, this was the first time he'd seen those tiger claws sheathed. "Obviously a gross mistake on my part, O'Halloran," he muttered. "It won't happen again." His words were barely audible. He felt restless, ready to leave. He had the answer he'd sought. The smoke from Spud Mallory's cigars was starting to make him sick. "I'm outta here," he said, heading for the window.

Kat pulled her knees to her chest and hunched her shoulders, massaging her upper arms. "Go. I'm waiting out the rain."

He couldn't just leave her like this. Sighing, Slater leaned toward her and extended a hand. "Come on," he said, "it's over."

Again the music ended. Nat King Cole's "Black Magic" this time. In the lull, Buzz Moran's voice rose above the others. "I swear, Louie, you win every pot. With your luck, we should ship you off to Atlantic City with all our remaining cash."

Slater's dad laughed. "Good idea. But why don't we all go? I'm free anytime. It's you guys who need permission." Much male posturing followed his statement, with all the others also claiming freedom.

"I can go anytime," bragged Tim O'Halloran. "I'll tell Maureen I'm working on the church carnival. In fact, there it is, if anyone needs an excuse."

"When shall we go?" Louie badgered.

Several dates were bandied about before the music blared again, blocking whatever date they'd selected from the two listening upstairs.

Kat uncoiled from her position near the door. She tendered Slater an I-told-you-so look.

He avoided her eyes. Damn, why hadn't he left sooner? Before L.J. made a fool of himself. Slater would rather not have known about those wins, to say nothing of the proposed gambling trip. Because it meant he had to find time to deal with that issue now. Time better spent solving the car's fuel-injection problems. He crossed to stand beneath the peaked roof and tucked both hands in his back pockets. Well, now they were even. But so help him, if she rubbed it in, if she smirked or laughed he'd—

Far from rubbing salt in his wounds, Kat's gaze suddenly became understanding.

It wasn't pity. That would have allowed Slater to simply walk away. Damn. He felt again as he had when he was a teenager and his boat had been cut adrift in a storm-tossed river. Hurriedly burying that particular bad memory, he extended his hand to Kat again. "Come on, tiger, I'll buy you a drink. I think we both need one."

She shut the trapdoor fully, forgetting it was their only source of light. Kat gasped as the attic was plunged into darkness.

Slater materialized out of nowhere to grip her arm. He intended to lead the way to the window. It wasn't his fault he picked the arm lacerated by the thorn.

Cringing, Kat cried out involuntarily.

"What's wrong?" he hissed. But by then Slater's probing fingers had found the rent in her sleeve. Skimming lightly, he explored the torn flesh beneath.

"Stop it," Kat breathed, fighting a stab of need that sprang from his touch. "I got in a fight with the tree, okay? Score is hawthorn two, O'Halloran zero."

Slater chuckled.

“Go ahead, laugh.” She backed away. “And then let’s go before we’re caught.”

Not normally prone to wild mood swings, he took pride in keeping a cool head. Therefore, he couldn’t imagine what craziness provoked him to fracture his own rule about never romantically involving himself with an employee. Shocking them both, he slid his hands through Kathleen’s short curls, tipped her head back and kissed her.

Kat could almost feel the steam rising from her still-damp clothes. A kiss from Kowalski was the last thing she’d expected. Furthermore, she never would have imagined he’d be so good at it.

Out of nowhere, it seemed, flashes of light filled the interior of the room. Thunder boomed and shook the rafters. Kat’s heart leaped and pounded in tempo. It was as if her knees refused to support her, and several seconds went by before she realized Slater had pulled away and said something fairly benign about the ferocity of the storm.

Kat heard him open the window. A sudden gust of wind cooled her hot face. It was precisely what she needed to plunge her back into reality. The return of sanity enabled her to shake off his mind-numbing kiss. Climbing out on the window ledge unaided, she leaped onto a rain-slicked branch.

Kat told herself that she’d known all along it was the storm and not his kiss setting off all those fireworks in the room. But when her knees gave way and she slipped and would have fallen had he not been there, she revised her thinking and gave credit where credit was due. Kowalski kissed like he did everything else—with complete control, but with purpose.

What that purpose might be in this instance evaded her. She just knew he’d better not try anything like that after she got her feet safely on the ground, or Mr. CEO of Flintridge would be picking himself up in the next county.

Slater felt the change in her. He knew it was because of that unexpected kiss. Yet if she’d asked point-blank why he’d done it, he couldn’t have explained to save his life. He hated the fact that he’d broken his own rule. But he’d be damned if he’d apologize.

On the ground, Slater found he didn’t trust himself to talk or to touch her until they were both well away from the Mallorys’ property. Once they’d walked some distance he exhaled and placed his hand in what he thought was an impersonal gesture beneath Kathleen’s elbow. He didn’t see her Isuzu, and his car was down the block.

She slapped his hand away. “Hands off, Kowalski, or...”

His grip tightened. “I thought we were going for a drink. You may enjoy hiking in the rain, O’Halloran. I prefer to drive and stay dry.”

Kat hadn’t realized she’d steeled herself for his apology until it didn’t come. And she was at a loss to explain why she felt furious with him for acting so blasé about what had gone on between them upstairs.

“I don’t drink, but if I did, you’d be the last person I’d drink with. I’m going home. To map out a plan to save my pop from sure disaster. I suggest you do the same. Kowalskis may be able to afford an attempt to break the bank in Atlantic City. O’Hallorans can’t.” Leaving him standing in the rain, Kat crossed the street and started jogging in the opposite direction, in spite of the fact that her cold muscles objected.

Slater shivered as rain seeped through his shirt. Where the hell was she going? Hadn’t that father of hers warned her how dangerous it was for a woman to be walking the streets at night? Even in a company town like Flintridge? She’d turned the corner before he realized she meant business. Swearing, he dashed to his car and promptly made a U-turn to go find her.

Pulling alongside Kat midway down the block, Slater rolled down his window. “Enough, O’Halloran. I propose a truce. I don’t want it on my conscience if you get pneumonia, or worse, if you get murdered.”

“Murdered? By whom? I know almost everyone who lives on the Hill.” Kat forced a laugh. Laughing proved to be a mistake. It broke her stride, and the muscles in her right calf seized. She fell instantly to her knees.

Slater was out of his car in a flash. “What happened? Did you trip? I swear, you are the most accident-prone female I’ve ever met.”

That did it! Kat struggled to stand. Only, her leg refused to cooperate. All she could do was fight back angry tears when he picked her up and carried her to his car. She found her voice after he’d stripped off her sneaker and started massaging her foot. “Don’t. It...it’s a charley horse in my calf. Give me a minute. It’ll ease on its own.”

“Where’s your house? I’ll drive you there.”

“My Trooper’s at the grocery store.” Then as pain shot up her leg, she grudgingly relented. “I suppose you could give me a lift there.”

Slater had a sarcastic retort on the tip of his tongue, but curbed it as they passed beneath a street lamp and he saw she was still hurting. Not only that, the welt on her cheek looked red and angry. “I’ll follow you home. You can invite me in for coffee,” he ordered. Then his voice grew gentle, “I’ll tend the scrapes left by that tree.”

Kat caught sight of the clock in his dashboard. “No, you can’t come in,” she said, urgently shaking her head. “It’s nearly ten.”

He smiled. “Do you turn into a pumpkin at ten?”

That brought the first break in tension since their kiss. Kat’s lips curved upward. “My mother’s due home at ten. She hasn’t the foggiest idea I’m out playing Sherlock Holmes. Give me a rain check on the coffee, please?”

Before Slater could say it always rained when she was around, she directed him into the parking lot at the grocery store.

His heart shot into high gear for no reason at all that he could ascertain as she climbed from his car and limped swiftly to her own. Dynamite came in small packages. Damn, but the woman intrigued him.

Slater drifted in behind her vehicle. He followed at a discreet distance as she zigzagged through the dark residential area that made up the Hill’s territory. It was just as well things had worked out the way they had, he thought, nervously rubbing his neck. She was nothing like the women he normally found attractive. For crying out loud! Didn’t he have enough problems in his life without deliberately soliciting more?

So why did he hold his breath until he saw her safely inside a sprawling, well-kept house? And why, all the way home, did he plot strategies that involved joining forces with her to save their two fathers from calamity?

What most haunted Slater after he got home and climbed into bed was that damned kiss. He’d certainly kissed less difficult women. Women who’d grown up in the bosom of his community. The only thing his mother had asked of him, before she slipped into a coma from which she’d never emerged, was that her only son marry a nice woman who’d embrace Polish traditions.

Unable to sleep, Slater rose. He poured himself a stiff shot of brandy, and by the time his father sneaked in through the front door at one-fifteen, Slater sat quietly in one corner of the library, reading a book on Ireland’s customs.

ACROSS TOWN, Kat O’Halloran feigned sleep when her mother peeked in at eleven. Yet she was still awake watching shadows dance on her ceiling when Pop strolled in at one. At 3:00 a.m., for about the hundredth time, Kat plumped her pillow and covered her head. She resented Poseidon’s snoozing so easily at her feet.

“Monday,” she groused, “I’m going to march straight into Slater Kowalski’s office and resign.”

At four o’clock, Kat got up and rubbed more salve on her cuts. “Yes. Resign is the smart thing to do. We’re worlds apart,” she told her ravaged reflection in the mirror. “We have nothing in common.” Kat imagined the furor among her brothers and their wives if she were to date someone from the Ridge. Under the circumstance, resigning was the only choice. No kiss had ever interrupted her sleep before. Nor had any kiss ever left her longing like this. Longing for more of the same...

CHAPTER FOUR

BY SATURDAY MORNING, Kat thought the scratches on her face and arms had faded. She didn't expect anyone to notice them and was alarmed when both parents expressed concern. She mumbled something innocuous about how it had happened when she had sorted old sporting equipment stored in the attic. They accepted her story. Too quickly, Kat decided.

Her parents seemed vaguely preoccupied—a fact that concerned Kat more than the injuries resulting from her encounter with Spud's tree.

The most emotion she'd seen either parent exhibit throughout the day occurred after Kat had wheedled her mother into modeling the dress she'd bought. Pop happened to pass the bedroom, and Kat couldn't fault his response. His eyes lit up, and the kiss he laid on his wife was enough to make a grown daughter blush.

It reminded Kat of Slater's kiss. A memory so real, she left her parents in their clench and dashed upstairs to revise the resignation letter she had drafted around midnight.

Much later, they'd barely sat down to dinner when Slater phoned. "I intended to call earlier," he said. "But I got tied up running tests on the Special. How's the leg, and your cuts?"

Kat recognized his polite boss-to-employee voice. He sounded distracted, as if he had other things on his mind. His car, no doubt. Obviously he hadn't spent time mooning over their kiss. "I'm fine." She kept her response brief and to the point. "You're interrupting dinner, Kowalski. Is an update on my health all you needed?"

"By all means, go eat. I'd hate to stand in the way of your putting meat on those scrawny bones."

Kat sputtered indignantly as Slater clicked off.

"Is everything all right, Katie?" her mother called into the hall.

"Fine," she snapped without elaborating. If the elder O'Hallorans suspected the call was to blame for her moodiness, they let it go. Tim declined dessert. He took off to meet his pals, not offering any excuse for leaving Kat and her mother to spend another solitary evening.

By Sunday, Kat had made up her mind to discuss her resignation with her brothers and their wives. Maureen had planned a family dinner as usual. "Count me out," Timothy announced. "I have a meeting of the church carnival committee. We're considering some changes this year. All improvements—you'll see," he said in an offhand way.

Kat gazed at him suspiciously. Now she'd be distrustful of everything Pop said.

Rightly so. As he passed his sons on their way into the house after church, Tim caught Mark's arm. "Keep an eye on your mama and sister next week, son. My carnival committee's going to Atlantic City to check out new games for our booths," he said evenly, as if his words had nothing to do with the circle of shocked faces. Of course, everyone except Kat was floored by his announcement. But she could tell this wasn't an ideal time to discuss her resignation from Flintridge.

"It's Louie Kowalski's fault," Mark ranted after Timothy climbed into his car. "Why else would Pop's carnival committee entertain the notion of using gaming tables? That man is a bad influence all the way around."

Kat poured coffee and held her tongue, even though she alone knew Mark's statement to be true. Yet it bothered her that Pop hadn't acted guilty. Right before he took off, he'd kissed Mama with gusto—as if nothing was wrong.

Josh turned to Kat, his tone reproachful. "Mama said Louie's son is CEO at Flintridge and that you report directly to him. At Motorhill, our rec director reports to Internal Affairs. I tell you, this is a setup to bleed Pop's mind."

"Kowalski did not recruit me, Josh. Your own wife sent me the job notice."

Josh drummed his fingers on the table. They all studied the spouse under discussion as she helped her mother-in-law place dinner on the table.

Matt's wife unloaded two apple pies she'd baked. "Josh, you can't mean you think Louie Junior would really do something so underhanded? They've been in business as long as Motorhill."

"Slater," Kat corrected. "He's not a Junior."

No one paid attention as Matt continued. "I believe Junior would do anything to save his butt with the company." Matt waited as they all bowed their heads and his brother Mark gave the blessing, then he picked up where he'd left off. "Friday, a car buff who works at Flintridge came by for his headers. He happened to mention Kowalski's flawed engine. I gather it may cost the company a government contract. Major flaw," Matt reiterated, raising a brow. "And a big contract."

Mark whistled through his teeth. "Well, it's a cinch a family can't hang on to an auto empire in this day and age by being nice guys. I'll bet they're all tough nuts."

Kat recalled Slater's sympathy and his tender touch that night in Spud's garage. But of course she couldn't bring that up to her brothers.

Josh's scowl enveloped the entire clan. "Tough nuts or not, somebody has to shake Kowalski's family tree. I'll bet dollars to doughnuts Pop's not going to Atlantic City just for the committee. Kowalski probably dreamed this up. What if Pop gambles away his whole retirement fund? Someone has to stop him."

All at once Maureen, who sat at the head of the table, jumped to her feet, let out a sob and fled the room.

Josh's wife, Mary, ever the placater, followed close behind.

"Dammit!" Mark vaulted from his chair. "Pop never used to be a fool. Kat, you've gotta do something."

"Me? Like what? I told you, Pop ignores me." Flustered, she fed a piece of meat from her plate to Poseidon. He wolfed it down and begged for more. Distracted, Kat stroked his ears.

"Mother O'Halloran has locked herself in the bedroom," Mary announced, as she returned to the dining room. She, too, appealed to Kat. "Your father may ignore you, but you're in a position at Flintridge to hear things. Workers talk. You'll know if Kowalski is pilfering ideas."

"I tell you, no. I can't do it." Kat glanced desperately at her brothers. "I think Pop's going through some male crisis. A postretirement thing. One of you should deal with him, man to man."

Matt stood and paced around the table. "You've always been his favorite, kitten. Mary's right. You're our best bet." Bending, he dropped a kiss on Kat's nose. "I'll go talk to Mama. She shouldn't put her life on hold just because Pop's being an old fool."

During the time Matt was upstairs, Mark and Josh bombarded Kat with suggestions on how she should go about spying on Kowalski at the plant. She couldn't say she was unhappy to see them pile into their cars and leave.

Kat cleared the table, covered the pies, and then coaxed Poseidon out for a brisk run. A light, cooling rain not only cleared the air but also her head. She would've liked to spend more time outside, but Poseidon kept slowing and shooting her insulted looks until she turned home.

Back at the house, all of Kat's attempts to cheer her mother failed.

"I'm sorry, Katie, but I'm not good company. I'm going to bed."

"Sure. G'night, Mama." Her heart heavy, Kat took the dog for another walk, a quick one. She towed dry her hair and Poseidon's fur before turning out all the lights—including the one on the porch. "Let Pop stumble around in the dark tonight. If he breaks a toe, it'll serve him right."

"Men!" she later grumbled around her loaded toothbrush. "Why do women always have to do their dirty work? Answer me that, Poseidon," she gurgled as she rinsed her mouth. "My brothers don't want to step on Pop's toes, but apparently it's okay if I do. That's why this mess got dumped in my lap. Suddenly they've forgotten all about telling me I could leave that job anytime I wanted."

Taking his sharp bark as agreement, Kat threw herself full-length on the bed and unfolded her resignation letter. "Who'll this family get to be their spy when I waltz into Kowalski's office tomorrow and quit?"

This time the dog remained silent. He lay curled on his rug, his eyes closed.

MONDAY, AT EIGHT SHARP, Kat trudged up the nine flights of steps leading to the Flintridge executive suites. Her mind freewheeled over the scene she'd left at home. Pop, bustling around the stove making pancakes and small talk, as if he hadn't ruined Sunday dinner. How could he miss Mama's red, puffy eyes? Sighing, Kat charged up the last two flights. And what about Mama? She exhibited a textbook case of passive aggression, if ever Kat had read of one in beginning psychology.

Josh should have been there to witness how many times Pop said things about the church carnival. The man didn't expect his family to doubt his word. After all, Mama, too, devoted countless hours to organizing food for the carnival. The only thing that drew a bigger crowd from the Hill was a Murphy wake.

Kat considered visiting Father Hanrahan. But that would be like airing the family's dirty laundry in public. Something O'Hallorans didn't do. She hoped the frown she'd given Pop on her way out today let her errant father know she wasn't buying his hypocrisy. That thought was where Kat ran out of stairs.

She entered the reception area and Hazel turned, a perfunctory smile on her lips. "Kathleen," she exclaimed, the smile now genuine. She reached for an appointment book. "You're not on today's calendar. Did you book directly with his nibs? As usual, he forgot to tell me."

"No. I, ah, something came up over the weekend. Is he in?"

The gray head bobbed. "Poor boy has been here all weekend poring over engine blueprints. The Special left him stranded again. I hope you bring good tidings." She aimed a worried look at the door marked Private.

Kat fingered the long white envelope containing her resignation, and flushed. "I...guess this can wait." Folding the letter, she slipped it into the back pocket of her jeans. "So the motor's still cutting out?" For reasons not quite clear, Kat really hoped Matt's rumor was wrong. She'd hate to see Slater lose that contract.

"More than cutting out. I overheard Scott say the fuel's hanging up in the translator conversion system. Melted one of the aluminum cams. Yesterday they installed a new microprocessor and recalibrated the algorithms—if that tells you anything." She rolled her eyes

Kat did understand, but she shrugged it off. "Think I'll stick to flying kites. That's the activity I scheduled for today."

"You amaze me. Last week a group in the cafeteria were saying you planned to teach kayaking."

"Um...later probably. When the river's not so high."

"Oh. Well, I'm keeping you from your kite-flying." Hazel reached for the phone's intercom.

"Hazel, leave the boss to his flow valves and combustion chambers." Kat backed away. She ran lightly down the single flight of stairs to her office. What did it matter if she quit today or tomorrow? Luckily, she hadn't left the kites at home.

It occurred to her that Matt had been right about Slater's engine problems. Maybe she should stay on awhile and do a bit of sleuthing. She'd certainly have the opportunity. Scott Wishynski, Slater's buddy and chief engineer, showed up for every sport. He remained an unregenerate flirt, and that made him the most likely candidate to let something slip. Kat didn't care to become part of the rumors floating around Scott, however. Not that he'd put any obvious moves on her—yet. And it stood to reason that if anyone knew whether Pop was being used as a sounding board, it'd be the Special's primary engineer.

After the cold war at her house this morning, Kat had fewer qualms about pumping Scott. Tucking away the idea for future use, she made multiple trips out to her Isuzu to unload a colorful array of state-of-the-art kites. Sport models, stunt kites and parafoils in the shapes of stars, dragons and shields.

Thankfully the wind was perfect. Kat stuffed the lesson sheets she'd typed into a box of spools. While stringing cord for her morning class, she'd rehearsed how to deal with the ribbing she'd get from the macho machinists.

Kat grinned. She'd heard all the excuses before. A favorite was referring to kite flying as child's play. Wait'll these men discovered how much strength it took to fly these babies.

Flying conditions were perfect inside the inner courtyard. The grassy slopes offered the ideal site for liftoff. Plus, the area was free of power lines.

Approaching her SUV for a last load, the very person Kat hoped to see suddenly materialized. "Hey, Scott." She sidestepped the arm he would have put around her waist. "Lend me your brawn."

"Everything I have is yours, baby. Brawn, brain and..." Scott leered suggestively.

Oh, brother! The family had better appreciate her efforts.

"Hey, cool," Scott said when Kat popped the canopy and thrust a large winged glider into his arms. "Wow! When you tell a guy to go fly a kite, you mean it."

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