

Lynda Sandoval

You, And No Other

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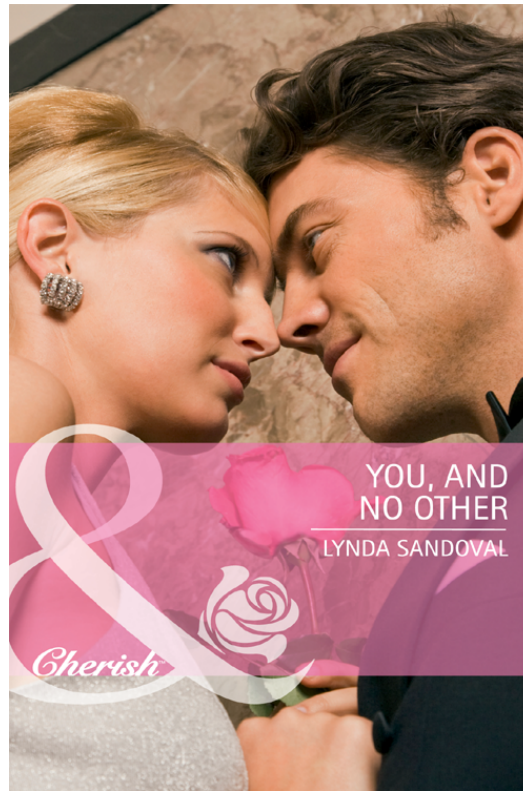
The boy is back in town...Twelve years ago Jonas was run out of town on prom night by the police chief. Even worse, the chief's daughter, Cagney, love of Jonas's life, seemed to go along with Daddy's wishes. But the boy from the wrong side of the tracks made millions and he's back to fund a youth centre for troubled teens... and rub the naysayers noses in it. Especially Cagney's. Cagney Bishop's chance at happiness was ruined forever on prom night – until seeing Jonas reopened a door in her heart she thought was sealed forever. But is Jonas there to get even...or get true love back on track?

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Cagney gasped. Stars filled her vision until she feared she'd pass out.

The curtains opened, revealing the boy she saw in her dreams every single night. A boy life had chiseled into an incredibly gorgeous—and apparently filthy rich—man. A boy who had listened to her dreams, yet who'd left her in the hospital after the devastating crash without so much as a get-well balloon.

A boy who'd broken her heart, and yet, despite that, the one person she'd never stopped loving. Jonas had returned.

Dear Reader,

Sometimes a teenage romance is simply puppy love, but every so often that first love truly is meant to last forever. My best friend, Terri, and her husband, Dan, have been together since high school—growing and changing and building a family together. They're the inspiration for this story about Cagney and Jonas.

Like Terri and Dan, Cagney and Jonas are absolutely meant for each other. Soul mates. Unlike my friends (thank goodness, huh, Terri?), Cagney and Jonas have to suffer heartache, distance and estrangement before they reach their much-deserved happily ever after.

I hope you enjoy their journey back to one another, and I hope you find your happily ever after, whether in high school or later in life. I'd love to hear your soul-mate story. Please write me through my publisher, or via my website, www.LyndaSandoval.com.

Hugs,

Lynda Sandoval

About the Author

LYNDAL SANDOVAL is a former police officer who exchanged the excitement of that career for blissfully isolated days, creating stories she hopes readers will love. Though she's also worked as a youth mentalhealth and runaway crisis counselor, a television extra, a trade-show art salesperson, a European tour guide and a bookkeeper for an exotic bird and reptile company—among other weird jobs—Lynda's favorite career, by far, is writing books.

In addition to romance, Lynda writes women's fiction and young adult novels, and in her spare time, she loves to travel, quilt, bid on eBay, hike, read and spend time with her dog. Lynda also works part-time as an emergency fire/medical dispatcher for the fire department.

Readers are invited to visit Lynda on the web at [www. LyndaSandoval.com](http://www.LyndaSandoval.com), or to send mail with an SAE (with return postage) for reply to PO Box 1018, Conifer, CO 80433-1018, USA.

YOU, AND

NO OTHER

LYNDA SANDOVAL



www.millsandboon.co.uk

This one is for Charles Griemsmann,
a kick-butt editor (in a good way)
and my new friend.

I live for your hearts and smiley faces!

Prologue

Twelve years ago ...

Cagney Bishop tensed when she heard the crunch of tires on the gravel drive in front of their house. She'd become so attuned to her police chief father's explosive and unpredictable behavior over the years, she could gauge the mood of the coming evening simply from how he opened and closed the doors.

Engine killed.

Door opened.

SLAM!

She winced, then quickly hid her sketch pad beneath her comforter, replacing it with a textbook and spiral notebook. She poised her pencil over the page and cocked her head to listen.

Heavy stomps.

Key in the lock.

Door creak.

SLAM!

Her shoulders sagged. So much for tonight, but oh, well. Same crap, different day, right? She shouldn't feel the least twinge of disappointment. After seven-teen-plus years, did she think he'd suddenly morph into a father worthy of a Hallmark card? Dream on.

She snuggled farther into her upholstered headboard, as if she could somehow make herself a smaller target. No doubt he'd have words with Mom first, but eventually—like always—he'd wind up in her face for some trumped-up reason.

Hang in there, she told herself, vying to shake off the never-ending pall of her home life and refocus on her goals for the weeks, months, years ahead. Prom, then graduation, then she'd finally—thank God—*finally* be off to college and out from under the chief's oppressive regime. If she could just suck it up a few more weeks, which was nothing in the scheme of things. Even if it felt like an eternity ...

Her door swung open much sooner than expected and hit the opposite wall, but she didn't react—a coping mechanism she'd honed to perfection over the years.

Never let him see you sweat.

After his last bout of fury, when he'd, yet again, thrown her door open so violently that the doorknob had punched into the drywall, she'd given up on the futile and repeated patch jobs. Instead, she stuffed the hole with a small, poofy pillow to soften future blows and prevent those loud, intimidating slams he seemed so fond of. Still, she wanted to yell *have a little respect for my privacy*—or better, *go the hell away*—but she never would.

Despite the lack of clatter with today's entrance, one glance into her father's reddened face told her she was in for it. It didn't help that he still wore his intimidatingly authoritative uniform, gun and all—not that he'd ever *physically* abuse any of them, but still. Sometimes she wondered if a punch would hurt less than his relentless, cutting words.

Schooling her features into nothingness, she held his gaze. Waiting. Always best to take the defensive when dealing with an unpredictable force.

When he didn't speak, a dull thud started in her chest. He couldn't have found out about her subversive prom plans, could he? She almost scoffed aloud, even as fear clawed up her spine. Who was she kidding? He could find out anything. He had an entire police force of spies and wasn't afraid to use them, ethics be damned.

"What in the *hell* do you think you're doing?" he said finally, through clenched teeth.

Play dumb. Her gaze strayed to the books in her lap, then back to his face. "Homework, Chief?" Pretty pathetic that she couldn't bear to call her father by anything but that. Any affection she'd felt

for the man had died long ago. Dad? Daddy? Those words meant nothing to her. Some kids got lucky. Other kids got *out*.

“Don’t get smart with me.” He yanked the little pillow out of the ruined drywall and whipped it across the room. “You know what I’m talking about.”

Uh-oh. She managed a tight swallow. She probably did know. Still, the prom wasn’t until tomorrow night, and it could be any number of perceived transgressions. No sense showing her hand prematurely. “If you’ll just tell me—”

“Prom, Cagney.” Chief started pacing—no, stalking—around the room, clenching and unclenching his fists. “Your lies, Cagney. That little Eberhardt dirtbag, *Cagney*,” he spat, his tone icy and derisive. “You thought I wouldn’t find out?”

Hopefully? Well, at least not until she chose to tell him. She decided to consider his question rhetorical and not address it at all. “It’s just a dance.” She struggled to keep her tone light, to avoid pleading. “We’re school friends, that’s all. If you’d give Jonas a chance—”

“Damn it! Are you stupid?” In two strides, he loomed over her. “I forbid you to go with that criminal, do you understand?”

It took a moment for his words to sink in. “But—”

No!” He cut off her protests with one slash of his hand through the air. “After all I’ve given you, all I’ve done for you, now this? I’d expect this kind of sneaky behavior from that worthless sister of yours, Terri. But I thought you were following in Deirdre’s footsteps.

“Deirdre, the “good daughter.” She’d gone off and joined the FBI, making Chief proud. Cagney pushed back her initial shock that he’d even mentioned the “bad daughter,” Terri, who had defied him to run off to New York City two years earlier. Since then, no one was allowed to utter her name in his presence. Apparently the unfair rule only applied to the rest of them. “I’m not following in anyone’s footsteps, Chief. I have my own path. I’m just me.”

He barked out an evil laugh. “Well, let me tell you how things are going to be, ‘*just me*,’” he said with a sneer, “because I’m going to give you a chance to redeem yourself. You have a choice.”

A choice? Wow, a first. She gulped. “Okay.”

“You either go off to your prom with that Eberhardt bastard, or you don’t.”

She blinked. “W-what do you mean?”

“I mean, instead, you’ll go with someone else. Someone I approve of.”

Too easy. Had to be a trap. She bit one corner of her lip and took a moment to consider what exactly he was up to, but couldn’t figure it out. “Then, if that’s my choice, I’ll go with Jonas.”

A slash of a smile split his stern face. Not a real smile, of course. She didn’t remember him ever *truly* smiling. “Great. Go off with your little hoodlum.” A long, thick pause ensued. “But you’ll see no money from me for your college education if you do. Not a dime.”

Her stomach churned violently. “Chief—!”

“Those are the terms.” He let them sink in. “Because I’m a nice guy, I’ll give you one more chance to make a different choice, and that college education you dream of can be yours.”

To her horror, the churning rose to her throat, and she thought she might be sick right then and there. How could she choose between those awful options? Jonas or college? Bottom line, she *needed* the Chief’s financial backing to get to college, and she desperately needed college for her freedom and sanity. It was too late to apply for financial assistance. Even loans, at least for the first semester, and her dad made too much money for her to qualify for any grants. But she couldn’t bear another six months at home. She *had* to start classes on time.

And yet, she needed Jonas for her sanity. Prom without Jonas? Her heart rattled.

Sure, he lived in a trailer on the far side of Troublesome Gulch with a single mom who spent too much time in the bars—the ultimate hard-luck cliché—but so what? Should he be punished for that?

Jonas was the best person she knew. Thoughtful, observant, supportive, unassuming. He rose above his circumstances with dreams and goals and the resiliency to make them come true.

He wanted to write and had already composed raw, poignant, honest poetry she kept hidden in a box at the back of her closet. Aside from Mrs. DeLuca, the art teacher at school (and also her friend Erin's mom), Jonas was the only person in the world who believed Cagney could succeed as an artist and could use her talent to help others.

He inspired her.

He loved her.

Jonas knew more about her and her farce of a home life than even her best friends. She glossed over most of that with the girls out of sheer embarrassment, but she told Jonas *everything*. They'd been forced to sneak around for years now, thanks to Chief's discrimination against anyone he deemed unworthy. As far as *he* knew, she hadn't been hanging with Jonas since before sophomore year, while in fact, she and Jonas had been in love since then.

They'd simply become experts at hiding.

Her rebellion was alive and well, but unequivocally passive.

She and Jonas had decided the prom would be their one out-in-the-open hurrah in Troublesome Gulch, a night just for the two of them and to hell with her father. They had the whole thing planned. They'd present a united front to Chief, lay out their case with cool logic, refuse to take no for an answer, and he'd eventually relent. What else could he do? Cagney was almost eighteen. It was supposed to be a magical night. Cagney and Jonas, just like fate intended.

Oh, how she'd underestimated her father. He'd rather deny her an education than see her happy with someone who didn't meet his approval.

"Well?" Chief growled.

She worried her bottom lip between her teeth.

Jonas was a long-term, big-picture type of thinker, though. Who cared about one night, one dance, in the grand scheme of things, when they had their whole future? She could explain the situation; he knew what Chief was about. Knowing Jonas, he'd probably encourage her to jump through her father's stupid hoops. The most important thing was getting to the university where they'd both been accepted, where they could spend every day together.

Jonas would get it. She just had to talk to him.

Her tension eased. "Fine. I'll call Jonas and—"

"Absolutely not."

Her eyes widened. "What?"

"I forbade you from talking to that hoodlum years ago, and although you disobeyed my orders without any regard, the rules still apply."

Her breathing shallowed. "I can't just stand him up. That's completely rude."

Her father leaned closer until she could smell the bitter precinct coffee on his breath. "You don't get it, do you? I don't care about that kid or his feelings, if he has any. You'll go to the prom with someone else, and you won't call your friends or Eberhardt before then. If you defy these terms, no college. Simple. Don't think I'm kidding."

"Chief!" She pounded her fists on the mattress at her sides. "That's not fair."

He grabbed her wrist and squeezed. "Life isn't fair, and here's a prime chance for you to learn that."

As if she didn't already know. A flash of anger emboldened her. "What happened that turned you so unbelievably cruel?" she asked in a hard whisper.

An avalanche of emotion moved over his face in a split second before his expression went stony and his tone lowered to a dangerous growl. "Yes or no, Cagney. Now. I have better things to do than play games with you."

Her chin quivered from rage despite her best efforts to keep her emotions in the deep freeze. She stiffened her spine. It would be last-minute, but she could talk to Jonas at school tomorrow, hash everything out.

“Oh, and you won’t be going to school tomorrow,” Chief said, as though reading her mind. “I’ve called the office already.”

Her heart sank, and her vision swirled.

“What? You thought I wouldn’t consider every angle?”

How could she? Her father was the most calculating, manipulative person she’d ever known. But this really topped all. What was the point in it? To purposefully hurt Jonas? And her? She knew Chief was a control freak, but she hadn’t realized until that moment how truly mean-spirited he was.

“So?” His eyes glittered victoriously. He knew he had her. “What will it be? Prom with a boy who will never be worthy of you, or a college education? Your choice.”

Everything inside her went cold. She couldn’t feel. Couldn’t react appropriately. She should be weeping, screaming at him like Terri would’ve been. Instead, she just felt numb. Trapped. Tortured. “College, Chief. Of course college. What do you think I am, some kind of an idiot?”

He released her wrist, disgust in his expression. “Considering your choice of associates, sometimes I wonder.” He swaggered over to her purse, opened it, removed her cell phone, then walked to the wall and unplugged her home extension. “These go with me. Now that I know I can’t trust you. Don’t even try to use the computer, either. The modem is also with me.”

Icy fury bubbled in her throat.

Fight it back. Fight it back.

“There is no getting around this, so don’t bother trying. I’ll be staying home tomorrow to monitor you until your date picks you up for prom.”

“I’m not your prisoner, you know.” Though sometimes she wondered.

“No, you’re my daughter, who lives in *my* house and abides by *my* rules. Who will be your date?” No answer.

“Fine.” He started toward the door. “Don’t go at all. I’d prefer that anyway.”

“No, wait.” She blew out a steady breath. She couldn’t bear the thought of sitting in this oppressive house while her best friends in the world were at prom, especially knowing it would be her father’s preference. Her heart ached for Jonas, but she was backed into a corner. She supposed she could call him from the dance and have him meet her there. That was something. “I’ll go stag. With my friends.”

“Forget it. Only losers and sluts go stag.”

“That’s not true!”

He shrugged. “Name an escort or stay home.”

She blew out her frustration. “Tad Rivers, I guess?” she muttered. “He asked me, and I don’t think he has another date. He’d planned on going *stag*.” She glared up through her lashes. “So, is he a loser because of that or does he pass your inspection? His dad’s the city attorney.”

“I’ll call Will Rivers right now.”

“I want to go in a group. With my friends. Mick and Erin and Lexy are all going together with their dates.” Maybe she could get word to Jonas that he’d have to meet her there if she had the chance to rearrange plans with them. “If I can just call Lexy—”

“I’ll take care of it.”

“Gee, thanks. Do you even know what to say to her?”

He held up a finger. “Cut the snotty attitude. I’m doing you a favor. You should be thanking me.”

Cagney clenched her fists so hard that her fingernails drew blood in her palms, but she welcomed the sting. If she couldn’t go with Jonas, she was going to smuggle in the alcohol and get stinking drunk. Her father deserved that slap in the face, at least.

“Your mother said dinner is in twenty minutes.”

“I’m not hungry,” she muttered.

He whipped back, frowning. “I don’t give a damn if you ate three lunches and you’re stuffed full. Your mother cooked a meal, which is more than that worthless drunk Ava Eberhardt did tonight, I’m sure, and you’ll be at the table in twenty minutes. Do I make myself clear?”

A long pause ensued, during which she contemplated defending Jonas’s mother, toyed with telling Chief exactly where to go. Then she remembered her college escape plan, his invisible financial choke collar on her. He hadn’t even allowed her to work a part-time job during high school, so she had no money of her own. Zippo. Not a dime. Just another way for him to keep her under his thumb.

“Yes, sir,” she said, an emotionless, powerless shell.

“I’m glad to see you can be reasonable. On occasion. I won’t forget your defiance, Cagney.”

She met his gaze directly but managed to leach the emotion from her words. “I feel sorry for you, Chief.”

His lips thinned. “Save it.” And with that, he left.

Cagney’s feelings were twisted and stuffed so far inside her she couldn’t even cry. Her father deadened every part of her—it seemed the only way she could survive. She couldn’t even trust that her feelings were real anymore. When she hurt, did she *really* hurt? She thought she felt the cold clutch of fear sometimes, but was it truly fear or something else? How could she know? Everything was messed up inside her. She rested her face in her hands and breathed deeply.

Any other girl might be able to go to her mother for an ally in an argument like this, but *her* mom—Cagney shook her head. Look up the word passive in the dictionary, and you’d find a picture of Mom beside the word. She’d never defy Chief, not even to righteously defend her daughters.

Cagney sighed.

They would pull through this, she and Jonas.

He would get over the disappointment. He loved her.

He’d meet her at the dance, and they’d proceed as planned. It wouldn’t be the way they’d hoped the night would play out, but somehow ... some way, she’d explain away all the hassle and lies and convolutions.

And Jonas, as always, would understand.

Jonas still couldn’t believe how much it cost to rent an uncomfortable penguin suit for one measly night. It was worth it, though. For Cagney. A mixture of excitement and dread swirled inside him as he pulled his mom’s decrepit Monte Carlo into the circular drive in front of her house, half expecting her father to come smashing out of the door, shotgun in hand. He turned off the engine and waited, holding his breath. Nothing happened.

He studied the front of the imposing, impeccable stone house trying not to compare it to his and mom’s shabby mobile home with its loose metal siding and squeaky porch stairs. Still, this house might be big, impressive from the outside, but he knew from Cagney how little love resided within its walls. He’d take his troubled but sweet mom and their rented trailer any day of the week.

To his surprise, the Bishops’ porch light flicked on. He didn’t know whether to take that as welcome or warning, but one thing was sure—stalling in the driveway would get him nowhere fast.

Blowing out a breath, he retrieved the orchid wrist corsage he’d picked up for Cagney at the grocery store florist and stepped out of the car. He took a moment to button his jacket and smooth his hair before heading toward the porch.

Now or never, he supposed.

The front door opened before he ever got a chance to ring the doorbell, and Chief Bishop stepped out, scowling as usual. Jonas honestly didn’t know what he’d ever done to make the man despise him so much. He cleared his throat and squared his shoulders. “Sir.”

“Don’t ‘sir’ me.” The man’s eyebrows dipped into a deep V. “What do you think you’re doing setting foot on my property?”

For a moment, the sheer rudeness of the question threw Jonas, and he couldn’t formulate a response. Cagney hadn’t been at school, nor had she returned any of his many phone calls or e-mails,

but surely by now Chief Bishop knew who her prom date was. His mouth went dry, and he moistened his lips with a flick of his tongue to bolster his waning courage. "I'm here to pick up Cagney for the prom."

The older man's laughter fell to the stone floor of the porch like shattering icicles, cold and sharp. He stood, legs apart, arms crossed over his wide chest. "Hate to burst your bubble, but Cagney left for the prom half an hour ago with her date, Tad Rivers. And her friends. Go on home now. Get."

Jonas blinked twice, scarcely believing what he'd just heard. "That's impossible. Cagney's my girlfriend," he blurted without thinking. "We have a date."

"Your *girlfriend*." Chief chewed on that. "Let me give you a bit of friendly advice, son. You want a girlfriend, you need to set your sights a little lower than my daughter. She's too good for you. Always has been, always will be."

Jonas felt the cruel sting, but he hiked his chin. Chief Bishop knew nothing about who Cagney was or what she wanted. "She loves me. And I love her."

"You love her?" The bastard's eyes widened. "You best show that love by staying the hell out of her way, then. Isn't there a little gal in that trailer park of yours you can *date*?" he said, imbuing the word with oily innuendo. "Whatever you're trying to get from my daughter is probably freely available in that encampment of yours."

Despite his best efforts, fury flamed inside Jonas. He'd never misused Cagney, and he never would. Beneath the stupid expensive tux, he began to sweat. "You don't know what you're talking about. I respect Cagney more than you ever have. I know she's here. Let me see her." He went to bypass the old man to get to the door, but a big hand on his chest held him back. "Cagney!" he yelled.

The hand became a fist, wadding his freshly pressed shirt into a mass of wrinkles as Chief Bishop lifted him slightly off his feet. "Go ahead, you little scumbag. Try to enter my house uninvited," Chief growled through clenched teeth. "Arresting you for trespassing would be the perfect satisfying cap to my evening."

Jonas lost his fight, and the older man took the opportunity to shove him back.

He staggered, then caught himself on the railing. Grasping on to his remaining dignity by a thread, Jonas tried in vain to smooth his shirt. "How can you live with so much hate inside you?" He couldn't quite keep the quaver out of his voice.

The old man ignored his question. "Cagney did leave you a letter before she and Tad headed for the dance. Good kid, that Tad Rivers," Chief mused. "Good *family*." He allowed a moment for the comment to slice into Jonas like a rusty knife before pulling an envelope from his back pocket and holding it out. "I suppose you deserve to read it since she wrote it. Against my advice, mind you. My daughter owes you no explanation."

Explanation of *what*? Jonas's mind raced, and an icy sense of dread trickled through him. Eying the man warily, Jonas stepped forward and snatched the envelope. He tore into it, hoping for some clue as to why their planned "united front" had fallen so far by the wayside. Why hadn't she returned his calls? Made some attempt to warn him that all hell had busted loose? They'd always protected each other.

He scanned the letter quickly, recognized Cagney's writing. And the page had been torn from her favorite school notebook, the one with paper lined in purple that smelled of grapes if you rubbed it.

Bracing himself, Jonas read:

Dear Jonas:

I would've told you sooner, but I just didn't know how. You're a nice guy and you've been a good friend, but Tad and I started talking a few months ago, and I fell in love with him. It just ... happened. It's easier on me, too, because Chief approves. I hope you understand ...

He couldn't bear to read another agonizing word in front of Chief Bishop. The man's gloating was nearly palpable, and the pain in Jonas's heart was too intense. He crumpled the letter in one hand and stared off to the side. After a moment, he glared at the smug man before him. "You did this."

“Cut the paranoia, boy. I had nothing to do with it. Read the letter. Cagney made her choice.” His tone smoothed into an arrogant purr. “It’s for the best.”

“When have you ever known what was best for Cagney or any of your daughters?” Jonas snapped, his voice hoarse with tears he could hardly hold back. “None of them can stand you, and everyone in this town knows it.”

Chief Bishop’s face reddened. “You have your damned letter, now get the hell off my property. And don’t let me see you here ever again.”

“Don’t worry,” Jonas tossed over his shoulder as he spun and took the steps two at a time, his world collapsing around him.

But, no more.

If ever there was a last straw, he’d just received it.

It’s easier on me, too, because Chief approves. Chief approves.

Approval.

He’d exhausted himself trying to attain that ever-elusive approval, with zero luck. Facts were facts: this town had been nothing but unwelcoming, if not downright hostile, to him and his mom from the moment they’d made the mistake of setting foot in it.

Just today, the owner of one of the bars Mom frequented kicked her out because she was two dollars short for her tab.

Two measly dollars. Literally.

The man left his mom humiliated and sobbing on the curb, as if she hadn’t poured enough money into that dive over the years. Jonas might not approve of his mother’s behavior, but she was kind and broken and vulnerable, and her coping skills weren’t the best, to put it mildly.

Now this.

All he and Mom had was each other.

That much was crystal clear.

The Gulch? Jonas was done with the whole damn place. Done. He might be poor, but he was whip smart and motivated, unlike so many of his classmates. He’d taken enough credits that he’d technically graduated in December, but had held out to go through the spring ceremony with Cagney.

His gut cramped.

As things stood, the school could send him his diploma, or keep it, for all he cared, because he never wanted to see any of his fellow students again, and that included Cagney. The only good thing about Troublesome Gulch had been her, and unbelievably, even their relationship turned out to be a lie.

Pain unlike any he’d ever felt seared through him. He needed to escape this hellhole as soon as possible. That was the benefit of living in a minuscule month-to-month rental, though. Not much to pack. If he had anything to say about it, he and his mother would be boxed up and out of this nightmare town tonight, and he’d never look back. He’d find a place for them to live where people judged you for what was in your heart, not your bank account. He’d work and he’d study and he’d show them all just how wrong they were about him.

One day, so help him God ...

Jonas chucked the orchid corsage out of his window, clear plastic container and all, then spun gravel leaving the Bishop property. Who cared if doing so meant another point against him with Chief? None of that mattered anymore.

The prepaid cell phone he’d scrimped and saved for rang, and a stupid spark of hope had him wrestling it from his jacket to check the caller ID. Maybe, just maybe—

Tad Rivers.

Betrayal lanced through him, stealing his breath.

He ignored the rings and waited until the secondary tone told him he had a new message, then dialed in to listen to it.

Cagney.

From *Tad's* phone.

Stars swirled in his head. So, it was true. All of it. She'd gone with Tad and didn't even tell him. She'd let him waste money on a tux and flowers, then humiliate himself in front of Chief. How could *she*, of all people, do that to him?

"Jonas," the message said, "please, please answer your phone. I want to talk to you about this. To explain. I'll call you back. Okay? Please answer."

Yeah, she'd call him back. Sure she would.

From *Tad Rivers's* phone.

With his temples pounding, he glanced down at the letter that had nearly ripped the heart from his chest. Tears blurred his vision, and he wiped angrily at them with the back of one hand.

Done. Finished. Finito.

The words on those pages were all the explanation he needed from Cagney Bishop, now or ever. Hadn't his mom always told him love couldn't be trusted?

Chapter One

Present day ...

Cagney glanced around the large parking area of High Country Medical Center at the snaking vehicles and foot traffic slithering slowly in. She couldn't believe how many people were showing up for a stupid press conference. Then again, this *was* Troublesome Gulch, Colorado, where curiosity reigned. Where else would a simple media event merit this level of police presence?

She adjusted her gun belt to rest more comfortably on her hip bones, waved at one of her fellow officers who'd been assigned to work the event, too, then checked her watch. Barely nine o'clock in the morning, and she was already bored out of her mind. Go figure. Just another day in the life of Officer Cagney Bishop.

She hated crowd control almost as much as she hated traffic duty. In fact, she hated most of her duties, unless they included dealing with disadvantaged kids or truly helping people, and honestly, how often did that happen?

Inside, she groaned. How many years until she could retire? She began calculations in her head, just to pass the time.

As if sensing her need for a break in the monotony of a job that fit her like a cheaply-made dress, Cagney's cell phone rang. She freed it from the pouch on her duty belt, checked the caller ID, then smiled and flipped it open. "Hey, Faith. How's the baby?"

Faith Montesantos Austin had given birth to her and Brody's first daughter three months earlier and was riding out the tail end of leave from her job as counselor at Troublesome Gulch High School. They'd named the baby Mickie, after Faith's late sister who died in the prom night crash along with Tad, Kevin and Randy.

"She's perky and great, as usual. Woke me up three times last night, though, so she's fat-bellied and chipper, while I'm beat, bloated and bitter."

"Ugh."

"Tell me." Faith groaned. "It's why they have to make babies cute, you know."

"Puppies, too."

"So true. Huh, Hope?" The scruffy puppy Brody had given her during his marriage proposal barked once in the background. Faith laughed, then asked, "What are you up to? Are you coming by?"

When duty allowed, Cagney stopped in for a morning coffee visit to keep Faith sane during her extended maternity leave.

Faith's tone turned plaintive. "I need adult contact, Cag. Girl talk, someone to reassure me that the baby weight really *is* melting away. I mean, my God, have you seen *Erin*?" she added, referring to their close mutual friend, Erin DeLuca, a Troublesome Gulch firefighter. "Granted, she had Nate Jr. a few months before Mickie's grand entrance, but she looked like an Olympic athlete freakin' three weeks after she gave birth. *So* not fair."

"True, but remember, she only gained nineteen pounds with her pregnancy and she's a workout maniac."

"Casey Laine Bishop, are you calling me a slug?"

Cagney laughed softly. No one ever called her Casey anymore. "Not at all, hon. Erin's just in a different physical class than most of us. We have to accept it and move on, or we'll fall into the body image self-loathing pit and never scratch our way out."

"Lucky wench, that Erin. It's a good thing I love her so much, or I'd hate her."

"Don't hate her because she's bionic," Cagney teased.

"Seriously, I'm regretting every single time I uttered the word *supersize* during those nine months of blinding French-fry cravings and zero self-control." Faith sighed. "So, now that I'm totally depressed *and* fat, are you coming over, or what?"

“Can’t. Sorry. Chief assigned me to crowd control at the hospital, oh, joy.” She rolled her eyes.

“The hosp—Oh! I’d forgotten that hoopla was today.” Mickie started fussing in the background, and Faith shushed her gently. “What’s up with the new wing anyway? Any insider info?”

“None.” Cagney raised her chin to acknowledge the hand signal from the cop working traffic control at the entrance about fifty yards away from her, then waved a sleek, black limousine past the barricade she guarded. The mystery guest of honor, of course. Who else rode around in a stretch limo in Troublesome Freakin’ Gulch?

She strained for a peek through the heavily tinted windows but saw nothing. Her hat brim and dark sunglasses didn’t help. “Cops don’t rate insider info. Not this cop, at least. Anyway, surprise benefactor, surprise wing, blah blah blah. Supposedly something that will put Troublesome Gulch on the map.”

“Ooh,” Faith mocked. “I swear, they’re always trying to put Troublesome Gulch on one stupid map or the other, and yet our claim to fame remains being ‘that mountain town with the horrible prom night tragedy from way back when.’ Sorry for the ugly reminder,” she said quickly, “but really, all this municipal social climbing is futile and annoying.”

“Believe me, I agree. But you know how old Walt loves his publicity,” Cagney added wryly, referring to the camera-loving city manager. “I’ll fill you in as soon as I get any kind of scoop whatsoever. It’ll probably be anticlimactic after all the buildup, though.”

“I don’t know why they’ve been so secretive,” Faith said, her tone peevish. “Don’t they grasp the fact that this is a small town? We’re supposed to know everyone else’s business. It’s part of the benefits package.”

Cagney snickered. “I guess the moneyman—or woman—wanted it this way.”

“Yeah, but why?”

“Who knows? Rich people can be freaky and demanding. And when you’re donating an entire wing to a hospital, you get whatever you ask for. We’re talking millions.”

“I wonder how much, exactly?”

“No clue. More than I’ll ever see in this lifetime, that’s for sure.” She paused to watch the tail end of the limo disappear into the underground garage that had been secured for its private use, as if the First Lady herself had donated the wing. “You have to admit, all talk of maps aside, this *is* the most exciting thing that’s happened in Troublesome Gulch in a while.”

“But that’s not saying much.” Faith sighed again. “Well, call me as soon as you know something juicy. All I have on my agenda is laundry, laundry and more laundry. Who knew a baby would go through so many clothes?”

“You have my sympathy. Just wait until she’s a teenager.”

“Hush your mouth. She’ll always be my precious baby.”

A pang of envy struck Cagney’s middle. “You know I’d switch places with you in a minute.”

“I’ll call you at 3:00 a.m. and remind you of those words,” Faith said, her tone wry.

“Okay, never mind.” Cagney chuckled. An electric excitement rippled through the press area, and at the same time her radio crackled with conversation. She tilted her ear to her shoulder mic to listen; the dog and pony show was about to get started. “Gotta go. Kiss that little sweetie for me.”

She hung up without waiting for an answer, then slipped the phone back into its holder. After securing her barricades, she moved closer so she didn’t miss anything. Faith would kill her if she didn’t memorize every single detail for later.

From the curtained-off area behind the outdoor dais, Jonas Eberhardt listened dispassionately as the city manager used every effusive suck-up phrase known to man during his blustery, prolonged introduction. Jonas shook his head with disgust. The man sure liked to hear himself talk.

Tuning out the blowhard, Jonas tried to focus on this moment he’d been anticipating for more than a decade. He’d fantasized about it, dreamed it, visualized it, and yet so far, it fell short of what he’d expected. He’d begun orchestrating this revenge plot almost since he’d driven away, brokenhearted,

from Cagney Bishop's house all those years ago, and he'd always planned to revel in every single second. He had pictured spending this day lording over the Gulchers in repayment for having always passed unfair judgment on him and his mother.

It wasn't working that way.

To his shock, everyone so far had been gracious.

Genuinely, or so it seemed. Certainly it had something to do with the fact that he had money now, his inner cynic whispered. He should be happy they were welcoming, regardless of the reason, but he couldn't seem to muster up the emotion. Wealthy or not, he still didn't belong.

With a yank on one diamond-and-platinum-cuff-linked sleeve, then the other, he frowned at his inner turmoil. Throughout all of his extensive planning, he hadn't foreseen the strangeness of being back in the town he despised after so many years. It defied simple description. After all he'd accomplished in the computer world, he hadn't banked on feeling like that same unwanted outsider, that shame-filled kid who'd tried so hard to blend in.

Shoot, with the staggering amount of money he'd just handed over to the hospital board, they ought to give him the key to the damn city and rename the main road after him. And yet, a small part of him felt somehow ... undeserving.

Which was bull, of course. But the town stripped him of confidence, seemingly without trying.

The hand-tailored suit he wore cost more than twelve months' rent on that dilapidated trailer he'd spent his high-school years living in. So why did he still feel like the lonely, misjudged teenager from the bad side of town wearing secondhand jeans from the thrift shop?

He flinched. *Stop it.*

The surreal feelings churning inside him threatened to ruin everything. He clenched his jaw and fought to shake them off. The fact was, he'd more than succeeded in his life despite overwhelming odds, and no insular little Podunk town should be able to diminish that, not even Troublesome Gulch.

Cagney's town.

Cagney.

A familiar flash of pain, followed by a roar of self-preserving anger. He let his eyes drift shut for a moment. Okay, she was the problem, and the honest part of him knew it.

He had loved her more than anything in this world, opened up to her like he hadn't done with anyone before or since, and she'd ruthlessly trampled his heart. He never wanted to feel that kind of pain again.

The merciless part of him hoped she still lived here, though he knew she'd hear about this spectacle either way. And when it was all over, he hoped she felt this precision cut all the way down to the bone. God knew, his wounds at her hand were still festering, and paybacks were ... well, everyone knew exactly what they were.

He *had* learned that her bastard of a father still ran his dictatorship in the Gulch, and knowing this whole thing would infuriate the old man provided some consolation. But mostly, he focused on Cagney.

And yet, a twinge of ... something ... nagged at him.

Regret? Conscience? Self-doubt? Whatever it was, the fact that it detracted from this all-important day annoyed him. He deserved this. More importantly, *she* deserved this.

Being back in the Gulch brought forth the kid he used to be, and the problem was, it shook him. He never thought he'd end up being the kind of man who'd seek retribution, but prom night—that deep betrayal—had killed something innocent inside him. His heart had shattered and his soul hardened in one fell swoop, and he'd vowed to show them all one day that Jonas Eberhardt couldn't be shoved aside like so much trash.

Every single decision he'd made in his adult life had led him toward this day, this place, this chance to subtly smack down a few people and set the record straight. He'd *lived* for this goal, worthy or not, so he'd better quash the unexpected doubt immediately or he'd miss out on the glory moment.

Reaching into his jacket pocket, he wrapped his hand around the talisman he always carried. In previous times of self-doubt, it had always given him strength of purpose. Power. Now it fueled him for what lay ahead. An eye for an eye, just as it should be. He'd make his point—one only Cagney would fully grasp—and then he'd hightail it out of Troublesome Gulch for the second time and never look back.

Score: even.

This town had made it abundantly clear what they thought of him twelve years ago, and his current financial status wouldn't change that—at least not for him. Today, despite his unexpected maelstrom of feelings and no matter how many millions it cost him, the last word would be his. The awkward feelings would dissipate eventually, and money had never mattered to him anyway.

Cagney mostly tuned out Walt Hennessy—master of verbosity—as he dragged out the introduction until it made the worst of Oscar-night speeches seem like breezy, witty blips.

Get on with it, she wanted to yell.

The table in front of the podium held some large lumpy thing covered with billowy, red fabric, and she could see most eyes focused on that rather than Hennessy. No doubt it was an architect's rendering of the proposed supersecret wing. Surely *that* would be more interesting than old Walt's incessant prattle.

After several more minutes of pointless effusing, Hennessy nodded to his four underlings, who were poised to unveil the model. They moved into position, each grasping a corner of the red cloth.

"Without further ado, I'd like to bring out the man who is making this all possible, one of Troublesome Gulch's own."

Wait a minute—a Gulcher? That was an unexpected twist. Cagney's curiosity was piqued, and she angled a bit closer. Who could it be? More importantly, how had this mysterious Gulcher walked amongst them and still kept the secret? Everybody knew secrets were impossible in the Gulch.

"Before that, however, I'd like you all to take a look at what will be the crowning jewel of High Country Medical Center." He paused dramatically, then spoke in a booming voice, arms spread wide. "The Ava Eberhardt Memorial Art Therapy Wing. Gentlemen?"

The cloth billowed back, and everyone erupted into applause and cheers and excited conversation. Cameras flashed. People shouldered closer, craning their necks and jockeying for a better view.

All Cagney could do was stand frozen and replay Hennessy's incomprehensible words in her brain.

Ava Eberhardt?

Memorial?

Art therapy?

The thud of her heart literally hurt; she couldn't feel her extremities. Her mind raced and her blood chilled. Jonas's mother hadn't exactly been an icon of Troublesome Gulch society—far from it. So, who could the benefactor be but—

"And, the man making it all possible, Troublesome Gulch's own prodigal son, Mr. Jonas Eberhardt."

Cagney gasped. Stars filled her vision until she feared she'd pass out.

The curtains behind the elaborate outdoor dais opened revealing none other than the boy she saw in her dreams every single night. A boy life had chiseled into an incredibly gorgeous—and apparently filthy rich—man. A boy who had listened to and encouraged all her dreams of creating art and helping people, of combining the two into a career, yet who'd left her in the hospital after the devastating prom night crash without so much as a phone call or a get-well balloon. A boy who'd broken her heart, and yet, despite that, the one person she'd never stopped loving.

Jonas had returned.

Her knees melted to nothing. She wobbled toward the nearest parked vehicle—a Ford pickup—and sank onto the front bumper, sucking air and trying to regain her equilibrium. A myriad of emotions swirled through her. Excitement. Fear. Wonder. Resentment. Anger.

Why?

Why had Jonas come back after all these years? Why—and how—was he funding, of all things, an art therapy wing at the hospital when that career field had been *her* dream, not his? More importantly, why hadn't he cared enough to tell her?

The big part of her that would always love Jonas wanted to believe this grand gesture was somehow for her, which warmed her soul. But it also made no sense. Another more resentful, less logical part felt as though he'd intentionally stolen her dream. Or worse, as if he were rubbing the failures of her life in her face. Bringing into sharp relief the fact that she hadn't been able to cut it, had abandoned her art and settled for a job she never wanted in the first place.

But why would he do that? How would he even know?

She hadn't seen nor heard from him in twelve long, empty years.

Every one of her stuffed-down regrets boiled to the surface. She wanted to run. Hide. Scream. She wanted to tear off this stupid uniform and demand a life do-over.

With considerable effort, Cagney pulled herself together.

She needed to talk to Jonas privately before her wild imagination created yet more scenarios that didn't exist, before she did something rash that she'd regret. Because, more than anything else, she wanted a second chance at the conversation that should have happened more than a decade earlier.

Chapter Two

Jonas addressed the assemblage much more quickly than Hennessy had introduced him, or at least it felt that way. He fake smiled his way through a ceremonial groundbreaking, mostly for the media, then made himself and the architect who'd designed the new wing available for one-on-one questions during a meet-and-greet reception.

That part only took about an hour, but by the end, he was emotionally drained and ready to retreat to his hotel room in nearby Crested Butte. The whole day had been ... weird. A letdown. Not at all what he'd expected. The glow of smug satisfaction he'd anticipated over the years simply hadn't materialized.

Confused and lost, he said his requisite goodbyes as swiftly as possible, then made his way down the ramp to where the limo waited in the underground garage. His handmade Italian leather shoes echoed on the pavement in the cavernous and largely empty concrete structure. He loosened his tie as he walked, then said to hell with it and whipped the thing off altogether.

After inhaling deeply, he blew out a long breath, ran his hands through his hair—and that's when he saw her.

Cagney. Standing next to his limo.

He stopped dead as—much to his surprise—a wave of uncertainty assailed him.

His Cagney, all grown-up and more beautiful than ever, stood right within reach. Her hair was pulled back, but wisps of it danced around her face. She fiddled her fingers together, finally settling on crossing her arms—just like she'd always done when she was nervous around him. Was she nervous? When he didn't move, she offered him a brave, small smile. Happy? Anxious?

Everything inside him twisted and tightened. He wasn't supposed to feel like this. He was supposed to hate her.

Her lips looked the same. Did they taste the same? And her thick, blond hair ... would it still feel like mink against his palms?

"Hi," she said, her tone choked off.

His well-honed composure crumbled, and all he wanted in that split second was *her*. Some uncontrollable insanity urged him to toss his vengeful plans out the window, then wrap her in his arms and whisper that everything was okay. They were adults now, and Chief Bishop no longer had a say in their choices. That evil SOB didn't even have to be a part of their lives if they didn't want him to be.

Drunk on impulse and long-dead romantic dreams, he took two steps forward before he noticed her outfit: a Troublesome Gulch Police uniform. It stunned him like an uppercut from out of nowhere. So much for excising Chief from their lives.

Oh, yeah. They didn't *have* a life together.

Remember? Never had, never would.

Ugly reality settled over him like armor, which was exactly what he needed to survive this unexpected encounter. He cleared his throat, hardened his heart. "What are you doing here?"

"I live here," she said, easily.

He didn't want to hear the unspoken, *and you don't*, but the implication ribboned through his brain unbidden. He raised one eyebrow and huffed. "Well, you have my sympathies in that respect."

Her smile faded into a look of confusion, which quickly transformed into something far more invasive and insightful. She cocked her head to the side, studying him with those laser-blue eyes that had always been able to see into his soul.

Good thing he'd developed a nearly impenetrable emotional shell over the years. Still, his breathing shallowed. "What?"

"Nice speech out there."

He didn't need her approval. "What do you want, Cagney?"

“At this point? A simple answer to a simple question.”

He exhaled with impatience. “Make it fast. I have meetings,” he lied.

“Oh, I will.” She paused until he looked at her. “If you hate Troublesome Gulch so much, then why did you bring your zillions here, to our hospital? And an art therapy wing, of all things.” Her tone was soft, unassuming. Her words were not. “It’s pretty puzzling.”

She knew him.

She’d always known him.

He didn’t have to put up with this. After a moment’s hesitation, he shouldered gently past her and opened the limo’s back door.

“Don’t you have a driver to do that kind of thing for you?”

He threw his tie inside the plush vehicle, then shrugged out of his jacket and did the same with it. He turned to face her, disconcerted by how close she stood. He could smell the unique perfume of her skin, etched into his memory. Pine and wildflowers and woman. “I don’t believe in making people wait on me just because I earn more money than they do. I’m perfectly capable of opening my own door.”

“Fair enough.” She shrugged. “But then, why the limo? Isn’t that sort of service the whole point?”

Valid question. Damn it. He silently castigated himself, then muttered, “Seemed fitting under the circumstances.”

“Ah, the circumstances.” Another pointed pause. “You haven’t answered my first question. Why here? Why this particular donation?”

Revenge was the honest answer. An eye for an eye. Paybacks. He wanted to hurt her like she’d hurt him. Worse. Of course, he couldn’t come right out and say that.

He dragged his gaze over the length of her body, ending at her face. “Maybe I thought you’d followed your dreams, though by the look of your work attire, I’m obviously mistaken.”

Her cheeks reddened as though he’d slapped her.

A surge of remorse bolted through him.

Then again, why should it? After the way she’d destroyed him, he shouldn’t feel bad about anything he said to her.

“You could’ve asked.” She shrugged. “I’ve always been here. Number’s in the book.”

Right. He struggled for a plausible explanation. “Maybe I did it for you, Cagney. Ever thought of that?” He held both palms up. “My error, since you seem to have taken a different path.”

Seemingly impervious to his icy demeanor, she hiked her chin. “Use your words as weapons all you want, but I don’t believe that.”

He frowned, feeling off-kilter and not liking it one bit. She was so together, so steady. “Don’t believe what?”

She gestured toward the hospital. “That you’d do something like ... this art therapy wing ... for me.”

His gaze narrowed. “Yeah? Why not? Finally learn to hate me from your old man?”

She paused again, but he could see the slight tremor of her hands. “If anyone has learned hate and anger, it’s obviously you.”

It pained him that he couldn’t deny it. He looked away.

“I don’t believe you’d do something this ... huge ... for me because you never even talked to me again, never let me explain what happened,” she said in a level tone.

“Which is what you wanted.”

“No, it wasn’t.” She spread her arms, the first show of frustration pinkening her cheeks. “You actually switched colleges, Jonas. After everything you and I had gone through to get there together. You declined your hard-earned financial aid package and disappeared. Never told a soul where you’d gone. Forgive me for stating the obvious, but clearly it was what *you* wanted.”

A boost of anger emboldened him. Now he was to blame? Frowning, he leaned closer and lowered his tone. “Why would I stay in touch after what happened? Go through with our so-called plans? Your feelings were abundantly clear.”

To her credit, she held her ground. “They *weren’t*. You never gave me the chance to discuss my feelings before you hightailed it out of here, forwarding address unknown.” She shook her head. “The going got a little tough, Jonas, and you ran. Without a single word.”

“That’s bull.”

“Why can’t you own up to it?”

Now he was pissed. “I have to go.”

“Going getting tough again?”

“Drop it. I’m not kidding.”

She reached out and grabbed his forearm, not cowed by his obvious anger. “I’m not done.”

“Then finish,” he snapped, pulling away from her grasp.

Those blue eyes of hers went round. “You never visited me in the hospital after the crash on prom night. Not once. Why?”

Jonas held her gaze, but not easily, and he didn’t say a word. Truth was, he hadn’t known. Not right away. He remembered every minute detail of the morning he’d read about the crash, more than two years after it happened. Some kind of exposé in the Sunday paper about teen driving dangers. He remembered gripping the newsprint so tightly that it had torn, and not being able to take a breath until he knew Cagney had survived. And then breaking down ... and hating himself for it.

“Fine, don’t answer.” Her eyes shone, but she didn’t waver. “Doesn’t matter anyway, because I know the truth. I lived it. You just flat out vanished when I needed you more than ever. Our love was obviously a lie—”

“No kidding.”

That startled her, but she covered it quickly. “So, you see? It’s only logical. With all that evidence, why would I believe that you’d cater to a decade-old dream of mine now?”

Decade-old, huh? He supposed he should be happy about her dreams going to dust, but strangely, he wasn’t. She was born to be an artist, and artists created. Her abandoning that God-given gift felt like a death, and he’d stomached more than his share of that recently. But she didn’t deserve his compassion. He needed to remember that. “I got all the explanation I needed that night.”

“Explanation from whom? Chief?”

He hesitated, questioning his motivation for the first time ever. “From your actions,” he said, although, admittedly, Chief’s words had a lot to do with it.

“And that was enough for you? Chief? Assumptions? My so-called actions?” she asked, with a small, humorless laugh. “Without ever talking to me again? You said you would love me forever, Jonas.”

“I—” His gut twisted as the ugly night rushed back at him. In his blinding, teenage, lovesick anger, he’d truly never looked at the whole thing from all perspectives. He *had* loved her, more than life itself. But it hardly mattered now, and he wouldn’t stand here and let her manipulate him into looking like the bad guy. “Talking would’ve been a waste of time—” he took in her uniform and couldn’t hold back the derision “—obviously. Just let it go. It’s over, Cagney. It’s *been* over.”

“Okay, it’s over. But don’t you think we should talk? Get some closure at least?”

“Closure’s overrated.” Shaking his head in disgust, he got into the limo and tried to shut the door.

She held it open, but her blue eyes had lost some of their hopefulness. “Run away if you have to. But you’re wrong, Jonas. About me, about that night. About so many things, and it just makes me ...”

“What?” he asked in a belligerent tone, daring her to say *she* was angry.

She seemed to consider her words, but finally, she shrugged. “It makes me sad.”

Unexpected. But he had to hold on to his purpose. Now he was in the wrong and she was sad? What about his pain? His own heartbreak? His body flashed over with that familiar, blinding bitterness that had ruled his world for so many years. “Wow, I’m sorry you feel *sad*, Cagney,” he snapped. “By the way, how was prom with Tad?”

She flinched visibly, looking at him as if she hadn’t a clue who he was anymore. “My God. Tad is *dead*, Jonas. And so are three of my best friends in the world. I can’t believe you’d throw that in my face.”

He clenched his fists, silently chastising himself. He’d known that, of course. His comment had been knee-jerk, heartless and unwarranted. Damn it. He should apologize—right then and there. He knew it, and yet his throat constricted until he couldn’t say the words.

“Look, I thought we could talk this out, but it’s obvious you’re not willing to listen to any of my explanations about the past. I will say this about the future, though,” Cagney said, softly. “If you donated that hospital wing in some inexplicable attempt to hurt me, you wasted your money.” A wistful half smile lifted the corners of her lips. “And, then again, you didn’t. There are a lot of needy kids in pain—a lot of people who will benefit from what you’re doing here. Sorry if that’s not what you intended.”

He scowled, completely off his game. How in the hell had his revenge plan backfired so monumentally? “You have no idea about my intentions. You might recall, I was one of those needy kids in pain, thanks to this town. To your father, in particular.” *And you*, he wanted to say. He settled for a snide tone as he added, “But I guess I shouldn’t speak ill of the old bastard now that you play on his team.”

A shadow of shame crossed her expression. Just as quickly, it vanished, replaced by a look of penetrating recognition. “Okay, point taken. I’m a cop and you don’t approve. Take a number, get in line.” She paused. “So, how’s the writing going, Jonas?”

The jab hit home. He struggled for footing on his own slippery rock of pain, his own shame, his own purpose—if he had one anymore. Truth was, he hadn’t written a word in twelve years. Easier to point out her failings than face his own. “Tell me, Cagney, how long did it take him to browbeat you into submission? Into giving up everything you ever wanted for the almighty badge and gun?”

Her gaze went distant. “Stop it.”

He ignored her. “Unless everything we talked and dreamed about was just another elaborate set of Cagney Bishop lies, and you never wanted to be an artist in the first place. Maybe our whole so-called relationship was bull, beginning to end, and you were more your father’s daughter than I realized. What was I, then, other than the town fool?” he asked in a rough tone. “Your little wrong-side-of-the-tracks experiment? Every rich Gulch girl wants to get with a bad boy, right?”

Cagney yanked her hand from the doorjamb as though the metal had shocked her. Her eyes went round, filled with tears. “Oh, my God. I get it now. I can’t believe this.”

“Believe what,” he snapped, hating to see her cry.

“You ... hate me,” she whispered, her voice quavering. “I never would’ve imagined it, but *you* actually hate *me*.”

The anguish in her tone tore him up. This couldn’t be happening. It wasn’t supposed to go this way. The past twelve years zipped through his vision, like the view out of a bus window as he fought to slam on the brakes. He grappled for something familiar to get him through. Anger. Anger always worked, didn’t it?

“Jonas, say it,” she persisted, her voice wavering. “Be a man and say it if it’s true. You hate me. Right?”

Hate implied passion, and passion was way too close to love. Not going there. What he felt for Cagney wasn’t what he expected upon his return, but he didn’t dare examine it too closely. Not in front of her, at least. So, he did the only thing he knew to do anymore: he retreated. “Nope.” He

grabbed the door handle and formulated the lie that felt like poison at the back of his throat. “It’s worse than that, Officer Bishop. I just don’t care.”

He slammed the door, desperate to escape, then pressed the speaker button and told his driver, Leon, to hit it.

“You’ve become just like him,” came Cagney’s muffled voice through the closed window, “and you can’t even see it. God, Jonas, how could you have let him win?”

His entire body began to shake, as everything he’d based his adult life on disintegrated before his eyes. He had to get away from the disaster this day—his whole world—had become. Had to get away from Cagney and her excruciatingly clear insights.

Could he have misread the situation all along?

No. Not going there, either.

The engine sprang to life, and Cagney stumbled backward from the limo, wrapping her arms around her middle. He knew she couldn’t see him through the dark window, but she never took those piercing eyes off it anyway. He watched as one tear spilled over and coursed down her soft cheek, and yet she stood in stoic silence, not bothering to wipe it away.

I am not like that bastard, he thought, his jaw tight, head pounding. But it felt like a lie, and that killed him. He pressed his palm to the glass and let the regret for everything they’d lost, everything it was far too late to get back, wash over him. The whole fiasco might be funny if it weren’t so damn tragic.

Twelve years ago, he’d walked blindly into a wellset trap of blame and anger and resentment, and he’d been stuck there ever since. Now he had nothing good left inside him, nor did he have Cagney. And there was no going back.

Wouldn’t Chief Bishop be thrilled?

“I don’t hate you,” Jonas whispered, as the only woman he’d ever loved grew smaller and smaller in the distance. “But it’s way too late to fix that now.”

Chapter Three

It had taken an emergency pity party with Lexy, Erin and Faith, two extralarge pizzas, a box of Godiva chocolates and three bottles of wine, but she'd done it. Merely two days after her confrontation with Jonas, Cagney had regained her footing enough to set some ideas of her own in motion.

If Jonas thought she would simply hide and lick her wounds after their clash at the press conference, he was sadly mistaken. Life had hardened him, no doubt about that, but she'd toughened up, too. Enough to know that a large part of his armor was for self-protection. She knew him well enough to see past the cold veneer to the vulnerable guy inside, no matter how much he wanted to pretend that person no longer existed.

She'd poked around and learned that he'd earned his fortune doing something with computers and would be in Troublesome Gulch until the hospital wing was finished, which meant months. Perfect. They might never be a couple again, but by the time he left, they would be friends if it killed her. They'd have their closure, if nothing else. How exactly to break through his steel shell and make all that happen ... well, she wasn't sure yet. But she'd figure out a way.

This wasn't over between them.

Not by a long shot.

She'd just finished her patrol shift and had stopped by the city building to drop off some paperwork at the human resources department. As she walked by the conference room, she caught the sound of her father's angry voice. It surprised her enough to stop her in her tracks. Cold and in command was more his style—at least in public. Had to keep up that image, after all.

Pausing out of sight by the door, she leaned her head back against the brick wall and eavesdropped.

"Look, the hospital wing is one thing—"

"It's a *great* thing," Walt Hennessy said.

"Whatever. The point is, we don't have the available space, nor do we have the need, for some idiotic youth center on top of that," her father said. "If there are displaced teens loitering about this town, we need to ticket them instead of rewarding their poor behavior with a fun place to hang out."

"Sorry to disagree, Chief Bishop," came none other than Jonas's voice, not sounding sorry at all, "but statistically, towns with designated after-school hangouts—especially for the underprivileged kids whose families might not be able to afford involving them in school or community sponsored activities like sports—have far lower crime rates."

Chief and Jonas in a room together?

Yeah, Cagney wasn't going anywhere.

"Well, thank you for the lesson on crime, Eberhardt," Chief said, barely able to hold back his sneer. Clearly, he didn't appreciate being one-upped by the kid he'd effectively run out of town. "I guess you'd know."

"That I would. Hence my vested interest."

Chief's disgust threaded through his words. "Right. However, I might point out that I have a helluva lot more experience with law enforcement than you do."

"This isn't about law enforcement, Chief," Mayor Ron Blackman interjected. "It's about serving the needs of our community, and Jonas has an excellent point."

Cagney grinned, in spite of herself. The fact that the city leaders were on a first-name basis with Jonas—and on his side—had to be killing Chief. Priceless.

Blackman continued, "We need to give these kids something to do besides causing trouble."

"Isn't that what their parents are for?" Chief barked.

"Bill," Walt Hennessy said, his tone chastising. "As one of the most prominent members of our community, your attitude is surprising. I don't understand why you're so against such a positive

improvement for the Gulch. You more than anyone should know that not every child has the advantage of involved parents like yourself.”

Like Chief? Cagney thought, muffling a snort. Boy, Hennessy had no clue how off base he was. She honestly couldn’t believe Chief had managed to hide his true nature from an entire city for so many years.

“Well, then, the neglectful parents need to be punished somehow,” Chief sputtered. “Why should we have to cater to these people?”

“Because *these people* are citizens of Troublesome Gulch,” the mayor said, his tone indignant. “And Troublesome Gulch isn’t a prison, nor is it some elitist country-club community. It’s a town in which people of all socioeconomic levels are welcome. No one appointed us judge, jury and executioner. We aren’t the moral police, either.”

“It’s our job to provide services to the citizens,” one of the female city council members said, which—Cagney knew—would enrage her father even more. He hated to be contradicted by women. “*All* the citizens. Perhaps you’ve lost a bit of perspective, Chief Bishop. A lot of those parents you refer to as neglectful simply have to work more than one job to make ends meet.”

Glee bubbled up in Cagney’s throat. She smacked a palm over her mouth and swallowed to avoid busting into laughter and getting caught spying. But, man, she loved witnessing her father outnumbered and outwitted.

“Well, the fact remains, we don’t have available space in the areas zoned for such business,” Chief said, his tone stiff. “It’s a moot point. Is there even money left in this year’s budget for nonsense like this, Walt?”

“I’ll be funding the majority of it,” Jonas said, shooting down that argument.

A flash of inspiration struck Cagney, and she jolted.

Wait one minute.

This was her chance, staring her in the face.

She could subtly stand up to her father, in front of witnesses, *and* set her plan with Jonas into motion by offering one simple suggestion. She’d pay dearly for this later with Chief, but who the hell cared? What could he do—fire her? She wasn’t his minor child anymore. She turned into the doorway and rapped her knuckles on the open door.

Jonas, Chief, Walt Hennessy, Mayor Blackman and the entire city council glanced toward her at the sound. She smiled. “Sorry to interrupt. I was walking by and happened to catch some of your debate. I didn’t mean to eavesdrop,” she fibbed, “but I think I might have an excellent solution.”

“Officer Bishop, don’t you have duties to attend to?” her father asked in a voice as cold and stinging as dry ice.

“As a matter of fact, no,” she said, saccharine sweet. “I’m just off shift.”

The mayor’s chair scraped back, and he stood. “Come in, come in.” He glanced toward the council. “I’m sure you all know Chief Bishop’s youngest daughter, Cagney, one of our esteemed police officers.”

Nods and murmured hellos followed.

Cagney didn’t know if she would use the word *esteemed* to describe her half-hearted contribution to public safety, but whatever. It meant a paycheck every two weeks.

“Have a seat,” Blackman said. “What brainstorm have you come up with, dear? Goodness knows, we’re just going in circles here and could use a fresh perspective.”

As she took a seat, she glanced surreptitiously at both her father and Jonas. Chief looked red-faced and ready to blow a gasket, and Jonas? Confused and more than a little intrigued. Maybe a tad annoyed, too, but so be it. She’d had enough of impossible men to last her ten lifetimes.

Steepling her hands on the table before her, she addressed the eager members of the group, letting her gaze pass over the two men who probably wished she’d never happened to come by. “As you all know, I purchased and renovated the old horse saddle plant several years ago.”

“And you did a fine job,” Hennessy blustered.

As if he knew. She smiled anyway. “Thank you. What you all might not know is this—I received approval from the building inspectors to use the space as residential property once I’d finished, but it’s still in an area of town zoned for business. And the building is extremely large, of course, having been a manufacturing plant.”

“Three stories tall, isn’t it, Cagney?” the mayor asked.

She nodded. “More than fifteen thousand square feet, all told. I chose to live on the second and third floors, and I left the street level floor unfinished. It’s just over five thousand square feet of wide open warehouse space.”

“What’s your point, Cagney?” her father growled. “We’re having a meeting here, if you hadn’t noticed.”

Walt frowned at him. “For God’s sake, Bill, let the woman talk. She’s not a child anymore.”

“She *is* my employee.”

“Yes, well, right now she’s off duty and she’s here as a citizen of Troublesome Gulch,” Mayor Blackman snapped. “So let her speak her piece.”

She didn’t even look at her father. “My *point* is, I would be more than happy to allow the city use of the street-level space to build the youth center you’re discussing, since, as Chief says, we’re a bit short on free space in the city proper. Like Jonas, I’ve thought for years now that we need a teen center in the Gulch.”

Excitement rippled through the room.

“That’s ridiculous,” Chief said. “You don’t want the town’s riff-raff loitering in the same building as your home. The place will need an almost constant police presence.”

He was falling right into her trap. It was almost too easy. “Makes it convenient, then, since I happen to be a police officer. And I relate well with disadvantaged teens, none of whom I consider riffraff. As a matter of fact—” she glanced at the council members “—I’d be willing to hand over my patrol duties and take a fulltime assignment at the youth center, since Chief thinks we need round-the-clock law enforcement there. I’ve worked as a resource officer at the high school. I know a lot of these kids.”

“Oh, Cagney, are you sure?” Blackman asked. “You’re such a valuable member of the force.”

She choked back a scoff. “I’m more than sure. Most of the cities and towns in Colorado have community policing projects like this. We don’t, and that’s a shame. Law enforcement shouldn’t be strictly punitive.”

“That’s true,” Hennessy mused.

She rushed ahead. “As for the budget concerns—”

“There are no budget concerns,” Jonas said. “I can pay for the center.”

She inclined her head. “Okay, then to get the community involved. I’d love to seek donations of building supplies from local businesses and renovate the space myself to save the city—and our benefactor—their money, whether it’s necessary or not.” Cagney shrugged. “I certainly have the renovation experience, and I think it’s important to involve the residents of the Gulch as much as possible.”

Murmurs filled the space.

“Just think how much local business donations will increase community investment in the place,” she added.

Again, eager conversation ensued.

“Wait one damn minute,” Chief barked, silencing everyone. “Officer Bishop, you are being insubordinate. It is not your place to waltz into a meeting to which you weren’t invited and change your duty assignment on a whim.”

“For goodness sake, Chief, stop being such an unreasonable taskmaster,” the mayor said, spreading his arms. “I realize the young lady is your daughter and your employee, but she’s what—thirty years old, Cagney?”

“Yes.”

“Not to mention, she’s making a generous offer and a professional sacrifice. There is no reason to accuse her of insubordination when she’s showing the kind of community spirit that makes Troublesome Gulch a great place to live. You should be proud of Cagney instead of reprimanding her.”

“She should receive a commendation,” Hennessy added.

Cagney started to say that wasn’t necessary, but—

“And considering the fact that we increased your budget so you could hire five new officers this year, surely you can spare one for this excellent cause,” fired off one of the longest-standing, most respected city council members, looking over his half glasses at Chief. “Why is it we don’t have any community policing projects in this town, Bill?” he asked.

The room hung in suspense.

Chief didn’t bother answering the council member’s question. Cagney knew he wasn’t of the kiss-babies-and-hand-out-balloons school of law enforcement. “Fine. Open your youth center, but I’ll assign an officer of my choosing,” he said finally, struggling to hide his rage.

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