

Perfect
SCOUNDRELS

A HEIST SOCIETY NOVEL

Ally Carter

Disney • HYPERION BOOKS
NEW YORK

Text copyright © 2013 by Ally Carter

All rights reserved. Published by Disney • Hyperion Books, an imprint of Disney Book Group. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the publisher. For information address Disney • Hyperion Books, 114 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10011-5690.

First Edition
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
G475-5664-5-12320

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Carter, Ally.

Perfect scoundrels: a Heist society novel/Ally Carter.—First edition.
pages cm

Summary: When feisty teenaged thief Kat's on-again off-again boyfriend, Hale, suddenly inherits his family's billion dollar company, Kat gets a tip-off that the will is a fake.

ISBN 978-1-4231-6600-9

[1. Inheritance and succession—Fiction. 2. Crime—Fiction. 3. Swindlers and swindling—Fiction. 4. Wealth—Fiction. 5. Dating (Social customs)—Fiction.]

I. Title.

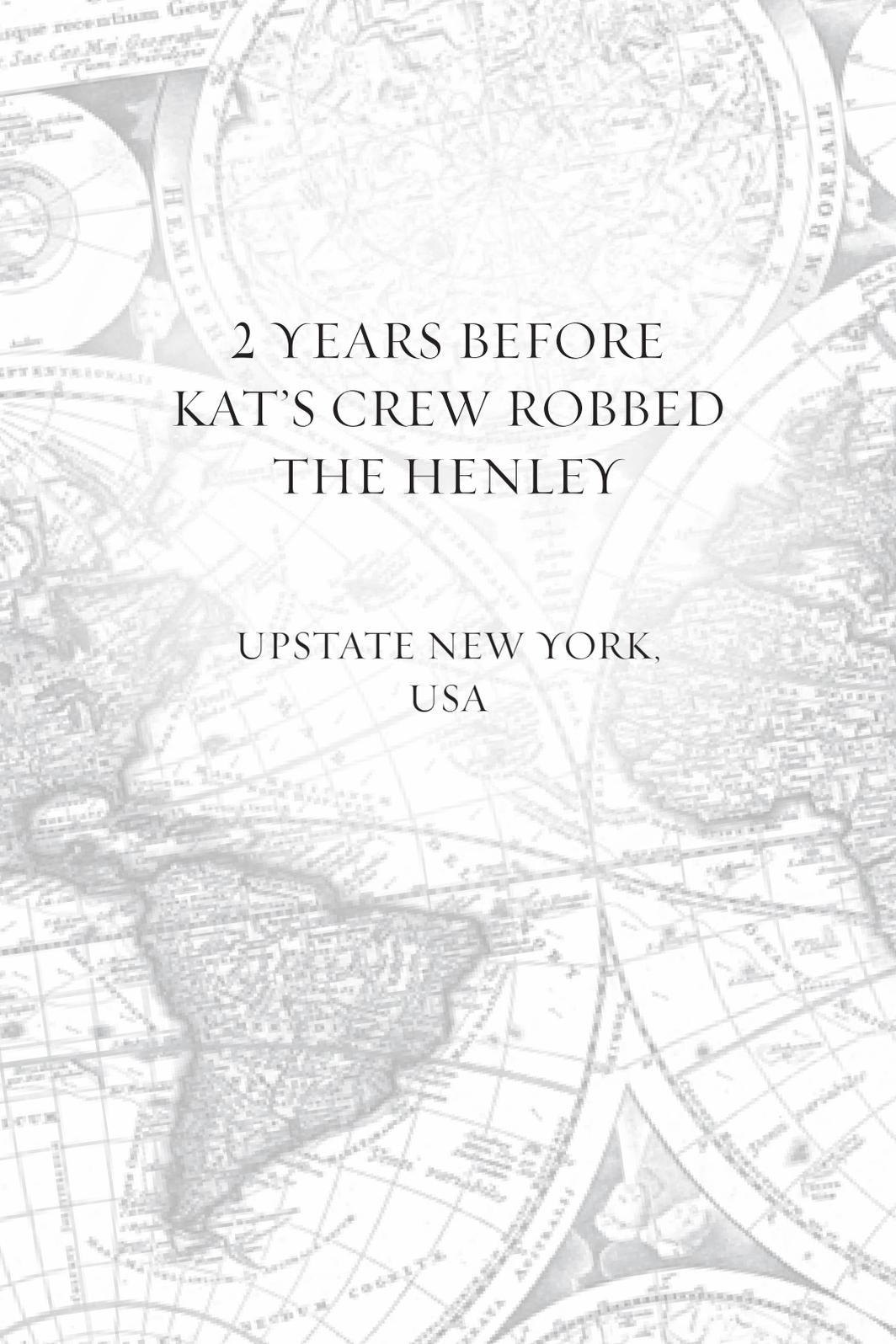
PZ7.C24263Pe 2013
[Fic]—dc23 2012032405

Reinforced binding

Visit www.un-requiredreading.com



For the Hale Girls



2 YEARS BEFORE
KAT'S CREW ROBBED
THE HENLEY

UPSTATE NEW YORK,
USA

CHAPTER 1

Of all the people who knew about the big house in the middle of Wyndham Woods, very few had ever been inside. For over a century, the owners had been importing their chefs from France, their butlers from England. Occasionally, someone from town would be summoned through the tall gates and down the winding lane to repair a pipe or deliver supplies; but for the most part, the house was like a dragon in the hills, a sleeping legend that barely touched anything beyond its line of trees.

But that never stopped the stories.

The ceilings are forty feet high, some people would say. The bathroom faucets are made of solid gold. Every so often, one teenager would dare another to climb the fence and wander through the grounds to get a look at the house, and the

trespasser would show up at school the following day with tales of armed guards, Doberman pinschers, and a narrow escape through a tunnel lined with barbed wire.

(The one-way ride in the back of a squad car and the stern call to their parents, however, always went unmentioned.)

But more than anything, people talked about the painting. Sure, most of the town gossips knew only the most basic facts about Claude Monet. For them, it was enough just to imagine what a hundred million dollars might look like, hanging on a wall in the middle of the woods.

And yet no one ever saw it. In truth, no outsider even came close until the night a teenage girl with a long black ponytail and bright blue eyes drove through the town and down the narrow, two-lane blacktop.

No one saw her park the Vespa she had “borrowed” from her uncle Calvin. Not a soul was there to witness how easily she scaled the tall iron fence and landed softly on the damp ground on the other side.

She was not the first teenager to find the narrow path through the woods, but she was the first to stop when she reached the clearing that surrounded the house. She didn’t move an inch until the cameras were blind and the guards were distracted, and then all she had to do was stroll to the ivy-covered trellis at the rear of the house. And climb.

At the top of the trellis, the girl wasted no time in pulling a pair of pliers from her belt and clipping the wires that ran, almost undetectable, around the window. A moment later, she was sliding open the glass and crawling inside, as quick and nimble and quiet as a cat.

* * *

The girl dropped lightly onto the hardwood floor, but stayed perfectly still for a long while, waiting for a creak that never came. Even as she crept along the hall and down the stairs, there were no noises of any kind. Not the ticking of a clock. There were no crackling fires or rushing winds. The house was utterly silent, abandoned; and so she dared to walk a little faster, move a little easier, until she reached the big double doors at the back of the house.

There was an ornate desk that had once belonged to a king of England (one of the Georges, rumor said) and a grandfather clock that had been made in Switzerland, a Fabergé egg, and a Hemingway first edition that had been autographed by the author himself. But those things paled in comparison to the painting that hung in the gentle light over the mantel of the fireplace in the back of the room.

For a moment, the girl simply marveled at the painting. She might have been a student in a gallery, a buyer at an auction. It seemed almost enough just to see it—to be so close to something so beautiful. So she stood alone, waiting, until a voice said, “I see you found the Monet.”

She startled when the lights flicked on, but she didn’t yell or run. She just looked at the boy who stood behind her in a T-shirt with a frayed collar and a bright blue pair of Superman pajama bottoms.

“You’re not supposed to be here,” the girl said.

“Funny, I was going to say the same thing about you.” He smiled like his night had just gotten significantly more interesting.

“You don’t seem afraid,” the girl said.

“Well, that makes two of us.”

Spotlights shone down, and the boy studied her in the manner of someone who is used to looking at rare, beautiful things. Then he jerked his head at the painting and said, “Okay. Go ahead, take it.”

He started to leave, but stopped when the girl said, “Yeah, I can have *this* one. It’s a fake.”

“Oh now, that hurts.” He brought a hand to his chest like he’d been stabbed. “Not that it’s any of your business, but the Hale family happens to have the largest collection of Monets in the United States.”

“Technically, it’s the largest *private* collection. And this isn’t one of them. This”—she shined a small flashlight onto the delicate brushstrokes—“is a slightly better-than-average forgery.”

When the boy eased closer to the painting, it was like he was seeing it for the first time. “No. That can’t be right.”

“Sorry to break it to you.”

He shook his head slowly. “But my grandmother said . . .”

“She lied,” the girl told him.

The boy smiled again and whispered something that sounded like “*Hazel is awesome*,” but the girl wasn’t quite sure.

“What was that?” she asked, but the boy just laughed.

“Nothing.”

“You’re a strange kid,” she told him.

“Yet another thing we have in common.”

This time the girl blushed. It seemed like a compliment, and the way he looked up at the painting told her that the forgery was more precious to him than any old master could possibly be. The girl, however, didn’t share that opinion.

Hurriedly, she put her tools away and turned, heading for

her window and the path through the woods. But the boy rushed after her.

“Where are you going?”

“Oh”—the girl laughed—“it’s probably best if I don’t tell you that.”

The boy raced ahead and blocked her way onto the landing. “Tell me anyway.”

“Why?”

“So I can go with you.”

The girl pushed past and started back the way she’d come. “No thanks.”

“I could help.”

“I’m sure you’d try.” She reached for the window, but his hand landed on top of her own, and right then the glass beneath her palm felt too cold. His skin was too warm. And the girl felt her face flush even against the chill.

He raised an eyebrow. “Of course, I could yell.”

She tried to sense whether or not he was bluffing. He had tousled hair and sleepy eyes, and even though he couldn’t have been more than fourteen, there was a weariness about him. He seemed thin and pale, and she wondered for a moment if he were seriously ill, like in an old movie where the rich boy is kept locked away from the world at large for his own good.

“No dice.” The girl started to open the window. “A Monet I’m willing to steal, sure. But the heir apparent to the Hale empire? No thank you.”

“They won’t miss me.”

“Oh.” She laughed again. “I bet they would.”

“You don’t want to make that bet.”

“Why?” the girl asked.

In the moonlight, a shadow seemed to cross his face as he whispered, “You’d lose.” Then he moved the hand that had been on top of hers, held it toward her. “I’m W. W. Hale the Fifth, by the way. It’s nice to meet you.”

He looked serious. He sounded serious. But the girl just eyed the outstretched hand as if it might come with a hidden switch or sensor, and making contact would trigger some silent alarm.

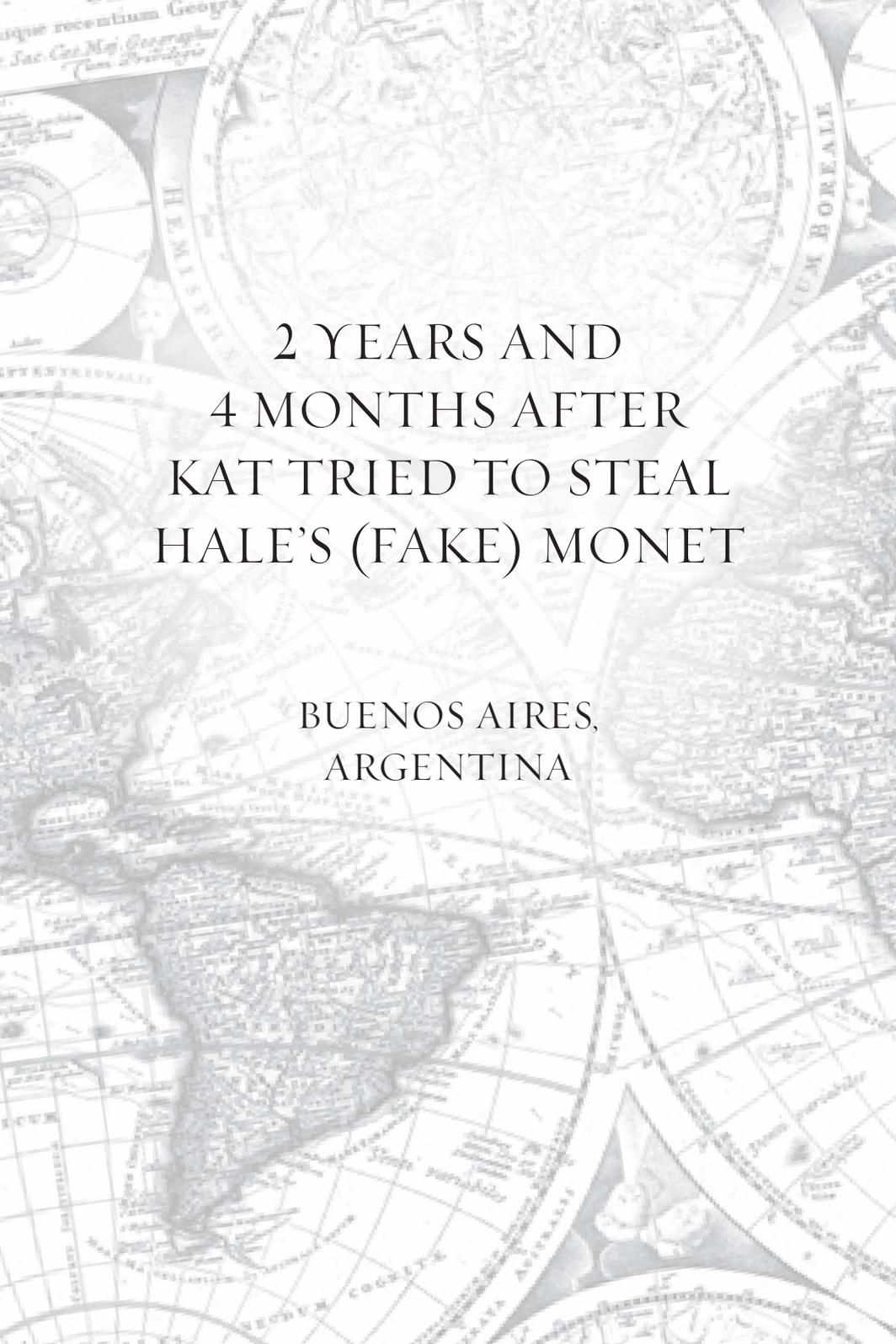
“What do the *W*’s stand for?” she asked.

“Take me with you and maybe you’ll find out.” He stared down into her eyes and whispered, “I go or I scream. You look like a smart girl. It’s your call.”

She *was* a smart girl, or so everyone always said. Her whole life she had been taught to be cautious, wise, and most of all, decisive. And yet she stood there in the cold air of the drafty window, completely uncertain what to do. After all, she’d stolen a lot of things in her short life, but she’d never, ever stolen *someone*.

But then again, the girl thought, there is a first time for everything.

So she pushed open the window and climbed out onto the trellis. A moment later, the boy followed; and in the morning, all that the security footage showed was two shadows disappearing into the deep black of the night.



2 YEARS AND
4 MONTHS AFTER
KAT TRIED TO STEAL
HALE'S (FAKE) MONET

BUENOS AIRES,
ARGENTINA

CHAPTER 2

There are few things quite as lovely as autumn in Argentina, Bobby Bishop had often said. And Bobby Bishop was in the business of beautiful things. That was why he had taught his daughter, Kat, how to spot a forgery and scale a fence. It was his voice that was in her ear every time she had to find the blind spots of a surveillance camera or squeeze into a dumbwaiter while reminding herself that claustrophobia is for sissies.

So it was almost impossible for Kat *not* to see the world through her father's eyes. Where would he go? What would he do? And, as the case may be, where would he eat?

"Are you sure your dad's not here?" Hale asked as they stepped into the elevator and he pushed the button for the eighty-seventh floor.

“I’m sure,” Kat said.

“Because going to a romantic restaurant with my girlfriend is going to be seriously awkward if her dad is here.”

“First, my father isn’t here—he’s in Bulgaria. I think.” Kat furrowed her brow and pondered for a moment before her mind returned to more pressing matters. “Secondly . . .” she started, then seemed to think better of it.

In the past six weeks, she had spent a lot of time editing her thoughts, carefully choosing her words. Laser grids, Kat could handle. But there was a special sort of danger that could lie inside a word like *girlfriend*, so Kat looked at their reflection on the wall of the glossy elevator compartment and tried to steady her voice.

“Secondly, I’m hungry.”

Kat hadn’t been nervous at all during the planning stages of that particular evening—not when they’d chosen the restaurant or even when her cousin, Gabrielle, had carefully selected Kat’s dress and shoes. But as soon as the elevator doors slid open, she heard the music—sultry and low, accordions and violins—and suddenly, Kat was terrified.

In the restaurant, tangoing couples circled past, and the look in Hale’s eyes was especially mischievous when he told her, “Oh, I see. You brought me here so you can have your way with me on the dance floor.”

“No.” Kat pointed past the dancing couples to the solid wall of windows that wrapped around the room. “I brought you here for the view.”

Over fifteen million people live in Buenos Aires, and there, on the top floor of the city’s tallest building, Kat felt like she could see them all. The restaurant sat on a platform that was built to revolve, slowly moving clockwise past lights and

skyscrapers, old historic buildings and illuminated squares. Kat knew it would take exactly one hour for the restaurant to make a full revolution. An hour to talk. An hour to eat. An hour (much to Kat's chagrin) to dance.

"Come on," Hale said, pulling her close. "Humor me."

All around them, couples danced so closely it was as if they were stuck together with Velcro, each absorbed in their own little world, moving like they didn't share the dance floor with a dozen other people.

They were beautiful, and when Kat and Hale joined them, she too forgot that the other dancers existed. Hale was with her. Just the two of them. And Kat actually stopped thinking. She forgot about the jobs they had to do, the things she had to steal. When Hale pulled to a sudden stop, Kat thought he might kiss her. Dip her. Spin her. She was bracing herself, mentally preparing for it all, and she was ready—she really was—for anything but his pulling her close and whispering, "Kat, it's time."

"Right. I . . ." Kat jerked upright and stumbled over the words. "I have to go to the bathroom."

And then she was gone, pushing past waiters carrying trays and women slipping lipsticks into handbags as they returned to their partners. Kat rushed into the ladies' room and stood there gripping the sink and staring into the mirror, trying to catch her breath.

"Kat?" Hale yelled through the door. "Kat! I'm coming in." But he didn't wait for her to answer.

A woman came out of one of the stalls just as Hale burst through the door. She gasped but didn't scream, and Hale gave her a very Hale-ish grin, so the woman hurriedly rinsed her hands and left without a word.

"Are you okay?" he asked as soon as they were alone. Kat

felt her breathing start to rev again. She heard a sound—a *bang, bang, bang*—beating like the telltale heart.

“Kat?” Hale asked.

Slowly, he brought a hand to her face and pushed a stray hair away from her eyes. “Thanks for the dance,” he said just as—*bang*—the noise came again.

Kat shuddered and looked out the window. The apartment building she had seen when they’d first arrived was coming into view as the restaurant continued its rotation, so Kat took a deep breath and reached for the glass.

“Are we ready?” Gabrielle asked, sliding into the room, a crossbow, black backpack, and fifty feet of military-grade cable in tow.

Kat nodded. “Let’s go.”

“You look freaked,” Gabrielle whispered while she unpacked their gear and Kat stripped off her dress to reveal the black catsuit she wore beneath it.

Hale was busy at the window, so Kat whispered back, “There was tango,” which was answer enough for Gabrielle.

“We’re coming into position,” Hale said, then handed the crossbow to Gabrielle, who took aim at the building that was slowly moving into direct line with the bathroom window.

“We only have fifteen minutes,” he reminded them.

“I know,” Kat said.

A knock came on the door just as Gabrielle shot an arrow, sending the cable spiraling across the street to lodge in the mortar above the apartment’s window. She clipped a strap from the belt around her waist onto the outstretched line.

“See you on the other side, Kitty Kat,” Gabrielle said with a smile, and a moment later she was zooming into the black.

Kat climbed onto the ledge as soon as Gabrielle was clear, but Hale had to help her reach up to grab the cable and attach it to the belt at her waist. She was still dangling there when the knock came again.

“Sir,” a familiar voice said from the other side of the door. “Sir, are you in there?”

“Hold on,” Hale told Kat, and unlocked the door. “Marcus?”

Hale’s valet wore his usual dark gray suit. His posture, as always, was perfect, but there was something decidedly different about the man who stood on the other side of the ladies’ room door. He stepped carefully inside and looked at Hale. “Excuse me, sir. If I could have a moment . . .”

“Sure, Marcus,” Kat said, still dangling, swaying more than eighty stories in the air. “Take your time.”

Hale walked to where Marcus stood, and listened while the butler whispered. Kat couldn’t read his lips, but there was no mistaking the look on Hale’s face as he turned toward her.

“I gotta go.”

“Go?” Kat yelled. She tried to wiggle free of her harness, but the cable was too high and Hale was already reaching for her arms, holding her steady as he kissed her forehead.

“Where are you going?”

“I’ll call you in a few days and . . .” He trailed off as if he had no idea what was supposed to come next. “I’ll call you.”

“You said that already! Hale. Hale!” Kat tried to grab him, but he was out of reach, Marcus at his side, disappearing behind the closing door.

And through it all, Kat’s heart kept pounding. The clock kept ticking. So Kat pushed away from the window, zooming into the night.



ONE DAY AFTER
HALE LEFT KAT
HANGING
(LITERALLY)

BROOKLYN, NEW YORK,
USA

CHAPTER 3

The old brownstone in Brooklyn was not, technically, Katarina Bishop's home, but Kat was a girl for whom technicalities rarely—if ever—applied. The building itself belonged to a corporation that was a part of a conglomerate that was purchased by a shell company in 1972, and won in a poker game in '73 by Kat's uncle Eddie.

And yet his name did not appear on any titles or tax rolls. Utilities were listed in the names of a half dozen different aliases and paid in full on the fifteenth of every month. As far as the city of New York was concerned, the building was the property of a ghost, a figment, a very prompt and responsible illusion. But Kat knew better. Kat knew the building belonged to a legend.

When she pushed open the back door and stepped into

the kitchen, Kat was certain what she was going to find. The lights were on and the stove was hot. A pair of ancient Dutch ovens sat over low heat, but for the moment, she and Gabrielle were alone as they carried in the small crate that they'd brought from Buenos Aires.

Rich, sweet smells washed over Kat, so she sank onto a chair and put the crate on the table. They'd gone all the way to Argentina for the painting that lay inside, but Kat felt no sense of accomplishment or relief. The couriers would come for it tomorrow, and in the meantime, Kat was tired and drained and happy to be at least temporarily finished.

"Okay, Kitty Kat, spill it." Gabrielle walked to the old refrigerator, threw open the door, and studied the food inside. "I've been beside you for five thousand miles, and, trust me . . . you're in something of a *mood*."

Kat thought about her cousin's words, but she didn't try to deny them. Changing the subject would be futile, and as tired as she was, there was no use in trying to run. So Kat rested her arms on the crate and her chin on her arms, and thought about all the things she didn't like in that moment.

Her head hurt.

Her back hurt.

Her hands hurt (but that was her own fault for doing zip-line work with no gloves).

They were the typical aches and pains of any thief a day off the job, and none of them, Kat realized, could possibly compare to the pain inside her heart, so she took a deep breath and whispered, "Hale left me."

"He didn't *leave you*, leave you," Gabrielle said. "He just made a rapid and ill-timed departure."

"He left," Kat snapped.

“He had a sudden change of plans.”

“Do I have to remind you, Gabrielle, that he left me hanging? *Literally*. Are you seriously not furious right now?”

“Oh, I’m mad at him,” Gabrielle said. She stirred the contents of the largest pot. “I’m just a little surprised that *you’re* mad at him.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means, dear cousin, that I wouldn’t expect you to be angry. I would expect *you* to wonder *why*. . . .”

Kat had spent twenty-four hours and a very long plane ride across most of two continents fuming at Hale for running off without a moment of thought or a word of explanation. But Gabrielle was right.

Why would he leave so suddenly?

Why would he jeopardize her safety and their job?

Why would Hale, the boy who had been willing to do almost anything to be a part of her world for over two years, suddenly flee without a single clue as to where he might be going?

Somewhere in the house, a door slammed. The floor creaked. On the stove, the contents of the Dutch ovens began to boil. And Kat’s cousin raised an eyebrow.

“Are you going to tell him?” Gabrielle asked. “Or should I?”

“Tell me what?” the old man said, but he didn’t really stop for an answer. “Do not stir my goulash, Gabrielle.”

He moved to the stove slowly, like he’d been dozing in his easy chair and his legs weren’t quite working yet. But even with his gray hair and ratty, moth-eaten cardigan, there was something in Kat’s great-uncle’s eyes—a gravity that could make even a great thief tremble.

“So,” he asked again, “tell me what?”

"It's good to see you too, Edward," Gabrielle said in her uncle's native tongue. Then she pulled a noodle out of one of the pots, plopped it into her mouth, and took her seat at the table.

"So, Katarina, what is wrong?" Uncle Eddie sprinkled some oregano into a pot and stirred, but didn't look back. "Was it the access? High-rises can be tricky."

"Access was fine, Uncle Eddie," Kat said.

"The exit, then," he said.

"The exit wasn't a problem." Kat ran her fingers along the rough pine of the crate, and didn't bother asking how her uncle had known the details of the job in Buenos Aires. Uncle Eddie knew everything.

He eyed the crate on the table. Kat could see him calculating the value of the painting that lay inside when he asked, "And so you bring me a box I cannot have, and a problem I cannot solve, is that it?"

"The job was fine, Uncle Eddie," Kat said. "It's just that—"

"Hale ran off in the middle of it."

"Gabrielle," Kat snapped.

"What?" Gabrielle said. "It's the truth. I'm sure Uncle Eddie won't kill him. He'll probably just maim him a little."

"No," Eddie said. "I won't."

"Okay," Gabrielle said. "So he'll maim him *a lot*. But Hale can take it. I'm sure between Eddie and your dad, Hale's just looking at a few broken—"

"No, Gabrielle." Eddie's voice was stern. "I will do nothing of the kind."

"But . . ." Gabrielle gave her uncle a confused glance.

"I value a young man who values family."

"*We* are Hale's family," Gabrielle said.

“No.” Eddie picked up the newspaper that lay beside the stove and tossed it onto the kitchen table. “We’re not.”

Kat didn’t reach for it. She didn’t have to. The headline was big and bold and looming in black and white: WORLD’S SIXTH WEALTHIEST WOMAN COMATOSE IN MANHATTAN HOME.

“Is this . . . ?” Kat couldn’t pull her eyes away from the photo that accompanied the words. The woman wore her white hair in an elegant updo, a diamond broach at the base of her neck, as she sat beneath a Monet that, if Kat were to guess, was most definitely the real one.

“That, my dear, is Hazel Hale,” Uncle Eddie said. “She is your young man’s grandmother.”

“She’s in a coma?” Gabrielle asked, turning the paper to get a better view.

“She was,” Eddie said. “At six o’clock this morning she died.”

Kat craned her neck and looked straight up at the building, utterly uncertain what to do. The height would not be a problem, of course, but there was something about the penthouse apartment that loomed over the east side of Central Park that left Kat feeling exposed and fragile. So she shivered, staring up, completely unsure how to find her way inside.

Oh, it would have been easy enough to purchase a bouquet of flowers, throw on an apron, and disappear into the parade of florists and caterers that had been filing in and out of the service elevators all morning. A window washer had left his rig on the third floor, easily within Kat’s reach. There were at least a half dozen ways for Kat to access the penthouse, but even Katarina Bishop knew there were some rooms she shouldn’t con or break her way into.

Besides, it was the only Hale family residence into which Kat had never been invited. Like a vampire, she felt that it would be almost impossible to enter. So she stayed on the corner, watching, staring at her phone.

“Hey, Hale,” she told the recording that answered when she tried his number, “it’s me. Again. Like I said in my last message, I’m back in the city and I heard about your grandmother. Hale, I’m so sorry.” Kat ended the call without another word.

Maybe he was busy.

Maybe he was sad.

Maybe he was grounded.

Maybe he was still in Argentina, lying in a roadside ditch and calling out her name.

Or maybe he was . . .

“Hale?” Kat said when she saw a pack of men emerge through the building’s glistening doors. They all wore dark suits and darker expressions, and they were so uniform in appearance that Kat almost missed the boy among their midst. She stared for a moment, uncertain at first that it was him. She’d seen him in so many situations—playing so many different roles—but Kat couldn’t help but realize that the boy who stood before her was someone she had never seen before.

The men were almost at the limo that sat idling at the curb, so she spoke louder. “Hale!”

Every man in the group stopped and stared.

“Sorry,” she said. “I meant *that* one.” She pointed to the youngest Hale on the sidewalk.

He stepped cautiously away from the others and asked, “Kat?” almost as if he didn’t recognize her.

“Hey,” she told him.

“Hey,” he said back. “How’s the Raphael?”

“Fine. Halfway to Mr. Stein and its rightful owner.”

“Any trouble?”

“There were dogs,” Kat found herself confiding. “We hadn’t been expecting dogs, but they took one look at Gabrielle and fell in love, so . . . we made it.”

“Dogs and boys, right?” Hale laughed a little.

“Right,” Kat said and mimicked his smile. “We missed you.”

“Son?” one of the men said. He was tall, like Hale. Flecks of gray mixed among his black hair. He stood at the limo doors, speaking in Hale’s direction.

“Just a minute.” Hale called over his shoulder and kept his hands deep in his pockets.

“That’s your dad?” Kat asked, but Hale acted like he hadn’t heard.

“Kat,” he said, voice low, “what are you doing here?”

He looked and sounded a world away from the boy who had left her in Argentina.

She swallowed and told him, “I heard about your grandmother. I’m so sorry.”

“Thanks.”

“I tried calling, but . . . I was worried, Hale. You just disappeared.”

“Son?” Hale’s father called again.

The first black car pulled away from the curb, and another appeared almost as if by magic.

“Look, I’ve got to go. The funeral is upstate tomorrow, and we’re all going up there today, so . . .”

“Are you okay?”

“It’s good seeing you.” He headed for the limo, but called back over his shoulder, “Take care of yourself, Kat.”

And then he was in the car.

And then the car was melding into traffic and disappearing down the street.

Kat felt Gabrielle come to stand beside her, a cup of coffee in each hand. She gave one to Kat and blew on the contents of the other. "How was he?" Gabrielle asked.

"Different," Kat said, not sipping. Not smiling. "He was different."

CHAPTER 4

Driving toward the big house in Wyndham Woods, Kat couldn't help but think about the first time she'd ever been there. It had been dark, and she had been younger. But the biggest difference, it turned out, was that some places are far more intimidating when you approach them via the front door.

"Name?" the guard asked when Gabrielle pulled up to the gate.

"We're here for the memorial service." Gabrielle gestured at her black dress as if that should be explanation enough. Kat thought that perhaps Gabrielle should have chosen a *longer* dress if she'd truly wanted to send the right message.

"It's a private ceremony." The guard pointed to his clipboard. "Name?"

"We're guests of Hale's," Gabrielle said.

“You’re going to have to be a little more specific,” the man told them.

“The Fifth,” Gabrielle added. “W. W. Hale *the Fifth*.”

“You sound very close.” The guard put his clipboard away.

“She’s his girlfriend.” Gabrielle jerked her head in Kat’s direction.

The guard leaned down to peer at Kat, then whispered to Gabrielle, “Between you and me, Mr. Hale the Fifth has a lot of girlfriends.”

“Well, between you and me—”

Kat leaned across her cousin and spoke through the open window. “Thank you.”

“But—”

“It’s okay, Gabrielle. We don’t need to be *let in*.”

It was easy enough to park the car and climb the fence. Even in heels, Gabrielle didn’t complain about the long walk through the forest and short stroll across the vacant side of the yard. It was almost like nothing had changed, Kat thought, when she reached the top of the trellis, forced open the window, and slid inside the empty hall. But walking toward the railing at the top of the stairs, Kat immediately knew that she was wrong.

The first time she’d been in that building, it had been dark and quiet. Sleeping. But now the main floor was wide awake. Gabrielle peeked over Kat’s shoulder, stared at the crowd that filled the foyer below, and said, “I thought *we* had a big family.”

There were men in dark suits, women in black dresses and the occasional veil. And yet it didn’t look or feel or sound like a funeral, not with the clinking of glasses and waiters making their way through the crowd with champagne and caviar on silver trays.

It seemed to Kat that it had taken a death to make the big, abandoned house come alive.

“So,” Gabrielle said with a deep breath, “this is how the other half lives.”

“No, Gabs.” Kat shook her head. “This is how the other half dies.”

“I guess,” Gabrielle said. “I haven’t been to a funeral since . . .” She looked away, unable or unwilling to say *your mom*. “Sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“No, seriously. I’m—”

“Let’s just find Hale,” Kat said and started down the stairs. Gabrielle fell into step beside her. “We should split up.”

“You sure?” Gabrielle asked.

Kat forced a smile. “Absolutely.” But as she watched her cousin walk away, she couldn’t stop herself from thinking about another day in another crowded room, when she’d sat between her father and her uncle Eddie, receiving guests, hearing condolences. Trying to ignore the fact that her mother was never coming home again.

But Kat didn’t want to think about that. She shook the memory from her head and started through the big house, wandering alone, almost invisible, until she found her way back to the painting that had brought her there years before.

“Do you want to know a secret?” someone asked, and Kat jumped, surprised to see a man standing behind her. He had white hair and a trim mustache. The buttons on his silk vest strained against the slight paunch around his middle, but his bow tie was perfectly straight. And behind Coke-bottle glasses, his eyes were bright and clear. Kat suddenly craved fried chicken.

“Excuse me?” she said.

The man looked around the crowd of people, who were indifferent to the girl and unimpressed by the painting, utterly unaware that at least one of them wasn’t what they seemed.

“It’s a fake,” the man said, then laughed a laugh that was completely free of pretension, utterly unself-conscious. To Kat, it seemed like the only genuine emotion in that big, cold room.

“Oh, is it?” Kat asked with a smile.

The man nodded. “Hazel had it made after she lost the original in a poker game.”

Kat laughed and, like Hale years before, she looked upon the painting—and the woman—with newfound admiration.

“Are you sure?” she said.

“I should be.” He leaned a little closer. “I’m the one she lost it to.” The man eyed Kat with amused interest. “Forgive me. Silas Foster. Friend of the family.”

“Kat Bishop,” Kat said, taking his outstretched hand. “Same.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Did you know Mrs. Hale well, Mr. Foster?”

He pondered for a moment before nodding. “You could say that. I met Hazel in . . . what was it? Spring of seventy-two, I guess. Of course, I was just a pup researcher then, and she was the boss’s widow.” He gave a little laugh. “She got lost her first day on the job and ended up in my lab. Spent the rest of the day hiding in there, plotting her escape. I offered to make her a rappelling harness, but the lab was on the thirty-sixth floor and Hazel was afraid of heights, so . . . she respectfully declined.”

“You work at Hale Industries?” Kat asked.

“Director of Research and New Product Development.” The man gave a little bow. “I’m the idea guy.”

“I like idea guys,” Kat said.

The older man cocked his head and gave a laugh. “We get all the ladies. But for some reason I don’t think you’re here looking for me.”

“I don’t know,” Kat said. “I’m always in the market for a good rappelling harness.”

“For you, my dear, nothing but the best.”

“But you are right about something. I’m actually trying to find—”

“Young Mr. Hale, I’m assuming.”

Kat blushed. “Let me guess—I’m not the only one?”

“Maybe. But you’re the one I hope finds him.” He gave a wink and walked away, and Kat didn’t feel alone anymore in the big room full of people.

“That pervy old dude wasn’t hitting on you, was he?”

Kat studied the girl who was coming her way. Her hair was red and her eyes were as black as her dress. She wasn’t necessarily pretty, but she was striking just the same, and something about her made Kat stand up taller and blurt, “He wasn’t pervy.”

She wished she’d created a cover, a purpose. Because the role of uninvited girlfriend absolutely didn’t suit her.

“Well, you look . . . nervous.”

“No, I’m not nervous. I’m just . . . looking for someone.”

If possible, the girl studied her even more closely. She cocked her hip and eyed Kat from head to toe, and in her presence, Kat had never felt more like an outsider, a party crasher, the proverbial thief in the night.

She was just beginning to plan her escape, when the girl said, “You’re cute. Who are you?”

“Kat.”

“Cool.” The girl wrapped her arm through Kat’s. “Come on, Cute Kat, we can look together. I’ll give you the tour.”

Walking arm and arm through the big living room, Kat expected to hear about the history of the house, maybe the story of the Ming vase by the window. She was surprised to see the girl gesture to a woman and three children sitting near the fireplace, then say, “On our left we have the West Coast Hales.”

Kat glanced at the foursome. The woman was too thin—her face too tight. Kat was about to ask what was wrong with her when the girl shrugged and said, “Hazel’s baby girl thought she’d be a movie star, but instead she married some struggling producer who did nothing but try to get his wife to bankroll movies.” She sighed. “She hadn’t seen her mother in six years, but she’s here now.”

They walked through the foyer, and Kat’s guide jerked her head in the direction of a short man standing on the bottom step.

“Ezekiel Hale,” the girl whispered. “He’s part of the European branch; tells everyone he races Formula One cars, but really he’s just a gambler. A bad one.”

There was a distant cousin who had bought (and lost) a sheep ranch in Australia, a son-in-law who had served time for crimes no one ever mentioned (insider trading), and a son who had shamed everyone by choosing Cambridge over Oxford.

By Kat’s count, there were five branches, six divorces, and nine pending lawsuits.

Uncle Joseph didn’t speak to Cousin Isabel. Great-great-uncle George’s descendants adamantly refused to be in the same room as the children of Aunt Margaret. And everyone

thought Alfonzo Hale (a cousin whose mother was an Italian heiress) really needed to get a new toupee.

“And I thought my family was crazy,” Kat whispered.

“What?”

“Oh, nothing.” Kat squeezed against the wall to let a woman pass (Georgette, granddaughter of George). “How do you know all this?”

“Maybe I’m a spy.”

Kat smiled but didn’t reply, so the girl shrugged. “Let’s just say, if you’re young enough and female enough, you wouldn’t believe what people will say around you.”

“Yeah. I think I would,” Kat said just as they returned to the room where the tour had begun.

The people still ate and drank and clamored on about things like dividends and capital reinvestment, and something about the day felt off—almost like Hazel’s Monet was not the only forgery in the room.

“Nobody seems . . . sad,” Kat finally realized.

“Oh, they aren’t sad. They’re freaked.”

“Why?”

“Hazel was a nice old lady, don’t get me wrong, but word at the dessert tray is that the company isn’t doing so hot.”

“It’s not?” Kat asked.

“We’ll find Scooter; he’ll know all the gossip.”

“Who’s Scooter?” Kat said just as the girl stopped. And pointed.

“He is.”

Kat followed her stare.

And whispered, “Hale.”

CHAPTER 5

Hale stood alone in the crowded room, gazing up at the painting that hung above the fireplace. Kat remembered the look in his eyes when she'd told him it was a fake, the way he had come alive. She tried to compare the boy in the Superman pajamas to the young man in the dark suit, but whatever spark had been lit the night they'd met had gone out. She tried not to think that his rightful owners had somehow tracked him down and stolen him back.

"Hey, Scoot."

The redheaded girl stepped toward him.

"Nat!"

Hale smiled and threw his arms around her, and it was like he didn't notice Kat at all. And maybe he didn't, because he just asked the other girl, "What are you doing here?"

“What do you think?” she challenged. “Dad told me about Hazel.”

“But . . . I thought you were in Switzerland.”

Kat watched the girl tilt her head and choose her words. “Switzerland didn’t exactly work out. Neither did France. Or Norway.”

“Three schools?” Hale asked.

“Well, technically, five schools—three *countries*.”

“Impressive,” Hale said with a nod, and Kat honestly thought he meant it.

The girl reached to straighten Hale’s tie. “It’s good to see you, Scoot.”

“You too,” Hale told her, and Kat didn’t know what to make of this girl who was calling him *Scoot* and straightening his tie and making him smile.

“Sorry! I’m so rude,” the girl said. “I have to introduce you to my new friend, Kat. Kat is—”

“Oh, I know who Kat is,” he said.

Kat just whispered, “*Scooter?*”

“So you two do know each other.” Natalie crossed her arms and eyed Kat with new interest.

“Natalie’s an old friend,” Hale explained. “And, Nat, Kat is . . .”

“New,” Kat said. “I guess I’m the new friend.”

“I didn’t know you were coming,” he told her.

“Surprise,” Kat tried, but Hale didn’t look amused. “So, how do you two know each other?” she asked.

“My dad’s the family lawyer,” Natalie explained. “Before him, my grandfather was the family lawyer. And before him . . . well . . . you get the picture. So I was kind of always around. Scooter here took pity on me, made friends with *the*

help. He always was the family rebel.” She intertwined her arm into his and pulled him closer.

“You say rebel. They say massive disappointment. . . .”

“You know, I was just thinking about the time with the good china and—”

“Aunt Olivia’s Pekingese,” Hale said, then broke into laughter. Natalie joined in. And Kat kept on standing there watching, utterly on the outside of the joke.

“So, Natalie,” Kat said, “are you back in the States for good?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.” Natalie shrugged and changed the subject. “What about you two? How’d you meet?”

Kat couldn’t help herself. She glanced at the painting above the fireplace, but Hale seemed immune to nostalgia.

“Oh, you know,” he said. “Around.”

“Cool.” Natalie shifted on her heels. Then her eyes locked on a point over Hale’s shoulder as a voice rang out. “Scooter!”

“And that’s my cue,” Natalie said, her eyes wide. “Scoot, I’ll see you around. Kat, it’s been rad.” The girl turned and disappeared into the mourners and out into the garden, before Kat even had a chance to say good-bye.

“Scooter, there you are.” A woman was pushing her way through the crowd and toward Hale. She flicked a piece of lint off of his shoulder and told him, “You’re as bad as Marianne. Where is she, by the way?”

“I imagine she’s taking the afternoon off.” Hale’s voice was cold. “To mourn.”

If the woman had noticed Hale’s pointed tone, she didn’t show it. Instead, she shifted her attention off of Hale and his nonexistent lint and onto the girl beside him. She looked at Kat’s hair, her dress, her shoes, all within a span of

a second, deftly taking in everything about her.

“*Scooter* . . .” the woman said, drawing out the word, “aren’t you going to introduce me?”

“Hello,” Kat said, extending her hand. “I’m Hale’s—”

“Friend,” Hale said. “A friend of mine. From Knightsbury.”

“Oh. How nice.” But the woman didn’t sound like she thought it was nice. She kept eyeing Kat, looking her up and down. “Where do you call home, dear?”

“Oh.” Kat looked nervously at Hale.

“Kat was raised in Europe,” he told the woman. “But she lives here now.”

“I see,” the woman said. “And how do you find Knightsbury?”

“It’s better than Colgan,” Kat said, knowing that all good lies have their roots in the truth.

“That’s what Scooter says.” The woman looked at Hale. “Scooter, your father needs us in the study. It’s almost time. Say good-bye to your friend.”

“Yes, Mother,” Hale said, and the woman walked away. He watched her go, and seemed utterly lost in thought until Kat slapped his arm.

“Mother?” Kat gasped. “That was your mother!”

He took her arm and whispered, “You’ve got to go, Kat.”

“I just got here. I thought that I should . . . you know . . . be here for you.”

“They’re going to read the will.”

“They do that at the memorial service?”

“When control of Hale Industries hangs in the balance they do. The business is . . . complicated.”

“I see.”

“You don’t want to be here when all these vultures start

circling.” He looked out at the people in the room—at his family. “Go on, Kat. I’ll be fine,” Hale said, but something in his words rang false to Kat; she wondered exactly who he was trying to con.

“It sounds like your grandmother was an amazing woman, Hale.” She thought about Silas Foster and Hazel’s fake Monet. “I wish I’d known her. I’m sure everyone just really wants to say good-bye. Hale”—she took his hand—“it’s not about the money.”

Then for the first time Kat could remember, Hale looked at her like she was a fool.

“It’s *always* about the money.”

Even before he moved, Kat could feel him slipping away. “Why didn’t you tell me she was sick, Hale? I could have—”

“What, Kat?” Hale snapped, then lowered his voice. “What could we have done? Stolen something? Conned someone? Trust me, there was nothing *anyone* could do. She didn’t even want to live anymore.”

“I’m sure that’s not true.”

“Of course it’s true. The doctors said she could have recovered, but she had a Do Not Resuscitate order. She could have hung on for years, but she wanted to . . . leave.”

“Hey, Scooter,” Natalie said, reappearing. “Dad told me to find you. They’re getting ready to start.”

“Okay,” Hale said. “Thanks again for coming, Kat,” he told her.

“Hale,” Kat said, stopping him. “I’m very sorry for your loss.”

She meant it. She really did. But watching him walk away, Kat felt like maybe she was the person who had lost

something. Hale was always well groomed and well dressed, but that day his hair was parted just so. His cuff links bore the family crest. He didn't look like the Hale who helped himself to heaping bowls of soup in Uncle Eddie's kitchen. He looked like the Hale who belonged to that room, that house.

Natalie draped her arm through his when they walked.

That girl.

For the first time, Kat truly understood why gates and guards had to stand between his world and hers. Never before had she regretted breaking her way into someplace she didn't belong.

"Did he just run off with that redhead?" Gabrielle said, sidling up to Kat and taking a big bite of shrimp. "And answer to the name of *Scooter*?"

"Come on, Gabs. It's time for us to leave."

The woods seemed different on the long walk back to the car, and Kat couldn't shake the feeling that she was forgetting something. Then she stopped and looked at the house.

Someone.

"Hello, miss."

Kat couldn't help but smile when she saw the uniformed man who stood at attention beside a long black limousine.

"Marcus!" Kat cried. "I haven't seen you since—"

"I was very sorry about Buenos Aires. It was most unfortunate timing." He looked at Gabrielle, tipped his hat. "Miss Gabrielle, it's nice to see you. If you don't mind, I have a favor to ask."

"Anything," Gabrielle said.

"Well, I was wondering if I could perhaps drive your cousin back to the city myself."

“You don’t have to do that, Marcus,” Kat said. “I know it’s probably a difficult time for you.”

“Please,” Marcus said, reaching for the limo’s rear door. “It would be a relief to do something.”

Kat understood. For a girl who was used to adrenaline and fear, there was no feeling in the world she hated more than being helpless, so she asked her cousin, “Gab, you mind?”

“Oh, please.” Gabrielle rolled her eyes, then looked at Marcus. “You can have her.”

A second later, her cousin was climbing into her car and driving away without as much as a tire mark to prove she’d been there at all. Uncle Eddie would have been incredibly proud.

“If you will, miss . . .” Kat turned to see Marcus holding open the limo door. For a second, Kat considered sitting in the front, but Marcus was a man for whom tradition and decorum mattered. And so Kat slid into the backseat without another word.

Sitting on the soft leather, Kat couldn’t help but wonder how many hours she’d spent staring at the back of the valet’s head. He was always there. Never far from Hale’s side. And then Kat knew what had been missing from the big house.

“I didn’t see you inside, Marcus.”

“Yes. I wasn’t able to attend, but I was hoping to see you.”

“You were?”

“Yes,” he said, but didn’t offer anything more.

“Did you know Hale’s grandmother well?”

“I did. She was a great, great woman.”

“Was Hale close to her?”

Marcus nodded. “He was.”

“I didn’t know.” Kat stared out the window. “He never mentioned her to me. Why doesn’t he talk about her?”

“The things that are the most precious to us are sometimes the most secret.”

Kat nodded and considered the thought. Her family was loud and cranky, a force of nature, moving around the globe like a storm. Hale’s family was quiet and fractured, their issues simmering under the surface like a sleeping volcano.

“Marcus,” she said, bolting upright when the car steered off the main road and onto a narrow path. “Marcus, I don’t think this goes to the highway.”

“No, miss. It doesn’t.”

Marcus wasn’t forgetful. He wasn’t the sort of man to make mistakes, and so whatever had brought them to that narrow, winding lane, Kat knew it was absolutely not an error.

“We’re not going to Brooklyn, are we, Marcus?”

“No, miss.” He gripped the wheel and kept on driving. “We aren’t.”

They didn’t go far. By Kat’s estimation they weren’t more than a half a mile from the main road when the car stopped. She could still see the smoke rising from the chimney of the big house hidden behind the trees, and yet it felt a world away from the tiny cottage with the white picket fence and perfectly pruned roses that stood before her. There were black shutters and flower boxes on every window. An ornate railing ran along a cozy porch, and the whole place looked almost like it had been made from gingerbread.

“Marcus, where are we? Who lives here?”

He turned off the car and reached for the door. “I do.”

CHAPTER 6

“I never knew you had a house.”

Kat crawled from the backseat of the car and looked up at the man who held her door. Maybe it was her imagination, but she could have sworn he didn't stand quite as straight, there in his own driveway. He looked at her a little more squarely. He wasn't a servant then, she realized. He was a man, welcoming her into his home.

“Oh, it's not entirely mine. I share it with—”

“Marcus? Marcus, is that . . .”

A woman was standing in the doorway, a dish towel in her hands. She had steel gray hair and the same piercing eyes that Kat had seen reflected in the rearview mirror for years.

“Miss Katarina Bishop,” Marcus said, “please allow me to introduce my sister, Marianne.”

“You’re Marianne?” Kat thought about the way Hale’s mother had said the name, almost with a snarl. “It’s nice to meet you.” Kat extended her hand. But Marianne just gaped at Marcus.

“Oh, brother. What have you done?”

Somewhere in the house a kettle screamed. It made a sharp, haunting sound. The woman turned, Marcus at her heels, and Kat followed them into a tiny kitchen with white lace curtains and a tray set out for tea.

“I’m very sorry, Miss Bishop,” the woman said, her British accent even stronger than her brother’s. “I mean no disrespect. I’m sure you’re a very talented young lady. But this is a private family matter.”

“You were her family!” It was the first time Kat had ever heard Marcus raise his voice, and she had to do a double-take to make sure it was him and not some well-groomed imposter.

“You forget yourself, brother. And your place. If our father were alive—”

“He isn’t.”

“Marcus,” Marianne said grimly, “this is not our way.”

Marcus pointed at Kat. “It’s *her* way.”

The kettle still screamed, so Marianne pulled it from the flame, but the silence that followed was too loud, and Kat had no choice but to say, “Uh . . . which way is that?”

“I’ve observed many things in the past few years, miss.” Marcus looked her in the eye. “It is not my place to talk, but I do see. I see everything. And after what I’ve seen, I know that you may be the only person who can help. And so, miss, I would like to hire you. For a job.”

Kat could have sworn she’d misunderstood. “A *job* job?”

“Yes. There is something that I would like for you to steal.”

Marianne brought a handkerchief to her mouth but didn't protest.

“Okay, Marcus.” Kat took a seat at the table. “I think you'd probably better start at the beginning.”

Never before had Kat thought about whether or not Marcus had a family. She hadn't wondered where he went when he wasn't at Hale's beck and call. But there she was in his kitchen, sitting across from his sister, listening as he said, “Our parents were in service to the late Mr. Hale the Second. Marianne and I were born into this proud tradition, and when our time came, we were honored to follow in our parents' footsteps.”

“The family business,” Kat added, half under her breath.

Marcus nodded. “Exactly. Our family has worked for the Hales for four generations.”

He sat up a little straighter when he said it, and Kat knew that, in his world, that was a thing of great esteem.

“When she was very young, Marianne was asked to care for the new wife of Mr. Hale the Third—a young American woman who had come from . . . shall we say . . . humble beginnings. But who was also very, very kind.”

“Hazel,” Kat filled in.

Marcus nodded.

“When the new Mrs. Hale came to us . . . well . . . I imagine our world must have seemed incredibly strange to her. The ladies still dressed for dinner in those days. Her new husband played polo with a cousin of the king. And there she was, half a world away from anything she'd ever known, with nothing but a husband who was constantly working.”

Marcus took a deep breath. “Well, that's not exactly true.

She had a husband”—he cut his eyes at his sister—“and a maid.”

Soon Marianne was reaching for her handkerchief again and dabbing at tears.

“My sister wasn’t much younger than Mrs. Hale. There they were, both living apart from their families for the first time. And so Marianne wasn’t just a ladies’ maid. She was also Mrs. Hale’s only friend.”

“She was so alone.” Marianne’s voice cracked. “So, so alone in that big house. She had everything. But she had no one.”

“My sister worked for Mrs. Hale for sixty years,” Marcus said.

“Sixty-four,” Marianne corrected. “I was in service to a fine woman for sixty-four years.” She righted herself, standing. “And I know what you think, brother, but I will not sit here and hear her good name slandered.”

“So then don’t sit. Don’t listen,” Marcus said. “But that won’t change what happened.”

“What did happen, Marcus?” Kat asked.

“Mrs. Hale always told my sister that she would provide for her—that she would never have to worry about caring for herself because Marianne would be included in her will.”

“Aren’t they reading the will right now?” Kat asked.

Marcus gave a solemn nod. “Exactly. Yesterday, we received word that there would be no reason for Marianne to attend the reading—that only those who were *mentioned* in the will were invited.”

“Don’t be silly, Marcus,” Marianne said, summoning her pride. “Who was I to think I’d be included? I’m a ladies’ maid. No more. No less.”

“Hazel was your best friend, Marianne, and if—”

“It was *Mrs. Hale’s* fortune,” the maid said, special emphasis on the words as if her brother had grown too comfortable and needed to be reminded of his place. “And Mrs. Hale could do with it what she wanted.”

“*This* is what she wanted?” Marcus snapped. “For her oldest friend to be left with nothing? I don’t believe it. I do not.”

“Marcus,” Kat said, her voice low. “Marcus, are you saying . . .”

“These aren’t Mrs. Hale’s wishes, I’m sure of it. Her family is gathered at the big house today to hear *a* will, miss. But I do not believe that it is *her* will.”

“So you think there’s . . . what? Another will out there someplace?”

“I do.” Marcus nodded. “And I’d like to hire you to find it.”