

Bad Boys

Don't Play

Hero

Linda Kage

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by

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Linda Kage

NICK

Chapter One

A sliver of light sliced across the black room as the door crept open. The gap grew, making a dull outline of lockers appear. Two figures slipped inside, and the door clicked shut, snapping back the black. Only the muffled flow of music from the gymnasium vibrated through the murky silence.

“Man, it’s dark in here,” one teen said, his voice echoing through the room.

“Yeah. You got a lighter or something?”

“Hey, I do.” The sound of rustling clothes scattered the dark. “Just a sec. I almost got—Ouch!”

A loud thump was followed by the echo of hollow metal.

“What was that?”

“I ran into something. Oww, my shin hurts like son of a gun.”

“Well quit moving before you run into something else and just get the lighter.”

“I’m trying. It’s stuck in my pocket.”

“You know, if you didn’t wear your jeans so tight, you wouldn’t have that problem.”

“Dude. Tiff Morgan says she likes them tight.”

“Yeah, well Tiff Morgan has worse taste in clothes than she does guys.”

It took a moment for the injured party to realize he'd just been burned. He muttered an insulted, "Hey," making the second boy chuckle.

"Geez, you're slow."

"Don't go talking trash on me, man. I know where you live."

The sniggering only grew. "Ewww. Now you really got me scared."

An inch of flame sprouted between them. Two youthful faces glowed, shadows jiggling across their bodies. The light flickered and swayed, dumping a yellow flush on the room.

The light holder scowled at his grinning friend before he glanced down. "It was this bench."

"Huh?" The other turned away, distracted. He looked across the row of lockers. They smelled of fresh paint. He raised a hand and touched one, but it was dry, smooth, and cold against his fingers.

He hadn't known what to expect when they'd decided to browse around the boy's locker room of Tri-Delta Educational Academy, a private school for only the elite of Seattle's youth. Maybe body odor, moldy showers, floors littered with trash... just like the locker room at his school. But there was none of that here. The smell of fresh paint hugged him, wrapped around him so tight he thought he might choke on the jealousy.

"I ran into this bench," his partner in crime explained. "It's bolted to the floor. Bet I'm gonna have a bruise." He hefted his foot onto the offending bench and tried to hike up his pant leg but couldn't budge the tight material above his calf muscle. He tugged harder, then yelped when rough denim scraped over the sore spot.

"Shh," the other hissed.

"Sorry," he whispered and gave up, pushing the pant leg back into place. Then he glanced around. "Nicky? Where'd you go?"

"I'm over here, moron."

Besides being best friends, the two were first cousins. They'd grown up on the same street, spent holidays together, and became no less than close brothers. Nicholas Farrow, Jr. and Vince Delotini did most things as one. So, when they'd been out carousing the streets and came across the private upper class academy in the midst of a dance, where a side door had been left unlocked, Vinny was prone to follow Nick, who wanted to see what the inside of a rich kid's school looked like.

"What're you doing," Vinny asked.

Nick still faced the closed lockers that smelled so fresh and new. After digging in his pocket a moment, he pulled out a butterfly knife and flipped it open.

Vinny edged closer. "Where'd you get that thing?" As metal flashed, he examined the knife with glittering, excited eyes.

Nick studied the row of shiny new lockers and shrugged. "I traded it off for my Swiss Army from some idiot in Chuck's gang. I just hope Chucky don't find out I swindled one of his boys."

"Aren't owning butterfly knives illegal?"

Nick shot his cousin a grin. "Probably."

The knife ascended on a locker.

Vinny nudged his chin toward the door. "Whose locker is that?"

"Who cares?" Nick jimmied the knife into a keyhole. "The boy's rich, whoever he is. So I don't like him."

The light flickered as Vinny bent down to rub on his sore shin some more. When the zippo went out, sweeping the room with black, he fumbled to relight.

"Hold it steady, will you," Nick said.

"Well, hurry up. I don't know how much fluid's left."

A few seconds of prying, and the lock slid free. Nick held his breath as he opened the door and peered inside. Vinny raised his lighter above their heads and moved closer so he could get a look too.

The inside wasn't as neat as the out. Candy bar wrappers, jock strap, and deodorant piled on the bottom

along with balled paper and a couple of textbooks. Clothes hung carelessly from the side walls on tiny hooks.

“Hey, a flash light.” Vinny fished it out and flipped it on. He shoved the lighter back into his pocket.

Nick took out a pair of pants and lifted them, holding them up by the waist. He wrinkled his nose and glanced toward Vinny, who snickered. “Thank goodness we don’t have to wear dumb uniforms to school.”

“Yeah,” Nick answered even as he lowered them to his waist. “But, what do you know. They’re just my size.” He grinned and wiggled his eyebrows.

Vinny frowned. “Nicky?” His voice quivered, uncertain and suspicious.

The music from the gym paused before a new track started.

“Shall we mingle?” Nick said.

“No.” Vinny held up both hands. “That idea’s just plain crazy, Nick. Nicky? No way.”

Nick shrugged out of his own hole-ridden jeans.

“They’ll find us out, I’m telling you,” Vinny said.

Fruitless pleading.

Nick shoved his foot into a blue polyester pant leg. He knew his cuz would follow suit. Vinny trailed him everywhere.

“Two slums like us,” Vinny tried again, “will stand out like a turd on a rose.”

“Not if we’re dressed like them,” Nick said. “Besides. It’ll be dark.” He pulled the pants over his hips and zipped them closed. “Man, these things itch.”

Vinny watched him button a white dress shirt, then pull on a sweater vest. “What about me,” he finally said, fidgeting as he sent a nervous glance to the locker room entrance.

Nick finished fitting his clip-on tie into place and turned to study Vinny’s clothes. “I’m sure there’s something here that’s just your size, sir,” he said, mimicking a British

accent as he scratched his chin and studied Vinny's shape. Then he raised a finger. "Let me check my stock."

Knife raised, he turned to the next locker.

They exited the room minutes later, dressed like twins in their Tri Delta dress-code uniforms. Nick stood taller, hovering barely over six feet, slim with wide shoulder blades like starched cardboard under his wool sweater vest. Shorter and flabby in the middle, Vinny owned chipmunk cheeks their grandma liked to grab and shake, making his second chin flap. He'd stopped by the sinks on his way out and slicked back his dark hair until it lay matted to his head and poked down around his ears.

Nick glanced over as they strolled down the quiet halls and lifted an eyebrow. "You look like a geek. You know that, right?"

"Hey, this is what rich people do to their hair," Vinny said and patted at it again with his fingers.

"It's what morons do to their hair." Nick licked his thumb and forefinger, then plucked up a chunk of Vinny's hair at the crown of his head and twisted it between his wet fingers until it stuck up straight. "What a dork." He barked out a short laugh.

Vinny peered at his reflection in the glass of a trophy case in the hall only to slap the piece back down. "Jerk."

Still grinning, Nick grabbed his arm. "Come on. Let's check out the action."

The music grew louder as Nick dragged Vinny closer to the gymnasium doors. A popular song played fast and furious.

Vinny jerked his elbow out of Nick's hand, but continued to follow him. "I have a bad feeling about this."

"Oh, please. You always have a bad feeling. Just tell me. Have you ever had a bad feeling that hasn't ended up perfectly fine?"

“How about that time you told me to jump out of the tree in Jimmy Tricket’s yard?”

Nick winced, but quickly covered it with a shrug. “So what? You mangled your ankle a little.”

“I ended up in the hospital.”

“Yeah. You got out of school, ate ice cream all day, and had nurses bending over you, letting you gawk down their shirts. Uh, huh. I really feel for you, buddy.”

“I had to sit out the rest of the basketball season.”

Nick peeked around a corner, then turned when he saw it was clear, and started up a new hall. He glanced back, checking on Vinny who reluctantly followed. “You suck at basketball,” he said. “You would’ve sat on the bench anyway. I just gave you an excuse not to look bad while you did it.”

Vinny frowned. “I don’t suck at basketball.”

Nick stopped; his cousin skidded to a halt beside him.

“Look,” Nick said, staring at a set of double doors. The music was intense now. “There they are.”

They each took a small rectangle window and peered inside. Colored spotlights flared and flashed. A large disco ball spun overhead. Three tables of refreshments lined the side bleachers. Boys dressed like them in starchy, scratchy uniforms and girls in matching plaid skirts twirled across the dark gymnasium.

“Wow, it’s a co-ed school,” Vinny said as a girl stopped and bent down to adjust her shoes.

Rolling his eyes, Nick snorted. “What’d you think, Bozo, if they’re having a school dance? That boys would be dancing with boys?”

Vinny tugged at his collar and watched Nick reach for the door handle. “I gotta take a whiz,” he said before Nick could enter.

Nick sighed. “You always gotta take a whiz when you’re nervous.”

“I’m not nervous.”

“Whatever. I’m going in.”

Vinny's eyes bugged. "Without me?"

Nick paused, glanced over. Vinny's tie was askew and little flyaway hairs lifted around his ears.

"I'll wait for you by the food. OK?"

"You sure?"

"Yeah, now get out of here. Go find the john."

Nick watched Vinny scamper down the hall. Then he faced the entrance and took a deep breath. Grabbing the handle, he opened the door.

Chapter Two

Heat greeted Nick as he slipped inside the gymnasium. The motion of bodies dancing stirred the temperature, making the room hot and sticky. His borrowed clothes clung to his skin and hung on fearfully.

Some people glanced over as he let in light and cool air. The breeze rushed in behind him, nudging him along and fluttering his hair. He pulled the door shut, and the staring few turned away, disinterested.

Blood zipped to his head, which made his neck swell and the top button of his shirt press tight against his windpipe. But he refused to tug at the collar. Instead, he tucked a thumb in his pants pocket and strolled toward the refreshment table.

The first rule to lying was to believe the act yourself. If Nick was going to believe he was one of these people, he couldn't be worried about a stupid old collar. Yet with each step he took, the cloth seemed to grow tighter around his throat.

He stationed himself at the end of the refreshment table, crossed his arms over his chest, and waited for Vinny to hurry his rear up. A slow song played around him. Couples edged in closer and swayed. A girl rested her head on one boy's shoulder, and he brought his arms all the way around her back while she did the same to his neck. Others moved rigidly with a foot of room between them and stared over their partner's shoulder. One guy slid his hands down to the fullest part of the girl's skirt until a parent or teacher or whatever the dude was came over and blared a flashlight

at them. They jumped apart and the hand moved back up to a respectable position.

Nick grinned. This wasn't so different from his school after all. Adults were lecturing a pair of tipsy-looking guys and rushing them outside. Lone girls sat up in the bleachers with their arms wrapped around their upraised knees. A growing group of gossipers lingered at the edge of the floor laughing. His shoulders eased as he took in the sights. It wasn't so different at all.

Uncrossing his arms, he surveyed the food. Taking his pick of a tortilla chip, he dunked it in some nacho cheese sauce and brought it to his mouth. It was warm and spicy. Cheese dribbled down his chin. He glanced around, but no one took notice. Licking off as much as he could, Nick grabbed a napkin and wiped the rest clean.

A large crystal punch bowl sat in the center of the next table. Surrounding it were glass cups with handles. Nick picked one up by the handle and blinked at it. He tapped on the glass, thinking of the plastic cups set out at his own school dances.

OK, so maybe the two schools *did* have their differences.

He reached for the punch ladle but his hand collided with another. He snapped his fingers back and jerked his head up. A girl standing two feet away did the exact same thing, cradling her hand to her chest like it'd been bitten.

They spoke in unison.

"I'm sorry," she gasped.

"Go ahead," he said.

They smiled in unison.

She was tall, almost as tall as him, with a smooth expanse of blond hair, so yellow he'd seen pictures of ripe wheat the same hue. Even in the dark, her perfect locks glowed golden. She'd pulled the strands back from her heart-shaped face with a tortoise shell headband. Her cheekbones were high and her eyes large and dark. Her chest didn't fill out the top of her blouse like some of the other girls around, but her long slender legs made up for it.

Nick tried to swallow, but a lump got caught somewhere around the constricting collar area. “Go ahead,” he repeated and motioned toward the punch ladle.

“Oh.” She dropped her hands to her sides, then glanced at the punch to which he’d been motioning. “Thank you.”

He watched her ladle juice until her glass was three-fourths full. Then she offered the dipper to him. His hand grazed over her cold fingers when he accepted. He thanked her, and she stood by him while he filled his cup to the brim.

Nick took a drink; the carbonated liquid tickled his tongue. He sighed, refreshed. “Good stuff.”

She nodded, and they stood side by side, sleeves brushing as they watched the dancers. Nick fiddled with his cup, tapping on the glass with his thumbnail. He could smell her, like some fruit, peaches maybe.

He turned, mouth open and ready to speak when she said, “I don’t think I have any classes with you.”

“Oh, well, I...” He bit the inside of his cheek. “I’m new here.”

Her eyes lit. “Really? So am I.”

His eyebrows lifted. “Really?”

She nodded. “Where are you from?”

“Me? Oh, not too far away. My dad, uh, he transferred here.” She listened a little too intently, so he changed the subject. “What about you?”

“I’m from Gold Beach.”

“Gold Beach?” He wrinkled his nose. “Where’s that?”

“Oregon. It’s south of Portland. But I was born here in Seattle.”

Nick nodded. “Why’d you move back?” There was no way he’d come back if he ever had the chance to blow this town. He wanted to go somewhere warm and sunny... someplace where a single person didn’t own his entire family.

“I moved to Gold Beach with my mom when I was five and my parents divorced.” She looked down at her sandals.

"But they made some kind of custody agreement years ago; I'd stay with her through grade school and him through high school. So, I... I had to come back to live with my father." She sounded forlorn.

Nick blinked. "You don't want to live with him?"

She shrugged, shuffled her shoes. "I dunno," she mumbled. "I don't know him very well. I miss my mom."

"I'm sorry," Nick said, wishing he hadn't brought up such a sore topic. If only he would've kept lying about himself and not asked about her life. But no, he had to ruin it and make her remember what was obviously an awful situation.

She lifted her face. "You're sorry? What for?"

"Uh." He managed a small laugh, scratched his ear. "I don't know. I guess I'm sorry I brought it up. I didn't mean to make you homesick"

"No, it's fine." She said and touched his arm. "I don't mind."

He waited for her to continue. When she didn't, he shifted, not sure what to say. A new song started, just as slow as the previous. He turned back to her, rubbed his palms against the hips of his pants.

Again, they spoke in unison.

"Do you want to dance?" he said just as she blurted out, "I'm sorry."

He frowned. "Now, what're *you* sorry about?"

The girl lowered her face and stared at the floor. Nick glanced around. She was the prettiest girl in the room, but no one approached or talked to her. He didn't understand why. Where he came from, she'd have friends galore and boys chasing her daily. It didn't seem right she appeared to be an oddball here.

He held out his hand. "Come on," he said. "Let's dance."

Startled eyes raised; she bobbed her head. "OK."

She took his hand. Her fingers were slender and still freezing, but he felt a heat, a quick jolt of electricity at her touch. It shot through his chest and down to the bottom of his stomach where it sizzled and bubbled.

On the dance floor, he stopped and faced her, his hands cupping her waist. She held his neck; the ends of his hair curled over her fingers. Nick stopped breathing and watched her stare at the floor while they danced. When she looked up, she was almost eye level with him.

Lordy, but didn't she feel good. He wanted to run his hands around her back, maybe down her backside, to get a better sense of her. He wanted to dip his head in close, smell that fruit on her again. It was so odd. She was one of them but didn't act how he thought they would act. She didn't come off like a rich snob, like she was too good for him.

Then again, she thought he was an equal.

Make it last, Nick. When will you ever hold a classy girl like this in your arms again? Tell her she's a good dancer. Tell her how pretty she looks. He bent his head closer to her ear and got a whiff of peaches, or maybe they were apples.

I'm sorry," she said again, startling him.

He lifted his face. "About what?"

"I shouldn't have made you uncomfortable. I shouldn't have told you about the situation with my mom and dad."

He tilted his head. "Huh?"

"I feel like such a jerk. Every time someone starts talking to me, and I'm about to make a friend, I tell them how much I miss home. Suddenly, they think I'm rude because I don't want to live here. But I don't mean to scare them off. I just... I'm really sorry."

"Don't apologize for that." His voice was stern enough to make her stop and glance at him, a surprised expression plastered to her face. "You have all the right in the world to miss your mom. Don't let anyone make you feel bad about it."

She let out a loud breath. "I... I've never thought about it that way." Moving in closer to look over his shoulder, she whispered, "Thank you."

"No problem," he said and cleared his throat. Her silky hair touched his cheek. He squeezed his eyes shut. The heat

from her, the smell from her, the feel of her went straight to his head. He glanced over her shoulder for any adults, and wanted so badly to lower his hands just a few inches more. He turned them so her back faced the wall and lowered his head until his breath fell on her neck. But instead of moving down, his finger went up along her spine. Her waist was so small he could probably wrap both hands around it and touch fingers.

His mind whirled. *Make it last, Nick. She's all depressed about her mom. Give her something to remember you by. Besides, she'll never see you again.*

He moved his head up, rubbed his nose against her hair, smelling her shampoo. "I don't even know your name."

She grabbed his arm, her fingers digging deep into his bicep. "I'm going to be sick."

"What?" He frowned, stepped back, and looked at her face. She slapped her hand over her mouth and gaped at him with horrified eyes.

"I'm mowing moo frow up," her muffled voice came from behind her fingers.

He blinked. "*Now?!*"

She nodded.

Thinking quick, he grabbed her elbow and rushed her from the gym. The bright lights of the hall made him blink as he looked around for the bathrooms or a trashcan. She moaned and grabbed her stomach.

"Outside," he said and dragged her to the double doors that led out the backside of the school.

They barely made it off the concrete steps before she dropped--her knees colliding to the sidewalk--and heaved over a row of tulips. Nick stood by but had to turn away, listening to gagging and retching. He wanted to give her privacy, yet stuck around in case she needed something.

The seconds it took for her to empty her stomach seemed longer than the few minutes he'd been in the gym. As he listened, trying not to get sick himself, guilt flashed through him. Here he was, trying to grope her, and she'd been growing sick to her stomach.

Smooth move, X-lax.

After a quick dash back inside, he returned with a glass of cold water.

She looked worn out, but color had returned to her cheeks, so he knelt by her and handed her the water. "Better yet?"

She fell back onto her haunches and sat on the ground beside him, wagging her head up and down. "Yes, thank you." She took the water and gulped every drop.

Street lamps sprayed down on them and made tears at the corner of her eyes glisten. Spit and chunks of something he didn't want to think about drooled across her chin.

"I don't have a tissue or anything," he said. But he searched his pockets and felt a hard pebbled object wrapped in plastic.

"That's OK," she said. "I do." She pulled a Kleenex from her own pocket and dabbed at her mouth while Nick held the item from his pocket up to the light.

"I've got a 'Butterworth's Original' here." He handed it to her. "Might get the bad taste out of your mouth."

She took it. "I love these things."

"Hmm." He'd have to thank whoever he'd borrowed the clothes from for donating his candy to the cause.

Standing, he held his hand down to her and helped her to her feet. "Do you want to go back inside or stay out here a few minutes longer for some fresh air?"

She put a hand over her stomach. "Fresh air," she said. "I still have butterflies."

He jerked a leery step away. "You're not going to throw up again, are you?"

"No, no." She shook her head. "But I'd like to sit down."

"OK, sure." He led her to a wooden bench about twenty feet away under a hulking oak tree and gently sat her down.

He settled himself beside her and curled his hands in his lap. She looked cold with her elbows pressed firmly against her sides and her shoulders bent over as she

shivered. Nick felt a little hot himself, but he wished he had a jacket to offer. Heck, he wished a lot more than that. She wasn't like any person he'd ever met.

Whenever he pumped gas for a well-to-doer at Goodie's Station where he worked, they called him 'you, boy' at best and never thanked him for filling up their Bentleys or apologized for spraying mud all over him as they pulled away.

And they never smelled like fruit.

He wondered if she'd still treat him the same if he weren't in this outfit... if she knew what he was.

"I'm sorry," she said, taking his hand to squeeze his fingers, and making his heart stutter. "I probably shouldn't have danced. I've been nervous all day, worried about tonight and the whole school and—"

"Stop. Just—" He shook his head and laughed. "Stop apologizing, OK. You have nothing to be sorry for. You haven't done anything wrong."

"But I've ruined everything. First my mother and now throwing up all over the place."

"Hey," he said lightly and squeezed her hand. "Don't worry about it. If it'll make you feel any better, I'll barf too. Heck, I just might anyway after seeing what you tossed up."

She laughed. "Thank you." But the laughter stopped all too soon, and something sad and lonely entered her eyes. "Thanks for everything. You really don't have to stay out here with me if you don't want to. You can go back and enjoy the rest of the dance."

"Nah." Nick glanced up at the school. He hadn't known what he'd been looking for when he'd snuck inside that dance. But sitting here, holding her hand, he knew he'd found it. He shrugged. "Besides, I was just trying to think up a way to get you outside alone when you said you had to puke."

For a moment she stared blankly. Then she grinned and rolled her eyes. "I don't think you're supposed to let me in on your game plan."

He winked at her, wished he could see the color surrounding her pupils. "At least you can't say you were tricked when I have my wicked way with you."

Her hands had warmed in his. He rubbed his thumb over her smooth knuckles.

"I don't even know your name," she whispered.

"It's Nick."

Her smile was soft. "I'm Kiernan."

"Kiernan." He said the name on a sigh as if it were part of his regular breathing. It was unusual and original, just like her. "You look like a Kiernan."

She laughed. "And just what does a Kiernan look like?"

"Easy. I'm looking at one." When she rolled her eyes again, he continued. "They're very beautiful, you know. With skin like a china doll," he touched her cheek with the back of his hand and then slid his fingers over her hair, "and hair like silk I could never afford. Soft, small hands. And lips so kissable you think you need them more than you do your next breath. You want them so bad, you'd pay money for a taste."

She shook her head. "You're not like anyone I've ever met."

"Well you're not like anyone *I've* ever met," he countered.

"I mean, the rest of the boys at this school act like they're so wonderful. They're all full of themselves like they're better than the rest of the world."

"So, why aren't you like that too," he asked.

"Oh, my mom's not rich. She got money from the divorce and all, but it wasn't anything like what my father has. When I moved in with him last month, he insisted I go to a private academy. He said no child of his was attending a public school, when that's all I've ever known." She paused and looked up at Nick. "Have you ever been to a public school before?"

"Sure, I..." he trailed off, almost forgetting what he was supposed to be. "My dad, uh, when he was transferred, his business just recommended this school."

She nodded. "So, this whole rich kid mentality is new to you too?"

"Well, yeah, I guess." He bit the inside of his cheek and cracked his knuckles. He looked off across the street, thinking maybe he should tell her the truth.

She'd understand. He hoped.

"What grade are you in?"

"I'm a junior," he answered, glad he didn't have to lie about that at least.

"Oh." Her shoulders deflated a little.

He frowned. "Why? What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing. I'm... well, I'm only a freshman. There's probably not a lot of classes freshmen and juniors have together. I doubt we'll ever see much of each other in the halls." She looked up at him, sadness consuming her eyes.

He winced, feeling awful because after tonight, they'd never see each other again anyway. But instead of confessing, he continued the lie. "I'm not a very good student," he said. "Maybe I could flunk a few classes, and we'd end up in the same grade."

She laughed. "That's sweet."

"Oh, yeah?" He scooted closer until she had to tilt her head up to look at him. "How sweet?"

"Well... it's the sweetest thing I've heard all day." She grinned, fluttering her lashes.

His voice grew husky. "Just all day?"

"Maybe all week." The breath rushed out of her lungs, and butterscotch air caressed his cheek. She swayed toward him.

"Kiernan," he whispered and closed his eyes as his head descended.

But the kiss never came. The back door of the gym sprang opened; the two on the bench jerked apart and lurched to their feet. An adult came out and saw them. He paused and called back inside.

“Hey, out here!”

Nick would’ve run then but another adult emerged from the school. He hauled Vinny by the back of his collar.

“Nicky!” Vinny sobbed. “I’m so sorry. I tried to run.”

Then a third man exited. Seeing him, Nick sucked in a startled breath.

“Daddy?” Kiernan said when she saw the last arrival.

Nick’s mouth fell open. He spun to her, his breath choppy and rapid. “What? *Hilton Childler* is your father?”

She looked at Nick and bit her lip. “Yes. Why?”

He swiped a hand through his hair. “Not good.”

Chapter Three

Nick was about to run, ditching Vinny—had even stumbled a few steps back—when the first adult grabbed him.

“Let me go!” He panicked and struggled, flailing his arms and legs to no avail. Jabbing an elbow in the man’s chin, he stomped on the guy’s instep but still couldn’t break free.

“Get that boy under control,” boomed the voice of Hilton Childler, making Nick freeze.

Breathing heavily, he straightened his back and faced the huge, menacing man. Childler had a thick chest and thin black hair with wings of white flaring out behind his ears. He wore a dark three-piece suit, and the gold from his pinky ring winked up at Nick, mocking him.

“Just who do you think you are, boy, dragging my daughter outside alone?”

“Daddy, it’s my fault—” Kiernan started.

But her father hushed her by raising a hand. “I’ll deal with *you* when we get home.”

She gasped so softly only Nick could hear.

“Answer me,” Childler said to Nick.

“I... we were dancing when she got sick, so I took her out—”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

Scowling, Nick smarted back, “You *asked* what we were doing out here.”

Anger built in Childler’s face, making his cheeks darken and his jaw bulge. Suddenly Nick knew what his dad always meant when he’d called Hilton Childler an intimidating figure.

He pointed a finger at Nick, making him swallow. “Just who do you think you are, boy?”

Grinding his teeth, Nick said nothing.

“Who is he?” Childler asked the adult holding Nick.

“I don’t know, sir. He must’ve—”

“What kind of school are you running here, Gambly?” Childler roared, not letting the adult answer his questions either. “When I come to pick my daughter up from a dance, I expect her to be *in* the dance, not outside alone with some hoodlum. Now, tell me who he is at once.”

“H-he doesn’t attend Tri-Delta, sir. I suspect he’s here with the other boy that snuck in. The other claimed he came with his cousin. We were just looking for the second boy when we found these two outside.”

Nick glanced toward Vinny. He must’ve returned to the locker rooms and chickened out because he was dressed back in his street clothes, like he’d been about to abandon Nick at the dance.

“Nicky, I’m sorry,” he said, shaking enough to make a bead of sweat drip from his hairline. “They knew I couldn’t be here alone. They—”

“Shut up.” Childler roared, making Vinny whimper himself quiet. Turning back to Nick, Kiernan’s father glowered. “Did you sneak in here tonight with him?”

Nick quivered inside, but was glad his voice sounded sturdy enough as he lifted his chin. “Yes.”

Next to him, Kiernan gasped. He glanced over in time to see her clutch her stomach and stare at him like she’d been stolen from.

Shame consuming him, he lowered his head.

“Where’d you get those clothes?” Childler demanded.

Nick shrugged, still staring at the ground. “From the locker room.”

“You stole them?”

Nick lifted his face to frown. “We were just *borrowing* them. We weren’t going to keep them. What would we want with rich boy clothes?”

"Then why are you wearing them?"

Nick rolled his eyes. Was the guy really this slow? "To get into the dance." Why else?

Hilton Childler stepped forward and shook a finger at Nick's nose. "To get into the dance and man-handle my daughter—"

"I told you, she got sick!" Nick jabbed a finger toward the tulips. "You want proof? She threw up right over there."

"Don't ever interrupt me, boy!"

Kiernan began to cry.

Nick heard her sniff and saw her shoulders tremble. He had to look away. "Look," he said on a surrendering sigh. "Me and my buddy didn't do anything wrong. We were just curious, is all. Sure, we snuck in and took some clothes. But we were going to give them back. We weren't going to do anything. We aren't looking for trouble."

"Well, you found trouble." Childler looked between Vinny and him, and then pointed to Nick. "And you doubly for taking my daughter outside."

"Nothing happened," he muttered, raising his voice. "Ask her. Nothing happened."

"Leave her out of this." Childler stopped as if to pull himself back under control and then said, "You'll pay for this, boy. What's your name?" He grabbed Nick's lowered chin and forced it up. "Well?"

Nick snapped his face away, remaining mute.

"Kiernan," Childler boomed; her body jerked taunt, her eyes wide and scared. "What's this kid's name?"

She shook her head. "I... I don't know. Nick. All he said was Nick."

"You there," Childler pointed toward Vinny. "What's his name?"

"Nicky," Vinny wailed. "Nick Farrow."

"Vinny!" Nick kicked his cousin in the shins. "Shut up."

"That's enough out of you," the adult holding Nick, smacked him on the back of the head.

Childler snorted out a laugh. "Nick Farrow, huh?" He held his stomach and slowly became serious. When his

smile, a wicked leer really, settled on Nick, Nick's insides contracted. Childler knew that name. No matter how much Nick hoped he wouldn't, of course, Childler would recognize his name. He closed his eyes.

"You must be Nicholas Farrow, *junior*." Childler rubbed his hands with an evil kind of glee. "Bob," he barked.

The man holding Vinny stepped forward. "Yes, sir?"

"Fetch Nick sr. down here. Now."

The man shoved Vinny down on the bench and hurried away with another, "yes, sir."

"No!" Nick struggled against his captor. "I snuck in. I made the mistake, and I'll pay for the crime. Please. I'll do whatever you want. Just don't call my dad."

"Aww. Such a sweet, desperate plea." Childler said sympathetically before he burst out laughing. "But pointless."

"My dad didn't do anything wrong," Nick tried one last time.

Childler's chuckle stopped with a glare. "Listen here, boy. That daddy of yours has been a thorn in my side ever since he tried to start up a union in my factory."

"Leave him out of this," Nick said, his nostrils flaring.

"What?" Childler lifted his brows. "Don't you want Daddy to know what a bad little boy you've been?"

"I don't want him punished for something I did."

"Oh, but isn't that what father's do? Take the wrap for their children?"

Nick felt his chin quiver. "What're you going to do?"

"I guess you'll just have to wait and find out."

"My father is not involved with this," Nick repeated. "I'm not going to let him get into trouble for something I did."

Childler blinked and touched his own chest. "Are you giving *me* orders now? Wearing Tri-Delta clothes must really make you feel high and mighty."

Nick clamped his jaw shut. He looked at his feet.

"That's better," Childler said, satisfied. He turned away and then ignored Nick and even Kiernan until Nick's dad showed up.

The group stood there for what felt like forever. Kiernan stopped crying a little, but she sat on the bench with her arms locked around her chest. Every once in a while, she'd let out a little hiccup or shiver as she stared at the ground. Nick glanced at her a few times to see how she was holding up. But he felt so guilty every time he looked, he had to turn away again. So, he mainly just focused his attention on the ground and prayed "Bob" couldn't find his dad.

At one point, when Childler glared in his direction, he snapped at Gambly, still keeping guard of Nick, to take Nick inside and change him back into his own clothes. Nick hated how Gambly never let up on his neck. The principal kept a meaty palm fastened around the back of his throat like a leash. Nick glared as much as possible, but it didn't seem to help anything. He never gained his freedom.

Vinny was being a good boy and didn't move a muscle as he sat on the bench, tucking his hands under his thighs. He looked like a scared rabbit, which made Nick roll his eyes. His cousin never could handle the getting-caught part.

Kiernan's father paced the sidewalk, his shoes making a squishing sound that drove Nick nuts. He was actually relieved when Childler said. "Ah, here he is. Nicholas, we've been waiting."

Nick's head flew up; he watched his dad walk up the sidewalk behind "Bob."

"Mr. Childler," his dad said. "What's going on?" Then he spotted Nick. "Nicky? What in the world are *you* doing here?"

"Dad." Nick shrugged out of the principal's hold and hurried to his father.

"He's breaking into my daughter's school, trying to debauch her, is what's he's doing," Childler said. "I can only assume you set him up to do this."

"What!?" father and son spat together.

“That’s a lie,” Nick growled. “I didn’t even know she was your kid.”

“He’s very believable, Nicholas,” Childler murmured, narrowing his eyes. “Did you teach your boy to lie as well as you do?”

“I’d like an explanation to this,” Nick’s dad turned to him. “Nicky?”

“Me and Vinny were sneaking into their school dance, when—”

“Wait. You were *what?*”

“Yeah, we knew it was wrong. But we weren’t trying to cause any trouble. Honest, Dad. We were just curious is all. Then Vinny had to go to the bathroom. I said I’d wait for him by the food, which is where I met her.” He tipped his head in Kiernan’s direction, and Nick sr. glanced over at her. She shrank further down on the bench seat.

“We started to dance,” Nick continued. “But she got sick, so I took her outside.” He pointed toward the tulips again. “And that’s when *he* barged outside and found us.”

Kiernan started to hyperventilate. Nick swallowed as his father shook his head.

“You really got yourself in deep this time, didn’t you, Nicky?” He took Nick’s arm. “Thank you for calling me, Mr. Childler. I assure you, he’ll be properly punished.”

“Oh, I’m not through with you yet, Farrow.” Childler took a step in their direction. “This is the last straw. You’ve been vandalizing my factory long enough, trying to put it out of business ever since you realized you couldn’t get your little union started. Well, I’ve had enough. This is the final straw. With the evidence proving you started the fire in the break room, I should’ve fired you last week.”

Nick’s dad let out a long, tired sigh. “Mr. Childler,” he entreated. “Please. You know I didn’t start that fire.”

Nick hated the way his father looked so humbled as he faced his boss. He hated the way Childler looked at his dad like he was the scum of the earth. It wasn’t fair; the anger boiled inside him.

"I've worked for your company for twenty years," Nick sr. said. "You know I'd never vandalize any piece of that place. I'm not sure who started the fire in the break room, and I don't know who broke out the windows last month, but it makes me just as sick as it does you. You may own the factory, but it's my life. I know you know that. You can't honestly believe I'd have anything to do with my son being here tonight either. Sir, I wasn't even aware you *had* a daughter."

Nick thought that would be the end of it. His dad was a great leader and a great spokesperson. That's why he was now the senior foreman of the night shift at Childler Steel.

But Childler surprised him when he said, "I don't believe you. You're fired."

"No!" The blood roared through Nick's ears, and his vision blurred. He didn't realize he'd been the one to cry out until he charged Childler.

His father grabbed his arm, stopping him. "Nick. Cool it."

"No." He resisted his father's controlling hand and glared at Childler. "You can't do this! I didn't even know who she was. I swear, I didn't—"

"Nicky," his father's calming voice spoke again, soft this time. It made Nick clench his teeth. "Calm down, son. Don't say something you'll regret—"

"Regret!?"

He already regretted plenty. He'd snuck into that stupid dance, put on those ugly clothes, and then asked the wrong girl to dance. "But it's not fair, Dad! He's trying to fire you because of me. For something I didn't even do."

"Don't worry about that now," Nick sr. said. "Let's just get home. Vinny," he called. Nick's cousin popped to his feet and hurried forward. "Let's go home."

But Nick wasn't so willing. "No," he said and turned Childler. "This isn't right. How could you do this to my dad? He's done nothing but slave his life away for you."

Childler cocked a sardonic eyebrow that taunted, *Na, na, na. I won; you lost.*

Nick pointed a threatening finger at the old jerk. "You'll regret this. Your company won't run right without my dad."

Kiernan pushed to her feet. "Daddy," she said, tugging on his sleeve. "I don't think he meant any harm by asking me to dance. It was my fault, really. I said that I wanted to—"

"Shut up," Childler muttered from between clenched teeth. "I said I'd deal with you when we got home."

The fear Nick saw flash across her cheeks decided his next action. This time, when he struggled away from his dad, there was nothing Nick senior could do to hold him back. He tore free and raced to Kiernan. Grasping her hand and making her jump, he looked into her eyes. An unshed tear wobbled at the edge of her lashes as she gaped back. But she seemed to steady herself under his concerned gaze and let out a shaky breath.

Nick squeezed her fingers and turned to Hilton Childler, pulling Kiernan safely to his side. "Are you really firing my dad because of what I did tonight?"

Childler gave a brief nod, but his eyes seemed glued to where Nick's hand was fastened to Kiernan's. "Technically, it's because he's the only suspect we have on the fire. But this is the last straw. After tonight, I simply can't allow him to work for me any longer."

Nick glanced at his dad and then toward Kiernan. He bit his lip before facing Childler again. "In that case... If you're going to punish *him* for something I did, I think I should at least get to do it."

He smiled at Kiernan. She frowned the split second before he yanked her against him and sealed his mouth firmly over hers. She could only let out a short gasp of surprise before he muffled the sound.

It was a short kiss. Nick could taste butterscotch and smell fruit. She had soft lips he would've liked to linger over

longer, but at the bellow of rage from Childler, Nick's dad yanked him away by his arm.

"Farrow!" Childler screamed after them as Nick's dad and Vinny hustled him out of there. "You keep your son away from my daughter. I mean it. If I ever catch him near her again, I'll have the cops after him so fast he won't know what hit him."

As Childler raged on, Nick managed to glance over his dad's shoulder, catching sight of Kiernan. She touched her slightly parted lips with her fingers as she stared after him with wide eyes.

Since both his dad and cousin held his arms restrained, he couldn't wave goodbye, so he settled for winking at her.

Linda Kage

KIERNAN

Chapter Four

Kiernan couldn't stop touching her lips. It was a day after the fact, and she swore she could still feel Nick Farrow's mouth on hers.

As first kisses went, this one was nothing like what she'd always dreamed her debut smooch would be.

Sure, before her father showed up, Nick had been perfect.

He was cute with dark hair and darker eyes. And his smile. Oh, that smile. Part ornery, part innocent and totally sweet, his grin had hooked her right off. She loved that he was taller than her. So many boys were shorter, making her feel huge and gangly. But when Nick gazed down at her, she felt cute and girly. He was so nice too, putting her instantly at ease. She thought no one could be a better candidate to give her a first kiss.

She touched her lips again. They tingled. As crazy as the circumstances had been, Nick Farrow's kiss was divine. He hadn't had a lot of time to plant a wet one, but the quick press of his lips, the way he swooped in to touch her cheek, and then that wink afterward; she knew she'd never forget the experience.

Too bad he lied to her, kissed her only to get back at her father, and she never wanted to see him again.

She felt cheated. She had really liked Nick. But it had all been an act.

Slumped in a chair outside Hilton Childer's office, she folded her arms over her chest and commanded herself to stop thinking about him and his kisses and her embarrassing new parent.

After Nick's dad and friend dragged him away, Kiernan's father grabbed her arm and ushered her home in stony silence. He hadn't spoken to her once. This morning he'd woken her early and told her to get dressed. He had to go into work and speak to the arson investigator working on the case involving the fire at his plant. And she had to come with him.

"I don't trust you home alone; that boy could show up at any moment to harass you."

She'd tried to tell him that was unlikely. But, dad or not, she barely knew Hilton Childler and didn't have the guts to give her point of view. Besides, it was utterly embarrassing to talk about boys with *him*.

So, like the obedient daughter she was, she accompanied him to work, where he pointed her to a chair and then went into his office with Mr. Riggs, the investigator.

She wiggled in the cushioned seat, wishing she'd had time for breakfast before he'd hustled her out the door. Her stomach growled; she pressed her hand to the rumbling and tried to remember if she'd seen a vending machine anywhere in the halls.

Childler Steel was an enormous building. There had to be food or beverages somewhere. Watching the door to her dad's office, she eased to her feet, only to freeze when the leather cushion under her squeaked and groaned. Her rump a foot off the chair, she gaped at the office door, expecting it to fly open any second, and her father to come charging out.

"I thought I told you to sit there and don't move," he'd roar.

She swallowed.

The door remained shut.

Listening to the muffled murmur of voices on the other side of the thin wall, Kiernan rose fully and backed gingerly toward the opened exit. When she reached the doorway, she slipped out and disappeared around the corner.

The hall was deathly quiet. With the plant closed for the weekend, only a few emergency lights rained down on the tiled floor, showing just enough to make the place look creepy and ominous with shadows looming all around. Kiernan hovered next to the entrance of her father's outer office, debating whether she should venture down the eerie passageway in search of a water fountain, when she glanced behind her down the other end of the hall and spotted the glow of a pop machine beaming from the dark.

Her shoulders slumped with relief. Grinning, she skipped forward. But her footfalls echoed around her with her first cheerful step. She winced and slowed her stride. The quiet pitter-pat that followed didn't sound so booming, so she continued with the careful tip-toes.

As she neared the promise of a refreshing drink, Kiernan sniffed out the stale remnants of smoke. Figuring the infamous break room that had been torched was close, she passed the vending machine until she reached an intersection in the hall and glanced both ways until she caught sight of the yellow police tape crisscrossing its way over an open door.

Curiosity urging her on, she turned right and approached. A single soot-coated window inside provided her with enough light to see into the dim interior. Expecting to find nothing but charred-black remains, Kiernan frowned in disappointment when all she spotted was a couple of burnt patches on the tiled floor in front of an oven and refrigerator. The stovetop held most of the damage with two burners destroyed and a black stream running up the wall behind it. A grey smudge of smoke had been left on the ceiling directly above. But nothing looked as bad as her father had made it sound last night when he'd fired Nick's dad.

Rolling her eyes, she turned away and retraced her steps to the pop machine. She'd just dug enough quarters and dimes from the bottom of her purse when her cell phone rang.

She yelped, losing her grip on the money, not expecting to hear Carrie Underwood start chattering about “him” cheating.

Kiernan wasn’t used to having a cell phone. But her mom had bought it for her the weekend before she left for Seattle. They talked on it together at least once a day.

Still... not a lot a people knew her number beside her mom and a few close friends.

Popping back around the corner so the ring wouldn’t echo back to her father’s office when she slipped the phone from her purse, Kiernan was pleased to see her home number flash across the screen.

She flipped the phone open and pressed it to her ear. “Morning, Mom.”

“Morning, baby cakes. I didn’t wake you, did I?”

The term baby cakes used to annoy her to no end. Now, hearing it, Kiernan only wanted to cry, missing her mom more than ever. She wished she was home so bad.

“Nope. I’m up,” she answered and wandered back to the doorway of the burned break room, her gaze landing on the charred oven and once-white refrigerator that now looked more like a Gateway computer box with door handles.

“So...” her mom drew out. “How’d the dance go last night? Did you boogie with some cute boys? Meet anyone nice? Make any friends?”

Kiernan sighed out a quiet lungful, her shoulders slumping. Since she usually told her mom everything, she wanted to spill all. But she didn’t particularly want to mention the awful end of her evening. Plus, she didn’t want to worry her mom by telling her she was already in trouble with her father.

So, she went weak on the details. “Yeah, I, uh, I danced with someone.”

Her mom sucked in a breath. “You did?” She sounded awed. “Oh, Kiernan. That’s wonderful. What’s his name? Do I know him?”

Picturing her mom wiggling her eyebrows like she always did when she teased, Kiernan grinned. "His name's Nick."

As soon as the name left her lips, she frowned. Nick. Lying, cheating, thieving Nick, who'd made her smile... and then dashed all her hopes.

"Nick, hmm? He's sounds... well, the name Nick could pretty much cover anything? What's he like?"

"He's..." Kiernan bit her lip. Her mom sounded so hopeful, she didn't want to let her down. So, she finished with, "Nice." At least he *had* been, right up to the point where the truth had finally come out. "He kissed me," she finished, hoping that would satisfy her mom.

It did.

"He did?!" She let out a happy scream. "Oh, wow. My baby had her first kiss, and I wasn't there."

Kiernan snorted. "Geez, Mom. It wasn't that big a deal."

She could actually hear her mother's frame slump with disappointment. "It wasn't? Was he *that* bad a kisser then?"

Blushing, Kiernan covered her eyes with her hands. "No, it was a fine kiss," she muttered, "but... Ugg. New subject please."

"Fine. Don't kiss and tell. Just leave me in the dark." Her mom sighed. "I don't know how I ever raised such a respectful, modest daughter, but it can be a complete drag sometimes."

Kiernan laughed.

"New subject then," her mom agreed. "How's school? You had an English test yesterday, right?"

"Aced it," Kiernan announced, knowing that would please her mom.

A snort echoed through the phone. "Of course you did." Her mom was a high school English teacher who taught British Literature and a little grammar. It just wouldn't do if Kiernan received anything under an A on an English assignment.

It used to irritate Kiernan that she had to uphold such high standards on the subject, but now... now, it made her proud she'd learned so much from her mom.

She clutched the phone in her hand until her knuckles turned white. "I miss you," she said.

Her mom didn't reply immediately but when she spoke, her voice was more gruff than usual. "Oh, baby cakes, I miss you too."

They usually avoided the whole "miss you" subject, because it only brought on homesickness. But Kiernan couldn't hold back any longer.

She kept the phone planted to her ear as she stared at the burned oven. "I miss Rover and Oregon and my old school. I just want to come home."

"Oh, honey. Please, don't." Her mom sniffed before she blew her nose. "I signed a binding legal agreement with your dad years ago. He won't let me break it."

Kiernan hadn't wanted to make her mom sad, but she ached so much. "Couldn't I just come visit? Fall Break will be here soon." She put as much pleading into her voice as she could muster, which was a lot.

"Kiernan, I don't think that's such a good idea."

All her hopes dropped flat. "Why not?"

Her mom sighed. "I don't know how to tell you this but..."

Dread crawled up the back of her neck. She clutched her throat and demanded, "What?" thinking up all sorts of atrocities. Was her mom hurt, sick, dying?

"Kiernan—" she paused to sigh again. "I'm moving."

"You're... you're what?" Oxygen rushed from her lungs. Moving? Her mom was leaving their home? But she couldn't. "Why?"

"I just can't live here in this big, old house by myself. It hurts too much. I've found another job, and I'm moving next week. You should see this place. Boxes everywhere." She laughed a little. "Took me half an hour to find my toothbrush this morning."

Kiernan didn't even crack a smile. "But where are you going? Why didn't you tell me sooner? What—"

"Kiernan. Please try to understand. There are just too many memories. I can't..." She choked up for a second. "I can't live here anymore. Not without you. Now... I love you. I'll call when I'm settled in the new place."

When the phone clicked, Kiernan's body jerked like she'd been shot. "Mom?" she said. "Mom!"

Her own mother had hung up on her. She stared at the dead phone for a second before numbly snapping it closed and slipping it back into her purse.

She couldn't believe her mom was leaving the only place she'd ever known as home. It felt like she'd just been deserted, abandoned, left alone with a complete stranger who was supposed to be her father but she really didn't like.

How could her mom do this to her?

"So, our kiss was only fine, huh?"

Gasping at the quiet voice behind her, Kiernan whirled and clutched her purse to her chest.

A shadowed form emerged from the dark until she caught sight of his face.

She gasped again. Surprise quickly turning to anger, her eyes narrowed. "What are *you* doing here?"

She glanced around, wondering if her dad was going to appear. She'd be in even more trouble if he caught her with Nick Farrow a second time.

Before she could open her mouth again, Nick clamped a hand over her lips. "Shh," he said. "Please don't scream."

Chapter Five

He was just as cute today as he'd been last night.

It had to be his grin. There was just something about the mischievous curve to his lips and the naughty sparkle in his eyes when he smiled, like he knew he could charm his way out of any trouble.

Not that he was going to charm her. He'd lied to her. Just when she thought she was about to make her first friend since coming to town, he ended up being a cheat, thief, and liar.

Pushing his hand off her mouth, she backed away, scowling. "I can't believe you. You're sneaking in somewhere *else* you don't belong? Don't you remember what happened the last time? Your dad got fired."

"Of course, I remember," he muttered. "It only happened last night. But that's why I'm here. Your dad was only able to rightfully fire mine because of that stupid fire. So, I'm going to find out who really started it and get him his job back."

Kiernan stared at him a moment, waiting for him to grin and tell her he was kidding. When he didn't—his eyes remained serious—she snorted. "Yeah, right. Bad boys don't play hero and try to save the day."

"Bad boy?" Insult clear on his face, he frowned. "What makes you think I'm a bad boy?"

"Gee, let me think." She tapped her chin and rolled her eyes toward the ceiling. "You trespassed onto private school property, broke into the boy's locker room, stole clothes from someone you don't even know, snuck in a dance, lied and tricked me into thinking you were—"

“OK, OK.” He lifted his hands in surrender. “I get your point. And I’m sorry I lied to you. But come on, girls from expensive private academies don’t talk to guys like me. I didn’t want you to know I was... a nobody.”

The skin around his eyes crinkled, revealing the depth of his regret. The vulnerable expression made her pause, made her want to insist he wasn’t a nobody just because he didn’t attend Tri-Delta.

But he was a liar.

Maybe this sympathy act was just that... another lie.

She folded her arms over her chest, stiffening her resolve against him, reminding herself—twice—she couldn’t trust him. But when she looked at him, his slumped shoulders, begging eyes, and puckered bottom lip made her slip.

Uncertain and confused, she looked away. “Where’s your partner in crime today?”

“Who?” Nick frowned a moment before his face cleared.

“Oh, you mean, Vinny?” He shrugged. “He’s grounded.”

She lifted her eyebrows. “And you’re not?”

His grin was rueful. “Well, yeah, but—”

“You snuck out anyway,” she guessed. When he merely looked at her, not denying, she sighed. “You really are a hoodlum, aren’t you?” She couldn’t believe she’d been taken in by such a bad boy. She’d never fallen for a bad boy before.

His eyebrows bunched low as he scowled. “I’ll be anything I have to be to get Dad his job back. Aside from Mom and us kids, this plant is his life. I don’t know what he’d do if he didn’t have his job.”

“So you’re just going to find the arsonist on your own?”

He shrugged. “Unless you want to help.”

She jammed her fists on her hips. “Why should I help you? You lied to me. You made me think we were going to be friends.”

“Kiernan.” He winced. “I’m sorry. I...”

She waited. “You what?”

His shoulders slumped. “I don’t know. I can’t think of anything to say past sorry.”

She snorted and turned away.

He grasped her arm. “Wait. Are you sure you don’t want to help me?” He wiggled his eyebrows. “It might be fun.”

“No way am I doing anything else with you,” she said. “My father would kill me if he caught us within fifty feet of each other.”

His smile dropped dead. “Oh, no. How much trouble did you get into?”

Kiernan wished she could lie and tell him she’d been thrown in the basement, locked up, and grounded until she was thirty. But lying would only stoop her to his deceitful level.

“I didn’t get into any trouble. I got the silent treatment.”

Nick blinked, then scratched his head. “Really? Wow, wish my dad punished that way.”

Sighing, Kiernan rolled her eyes. “He wouldn’t leave me home alone today because of you. Said I had to come with him in case you showed up at the house to bother me.”

He frowned. “Why would I do that? I don’t even know where you live.”

“I don’t know. But what a coincidence it is that you’re here now, bothering me. Don’t you think?”

His scowl intensifying, Nick stepped closer. “Well, sorry to disappoint you, princess. But I’m not here because of you.”

Her mouth snapped shut. Kiernan couldn’t stop the snick of wounded pride that nipped at her stomach. She already knew he was here to get his dad his job back, but, geez. What a way to make a girl feel special.

She must’ve revealed her hurt feelings on her face because his eyes widened. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—”

She held up her hand. “I know what you meant.”

He lowered his face and scratched the back of his neck. When he looked up, he wouldn't meet her eyes, but glanced down the hall, where his gaze froze.

"Is that the room that burned?" His voice was hushed with a reverent kind of respect.

She nodded. He edged toward it, cautious, like he was approaching a wounded animal in the corner. When he stopped in the doorway, he stared inside a good five seconds before turning back to her, his eyes wide with disbelief and his mouth falling open.

"Is that it?"

He sounded as incredulous as she'd felt when she'd first seen the minimal damage.

Nick pointed into the room as he continued to gape at her. "My dad was fired because of that piddly little mess?"

For some reason she felt defensive at his aggressive question. Kiernan crossed her arms over her chest and gave a shrug. "What? It's probably thousands of dollars worth of damage. They'll need to replace the floor wall, and ceiling... not to mention the oven and refrigerator."

"You've gotta be kidding me," Nick said, turning back to stare into the break room. "All that big talk about someone torching Childler Steel and this is all that happened. Looks like someone had an accident on the stove to me, and caught it before things got too bad. This does not look like it's been torched."

"Well, it definitely wasn't an accident," Kiernan said. "The investigator's talking to my father right now. I overheard him say something about how an accelerant had been splashed on the stove. Someone started this intentionally. There's no doubt about that."

"It wasn't my dad," Nick said, sounding confident about his statement as he reached for the yellow "do not cross" tape.

Kiernan's eyes bugged. "What're you doing?"

He untacked the top two rungs. "I'm going to look around for clues."

She snorted. “Like the arson investigator wouldn’t have looked already?”

“Yeah, but what if he missed something?”

Grabbing his arm, she stopped him. “You can’t just go in there. You’ll leave footprints on the sooty floor and ruin what evidence is already there.” Geez, didn’t he watch CSI?

He glanced over his shoulder at her, then faced the room and scowled at the blackened floor. Sighing in defeat, he turned back. “What else did you hear the investigator say?”

She had to look away. “Nothing.”

“They didn’t mention my dad?”

Kiernan bit her lip.

He sighed and took her arm. “Kiernan, please. My dad’s job is at stake.”

She sighed too... in surrender. “He was the one to find the fire and put it out.”

Nick squeezed her arm. She looked up in time to see his eyes light. “See there,” he said. “Doesn’t that tell you he didn’t do it? He put it out. Why would he start it just to put it out again.”

Kiernan winced. He had a point. “But no one saw anyone else go in or come out. A secretary across the hall was sitting at her desk for at least thirty minutes before the fire started. She would’ve seen anyone that came or left the break room. Only your dad went in there.”

“So, the arsonist must’ve gotten in another way,” Nick argued.

They both turned together and peered into the dim room.

“How?” Kiernan asked. “Through that window? Not unless the fire-starter was the size of a five-year-old.” The opening was only about a foot tall and three feet wide.

Gnawing on his lip, Nick scanned the room until his gaze lifted to the ceiling. Eyes lighting, he pointed. “What

about that vent up there? He could've crawled up and slipped out there.

Studying the large vent located above the refrigerator, Kiernan tapped her chin with her fingers. The idea was fairly ludicrous. "How would he get up there so fast after starting the fire?" she asked. "And wouldn't that be kind of risky? I mean, if the flames really took off, I don't think he'd want to be stuck in a hot, old vent above it."

"Maybe he wasn't a very smart arsonist. I don't know. Maybe—hey, what's that on the other side of the fridge?"

Both leaning over the police tape and squinting to see, Kiernan sucked in a breath just as Nick said, "It's a step stool. That's how he got up there. And look at the vent closer. It's not all the way on. He was in too much a hurry to put it back right when he left. That would also explain the burn marks on the refrigerator. He splashed a few spots on his escape."

He whirled to Kiernan, his eyes wide and excited. "That's it. We have to go in there and see if there's a footprint on top of the refrigerator. If there is—" He paused suddenly and cocked his ear toward the door.

"Someone's coming," he hissed, grabbing her wrist and holding on tight.

Kiernan held her breath and listened. When she heard voices approaching—her father and Mr. Rigg's—she blanched. If her dad caught her with Nick, they'd both be in deep trouble.

"Quick. Hide." Grabbing his arm, she hauled him around a corner.

Chapter Six

“Wait!” Nick whispered in her ear, resisting her pull. “The voices are coming from *that* way.”

“Just trust me,” Kiernan shot back, dragging him along.

To keep the pop machine from sitting out in the middle of the hallway, a nook had been notched into the wall. The machine fit snugly in the alcove with only a foot of space to spare.

Slinking low to keep in the shadows so the two adults at the other end of the dark hall couldn't see them, Kiernan dashed into the free gap, yanking Nick in behind her. She crouched down, urging him to follow. The heat from a constantly-running pop machine warmed her left arm as the cool concrete wall chilled her right. In front of her, Nick hunkered and squished her even further into the crevice.

In the dark, she barely made out him lifting his finger to his lips to hush her.

“Well, thank you for your help, Mr. Childler,” Mr. Riggs said. “If you don't mind, I think I'll stick around a few minutes and check around the outside for some more clues.”

“Fine, fine,” her father said as the two of them passed directly by the pop machine.

Kiernan drew in a deep breath and held it, freezing as her heart pounded through her ears. Next to her, Nick was as still as stone. The two adults disappeared around the corner, and Nick's body went lax.

She sighed out a silent breath of release.

“You can look anywhere you want if you think it'll help you prove Farrow was the culprit.”

Nick tensed, and Kiernan grabbed his arm, hoping he didn't expose himself to defend his dad and get them both into even deeper trouble.

The adult voices drifted off, and Nick shifted, turned toward her. She lifted her eyes. Their faces were only an inch apart. His breath sifted across her cheek.

"What kind of shampoo do you use?" His fingers touched her hair.

She blinked. "What?"

"You smell like peaches," he whispered. "Did last night too."

Kiernan swallowed, too afraid to breathe.

His forehead bumped against hers. "I really am sorry I lied to you. I just knew you wouldn't talk to me if you found out I'd snuck in."

"It—it's okay," she heard herself say as she licked her lips.

"When we find out who the arsonist is—"

But his quiet words broke off again at the sound of more approaching footsteps.

A cell phone rang. Kiernan jumped out of her skin, instantly worried her mom was calling back to apologize for hanging up on her. But then she realized the sound wasn't coming from her purse and it was a normal ring tone that sounded like an actual phone ringing, not Carrie singing *Before He Cheats*.

"Hello," her father said; he was closer than she'd originally thought.

Biting her lip, she hoped he hadn't heard her and Nick talking.

"I thought I told you not to call me today," her father growled. "I was meeting with the arson investigator... No, he didn't mention you. And no, he doesn't suspect the fire was started by anyone other than Farrow...Hey, don't go getting cold feet on me. I paid you good money to frame Nicholas. You're not going to shoot your mouth off now. Just stay calm and no one will suspect a thing."

Nick turned and met Kiernan's gaze. She could barely see him in the dim light, but the whites of his eyes looked huge as he gaped at her. "Oh, my God," he wheezed. "You're dad's framing mine."

She gripped his arm. "We have to tell someone."

He shook his head. "But who? Who's going to believe us over Hilton Childler? We need proof."

Kiernan frowned, her face falling. Then her grin spread. "I've got it," she whispered, digging into her purse. She whipped out her cell phone and snapped it open.

Nick shifted closer. "What're you doing? Who're you going to call?"

"I have video on here." She bit her lip. "Somewhere."

As her phone's screen lit up, Nick moved to block the light for her. Kiernan held her breath with every button she pushed and every beeping sound she made. She glanced over Nick's shoulder a few times, but her father was too busy talking on his own phone to notice the racket she made.

Finally, she found the video application and started the film rolling. The light was too dark to catch her dad's face, but as long as it picked up his voice, she knew they'd be okay.

Come on, come on, she thought. *Say something about the fire again.*

But her father had moved onto a different topic as he stopped in front of the machine to buy himself a soda. "Have you sent a listing to the paper to advertise the new job opening yet? I want Farrow's spot filled within the month, Morris. We need someone bad. I didn't realize how much work he did until he was gone."

"Stay here," Nick whispered suddenly.

Before she could stop him, he wiggled out of their hidey-hole and pushed his way into the hall.

"Nick," she hissed, but her dad had already whirled around and was gaping at him with wide eyes. She jerked back into the shadows and lifted her phone to catch the

scene. Nick moved so her father would turn with him, bringing his face into the light.

"You framed my dad?" he said, his voice loud and accusing.

Hilton Childler's mouth fell open. For a moment, he could only gape. Then his face grew red and angry. "You," he hissed. "Where'd you come from? Where's my daughter?"

Kiernan tensed, ready to hop out of the alcove and help, but she wasn't sure what she could or should do. Besides, Nick didn't resist when her father stomped toward him and grabbed his arm. She bit her lip, hoping this was part of the plan, and panned from Nick being held captive to her father's face.

"What are you doing here?" Hilton demanded, stepping close enough she could squeeze them both on the screen.

"I came here to find proof my dad didn't start the fire. And it looks like I did."

Hilton threw back his head and let loose a loud, evil laugh. Shaking Nick's arm, he sneered. "And just who do you think's going to believe you, huh? You're nothing but a poor, dirty, thief."

Nick lifted his chin, his jaw tight. "And what would you say if I did have proof that you paid that guy Morris to start the fire, then framed my dad, and now he's blackmailing you to keep it quiet."

Her father's face turned red, the vein in his temple bulged, and he drew Nick closer. "So, where's your proof?"

Nick's lips twitched with a secret grin and he glanced toward the shadows where Kiernan still hid. "You just gave it me," he said, and then kicked his foot forward, right into her father's shin.

Hilton bellowed in rage and pain. Nick wiggled free of him and scurried backward, losing his footing and beginning to fall to the floor on his backside.

Snapping her phone shut, Kiernan darted from the pop machine and caught his hand, helping him back up.

"Run!" she screamed.

He didn't need to be told twice. Clutching her hand, he found his footing and shot ahead of her, leading their escape.

Her father's bellow made her cringe and falter enough that Hilton caught a hold of her ponytail and yanked her back. She let out a yelp of pain and fear, losing her grip on Nick's hand.

He glanced over his shoulder once. For a split second, she thought he was going to abandon her and keep running. But he skidded to a halt and came back around, gritting his teeth as he shoved her father's arm, causing him to let go of her hair.

Nick snatched her hand and once again, they were off.

Not daring to look behind her, Kiernan sprinted after her hero. She couldn't tell if it was her father's booming footsteps or her own heart making that mighty pounding sound. But no way was she going to pause long enough to glance over her shoulder and find out.

Following a red exit sign, Nick led her outside. But as soon as he shoved open the door, the bright daylight made Kiernan gasp. She couldn't see anything, though she did hear another adult shout. "Hey! What're you kids doing out here?"

Nick veered to the right, away from the voice. "This way," he urged.

Kiernan followed blindly, her eyes watering as she tried to blink them back into focus. But as soon as she could see and glanced over to catch sight of the man's face, she faltered.

"No, wait. It's the arson investigator." Instead of evading the adult, she tugged on Nick's hand and charged straight for him. "Mr. Riggs. Mr. Riggs."

"Miss Childler," he said, puzzlement wrinkling his brow. "What's wrong?"

"We know who the arsonist is," she rushed out, panting hard as Nick landed at her side.

"It's Mr. Childler himself," he added.

Her father skidded to a stop not ten feet behind them.

When Mr. Riggs saw him, he frowned and set his hands on his hips. "What's the meaning of his, Childler?"

"I... I don't know what they're talking about," her father said, sending a glare Kiernan's way, his narrowed eyes promising a punishment she didn't even want to think about. But she merely dragged her phone from her purse and pushed buttons.

"This boy is Farrow's son, and he's been brainwashing my daughter into—"

"Here," Nick broke in, taking the phone from Kiernan and thrusting it at the investigator. "Just watch this."

He pushed play, and everyone froze as Nick's voice came through the small phone speaker. "You framed my dad."

Mr. Riggs eyebrows wrinkled as he took the phone from Nick and held the screen out a couple inches further from his face. No one moved as the investigator watched the entire revealing truth. Once he was done, Kiernan held her breath. Mr. Riggs calmly shut her phone and slid it into his pocket. "I need to keep this for evidence," he told her.

She nodded, bobbing her head up and down.

Then he turned and looked directly at her father. "Hilton Childler, you are under arrest."

Epilogue

“Man, how long are you going to mope around here?” Vinny asked, nudging Nick in the arm with his elbow. “You’re no fun anymore.”

Behind the two, Kiernan beamed as she clutched a pile of books and binders to her chest. The boys stood in front of two opened lockers; Nick fished inside one and tugged out a textbook.

It had been over a week since she’d last seen him, and her dad was arrested. Through all the chaos of calling in more authorities, Mr. Riggs had handcuffed Hilton Childler and contacted Nick’s dad to come get him. It had taken longer to find her mother. For a few hours, she’d been taken into Social Services custody while her dad was booked in. But her mom arrived within the day, surprising Kiernan even more by announcing she’d been in the process of moving to Seattle all along.

“Where’d you think I was going, baby cakes?” she asked, rolling her eyes. “I couldn’t be far away from you, so I found a job here in town.”

And now that she was once again living with her mom, and her dad was probably going to stay in jail for a long time, Kiernan had transferred to public school—the very same public school Nicholas Farrow, jr. attended.

“Aren’t you happy you got your dad’s job back?” Nick’s cousin asked.

Nick gave a shrug. “Yeah.” His voice sounded bummed, and his shoulders slumped. “Of course I am. And I’m happy Kiernan was able to go back to her mom. I just wish I

would've gotten a phone number or address before she left. Now I'll never see her again."

Kiernan grinned. "How about my locker number?" she asked.

He whirled around; his mouth fell open. "Kiernan," he breathed her name.

She bit her lip. "Surprise."

"What're you doing here?" He looked around as if he expected someone—maybe her father—to jump out of the shadows and keep him away from her.

"My mom found a job here in Seattle to be closer to me. So... I'm living here now."

His eyes grew. "And you go to *this* school?"

She nodded and held her breath for his response, which came immediately.

He whooped out a sound of joy and leapt toward her, opening his arms wide. She laughed and hugged him back. When he pulled away far enough to look down at her, his face was alive with joy. She beamed, happier than she'd been in a long time.

"So, you want to go out sometime?" he asked, kissing her before she could answer.

Kiernan kissed him back, focusing on the soft press of his mouth as he moved his lips against hers. She'd say yes later.

The End